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SPECIAL OPERATIONS FORCES VS CONVENTIONAL FORCES AS PRIMARY CAF LAND-BASED RESPONSE

AIM

1. The aim of this service paper is to highlight the advantages and disadvantages of using Special Operations Forces (SOF) as the primary land force contribution in a theatre of operations. Based on this analysis, this paper will recommend factors to be considered at the operational and strategic levels when units are being selected to carry out Canadian Armed Forces (CAF) operations. Ideally, with consideration of these factors, the employment of SOF and conventional forces will be optimized in a manner that best achieves the objectives of the Canadian government.

INTRODUCTION

2. To best achieve the Canadian government's desired military effects, CAF personnel must be assigned to missions that are consistent with their core skills and competencies. This will set the conditions for success. However, in some cases the core skills and competencies of SOF, compared to that of conventional forces, are not well understood. As a result, SOF personnel may be assigned to missions for which they are not well suited. This lack of understanding is likely due to the fact that SOF is relatively new in Canada. With the first SOF unit standing up in 1993 (Joint Task Force (JTF) 2) and its headquarters (Canadian Special Operations Forces Command (CANSOFCOM)) activated thirteen years later in 2006, the concept of SOF employment and its capabilities are largely new and unknown.¹

¹ CBC News, "Joint Task Force 2: Canada's elite fighters," CBC News Canada, last modified Sep 15, 2010, <http://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/joint-task-force-2-canada-s-elite-fighters-1.873657>; Department of National Defence, "CANSOFCOM Capstone Concept for Special Operations," (2009): 8.

3. Today, debate surrounds the current Canadian SOF ‘advise and assist’ role in Iraq, part of Operation (Op) Impact, the “Canadian Armed Forces support to the Global Coalition against Daesh in Iraq and Syria.”² The debate pertains to the alignment (or potential misalignment) of SOF to a lengthy ‘conventional’ task. Although 427 Special Operations Aviation Squadron (SOAS) handed its support role over to conventional forces after three months in theatre, JTF2 and the Canadian Special Operations Regiment (CSOR) remained in Iraq as the land-force contribution for the next three years (and are set to continue this support for at least another year, until March 2019).³ The governmental decision to assign this task exclusively to SOF will be explored in this service paper by assessing the positive and negative impacts of this type, and length, of assignment. Also, the key differentiating capabilities of SOF and conventional forces will be analysed, as they pertain to optimizing their employment. The ‘advise and assist’ mission within Op Impact will be used as the recent deployment example throughout the discussion.

DISCUSSION

4. **Specialized Training for Specific Missions.** CANSOFCOM can employ “small, highly skilled,” and “technologically enabled” forces to conduct “high-risk and high value operations to achieve Military, Political, Economic, or Informational objectives.”⁴ These objectives are currently achieved by 2,000 SOF personnel, selected from 68,000 members of the conventional force, based on their ability to be self-reliant, creative and agile. The specific skills and core competencies that exist within CANSOFCOM enable it to perform its tasks such as Counter

² Canada, Department of National Defence, “Op Impact: Current Operations Abroad,” last accessed February 2, 2018, www.forces.gc.ca/en/operations-abroad-current/op-impact.page.

³ The Guardian, “Canada commits to fight ISIS in Iraq for another two years,” *The Guardian*, last accessed February 3, 2018, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2017/jun/29/canada-isis-iraq-mission-extended-two-years>.

⁴ Department of National Defence “CANSOFCOM Capstone Concept,” 22.

Terrorism (CT) (offensive and defensive), Special Reconnaissance (SR), Direct Action (DA), which includes hostage rescue, Non-Combatant Evacuation Operations (NEO), and Defence, Diplomacy, and Military Assistance (DDMA). The Canadian government's annual investment of \$85 million to cover CANSOFCOM's operating and maintenance budget indicates that the government understands the importance of its specialized capabilities and the effects it can provide.⁵ However, there has recently been an overreliance on SOF in Canada, as seen through the exclusive use of SOF to carry out the extended 'advise and assist' mission in Iraq. It is advantageous for Canada to invest in SOF capabilities as the world becomes more complex and wars less conventional, but if the employment of SOF and conventional forces is not optimized, the CAF risks straining its SOF units unnecessarily. Specifically, if CANSOFCOM reaches a breaking point, it may become unable to fulfil its mandate provided by the Canadian government. It is critically important for operational and strategic commanders to be familiar with the characteristics, limitations, and differences between SOF and conventional forces in order to provide recommendations to the Canadian government that optimize CAF employment. When personnel are assigned to missions that are consistent with their core skills and competencies, the probability of achieving the government's desired effects in an optimized manner is much higher.

5. **Iraq Mission in Context.** Over the past three years, SOF elements deployed to Northern Iraq have been successful in the government-assigned 'advise and assist' task, assisting the

⁵ Bruce Champion-Smith, "JTF2 is "jewel in the crown" of Canada's special forces," *The Star*, last updated June 26, 2016, <https://www.thestar.com/news/canada/2016/06/26/jtf2-is-jewel-in-the-crown-of-canadas-special-forces.html>.

Kurdish Forces to develop their military skills for their fight against Daesh.⁶ This success can likely be attributed to the cultural training that SOF personnel are provided, as well as their ability to be self-reliant, creative, and agile, as mentioned. JTF2 and CSOR personnel also have an exceptional ability to master (and train) basic combat skills, such as shooting and weapons handling. Doctrinally, a training role is well aligned with the JTF2 and CSOR function of Defence, Diplomacy, and Military Assistance (DDMA), “operations that contribute to nation building through assistance to select states through the provision of specialized military advice, training and assistance.”⁷ However, DDMA is the only role that CANSOFCOM has been fulfilling over the last three years in Iraq. As a result, the highly specialized skills that SOF personnel possess, are untapped.

6. **Size of SOF vs Conventional Forces.** SOF, by design, is a small force (i.e. CANSOFCOM personnel make up 2% of the CAF) comprised of small teams so that it can effectively accomplish its core tasks. As William McRaven explains through historical examples, small forces allow SOF to achieve its principles of simplicity, security, repetition, surprise, speed, and purpose; necessary for its assigned tasks. Conversely, it is generally difficult for conventional forces, based on their size, to “develop a simple plan, keep their movements concealed, conduct detailed full dress rehearsals, gain tactical surprise and speed on target, and motivate all soldiers in the unit to a single goal.”⁸ While this discussion of SOF principles is not necessarily relevant to the Op Impact ‘advise and assist’ task, it demonstrates why SOF forces

⁶ David Pugliese, ‘U.S. says Canadian special forces are involved in major offensive against Islamic State in Iraq,’ *Ottawa Citizen*, last modified May 30, 2016, <http://ottawacitizen.com/news/national/defence-watch/canadian-special-forces-involved-in-major-offensive-against-islamic-state-in-iraq>.

⁷ Department of National Defence “CANSOFCOM Capstone Concept,” 26.

⁸ William H. McRaven, “The Theory of Special Operations,” *Thesis: The Theory of Special Operations* (1993): 12.

are small by design. And therefore, the size of the force, and its associated capabilities, must be considered when employment options are being developed at the operational and strategic levels. Unfortunately, deploying a small force continually as the only land force contribution can be detrimental, because it can cause strain on SOF personnel, their families, and the supporting home units.

a. Strain on Personnel. The Task Force (TF) in Iraq is comprised of approximately 69-200 SOF positions (these are the open-source numbers) which have been filled by JTF2 and CSOR personnel only.⁹ Since the pool of SOF personnel is quite small, the same personnel have been deploying consistently over the last three years in Iraq, and SOF units are generally not built for operations lasting more than three months.¹⁰ Consistently deploying SOF personnel to conduct ‘conventional length’ tasks “runs the risk of rapidly depleting capacity. SOF cannot be quickly reconstituted or rapidly expanded, because of the lengthy process required” to recruit and to train specialized skills.¹¹ It is plausible that by end of the current mission (March 2019) the pool of available personnel to deploy will be diminished, due to personnel leaving in search for a more stable place of work or medical conditions preventing them from deploying. The length of mission and its associated strain should be considered when planning (and throughout) the operation.

⁹ The Canadian Press, “Canada sends 69 special forces to Iraq to advise in fight against ISIS,” *Global News*, last modified September 16, 2014, <https://globalnews.ca/news/1566794/canada-sends-69-special-forces-to-iraq-to-advise-in-fight-against-isis/>.

¹⁰ United States Armed Forces Joint Chiefs of Staff, “Special Operations,” *Joint Publication 3-05* (2014): I-6

¹¹ *Ibid.*, I-6.

b. Limited Sustainment. SOF units often require additional support from conventional forces to “optimize overall operational effectiveness” through use of “command and control, protection, fires, intelligence, movement and maneuver, and sustainment.”¹² This should be taken into consideration when courses of action are being developed at the operational and strategic levels. For Op Impact, the SOF elements have been supported by CANSOFCOM only, but its small specialized units are only able to operate “in austere, harsh and dangerous environments with limited support” for a short period of time.¹³ SOF units are generally built to sustain their small forces for up to three months at a time. Op Impact requires that the Iraq detachment manage long-term infrastructure, food, water, and vehicle contracts. From home, CANSOFCOM must resupply ammunition, and provide support to maintain equipment and complex computer/communication equipment. In addition to filling the SOF positions in theatre, JTF2, CSOR, and the Headquarters (HQ) must also arrange for unique SOF specialists to deploy as part of Technical Assistance Visits (TAVs) to theatre. These efforts cause strain on personnel, units, HQ, and risk support to other exercises and operations. A more sustainable option may be a SOF and conventional forces combined effort, or a transition from SOF to conventional forces.

7. **Impact to High Readiness State.** When SOF personnel are deployed on relatively simple missions for an extended period of time, they also face skill fade, and may be required to re-train some of their specialized skills upon return. This adds another strain to the home units. For example, when 427 SOAS deployed a detachment to Iraq in May 2016 to provide recce and transport capability to the SOF mission, they were not training and rehearsing for tasks

¹² United States Armed Forces Joint Chiefs of Staff, “Special Operations,” *Joint Publication 3-05* (2014): I-2.

¹³ Department of National Defence “CANSOFCOM Capstone Concept,” 6.

associated with CT, SR, or aviation DDMA. As a result, pilots became ‘rusty’ on the tactics and manoeuvres associated with these tasks, affecting their required level of readiness assigned by the government of Canada that support domestic (and international missions). Fortunately, the 427 SOAS detachment handed over to a conventional Squadron after six months (two rotations). This capitalized on SOF’s speed of deployment and as a result, optimized SOF and conventional force capability. For SOF land elements, the continued strain on personnel, families, and units to support lengthy SOF missions may eventually lead to depletion of personnel, impacting CANSOFCOM’s ability to fulfill their core SOF tasks.

8. **Inability to Anticipate Future Environments.** CANSOFCOM provides “a highly trained, specialized force capable of providing a response to ambiguous asymmetric unconventional situations that fall outside of the capabilities of law enforcement agencies, conventional military of other governmental departments.”¹⁴ These specialties are also outside of the conventional force capabilities. Therefore, if SOF capacity is reduced, there is no reserve. To avoid this, SOF must be provided with the time and resources to train and prepare for new threats. SOF need to hone their current skills, such as CT or hostage rescue, and remain on the leading edge of technology in order to anticipate future environments. However, this will be challenging for CANSOFCOM with its focus still on Op Impact. Being dedicated to an enduring mission introduces risk to SOFs’ ability to prepare for the next major mission (i.e. Africa or Eastern Europe). Worst-case scenario, if SOF employment is not optimized, Canada’s response to a major crisis could become reactionary, introducing additional, unnecessary risk.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 6.

9. **Conventional Forces Advise and Assist.** Training other military forces is a task that Canadian conventional forces are also very familiar with, and they have demonstrated success in recent missions. Some examples include Op Attention in Kabul, training Afghan National Security Forces; Op Athena operational mentor liaison (OMLT) teams mentoring Afghan Security Forces in Kandahar, and the current Op Unifier task Central and Eastern Europe, training the Ukrainian Armed Forces.¹⁵ Some of this mentorship included/includes running ranges, providing medical training, small unit tactics, and staff training, with the goal to produce professional and credible forces. These tasks parallel the tasks that are currently being carried out by SOF personnel in Iraq. Therefore the choice of CANSOFCOM for OP Impact is clearly not based on their training skillset. Potentially, a transition plan, and/or a division of tasks that includes conventional forces would be a more optimized approach.

10. **Operational and Strategic Importance.** Special operations personnel are selected and trained to conduct operations in “hostile, denied, or politically and/or diplomatically sensitive environments.”¹⁶ And therefore, SOF employment is optimized when used to respond to time-sensitive, low visibility, clandestine, or covert operations that possess a high degree of risk, requiring cultural expertise and communication through indigenous forces.¹⁷ The nature of these tasks usually implies strategic and political relevance. Conventional forces are not structured (or trained) to respond to these mission sets due to its large footprint, making it a poor candidate for agile and covert operations requiring simplicity, security, surprise and speed. While conventional

¹⁵ Wayne Niven, “Op Unifier turns the page on a busy year of training Ukrainian Armed Forces,” *Vanguard Canada*, last modified January 5, 2017, <https://vanguardcanada.com/2017/01/05/op-unifier-turns-the-page-on-a-busy-year-of-training-ukrainian-armed-forces/>; Government of Canada, “History of Canada’s Engagement in Afghanistan 2001-2014,” *Government of Canada*, last modified June 19, 2014 <http://www.international.gc.ca/afghanistan/history-histoire.aspx?lang=eng>.

¹⁶ United States Armed Forces. “Special Operations,” II-5.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, II-5.

forces can utilize its size and overwhelming firepower to defeat and defend against an enemy, these are the very characteristics that make it unsuitable to carry out certain SOF tasks. However, the current environment in Iraq is considered neither hostile nor denied and therefore the specialized skills that SOF possesses are potentially not required for the current ‘advise and assist’ mission. The situation is sensitive politically, and therefore potentially one of the reasons that the Op Impact force employer is CANSOFCOM.

a. Political Will. It is understood that the Canadian government has capped its number of land forces deployed to Iraq. This may be due to the hesitancy of the Canadian public to send its men and women into harms way and face ‘another Afghanistan mission.’ The Minister of National Defence and the Chief of the Defence Staff have routinely had to answer pointed questions about numbers of deployed personnel in Iraq and whether their role includes ‘combat.’ In 2017, when the two-year extension was announced, Minister Sajjan insisted that when personnel protect themselves through the use of force it remains “consistent” with its ‘advise and assist’ mission.¹⁸ If conventional forces were given this task in Iraq, however, it would likely require a larger footprint as does not have the same ability to distribute its personnel and operate autonomously. While the government may be hesitant to accept risk to Canadian support, the prolonged SOF employment may inadvertently be putting other SOF missions at risk. It is recommended that this risk be quantified at the strategic level, in order to ensure that the alignment of tasks to personnel is optimized.

¹⁸ Bruce Campion-Smith, “Defence Minister extends Iraq military mission by two years and praises sniper’s long-range kill,” *The Star*, last updated June 29, 2017, <https://www.thestar.com/news/canada/2017/06/29/iraq-military-mission-extended-by-two-years.html>

11. **Land-Based Response.** It is important to make clear that SOF does not compete with, or substitute for, conventional forces because they can be complementary in the same mission.¹⁹ In some cases, such as an ill-defined environment or mission, it may be prudent for SOF to be the first elements on the ground based on their ability to deploy quickly, autonomously, securely, and be adaptable. However, as Robert Spulak, professor at the United States Joint Special Operations University states, “if the conventional forces can accomplish the mission, it is time for SOF to move on.”²⁰ This speaks to the goal of optimizing SOF and conventional forces contribution. Each mission likely has a ‘sweet spot’ of necessary capabilities of necessary duration.

CONCLUSION

12. While SOF can provide a wide range of military effects, it is important to note that it is not a replacement for conventional forces’ abilities, or vice versa. They do not compete. Rather, they are different solutions to different problems that can sometimes be combined for maximum effect. This paper provided key differentiators between SOF and conventional forces capabilities, as well as advantages and disadvantages of using solely SOF as the primary land force contribution in a theatre of operations. Ideally with this consideration, the employment of SOF and conventional forces will be optimized in a manner that best achieves the objectives of the Canadian government.

¹⁹ Robert G. Jr. Spulak, “A Theory of Special Operations,” *Military Technology* 33, no. Special Issue (2009): 23.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 25.

RECOMMENDATIONS

13. This paper recommends the following factors to be considered at the operational and strategic levels when units are being selected to carry out CAF operations:

- a. Length of deployment;
- b. Sustainment required (home support);
- c. Required initial force composition and follow-on force composition;
- d. Ability of SOF to maintain specialized skills and remain on the edge of technology;
- e. Ability of SOF to train core tasks (i.e. CT, CR, NEO, DDMA); and
- f. Ability of SOF to continue to anticipate future environments.

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