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## **SPECIAL OPERATIONS FORCES AS PRIMARY CONTRIBUTIONS: IS THERE SUCH A THING AS TOO MUCH COWBELL?**

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**SPECIAL OPERATIONS FORCES AS PRIMARY CONTRIBUTIONS:  
Is there such a thing as too much cowbell?**

**AIM**

1. Applications of Special Operations Forces (SOF) are broad and have the ability to generate tremendous impacts on the battlefield. In the post-9/11 world, demand for SOF continues to rise due to their remarkable successes both globally and specifically in Iraq and Afghanistan.<sup>1</sup> The fact that these strategic assets, capable of providing governments with preemptive, disruptive, reactive, and proactive responses to emerging threats,<sup>2</sup> are so productive while deployed significant discussion occurs regarding whether they should serve as the primary land contribution in future operations or if they should remain reserved for traditional special operations roles. This paper examines both the benefits and downfalls of generating combat power using SOF as a primary land force contribution and provides a recommendation for future operations.

**INTRODUCTION**

2. Not much unlike their allied and coalition partners, Canadian SOF (CANSOF) must remain capable of performing “demanding and specialized tasks in hostile, denied, and politically sensitive areas.”<sup>3</sup> To better understand how and what CANSOF does, it is important to establish the definitions of SOF and clarify the environments in which SOF operates. The United

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<sup>1</sup> David Barno. “SOF Power.” *Foreign Policy*. 14 February, 2012. <http://foreignpolicy.com/2012/02/14/sof-power/>. Last accessed 01 February, 2018.

<sup>2</sup> Michael Day and Bernd Horn. “Canadian Special Operations Command: The Maturation of a National Capability.” *Canadian Military Journal*. 10, no. 4 (Autumn 2010): 72.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, 70.

States' Joint Publication (JP) 3-05.1 characterizes SOF as specially trained and selected units that are designed to operate in the harshest conditions, both mentally and physically, using specialized equipment and tactics with the ultimate aim of accomplishing strategic and operational objectives.<sup>4</sup> One of the most important aspects to note is the inclusion of strategic and operational objectives implying the higher order of a traditional SOF-like mission. Although fundamentally similar to maneuver tasks accomplished by Conventional Forces (CF), SOF tasks remain delineated by the “degree of physical and political risk, operational techniques, mode of employment, independence from friendly support, and dependence on detailed operational intelligence and indigenous assets.”<sup>5</sup> Equally as important as the employment of CF, a SOF contribution to any conflict or theater generates legitimacy, both militarily and politically, for any government.<sup>6</sup>

3. Given the highly specialized nature of training and tactical proficiency, balanced with the importance of maintaining legitimacy in the international community, the challenge becomes how much SOF is too much<sup>7</sup> and, if used, what should the focus be of their contribution with regards to capability, type, and nature.<sup>8</sup> Operating under the assumption that forces are readily available and remain capable of undertaking additional deployments, the simplest answer would be that their ability to rapidly deploy, adapt, and succeed while remaining a fiscally responsible

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<sup>4</sup> United States Armed Forces. Joint Chiefs of Staff. Joint Publication 3-05.1, Joint Special Operations Task Force Operations. Washington, D.C: Joint Chiefs of Staff, 26 April 2007: xi.

<sup>5</sup> Eric Olson. “U.S. Special Operations: Context and Capabilities in Irregular Warfare.” *JFQ: Joint Force Quarterly*. 1, no. 56 (2010): 66.

<sup>6</sup> J. Paul de B. Taillon. “Coalition Special Operations Forces.” *Military Technology*. 33, Special Issue (2009): 13.

<sup>7</sup> Stephen Biddle. *Special Forces and the Future of Warfare: Will SOF Predominate in 2020?* Carlisle, PA: United States Army War College, Strategic Studies Institute, 24 May 2004: 2.

<sup>8</sup> Bernard Brister. “Canadian Special Operations Forces: A Blueprint for the Future.” *Canadian Military Journal*. 5, no. 3 (Autumn 2004): 30.

resource<sup>9</sup> makes SOF the most desirable answer to any government's problems. CANSOF's own assessment of the Future Security Environment (FSE) captures the complexity of the problem stating that "non-state actors, and a combination of globalization and human mobility will ensure no clean division between the problems these adversaries pose both at home and abroad."<sup>10</sup> It is clear based on both SOF's defined scope and the uncertainty of the FSE that SOF is an answer, but further discussion is required to determine if it is the answer.

## DISCUSSION

4. There is no argument that the JP 3-05.1 definition of SOF encompasses the importance specialization plays into SOF employment. This holds true on both sides of the debate. It then becomes important to acknowledge the significant benefits SOF offers to both civilian and military leaders through the lens of size, perception, and capability. Given the complexity of the FSE, SOF is undoubtedly well-suited to undertake missions requiring mentally agile and culturally attuned operators. Additionally, warfighting shifted heavily towards coalitions and alliances in recent years and, especially from a Canadian Armed Forces (CAF) context, the reductions in host-nation support paired with the smaller physical and logistical footprint make SOF an ideal response.<sup>11</sup> In addition to the physical and logistical footprint of SOF, the force structure typically revolves around a nucleus of small teams comprised of members capable of fulfilling a multitude of roles. These small teams permit the organizational flexibility necessary in a modernized battlefield where the primary mission has the potential to fluctuate on the

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<sup>9</sup> Day & Horn. *Canadian Special Operations Command...*, 69.

<sup>10</sup> Canada. Department of National Defence. CANSOFCOM's Strategic Plan. Ottawa: Chief of the Defence Staff, June 2015: 14.

<sup>11</sup> Canada. *CANSOFCOM's Strategic Plan...*, 15.

spectrum of conventional and unconventional warfare rapidly.<sup>12</sup> Larger CF units, while capable of responding to varied opposing tactics and strategies, are slower to respond and, by size alone possess inherent sources of organizational friction creating fundamental limitations.<sup>13</sup>

5. In addition to the generally scalable size of SOF units, perceptions of SOF employment are wide-ranging. The general Canadian populace holds the notions of human security, individual rights, and peacekeeping<sup>14</sup> very close to heart and, for a CAF CF element to deploy in full capacity, the public opinion factors significantly. With respect to the size and scope of typical SOF deployments, the Government of Canada (GoC) possesses a strategic and operational element capable of achieving foreign policy objectives while appearing cognizant of spending constraints and the public's "aversion to violent conflict."<sup>15</sup> This is appealing on multiple fronts to multiple populations. It takes significant social and political capital to send full-scale deployments overseas and, after observing the continued instability in the post-9/11 world, that option is no longer optimal. In contrast, "the use of niche military capabilities is both a viable and cost effective means for governments to make meaningful contributions to international security at the times and places of their choosing."<sup>16</sup> This certainly allows for a sitting government to act in accordance with alliance and coalition aims as it suits their purposes while keeping their largest formations in reserve. In simplistic terms, the employment and the perceptions of SOF provides Canada with its greatest "return for the dollar in terms of

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<sup>12</sup> Marvin Leibstone. "Special Operations Forces and 21<sup>st</sup> Century Warfare." *Military Technology*. 33, Special Issue (2009): 31.

<sup>13</sup> Robert Spulak, Jr. "A Theory of Special Operations." *Military Technology*. 33, Special Issue (2009): 24.

<sup>14</sup> Brister. *Canadian Special Operations Forces: A Blueprint for the Future...*, 29.

<sup>15</sup> Canada. Department of National Defence. Future Operating Environment Handbook. Ottawa: Chief of the Defence Staff, August 2017: 12.

<sup>16</sup> Brister. *Canadian Special Operations Forces: A Blueprint for the Future...*, 36.

influence”<sup>17</sup> with allies, partners, and the home-front. Perhaps most important when viewed through the Canadian lens is the prevention of any notion of the CAF serving the role of an occupier as a massed presence of military has the potential to be detrimental to the overall desired outcomes.<sup>18</sup>

6. The final beneficial aspect, of which many remain unmentioned, is in the capabilities brought about by SOF both politically and militarily. It is undeniable that maintaining large standing armies is a financial burden to governments and in ensuring the upkeep of training, equipment, and personnel has the potential to become prohibitive in nature.<sup>19</sup> It is in this light that SOF, while using highly technological equipment and requiring significant support infrastructure and resources, has the potential to provide politicians with the necessary tools to accomplish their national objectives in opposition to retaining a large CF footprint both abroad or domestically. The implication in this argument, however, is that to expect the best equipped operator, there are still large costs incurred. But, by the scalability of SOF organizations, the cost associated with generating a world class SOF element is potentially more palatable than increasing the overall size of the CAF. As previously mentioned, SOF operators are required to be innovative, intelligent, and culturally attuned. These skills allow government leaders to place great trust in small elements of operators in critical strategic locations that are capable of accomplishing the government’s political aims that, without their unique and adaptive abilities, would otherwise have been unattainable by a large CF presence.<sup>20</sup> This is trust gained by

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<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, 37.

<sup>18</sup> Olson. *U.S. Special Operations: Context and Capabilities...*, 65.

<sup>19</sup> Brister. *Canadian Special Operations Forces: A Blueprint for the Future...*, 29.

<sup>20</sup> Spulak. *A Theory of Special Operations...*, 26.

repetition and reputation and does not dismiss the professionalism of CF or the CAF in particular.

7. For all of the benefits of SOF, there must be existing detrimental factors. Remaining aware of the SOF definition from JP 3-05.1 and the heavy emphasis on specialization, SOF's detriments will be similarly framed in size and capability but with the inclusion of durability instead of perception. SOF is an undeniably multi-faceted entity that has the ability to fit into many different problem spots. However, when arguing as to whether or not SOF should be a nation's sole contribution to land warfare, there are many factors to consider. As mentioned previously, the FSE is not becoming less complex requiring a wide variety of approaches from a military and political standpoint. With the understanding that operations have the potential to shift from unconventional back to conventional, based on their size alone, SOF "inherently cannot form the mainstay of large-scale military commitments abroad."<sup>21</sup> This has nothing to do with their ability to perform tasks far beyond what is expected of such a small group of professionals but simply because, in their lack of numbers, they "cannot have the full range of overall capabilities represented by the sum of the diverse large units of the much larger conventional forces."<sup>22</sup> Retired Admiral William McRaven, former Commander of the United States Special Operations Command (USSOCOM), frames this discussion using the phrase relative superiority. In a conflict in which SOF uses their most basic principles of warfare, they create a brief period of time in which they overmatch their opponent. Regardless of how long this period lasts, McRaven highlights the fact that "once relative superiority is achieved, it must

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<sup>21</sup> Olson. *U.S. Special Operations: Context and Capabilities...*, 64.

<sup>22</sup> Spulak. *A Theory of Special Operations...*, 26.



be sustained in order to guarantee victory. If relative superiority is lost, it is difficult to regain.”<sup>23</sup>

This theory certainly implies a more linear war with state-associated, or at least recognizable, enemy forces but the size of SOF elements inherently restricts their ability to retain relative superiority for long periods of time without the support of a follow-on CF unit regardless of environment.

8. Retired General Martin Dempsey, former Chairman of the U.S. Joint Chiefs of Staff (CJCS), reinforces the co-dependence of SOF and CF in stating that SOF “can only be ‘special’ if there is a conventional force that allows them to conduct their operations and shape the environment.”<sup>24</sup> This gives credence to how important both elements are in the conduct of warfare and does an excellent job at not diminishing the capabilities of either. Many choose to view the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan as SOF success stories given the close partnerships developed by coalition and alliance SOF with host-nation forces. Developing partnerships and partner capacity is a core function of SOF but, using Iraq and Afghanistan as an example, there must be caveats. These two environments included host-nation, or indigenous, forces that closely mirrored the capabilities of their opponents. This baseline provided SOF with a unique opportunity to integrate their specialized skills and technology to turn the tide in their favor. For this model to succeed, in which small teams advise and assist their counterparts in close maneuver warfare, SOF-predominance can be decisive and serve as a substitute for large-scale ground forces only when “indigenous allies are capable of providing troops whose skills and motivation are somewhere in the ballpark of their opponents’.”<sup>25</sup> Realizing that it is impossible

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<sup>23</sup> William McRaven. “The Theory of Special Operations.” In Thesis: The Theory of Special Operations. Monterey, CA: Naval Postgraduate School, 1993: 7.

<sup>24</sup> Barno. *SOF Power...*

<sup>25</sup> Biddle. *Special Operations and the Future of Warfare...*, 14.

to predict the next adversary with certainty, the argument for SOF-centric deployments becomes more difficult to sustain with these conditions in mind. Although formidable in the assets available to a combat-ready SOF element, their capabilities may not be formidable enough in the face of an equally equipped and trained opponent during sustained combat.

9. The final aspect worth discussing is the durability of such a small and specialized group. SOF is designed to be highly selective based on their mandate and core tasks. This presents numerous challenges because, to build a proper force, SOF cannot “be rapidly developed in the time of need.”<sup>26</sup> Moreover, the inability to quickly generate SOF operators in time of crisis is equally as debilitating as trying to replace losses – either through combat or normal attrition. A limitation identified by JP 3-05.1 is that the time and resources necessary to replace operators to match the high standards of SOF is time intensive and not easily done when recruiting, selecting, and training all take their toll on the available product.<sup>27</sup> CANSOF Command (CANSOFCOM) acknowledges this difficulty in their Future Operating Environment (FOE) document as it exposes the careful balance required between deploying a strategic and operational asset capable of serving as valuable members of coalitions and alliances and taking the time to consider “the impact of operational tempo (OPTEMPO) and various personnel policies on retention to maintain organizational capacity.”<sup>28</sup> They cannot be held as solely in extremis forces but their employment must be carefully considered as it has cascading effects. The overuse of SOF is a risk and one that should not be overlooked. As the OPTEMPO continues to increase, operators may be drawn to other less strenuous occupations requiring new recruiting to occur if appropriate retention efforts are not made. Another possible avenue to consider is increasing the size of SOF

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<sup>26</sup> Brister. *Canadian Special Operations Forces: A Blueprint for the Future...*, 32.

<sup>27</sup> United States Armed Forces. *JP 3-05.1...*, 1-3.

<sup>28</sup> Canada. *Future Operating Environment Handbook...*, 22.

in order to continue finding low-cost, high-impact output. Both mentalities place the current status of SOF in jeopardy as they have the potential to diminish the quality of the operator through either outright loss or dilution based on selection standards.<sup>29</sup>

## CONCLUSION

10. This paper presented several positive and negative aspects of using SOF as a primary contribution to a land campaign. The comparison assessed both the size and capabilities of SOF while offering different perspectives on their perception and durability. Regardless of opinion, it remains clear that “SOF will serve as the force of either first or last resort.”<sup>30</sup> This requires SOF commands around the world to carefully monitor conditions and identify potential points of friction while appropriately advising governments as to where carefully applied force would have the greatest impact. Perhaps the most concise description of SOF’s proper employment is that they are teams capable of achieving “strategic ends with a small footprint, while not constituting an irreversible foreign policy decision.”<sup>31</sup> These are very careful considerations to undertake both for and against SOF.

## RECOMMENDATION

11. With these factors in mind, it remains unadvisable for SOF to exist as the primary contribution to a land theater of operations. Fully acknowledging their continued success in the Global War on Terror (GWOT) and specifically in Iraq and Afghanistan, the FSE continues to evolve and the world faces “unprecedented challenges from an increasingly complex operating

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<sup>29</sup> Biddle. *Special Operations and the Future of Warfare...*, 2.

<sup>30</sup> Canada. *Future Operating Environment Handbook...*, 29.

<sup>31</sup> William McRaven. Posture Statement of Admiral William H. McRaven, USN, Commander United States Special Operations Command before the 113<sup>th</sup> Congress Senate Armed Services Committee Emerging Threats and Capabilities Subcommittee. Washington, D.C., United States Senate, 11 March 2014: 4.

environment filled with agile, rapidly adapting belligerents – adversaries that we expect to be even more innovative and asymmetric in their approach to conflict in the years ahead.”<sup>32</sup> This almost requires that governments maintain all options as viable and prevent themselves from only using SOF elements because of their flexibility, scope, and size. If a government were to continue using solely SOF contributions, they then must shoulder the responsibility of how to sustainably increase SOF’s size while maintaining the traditionally high standards of excellence.<sup>33</sup> Additionally, as identified by the examples of Iraq and Afghanistan, the capabilities of an indigenous force and their potential unwillingness to fight may bring isolated SOF elements into a position of disadvantage, one that may have been avoided by the inclusion of CF formations.<sup>34</sup> This is a factor that cannot be forecasted and must be present in the minds of military planners. Also at the forefront of planning should be the relationships between SOF and CF. They are designed to be complementary of each other and, by heavily favoring one over another, brings into question the other’s legitimacy creating an unanticipated culture clash.<sup>35</sup> Looking at some of the most recent deployments of SOF, there is no argument that states that SOF does not have a highly specialized set of skills and abilities. Additionally, there is no argument stating that the CAF is incapable of advising and assisting indigenous forces in accomplishing fundamental maneuver tasks. If the GoC remains intent on maximizing their return on investment while appeasing the population by not sending mass troop deployments overseas, CANSOFCOM will absolutely meet that intent through “continued delivery of excellence with economy of force.”<sup>36</sup> But, to truly keep special operations special, their use must be carefully synchronized in the larger picture and applied when strategically or operationally

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<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, 2.

<sup>33</sup> Barno. *SOF Power...*

<sup>34</sup> Biddle. *Special Operations and the Future of Warfare...*, 3.

<sup>35</sup> Barno. *SOF Power...*

<sup>36</sup> Canada. *CANSOFCOM’s Strategic Plan...*, 28.

necessary. This, in turn, helps in maintaining SOF's high level of readiness by allowing them to undergo the proper recruiting, selection, training, and resourcing prior to deployment. However, in the end, the military will always be the government's tool and, at their prerogative, will be "organized and ready to provide armed violence if and when deemed necessary in the public interest and toward state ends."<sup>37</sup> It remains to be seen what that organization looks like in the coming years.

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<sup>37</sup> Chris Madsen. "Military Responses and Capabilities in Canada's Domestic Context Post-9/11." *Journal of Military and Strategic Studies*. 13, no. 3 (Spring 2011): 2.

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