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CANSOFCOM: The Future Fight

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CANSOFCOM: THE FUTURE FIGHT

AIM

1. With the recently released *Canada's Indo-Pacific Strategy* document, the Canadian Armed Forces (CAF) is busy developing options for the Government of Canada that will achieve specific objectives contained therein. The Canadian Special Operations Forces Command (CANSOFCOM) intuitively fits within specified objectives due to its agility and ability to project with a light footprint while achieving exponential effects in any given area of operations. The purpose of this paper is to identify some key considerations for CANSOFCOM organizational structure that would enhance its ability to operate in the current and future operating environment. This paper will discuss relevant factors to be considered in CANSOFCOM's organizational structure but will not answer every possible question. Further analysis would be required on topics such as C2, specific capabilities, compensation for personnel and infrastructure requirements to name a few.

INTRODUCTION

2. Canada's Indo-Pacific Strategy is a welcomed publication that outlines key national strategic objectives. The strategy outlines 5 objectives focused on security, stability, trade and economics, fostering a deep connection and investment in people, climate change and demonstrating Canada as a valued partner in the region. CANSOFCOM has an opportunity to address, at minimum, two of the outlined objectives as well as maintaining other operational requirements around the globe. The first objective deals with security and stability, outlining the requirement for an "enhanced military presence, along with intelligence and cyber security, to promote security in the region"¹. The fifth objective describes deepening regional relationships across multiple domains including the military. Additional specific initiatives include support to capacity building, countering disinformation, identifying areas of collaboration, support to defence procurement and support to multinational operations. CANSOFCOM can be a force multiplier in these realms and continue to enable other nations by providing critical support through a military assistance line of operation.

3. Additionally, Russia has shown that conflict is unpredictable, and a seemingly calm state of competition can ignite with little notice. China and Russia have changed the security game, introducing global security challenges that will test NATO's ability to counter the threats directly. Providing support to nations by enabling their resistance operations as malign states continue to push, or ignore, the international rules-based order means that western nations must be prepared to execute activities below the threshold of conflict so as not to deliberately escalate tensions. This means that Special Warfare (SW) type activities will feature predominately in any employment concept for the foreseeable future. It is imperative that CANSOFCOM consider its organizational structure to meet these new demands. Capacity and capabilities must be made readily available to react to opportunities while ensuring the force remains healthy.

¹ Global Affairs Canada, 'Canada's Indo-Pacific Strategy', 2022, <https://www.international.gc.ca/transparency-transparence/assets/pdfs/indo-pacific-indo-pacifique/indo-pacific-indo-pacifique-en.pdf>. pg. 5.

DISCUSSION

4. With 5 units not including the headquarters element, CANSOFCOM has grown steadily since its implementation in 2006.² With 2 units capable of conducting the traditional special operations forces (SOF) tasks of direct action (DA), special reconnaissance (SR) and military assistance (MA)³⁴, managing capacity and duplication of effort has, and continues to be, an important function of the command team. CANSOFCOM must maintain the ability to meet the requirements to respond to violent extremist organizations (VEO) conducting counter-terrorism (CT) activities, while also achieving objectives in the Grey Space⁵ against strategic competitors. As described in the CANSOFCOM Future Operating Concept (FOC), “[t]he enterprise’s strategic value lies in accessing, understanding, and illuminating threat actors in the grey zone.”⁶ Based on *Beyond the Horizon* and the FOC, CANSOFCOM will continue to operate within the National Defence/National Security nexus with the sense function taking a lead role in illuminating threats. While remaining prepared to fight, conduct DA, the force of tomorrow will require additional emphasis on SR, as detailed above, and SW as detailed in the Indo-Pacific Strategy.⁷

5. Critical to CANSOFCOM’s success is its crisis response mandate. This will remain the priority for the future force as it is today. Based on an element within Joint Task Force (JTF) 2⁸, this component must maintain a high state of readiness and training supported with specific capabilities from across CANSOFCOM. With a challenging operational tempo, CANSOFCOM must constantly monitor and ensure this element is ever-ready. This is a key consideration when discussing organizational structure as any recommendation requires this high readiness element feature predominately as a critical piece to the puzzle. From a capability’s perspective, this requires that certain bespoke capabilities also maintain a high level of readiness and training. This must also be considered when analysing the issue of structure.

6. Currently the operational tempo is high and often operations are conducted specifically by one unit with limited support from one another. From a sheer capacity standpoint, often 2 or more units are focussed on one theatre of operations even though there is only one or two lines of

² Government of Canada. ‘Canadian Special Operations Forces Command’, 24 February 2023. <https://www.canada.ca/en/special-operations-forces-command.html>.

³ Moon, Madeleine. *NATO Special Operations Forces in the Modern Security Environment*. Vol. 169 DSCFC. NATO Parliamentary Assembly 18. Defence and Security Committee (DSC), 2018. <https://www.nato-pa.int/download-file?filename=/sites/default/files/2018-12/2018%20-%20SPECIAL%20OPERATIONS%20FORCES%20-%20MOON%20REPORT%20-%2020169%20DSCFC%2018%20E%20rev.1%20fin.pdf>. pg. 2.

⁴ In addition to the above, Special Forces often play a key role in several other types of tasks from counterinsurgency (CI), counterterrorism (CT) or chemical, biological, radiological and nuclear (CBRN) defence to hostage rescue/release operations.

⁵ CANSOFCOM. ‘Beyond the Horizon. A Strategy for Canada’s Special Operations Forces in an Evolving Security Environment’, 21 July 2020. <https://www.canada.ca/en/departement-national-defence/corporate/reports-publications/cansofcom-beyond-horizon.html>. pg. 9.

⁶ Canada. CANSOFCOM. Future Operating Concept Handbook. Ottawa: Minister of National Defence, 2019, pg. 9

⁷ Special Warfare (SW) is an umbrella term used to describe operations in support of friendly assets. This can be achieved through a myriad of ways to include providing military assistance and support to resistance operations as defined by NATO.

⁸ The organizational structure will not be detailed in this document due to OPSEC requirements.

operation for said theater. From an operator and close supporter perspective, this causes operational tempo issues even though many of the activities could be conducted by elements of similar units, such as JTF 2 and the Canadian Special Operations Regiment (CSOR). As an example, operators from JTF 2 and CSOR often conduct SW like tasks, specifically some level of capacity building and/or providing force multiplier effects in support of critical friendly assets or partners. When supporting a partnered nation, often the requirement is support via capacity building followed by providing equipment or support through the provision of access to specific capabilities they may not have organically. In the current CANSOFCOM organizational structure, these capabilities, although mostly consolidated within one unit, are spread amongst the Command. Although CANSOFCOM has made some advancements in the ‘ownership vs access’ conundrum, there are still difficulties in coordinating their use. Unfortunately, elements of the force may not gain any experience working with certain capabilities until on operations, and therefore do not gain an understanding of their abilities through training.

7. Discussing the tactical level elements of each organization, it is clear there are multiple similarities. Although not completely interchangeable, JTF2 Assaulters and CSOR Special Forces Operators share a lot in common. The sub-subunit and subunit compositions are very similar and smaller tactical elements consist of similar sub specialties in the operator realm. Close supporters from across many of the units are also similar in training and scope of practice, with any minor differences coming from specific requirements at the tactical level. Operators from JTF 2 and CSOR are selected for many of the same qualities and from the same pool of CAF candidates. One major difference resides in the training requirements for the crisis response elements and the precision of skill required for that mission set. CSOR operators do not undergo this training but still maintain a high level of proficiency in core skills with many baseline skills being indiscernible between units. Close supporters within CANSOFCOM undergo much of the same training regardless of unit and are almost completely interchangeable.⁹ An organizational structure that consolidated operators and close supporters would mitigate operational tempo by spreading similar tasks amongst a larger population.

8. As described in the CANSOFCOM FOC, JTF 2, CSOR and the Canadian Joint Incidence Response Unit (CJIRU) operators and close supporters will have employment concepts with similarities across the “entirety of the black, white and grey zones.”¹⁰ As described in the FOC, “[o]perations will depend on a forces’ ability to ingress, egress, and re-supply quickly, appropriately, and when required, covertly.”¹¹ Whether CT, SW or counter-proliferation, all elements will require support from one another and from bespoke capabilities sprinkled across CANSOFCOM. More intelligence collection while acting as a robust sense function for the Government of Canada will be facilitated by all units within CANSOFCOM, enabling a targeting enterprise and mitigating ambiguity.¹² A more streamlined organization with a specifically designed C2 structure would remove units from the responsibility of force employment (FE) and allow them to focus on force generation (FG) and force development (FD).

⁹ Caveats exist as certain close supporters receive enhanced training depending on position and unit within CANSOFCOM. Cannot be detailed due to OPSEC requirements.

¹⁰ Canada. CANSOFCOM. *Future Operating Concept Handbook*. Ottawa: Minister of National Defence, 2019, pg. 14

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Ibid.

9. When considering FG, there would be considerable efficiencies found if FG of operators was consolidated as opposed to having numerous selection processes and basic operator courses running throughout the year. Although not all operator training is identical, JTF2 and CSOR could find many efficiencies in the generation of SOF operators. CJIRU will continue to require specialized training for their operators, and close supporters generally conduct the same baseline training upon entry into CANSOFCOM facilitated by the Canadian Special Operations Training Center (CSOTC). If the organizational structure changed such that operators, specifically from JTF2 and CSOR, were consolidated in one organization, the entry pipeline and resources required to enable it would be significantly reduced and/or streamlined. Organizationally, having multiple fully enabled sub-units to conduct the tasks in support of strategic competition including those outlined in the Indo-Pacific Strategy, would allow for a decrease in operational tempo, more alignment across the force and more cooperation versus competition for scarce resources.

10. The CAF has also released its first publication detailing the Pan-Domain Force Employment Concept (PFEC). As detailed in the PFEC and supported in the Indo-Pacific Strategy, Canada's adversaries are skilled in the domains of cyber, information operations and space.¹³ Unlike our American counterparts that have component/environment-based SOF, CANSOFCOM is responsible for providing any and all SOF effects on behalf of the CAF and Government of Canada. This means that CANSOFCOM will continue to develop relationships and work with all domains in the CAF in order to provide required SOF effects in the maritime, land, air, cyber, space and information domains. This is a big ask and as Pan-Domain challenges continue to present themselves, CANSOFCOM will ever increasingly have to respond to the challenge. Having bespoke capabilities spread across the force means that it is sometimes difficult to build a Pan-Domain Task Force as certain units hold certain capabilities but not necessarily the ones they need for the challenge they face. Having a specific Pan-Domain unit that consolidates resources, FD, FG and is ever-ready to support manoeuvre elements across multiple theaters would increase agility and flexibility within the force.

CONCLUSION

11. With the publication of Canada's Indo-Pacific Strategy, it has become clear that CANSOFCOM's FOC, a product of the Strategic Capability Analysis, is on the right track. Understanding that the future operating environment will require both a response to VEOs and strategic competition, likely in multiple theatres, means that CANSOFCOM will require fully enabled teams, agnostic of unit, to conduct SW operations including military assistance engagements enabling partnered forces around the globe. With some creative thought, CANSOFCOM could increase capacity of operators and close supporters, reduce resources required for FG activities, eliminate ownership versus access issues with regards to specific capabilities and position itself as a leader in Pan-Domain operations by further integrating these capabilities at the tactical level.

12. Lastly, having SOF operators consolidated in one unit would increase the size of the pool to select for the crisis response elements while making it even more diverse than it currently is.

¹³ Canada, Department of National Defence. Pan-Domain Force Employment Concept: Prevailing in an Uncertain World. Ottawa: CJOC, 2022, pg. 4

This would provide operators with lateral movement options and allow for the most skilled operators in the command, indiscriminate of unit affiliation, the opportunity to serve in the crisis response element. If all operators in the command were trained to the same baseline, workups and internal selection would ensure those operators selected to serve in the crisis response element would be capable of meeting the required standards. CANSOFCOM would also be in the position to identify criteria for eligibility and other requirements for operators wanting to serve in the crisis response element ensuring quality control. As an example, basic requirements could consist of having a certain amount of time served as an operator within the unit, positive performance evaluations, additional fitness testing and qualifications to name a few. This would also establish opportunities for operators to move back and forth within the unit between crisis response and regular SOF responsibilities potentially easing tempo concerns across the force. Specific skillsets required for crisis response could also be examined and potentially economized so all operators did not have to maintain proficiency, but rather simply remain current until selected for high readiness tasks. Certain insert and delivery methods are an excellent example of this. Having a Pan-Domain-like unit would also allow for even more lateral movement for operators, close supporters and supporters alike while achieving specific objectives described in the Indo-Pacific Strategy, FOC and PFEC documents.

RECOMMENDATION

13. CANSOFCOM should continue to think critically about its organizational structure while remaining open to creative thinking and analysis driven options. In order to make a solid recommendation on organizational structure, more analysis and conversations at the secret level would be required in order to provide decision makers quality information. CANSOFCOM should consider consolidating operators, from JTF2 and CSOR, into one unit maintaining a crisis response element with several fully enabled sub-units prepared to deploy around the globe in order to achieve Government of Canada strategic objectives. At the same time, bespoke capabilities should be consolidated into a separate unit combining similar capabilities that currently exist across the Command. This specialty unit should form the basis of a Pan-Domain unit providing efficiencies in FG and FD specifically, as these functions would now be consolidated in one structure. More analysis on C2 is required, but a FE headquarters responsible to pull required resources from these different units and build Pan-Domain Task Forces would remove ownership versus access issues at the unit level and empower Special Operations Task Forces.

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