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AIM

1. This paper will examine employment options for Canadian Special Operation Forces (CANSOF) within a near-peer adversary context and provide recommendations for which SOF core activities require increased focus.¹ Although this paper is limited to the *how* CANSOF can be employed, there is a future requirement for recommendations on potential capabilities needed to best execute these SOF core activities.

INTRODUCTION

2. Canadian Special Operation Forces Command (CANSOFCOM) units have excelled in various missions given to them by the Government of Canada over the last two decades. Their track record in counter-terrorist and security force assistance missions in Afghanistan, Iraq and other locations have met the CANSOFCOM ethos of “We will find a way”.² However, with the emergence of a more globally competitive environment between nation-states, there is an increased possibility of Canada being brought into conflict with a near-peer adversary.³ This new context requires CANSOF to continue to be adaptive to evolving potential threats.

3. The United States’ (US) Department of Defense (DoD) Joint Publication (JP) 3-05: *Special Operations*, outlines 12 SOF core activities which are conducted throughout the spectrum of conflict.⁴ These SOF core activities are; Direct Action (DA), Special Reconnaissance (SR), Countering Weapons of Mass Destruction (CWMD), Counter-

¹ United States Armed Forces. Joint Chiefs of Staff. *Joint Publication 3-05, Special Operations* (Washington, D.C: Joint Chiefs of Staff, 16 July 2014), II-3.

² Michael Day and Bernd Horn, *Canadian Special Operations Command: The Maturation of a National Capability* (Canadian Military Journal. 10, no. 4, Autumn 2010), 70.

³ Department of National Defence. *Strong, Secure, Engaged - Canada's Defence Policy*. 2017, 50.

⁴ United States Armed Forces. Joint Chiefs of Staff. *Joint Publication 3-05...*, II-3.

Terrorism (CT), Unconventional or Irregular Warfare Operations (IWO), Foreign Internal Defense (FID), Security Force Assistance (SFA), Hostage Recovery and Rescue (HRR), Counterinsurgency (CI), Foreign Humanitarian Assistance (FHA), Military Information Support Operations and Civil Affairs Operations (MISO).⁵ Since the terrorist attacks of 11 September 2001 (9/11) and the founding of CANSOFCOM in 2006, CANSOF units have had to focus on certain SOF core activities which best meet threats posed by insurgent groups and Violent Extremist Organizations (VEOs), both at home and abroad. This has seen CANSOF units performing missions within SOF core activities such as SFA, CT and CWMD. The shift from operating against less technologically advanced VEOs and insurgent groups, to a near-peer threat is well within CANSOFCOM's current mandate but does require a new focus of how CANSOF can be employed using the SOF core activities.⁶ By looking at the evolution of SOF employment and usage of SOF core activities in previous near-peer conflicts, clarity can be provided on how CANSOF can adapt to and be employed in the future operating environment (FOE).

DISCUSSION

4. The creation of modern SOF units began during the Second World War, as the requirement emerged to have elite, highly trained and specially equipped forces able to conduct high risk, discrete missions achieving strategic effects.⁷ Post-war, the US, United Kingdom (UK) and Australia continued to use SOF in near-peer contexts to various degrees of success. While examining the employment of SOF in these conflicts, three

⁵ *Ibid.*, II-3.

⁶ Government of Canada, *Mandate of the Special Operation Forces*, last modified 16 January 2019, <https://www.canada.ca/en/special-operations-forces-command/corporate/mandate.html>.

⁷ Susan L. Marquis, *Unconventional Warfare: Rebuilding U.S. Special Operations Forces* (Washington: The Brookings Institution, 1997), 7.

SOF core activities emerged as being pivotal to achieving strategic effects. These SOF core activities were; DA, SR and IWO. Each of these SOF core activities will be looked at in detail using historical examples as the lens to view potential employment in the FOE against a near-peer adversary.

Direct Action

5. DA operations have been a cornerstone of SOF missions dating back to the British Special Air Service (SAS) in North Africa during the Second World War.⁸ JP 3-05 defines DA as:

short-duration strikes and other small-scale offensive actions conducted with specialized military capabilities to seize, destroy, capture, exploit, recover, or damage designated targets in hostile, denied, or diplomatically and/or politically sensitive environments.⁹

DA is a SOF core activity that CANSOF units have experience with and are specifically trained to conduct.¹⁰ Within a near-peer context, the ability for CANSOF units to successfully execute DA against enemy high value targets has the potential for strategic effects. Operating against a near-peer enemy will present much different challenges than the insurgent forces CANSOF has been fighting for the last few decades. These different challenges could include technology like anti-access, aerial denial (A2AD) automated weapon systems (AWS).¹¹ Therefore, focus must be put on conducting DA in a near-peer context to ensure success in a FOE. The employment of the SAS in the Falklands War provides an example of a strategic effect from DA against a near-peer threat, and the potential for skill fade to occur if other SOF core activities are provided more focus.

⁸ Tim Jones, *SAS: The First Secret Wars* (London: I.B. Tauris & Co Ltd, 2005), 9.

⁹ United States Armed Forces. Joint Chiefs of Staff. *Joint Publication 3-05...*, II-5.

¹⁰ Government of Canada, *Mandate of the Special Operation Forces*, last modified 16 January 2019, <https://www.canada.ca/en/special-operations-forces-command/corporate/mandate.html>.

¹¹ Department of National Defence. *Future Operating Environment Handbook*, (Ottawa: Chief of Defence Staff, 2017), 17.

6. Conflict broke out between the UK and Argentina, when the Falkland Islands were seized by Argentina using military force on the night of 01-02 April 1982.¹² In order to re-take the Falkland Islands, UK forces would have to execute a contested amphibious operation against a near-peer military over 8000 miles from their home station.¹³ In an attempt to mitigate risk to the Royal Navy (RN) ships and army assault forces from Argentinian anti-shipping strikes, the British planned to conduct a counter-airfield raid on Pebble Island. This preliminary action would seek to destroy an ideally sited Argentinian Forward Operating Base (FOB) enabling the maritime task force to begin amphibious operations.¹⁴ The mission would be executed by the SAS, which had recently come to international attention during the 1980 Iranian Embassy raid, an operation which showcased their CT dominance.¹⁵ The operation on Pebble Island, code named OP PRELIM,¹⁶ was the first solely SAS airfield attack since 1944.¹⁷ This lack of recent experience in DA against a near-peer enemy came not without its issues as Ewen Southby-Tailyour explains in his book *Exocet Falklands: The Untold Story of Special Forces Operations*:

This vital destruction of so many counter-insurgency Pucara aircraft stationed just 22 nautical miles from the entrance to San Carlos Water so nearly did not take place. It is only because Admiral Woodward, frustrated with delays by the ‘advance party’, ordered the attack to go ahead on the last possible night, despite the SAS’s misgivings. The postponement that so aggravated the Admiral was due to the reconnaissance party being landed, at their insistence, in the wrong place. This is relevant because the

¹² Ewen Southby-Tailyour, *Exocet Falklands: The Untold Story of Special Forces Operations* (South Yorkshire: Pen and Sword Military, 2014), 23.

¹³ Jon Cooksey and Francis Mackay, *Pebble Island: The Falklands War 1982* (South Yorkshire: Pen and Sword Military, 2007), 42.

¹⁴ Cooksey and Mackay, *Pebble Island:...*, 73.

¹⁵ Ken Connor, *Ghost Force: The Secret History of the SAS* (London: Weidenfeld & Nicholson, 1998), 235.

¹⁶ Cooksey and Mackay, *Pebble Island:...*, 12.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 23.

poor standard of conventional military reconnaissance by the SAS, as formally noted by Major General Moore, was to be a recurring theme.¹⁸

The support to the DA itself was a complete joint effort, which is essential in near-peer context, with Naval Gunfire Support (NGS) provided by the HMS GLAMORGAN, fire observation officers from the Royal Artillery (RA) and the insertion of the SAS assault forces by CH-4 Sea King helicopters.¹⁹ The DA began at approximately 0420 on 15 May 1982, and by 0745, 22 Argentinian aircraft were destroyed.²⁰ The tactical success of the raid by the SAS achieved strategic effects for the UK. Notably, the raid showed that UK SOF had the ability to conduct operations almost at will, and thus lowered the morale of the Argentinian forces, who felt increasingly vulnerable in their defensive position in the Falkland Islands.²¹ Although the DA was successful, this example does show that SOF units focusing too much on CT, or other SOF core activities, could experience skill fade in DA capabilities that has more importance in a near-peer context.

7. From a CANSOF perspective, in the FOE the target of a DA might be similar or completely different (i.e. cyber warfare command node) to what the SAS encountered on Pebble Island. However, the requirement for CANSOF to work similarly in a joint context to deliver a strategic effect for the Canadian government will not change. The complexities of executing DA in a near-peer context, fully utilizing the capabilities provided by joint forces requires additional focus by CANSOF.

Special Reconnaissance

¹⁸ Southby-Tailyour, *Exocet Falklands:...*, 312.

¹⁹ Cooksey and Mackay, *Pebble Island:...*, 91.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 78.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 93.

8. Another SOF core activity that is closely linked with DA and requires increased focus in a near-peer context is SR. JP 3-05 sees the role of SR as “...reconnaissance and surveillance actions normally conducted in a clandestine or covert manner...” with the aim being either collecting or verifying information of operational or strategic importance.²² This can be done with assets and platforms via ground, sea or air.²³ However, at its most basic and at times successful, SR is conducted by small teams of SOF in contested environments which can report on target locations, facilitate strikes and conduct battle damage assessments (BDA).²⁴ The importance of these operations in a near-peer context was shown during the Persian Gulf War in 1991 by US and UK SOF with their counter-Scud missile SR in western Iraq.

9. In January 1991, the coalition forces (CF) arrayed against Iraq were postured along the Saudi border preparing for the clearance of Kuwait. The CF had a major strategic issue when Iraqi Scud mobile launchers began attacking targets in Israel, Saudi Arabia and Bahrain on 18 January 1991.²⁵ Due to the Scud launcher’s mobility and small profile in conjunction with poor weather conditions, CF were unable to find, fix and strike them using only air power.²⁶ Therefore, a decision was made to use US and UK SOF to conduct SR in the western Iraqi desert in order to help facilitate the destruction of the Scud launchers. Despite having to cover a vast amount of terrain, the SOF SR operations proved to be successful in being able to find the Iraqi Scud launchers prior to

²² United States Armed Forces. Joint Chiefs of Staff. *Joint Publication 3-05...*, II-5.

²³ *Ibid.*, II-6.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, II-6.

²⁵ William Rosenau, *Special Operation Forces and Elusive Enemy Ground Targets: Lessons from Vietnam and the Persian Gulf War* (Santa Monica: RAND, 2001), 29..

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 33.

delivering their payload and coordinating their destruction by air interdiction platforms.²⁷

The SAS were even able to conduct DA operations concurrently, as shown in the following from William Rosenau's RAND report:

...SAS personnel did more than find targets and call in air strikes. They were multipurpose forces, capable of taking direct action, conducting BDA on targets previously hit by coalition aircraft, and capturing Iraqi prisoners. Teams destroyed fiber-optic links that carried targeting data for the Scud missile crews, and used plastic explosives to blow up microwave relay towers and communications bunkers. Frustrated with the relatively long delays involved in calling in air strikes, SAS troopers also attacked Iraqi vehicles and other targets directly, usually at night. Using thermal imagers, the teams employed shoulder-fired Milan missiles to engage Iraqi mobile TELs. As the Iraqis began moving Scud-related equipment in 10- to 20-vehicle convoys as a defensive measure, SAS teams mounted ambushes using bar mines and bulk explosives.²⁸

The strategic effect the US and UK SOF had in this SR operation was to limit the effectiveness of the Iraqi Scud attacks on neighbouring countries by facilitating their destruction. This prevented Israel from taking independent action against Iraq which could have had negative effects on other Arab nations contribution to the CF.

10. Thirty years after the SR operations of the US and UK SOF took place in the western Iraqi desert, the importance of SR in a near-peer context remains. Many of Canada's potential near-peer threats, like Russia, have a large amount of layered air defence assets capable of denying airspace, as shown in Ukraine.²⁹ Therefore, the air supremacy seen in recent campaigns in Afghanistan and Iraq will likely not be the same, thus reducing the effectiveness of UAVs and manned aircraft. Further, the likelihood of operations taking place in urban areas increase in the FOE, which can reduce connectivity

²⁷ Rosenau, *Special Operation Forces and Elusive Enemy Ground Targets*:...,43.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 39.

²⁹ R. Reed Anderson, Patrick J. Ellis, Antonio M. Paz, Kyle A. Reed, Lendy Renegar, John T. Vaughn, *Resurgent Russia: An Operational Approach to Deterrence*. (New York: US Army War College Press, 2016), 99.

and degrade technological advantages.³⁰ The requirement to get actionable intelligence to facilitate strikes on high payoff targets will continue and CANSOF units will need to be prepared to provide that through successful SR operations.

Unconventional or Irregular Warfare Operations

11. Of the three SOF core activities requiring increased focus by CANSOF in a near-peer context, IWO may prove to be the most challenging. Building an IWO capacity is difficult and the duration before strategic effects are seen can be long. However, IWO has the potential for the most strategic effect with the downfall of a particular regime or government.³¹ JP 3-05 sees IWO consisting of:

...operations and activities that are conducted to enable a resistance movement or insurgency to coerce, disrupt, or overthrow a government or occupying power by operating through or with an underground, auxiliary, and guerrilla force in a denied area.³²

These operations require very highly trained SOF personnel in small teams, which are not just proficient in combat operations, but also are culturally attuned and can act as warrior/diplomats.³³ Further, JP 3-05 states IWO to be employed as a “national strategic option, which uses fewer resources than conventional operations”.³⁴ Unlike the two previous SOF core activities, there are not as many examples of IWO being used successfully against a near-peer threat. JP 3-05 does highlight the successes of IWO in assisting with the overthrow of governments by the Nicaraguan Contras and the Afghan Mujahedeen,³⁵ but these conflicts don’t quite fit the mold within a near-peer context. The

³⁰ Department of National Defence. *Future Operating Environment...*, 17.

³¹ United States Armed Forces. Joint Chiefs of Staff. *Joint Publication 3-05...*, II-10.

³² *Ibid.*, II-8.

³³ Day and Horn, Canadian Special Operations Command:..., 71.

³⁴ United States Armed Forces. Joint Chiefs of Staff. *Joint Publication 3-05...*, II-9.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, II-8.

best recent example of successful IWO is seen in the SOF assistance to the Northern Alliance in Afghanistan 2001-2002.

12. Following the 9/11 attacks, the US government wanted to eliminate the Taliban regime in Afghanistan and proposed achieving this through supporting the Northern Alliance, a coalition of warlords that were against Taliban rule. US SOF, specifically an Operation Detachment Alpha (ODA) from the 5th Special Forces Group (5 SFG), was sent into Afghanistan on 19-20 October 2001 to support the Northern Alliance through IWO.³⁶ This ODA proved to be highly successful in coordinating with Northern Alliance leaders and facilitating their operations against the Taliban. Within 49 days of the initial insertion of the ODAs, Kandahar city fell from Taliban control.³⁷ Leigh Neville notes in his book on SOF operations in Afghanistan that this achievement took, "...several hundred SOF and perhaps 100 OGAs, supported by their determined allies of the Northern Alliance..."³⁸ The large strategic effect showcased in this example was the complete collapse of the Taliban government in Afghanistan. This was achieved through the use of only a few hundred SOF personnel trained to excel in IWO.

13. IWO is a very specific SOF core activity which can be difficult to build and foster but has great potential in near-peer context. One near-peer potential threat where IWO could be very valuable is against a nation-state like North Korea with its oppressive regime. This indirect approach to SOF operations has the potential to defeat a near-peer threat decisively "by disrupting his equilibrium by any means possible . . . or leveraging

³⁶ Leigh Neville, *Special Operation Forces in Afghanistan* (New York: Osprey Publishing Ltd., 2008), 15.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 22.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 22.

potential energy in a system to facilitate change toward a positive outcome”.³⁹ Therefore, CANSOF could assist with the collapse of an oppressive regime by utilizing the disenchanting population of another country and the means to achieve this is with IWO. Increased focus on this SOF core activity is required if CANSOF was to assist with an IWO campaign in a FOE near-peer context. Many of the skills and lessons learned of CANSOF with SFA could be transferred over for IWO.

CONCLUSION

14. As CANSOF prepares to meet near-peer threats in the FOE, three SOF core activities emerge that will be of vital use. This paper highlights how CANSOF can be employed in a near-peer context through executing DA, SR and IWO. This does not take away CANSOF's requirement to continue to excel in other SOF core functions but merely shifts focus amongst them. Using examples from the Falklands War, the Persian Gulf War and more recently in Afghanistan to build upon, CANSOF can utilize its inherent agility and adaptability to ensure it continues to deliver strategic effects for Canada. Key to this shift in SOF core activities is that although the focus may change and technologies continue to evolve, CANSOF will continue to have the people ready to execute.⁴⁰

RECOMMENDATION

15. It is recommended that CANSOF places more emphasis on three of the SOF core activities from JP 3-05, specifically: DA, SR and IWO. Increased focus on these three SOF core activities will enable CANSOF to best meet potential employment requirements in a near-peer adversary context. Although these specific SOF core activities are a part of the current CANSOFCOM mandate, they require specific attention

³⁹ Department of National Defence. *Future Operating Environment...*, 12.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 29.

in order for CANSOF personnel to maintain the appropriate skills required to action these to the standard they are known for. This increased focus does not come without a potential change in capabilities required to execute the SOF core activities, which need to be further researched and outlined.

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