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The Transformation of Special Operations Forces in Contemporary Conflict:
Strategy, Missions, Organisation and Tactics

by

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ABBREVIATIONS AND ACRONYMS

SOF	Special Operations Forces
TAG	Tactical Assault Group
UK	United Kingdom
US	United States
UW	Unconventional Warfare

ABSTRACT

This paper is a study of the recent transformation in the employment and structure of Special Operations Forces. The author argues that these forces have moved from a marginal, albeit important, part of traditional conventional strategy towards being a central component of any government warfighting or national security response. Their transformation may be seen in the context of the missions they are called on to perform and the capabilities they must therefore possess. Recent changes to organisational structures, doctrine and tactics demonstrate high levels of innovation, and the combination of technology with traditionally high levels of resourcefulness and adaptability has resulted in some new approaches to the conduct of operations. Taken together, these changes may offer governments an increasingly viable and effective alternative to the conventional use of force by states.

The Transformation of Special Operations Forces in Contemporary Conflict

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Captain Malcolm Brailey

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Introduction

In the fourteen years that have elapsed since the collapse of the Soviet Union in August 1991, armed conflict and the use of military force have transcended many traditional and well-established boundaries.[1] Numerous scholars have grappled with the systemic and strategic nature of these changes. However, significantly less attention has been given to the equally important changes and transformations occurring among the many and varied actors who actually participate in war. In this paper the author addresses this lacuna, in part, by examining one of the most interesting and important phenomena occurring in defence and strategic studies—the steadily increasing importance of Special Operations Forces (SOF).

In the late 20th century, it became almost standard practice among armed forces the world over to include elite combat units somewhere within their organisational structure. For most

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1 For an exceptional analysis of the broader changes occurring in the theory and practice of war, see M. Evans, 'From Kadesh to Kandahar: Military Theory and the Future of War', *Naval War College Review*, vol. 56, no. 3, Summer 2003, pp. 132–50.

countries these units typically centred around land force elements. Among many of the larger states specialist maritime and aviation elements were also present. Generally, the raison d'etre for any of these elite units was to support the aims of conventional strategy and to supplement the activities of conventional military forces.[2] Over the past decade, however, SOF have gradually developed into a potent and indispensable component of modern armed forces outside, and separate to, conventional structures and doctrine. They are becoming increasingly 'joint' in nature, as well as displaying great utility across the spectrum of conflict. More often than not, SOF now directly shape the strategy and conduct of military operations in both character and intent.

Historically, 'unorthodox' strategy is certainly not a new phenomenon: guerrilla warfare has long been the tactic of the 'irregular' combating the 'regular'.[3] In this context, however, 'irregular' has tended to be associated with non-state or quasi-state groups; and 'regular' with the standing and professional armed forces of governments and legitimate political actors. What is most striking about special operations in the late 20th century is the 'extraordinary growth in the irregular activities of the regulars … to secure strategic effect through an unconventional style'.[4]

In this paper the author aims to document and explore this phenomenon in detail. The paper begins by locating and defining SOF and special operations in the rubric of strategic theory. In this section the idea of these forces providing strategic utility is also examined. Then, from a more empirical perspective, the major

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[2] See R. A. Beaumont, *Special Operations and Elite Units: 1939–1988*, Greenwood, Westport, CT, 1988.

[3] For the definitive study of guerrilla warfare and strategy, see W. Laqueur, *Guerrilla Warfare: A Historical and Critical Study*, Transaction Publishers, New Brunswick, NJ, 1998; and R. B. Asprey, *War in the Shadows: The Guerrilla in History*, W Morrow, New York, 1994.

[4] C. Gray, *Modern Strategy*, Oxford University Press, New York, 1999, pp. 286 and 289.

changes and emerging trends in the missions and capabilities of SOF that have become evident in the many conflicts of the past decade are identified. Finally, a similar empirical framework is employed in order to examine the innovative tactics of SOF evident in more recent operations, such as those in Afghanistan and Iraq, and the equally innovative and adaptive organisational changes. The author contends that SOF represent a harbinger for change in the way states think about the conduct of war. In addition, they may offer an increasingly viable, effective and legitimate alternative to traditional approaches to the use of force by states.[5] Most of the argument is drawn from an analysis of the transformation and deployment of SOF from two developed nation-states at either end of the defence material scale: the United States of America and Australia. These two nations have greatly advanced the SOF concept in recent years. Thus, they provide a relevant and salient example of how these forces have been transformed and of future possibilities. [6]

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[5] It is not proposed here that SOF will make traditional strategy obsolete. However, as argued in this paper, these forces are moving from existing on the fringes of traditional approaches to strategy towards being a central component of all national and international security calculations. Indeed, further study is needed to show just where they sit within the strategic milieu. Many Western states are moving away from European strategic traditions towards more Eastern, indirect, strategic thinking. This shift is not addressed in this paper, however, as consideration of SOF involves examination of only Western strategic thought.

[6] The United Kingdom, South Africa and Israel are other nations that also have highly developed SOF. However, unlike the United States and Australia there is very little public access information available. This makes it extremely difficult for the researcher to identify any substantive evidence of transformation.

Strategic Theory and Special Operations Forces

It is necessary to preface the wider examination of SOF with a brief foray into what this term means from a theoretical perspective. Generally, the study of these forces suffers from being an inherently rich empirical subject with little or no available theory of contemporary strategic relevance.[7] A rudimentary look at the strategic fundamentals and principles of both SOF and special operations will provide added nuance to the empirical information presented in this paper.

SOF tend to be the part of any defence force that is glorified by the media and the entertainment industry, but remain shielded behind the closed doors of government security policy and, more often, self-imposed secrecy. Also, SOF generally consist of unique forces specific to particular country requirements. Therefore, they exhibit few commonalities internationally other than a shared elite status. As such, the initial temptation in defining SOF is to juxtapose their identity against the mainstream or conventional military identity—the special- as opposed to the general-purpose forces that make up a defence force. This tautological approach is, however, largely inadequate for the purposes of a wider study of these forces from a strategic theory perspective. It would include too wide a variety of military organisations with very different missions and capabilities. For example, some special units may fulfil internal policing and intelligence roles, while others may focus on a particular specialisation or capability such as parachuting. This situation

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[7] The most well known theory of special operations is W. H. McRaven, *Spec Ops, Case Studies of Special Operations Warfare: Theory and Practice*, Presidio, Novato, CA, 1995. The main shortcoming of this book, by McRaven's own admission, is the definition of special operations that he uses to establish his theory, limited as it is to direct action tasks. Less well known, but more useful, is a chapter on 'Special Operations and Strategy' in C. S. Gray, *Explorations in Strategy*, Greenwood Press, Westport, CT, 1996.

highlights national differences rather than international commonalities and reveals little about their higher strategic function. An alternative and more fruitful approach is to define what constitutes a special operation and to extrapolate from that which kinds of forces are selected and trained to perform those operations on a case-by-case basis.

Defining Special Operations

In Western military thought, special operations are most commonly defined in the context of conventional high-intensity war, as shaped by the experience of significant interstate conflict during the 20th century. For example, Edward Luttwak describes special operations as 'self-contained acts of war mounted by self-sufficient forces operating within hostile territory'.[8] Likewise, MRD Foot sees special operations as:

> unorthodox coups … unexpected strokes of violence, usually mounted and executed outside the military establishment of the day, which exercise a startling effect on the enemy: preferably at the highest level.[9]

However, Maurice Tugwell and David Charters have correctly noted that these types of definitions are deficient because they fail to consider that contemporary special operations are often undertaken outside the context of conventional war—that is, without a well-defined 'enemy', frequently not in 'hostile territory' (though arguably still dangerous), and indeed they may not always involve the use of 'violence'.[10]

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[8] E. Luttwak, *A Systematic Review of "Commando" (Special) Operations 1939–1980*, C&L Associates, Potomac, MD, 1982, p. I-1.

[9] M. R. D. Foot, 'Special Operations, I', in E. Elliott-Bateman (ed.), *The Fourth Dimension Resistance*, Manchester University Press, Manchester, 1970, p. 19.

[10] M. Tugwell, and D. Charters, 'Special Operations and the Threats to United States Interests in the 1980s', in F. R. Barnett, B. Hugh Tovar and R. H. Shultz (eds), *Special Operations in US Strategy*, National Defense University Press, Washington, DC, 1984, p. 34.

Tugwell and Charters go on to provide possibly the most concise and inclusive definition of special operations, which, despite being written in 1984, remains particularly salient today. They define such operations as:

> [s]mall scale, clandestine, covert or overt operations of an unorthodox and frequently high-risk nature, undertaken to achieve significant political or military objectives in support of foreign policy.[11]

Further, special operations are characterised by:

> either simplicity or complexity, by subtlety and imagination, by the discriminate use of violence, and by oversight at the highest level. Military and non-military resources, including intelligence assets, may be used in concert.[12]

The US Department of Defense has more recently affirmed the scope of this earlier academic position with a similar policy definition of its own. It states that:

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[11] *Ibid.*, p. 35. It is important for the reader to note the difference between 'covert' and 'clandestine' in this context. Kevin O'Brien gives us a succinct definition in that 'clandestine operations refer to those operations carried out by uniformed soldiers … such that their activities can be neither confirmed nor denied, but such that these operations are not done in the public eye; in contrast, covert operations refers to those operations carried out by non-uniformed soldiers and/or civilians such that their involvement … can be plausibly denied'. See K. A. O'Brien, 'Special Forces for Counter-Revolutionary Warfare: The South African Case' *Small Wars and Insurgencies*, vol. 12, no. 2, Summer 2001, pp. 79–109.

[12] *Ibid.*

> [s]pecial operations are operations conducted in hostile, denied, or politically sensitive environments to achieve military, diplomatic, informational, and/or economic objectives employing military capabilities for which there is no broad conventional force requirement.[13]

The strategic emphasis of special operations is also evident in recent Australian military doctrine. Australia defines special operations as highly focused operations executed at the tactical level, using unconventional military means, designed to achieve wider operational and strategic effects. Importantly, Australia also acknowledges that special operations are shaped by political and military considerations, and that they therefore require oversight at the national level.[14]

For the purposes of this paper, SOF are defined as those discrete elements of legitimate state-based military forces that are specifically selected, trained and organised to conduct special operations.[15]

The Concept of Strategic Utility

From the perspective of military theory, the most significant aspect of SOF is a consideration of their strategic utility. The concept of strategic utility surpasses mere questions of usefulness. Instead, it seeks to measure the effectiveness of a particular kind of military activity on the course and outcome of an entire

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[13] US Department of Defense, *Special Operations Force Posture Statement 2003/2004*, <www.defenselink.mil/policy/solic/2003_2004_SOF_posture_statement.pdf/>.

[14] See Australian Defence Doctrine Publication 3.12—*Special Operations*, April 2004. Readers should note that this is an internal ADF publication and is subject to a security caveat.

[15] While this may seem like an obvious point, it is important to make, since it is this fact that distinguishes SOF from other elite national security elements, such as paramilitary police units (who support domestic policy) or larger regular units such as marines or paratroopers (who carry out a specialised conventional task).

conflict.[16] At the tactical level SOF obviously can have a direct influence; at the operational level these forces can have both a direct and indirect influence; and at the strategic level they can also have an indirect influence. Colin Gray has argued that the use of special operations as a distinct strategy by states and the recent concurrent expansion of SOF may be attributed largely to their strategic utility—that is, their usefulness in providing an 'economy of force' and an 'expansion of strategic choice'.[17]

For Gray, these two 'master claims' form the core of the strategic utility of SOF. First, these forces provide economy of force—which is one of the key principles of war—because they can achieve significant results with limited resources. They act as a force multiplier on the battlefield for other more conventional components and can, relative to their size, also have a disproportionate impact on a battle themselves.[18] Second, SOF can expand the options available to political and military leaders in support of their respective goals. Gray makes the point that, in theory, there are always alternatives to the use of force for governments—for example, diplomacy and sanctions. He also notes, however, that in practice 'there are some situations that one cannot resolve successfully without resort to physical coercion'. The availability of a special operations capability means that a country can use military force 'flexibly, minimally, and precisely'.[19]

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[16] The key text on the analysis of strategic utility is A. R. Millett and W. Murray, *Military Effectiveness* (three volumes), Allen and Unwin, Boston, 1988.

[17] C. Gray, 'Handfuls of Heroes on Desperate Ventures: When do Special Operations Succeed?', *Parameters*, Spring 1999, no. 2. This idea had earlier been advanced by Gray (1996) in *Explorations in Strategy*, *op. cit.*

[18] Gray, 1996, *op. cit.*, pp. 168–74. Gray outlines seventeen separate reasons as to why special operations provide economy of force in battle. The two points that the current author notes are, however, a reasonable summary of his core argument.

[19] *Ibid.*, p. 174.

In his comprehensive study, Gray makes a further seven claims for the strategic utility of SOF that deserve passing mention here. He notes that they are innovative, contribute to morale, showcase a force's competence, provide reassurance, humiliate the enemy, control escalation, and shape the future.[20]

In the context of today's increasingly complex security environment, Mark Mitchell has pointed out a further, vital claim for the strategic utility of SOF—'tailor-to-task capabilities'.[21] Indeed, today's SOF seem able to adapt to a wide variety of constantly changing situations and conditions. Further, their extant skills, experience and operational maturity allow them to be used in an even wider variety of missions.

SOF Missions and Capabilities

It would be incorrect to imply that contemporary SOF are fundamentally different from either their historical antecedents or recent forerunners. As noted in the introduction, irregular units or raiding forces have been evident in the methods of warfare of many societies for millennia. For example, both the Roman and Persian empires employed a raiding style of unconventional warfare more than 1500 years ago.[22] In the 19th and early 20th centuries, Britain battled desperately on the Indian Northwest Frontier with an enemy whose strategic culture was centred on

[20] *Ibid.*, pp. 175–85 for a full analysis of these further seven claims.

[21] Major M. E. Mitchell, 'Strategic Leverage: Information Operations and Special Operations Forces', thesis, USN, Naval Postgraduate School, Monterey CA, 1999, p. 84.

[22] For a history of Roman unconventional warfare, see B. Isaac, *The Limits of Empire: the Roman Army in the East*, Clarendon Press, Oxford, 1990, pp. 235–49. For a history of Persian unconventional warfare, see I. Shahid, *Byzantium and the Arabs in the Fourth Century*, Dumbarton Oaks Research Library and Collection, Washington, DC, 1984.

irregular and unorthodox warfare.[23] Colin Gray noted that, while contemporary SOF certainly have historical antecedents—significantly most often of non-Western origin—the 'systemic organisation and training of small elite groups of soldiers … is essentially a recent innovation in warfare'.[24] In this modern context, SOF undoubtedly experienced their greatest expansion and first rise to prominence in World War II. In that conflict, almost all involved parties developed and employed some kind of unorthodox or irregular forces.[25]

What has changed since that formative period, and what appears to be a trend of increasing importance, is that contemporary SOF are required to conduct an extremely broad range of missions in a highly complex global security environment. Further, the capabilities that they must posses in order to achieve those missions include traditional skills as well as genuinely new and innovative aspects. While specific roles are generally country-dependent, several key areas can be highlighted as significant in the recent wider development of SOFs' missions and capabilities.They include:

- the conduct of global operations within a strategic culture of pre-emptive action, including the so-called Global War On Terror;
- domestic-security roles, including domestic counter-terrorism;

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23 See T. R. Moreman, 'The British and Indian Armies and North-West Frontier Warfare: 1849–1914', *Journal of Imperial and Commonwealth History*, vol. 20, no. 1, 1992, pp. 35–64.

24 Gray, 1996, *op. cit.*, p. 146.

25 The literature on SOF in World War II is immense. This paper does not fully outline the history of these forces over time, or even since 1945. The aim here is to establish the origins of modern elite military forces, as used by nation-states.

- several key missions outside of the warfighting rubric, including anti-drug operations and various peacekeeping roles; and
- the resurgence of unconventional warfare missions—perhaps a more traditional SOF task.

SOF have most recently been required to conduct operations on a global scale, across various regions, within a strategic culture of pre-emptive action.[26] On 11 September 2001 and 12 October 2002, terrorists attacked New York and Bali respectively. These attacks highlighted the, perhaps perceived, need for governments to take pre-emptive action—or at least to maintain a military pre-emptive capability—against two key threat agents: international terrorism and the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction.[27]

SOF have become the 'force of choice' for both international counter-terrorism operations and activities to stop the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction. A recent RAND report has noted that this offensive orientation is markedly different from past counter-terrorism efforts. The difference is such that this orientation can be defined as Offensive Counter-Terrorism to better distinguish it from more traditional doctrinal tasks.[28]

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[26] The catalyst for this culture is the *National Security Strategy of the United States of America September 2002*, or more broadly the suite of policies that have come to be known as the 'Bush Doctrine'. While this is an internal US policy initiative, other nations sympathetic to the United States have also stated an intent for a similar 'pre-emptive' strategy, Australia being a key example.

[27] For the purposes of operational clarity, these two types of threat agents should not always be conflated, though the most dangerous threat would certainly be terrorists equipped with weapons of mass destruction.

[28] B. Nardulli, *The Global War on Terrorism: An Early Look at Implications for the Army*, RAND Documented Briefing prepared for the US Army, RAND Corporation, Arlington, VA, 2003, p. viii.

Offensive Counter-terrorism

It would seem that only the armed forces of the United States have conducted offensive counter-terrorism missions. However, it is reasonable to speculate that other coalition and partner nations have participated and cooperated with the United States on such tasks. The exact nature and number of offensive counter-terrorism missions remains closely guarded for operational security reasons. There is, however, substantial secondary evidence suggesting a high tempo of SOF activity in the Global War On Terror and in the hunt for weapons of mass destruction. For example, Thomas W. O'Connell, the US Assistant Secretary of Defense for Special Operations and Low Intensity Conflict, has pointed out that US SOF are currently conducting 'combat missions, strategic reconnaissance … and training operations worldwide'.[29]

In addition to the high-profile activities in Iraq and Afghanistan, US SOF and partner nations have also been concurrently involved in offensive counter-terrorism operations in the Philippines, Djibouti, Yemen, Somalia, Pakistan, Georgia, Uzbekistan and Columbia.[30] In terms of operational success, since 11 September 2001, more than 3000 operatives have reportedly been captured in more than 100 countries. In the same period, more than fifty terrorist leaders and planners have been either killed or captured in twenty different countries.[31]

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[29] Quoted from G. Gilmore, 'Special Operations: Force Multiplier in Anti-terror War', *American Forces Information Service*, 13 November 2003, <www.defenselink.mil/news/Nov2003>.

[30] G. Corera, 'Special Operations Forces Take Care of War on Terror', *Janes Intelligence Review*, 1 January 2003.

[31] See statement by Marshall Billingslea, Principal Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defense SO/LIC, 'Waging the War on Terrorism', speech to the Heritage Foundation, 11 April 2003, <www.heritage.org/research/nationalsecurity>. These figures most likely represent a tally of all terrorists killed or captured by several United States agencies, and hence may not solely be a result of SOF operations. Similar results for weapons of mass destruction counter-proliferation operations are

Perhaps not surprisingly, the US Secretary of Defense, Donald Rumsfeld, has formally tasked the US Special Operations Command as the unified combatant command responsible for the conduct of offensive counter-terrorism operations.[32] Further, and more recently, Secretary Rumsfeld has designated US Special Operations Command as the 'global synchronizer' in the war on terrorism for all the US military combatant commands, and has given them responsibility for designating a new global counter-terrorism campaign plan and conducting preparatory reconnaissance missions against terrorist organisations around the world.[33] This new approach, documented in the classified 'National Military Strategic Plan for the War on Terrorism', has unified the US military under a special operations umbrella for the first time.[34] This is a significant development, since it is now a dedicated SOF headquarters that has primary control over all offensive counter-terrorism operations worldwide.[35]

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notably lacking from statements issued by United States officials. However, that should not detract from the fact that the hunt for weapons of mass destruction remains a policy priority that, it must be assumed, also translates to at least some level of operational activity.

32 M. Fitzsimmons, 'The Importance of Being Special: Planning for the Future of US Special Operations Forces', *Defense and Security Analysis*, vol. 19, no. 3, 2003, pp. 203–18.

33 L. Robinson, 'Plan of Attack', *US News and World Report*, 1 August 2005, <http://www.usnews.com/usnews/news/articles/050801/1terror.htm>.

34 *Ibid.*

35 For the first time, the new strategy also directs combatant commanders to go after a list of eight pressure points at which terrorist groups could be vulnerable: ideological support, weapons, funds, communications and movement, safe havens, foot soldiers, access to targets, and leadership. These nodes provide a focus for offensive counter-terrorism operations and will most likely involve significant—if not solely—SOF. See Robinson (*ibid.*) for further details.

The utility of SOF for this global mission lies not only in hard, or warfighting, capabilities, but more importantly in their high level of soft capabilities, including languages, regional area specialties (cultural and political) and the use of information technology. Special Operations Forces' soft capabilities have evolved to such an extent recently—and as demonstrated by their operational success—that Anthony Cordesman has labelled them as 'snake eaters with masters degrees'.[36]

Domestic Counter-terrorism

Counter-terrorism is now also an essential, and parallel, mission for SOF in the domestic environment.[37] Many nations have maintained—and in some cases very successfully used—domestic counter-terrorism capabilities for some time. However, typically, the military has been seen as a force of last resort, with primary responsibility instead resting with internal law-enforcement agencies. Once again, the events of 11 September 2001 have caused a paradigm shift in this regard. Since then, terrorism motivated by religion has increased, accompanied by a corresponding increase in the scale and lethality of terrorist attacks. This new situation means that the standard law-enforcement response may now be largely inadequate. The much higher level of operational capability found in military SOF now seems to be the more natural, and logical, response to domestic terrorist incidents.[38]

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[36] A. H. Cordesman, *The Iraq War: Strategy, Tactics, and Military Lessons*, CSIS Press, Washington, DC, 2003, p. 364.

[37] The author defines counter-terrorism as offensive measures taken to prevent, deter and respond to terrorist acts. This should not be confused with anti-terrorism, which would involve broader defensive measures taken to reduce vulnerability to terrorist acts. Naturally, SOF capabilities lend themselves more to the former.

[38] The author acknowledges that in most countries counter-terrorism remains a 'civil' responsibility, with the military responding only to requests for support from other internal agencies.

The demand for 'homeland security' has indeed evolved into a new strategic milieu. This new environment has seen governments, and their citizens, adjust their perceptions—material and ideological—about the boundaries of national defence and security policies. In this context, military and SOF involvement has come to be seen as a defining part of any homeland security strategy.[39] Of course SOF involvement in domestic counter-terrorism is not particularly new. However, since 2001 it has certainly received a much greater focus from many governments, and this has led to a significant increase in the military domestic counter-terrorism capability of many nations.

Australia, for example, has recently effectively doubled its domestic counter-terrorism capability. In May 2002, the Australian Defence Minister, Robert Hill, announced the details of several new counter-terrorism initiatives. The most significant of these initiatives for Australia's SOF was the raising of a second Tactical Assault Group (TAG) at a cost of $A219.4 million.[40] The second TAG is based in Sydney and complements the existing group located in Perth.[41] Both groups are primarily designed to

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39 The term *homeland security* has come to be associated with any national government policies or organisations that seek to 'defend' states (internally) from terrorism in a holistic fashion. The method is best characterised by the newly formed US Department of Homeland Security, though many other states have also sought to remodel their internal security apparatus along these lines.

40 See Minister for Defence, 'Budget 2002–03, Counter-Terrorism Capabilities Doubled', Media Release MIN 204/02, 14 May 2002.

41 The original tactical assault group was formed in 1980 as a direct consequence of the Hilton Hotel bombing in Sydney in 1978. It was Australia's first military specialist counter-terrorist capability and was both drawn from, and embedded in, the Special Air Service Regiment (SASR) in Perth. See Major General D. Lewis, 'Guarding Australians Against Terrorism', *Australian Army Journal*, December 2003, vol. I, no. 2, pp. 45–52. See also the chapter on the formation of the SAS CT

resolve hostage, or siege-style, terrorist incidents beyond the organic capabilities of police. This task is broadly known as ‘special recovery’. TAG capabilities also extend to a wider range of tasks, including service-assisted or protected evacuation, entry from the air and sea, maritime point of entry, and combat search and rescue.[42] Clarke Jones believes that it is almost inevitable that any major act of terrorism occurring within Australian territory, or against Australian interests, would elicit an Australian Defence Force response. The doubling of the Tactical Assault Group capability is a further important signal in that regard.[43]

The Australian SOF community is now firmly a part of the Australian Government’s domestic-security strategy. It provides policy advice, both inside and outside the Department of Defence, contributes to national command and control arrangements, and maintains an increased operational capability to combat terrorism within the Australian domestic environment.[44] The Australian Government recognises the significance, and growing importance, of SOF in Australia’s security policy arrangements. This recognition was highlighted when it appointed Major General Duncan Lewis, the former Special Operations Commander Australia, as the First Assistant Secretary for National Security in the Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet in 2004, and as Deputy Secretary in the same department in August 2005.[45] This important civilian political appointment plays a key role in driving

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capability in D. M. Horner, *SAS: Phantoms of War*, updated edn, Allen and Unwin, Sydney, 2002.

42 Minister for Defence Media Release 204/02. The exact nature of tactical assault group capabilities is not disclosed by official sources.

43 C. Jones, ‘Transnational threats and the role of the military in the 21st Century’, paper presented at the Australian Defence Studies Centre Homeland Security Conference, Canberra, 1 November 2002.

44 Lewis, *loc. cit.*

45 Minister for Defence Media Release 181/2004 dated 14 October 2004.

domestic-security and counter-terrorism policy in Australia across the spectrum of government, and the appointment of a former senior Special Operations officer is a significant development in Australia's policy approach.

Similar developments in the United States are somewhat more difficult to detect given that, traditionally, domestic counter-terrorism has long been the responsibility of the Federal Bureau of Investigation's Hostage Rescue Team.[46] However, the recently established US Northern Command has been assigned to deter, prevent and defeat threats and aggression targeted at the United States and its territories. This mission includes Operation *Noble Eagle*, an ongoing, US-based homeland defence and civil support operation associated with the wider war on terrorism.[47] It could be assumed that Northern Command may at some stage have access to the SOF units normally reserved for offshore incidents in situations requiring a military response to domestic terrorist incidents, noting the current limitations of the Posse Comitatus Act.[48]

Further to the national-level command and control developments at Northern Command, the US Special Operations Command has also recently established a Counter-Terrorism Campaign Support Group. The mission of this group is to provide inter-agency, civil

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46 In addition, the US Military is legally restricted from participating in domestic law enforcement, as codified in the *Posse Comitatus* Act of 1878. See K. Guttieri, 'Homeland Security and US Civil–Military Relations', US Naval Postgraduate School, *Strategic Insight*, 1 August 2003, <www.ccc.nps.navy.mil>.

47 C. Bolkom *et al.*, 'Homeland Security: Establishment and Implementation of Northern Command', Library of Congress Congressional Research Service (CRS), *CRS Report For Congress*, 14 May 2003, p. 3.

48 Currently, the two main US military counter-terrorism units are the Army's 1st Special Forces Operational Detachment—Delta, Combat Application Group (CAG), and the Naval Special Warfare Development Group (formerly known as Seal Team 6).

and military support to existing federal agencies at the operational level.[49] For the US Special Operations Command, the domestic counter-terrorism mission is so significant that ‘Enhancing Homeland Security’ is now the second operational priority for the Command, after countering global terrorism and chemical, biological, radiological, nuclear and explosive threats.[50]

Non-traditional Missions

Since the mid-1990s, SOF have also been called on to perform a wide variety of non-traditional military missions. These missions have been outside the warfighting rubric and in support of wider national security objectives or international peacekeeping efforts.[51] Initially, it is likely that governments were drawn into using, or choosing, these forces due to the latter’s high levels of operational readiness and broad range of capabilities as opposed to conventional units. Worldwide, SOF tend to have developed that unique capability within defence forces of being extremely agile when responding to such tasks and maintaining the high levels of training needed to perform with minimal risk.

Over time, the generally outstanding performance of SOF units on non-traditional missions has meant that they are now often the tool of choice for policy makers and politicians in times of international crisis, or whenever national military commitments or deployments to peacekeeping missions are considered. Australia

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[49] US Senate Committee on Appropriations, Defense Subcommittee Hearing: Statement of General Richard Myers, Press Release 5 March 2003.

[50] *Special Operations Force Posture Statement 2003/04*, *op. cit.*, p. 29.

[51] For a good introduction to this topic, see the range of articles in *Small Wars and Insurgencies*, vol. 7, no. 1, Spring 1996, ‘Special Issue: The Role of Special Operations Forces in Multinational Peace Operations’; and also L. L. Fuller, *Role of United States Special Operations Forces in Peace Operations*, Strategy Research Project, US Army War College, Carlisle, PA, 1996.

and the United States have used SOF extensively for non-traditional missions throughout the 1990s and in the early years of the 21st century.[52] Two good examples of non-traditional missions now performed by SOF are anti-drug operations, and global efforts to track down and capture terrorists and war criminals.

SOF and Anti-drug Missions

Since the mid-1990s the US Federal Government has required its SOF to conduct covert, clandestine and overt anti-drug missions in South and Central America. Principally, this has taken the form of US SOF supporting 'interagency and host-nation measures taken to detect, interdict or disrupt any action that may be reasonably related to illegal narcotics activity'.[53] In 1997 alone, US SOF conducted some 194 anti-drug missions, mostly in Central America.[54] These forces remain in the region, and are 'continuously training' host-nation counter-narcotics forces, particularly in Ecuador and Colombia, where Colombian military forces recently captured the key rebel leader and drug baron Ricardo Palmera, allegedly with the assistance of US SOF.[55]

Some observers have called for an even larger scale SOF commitment to Colombia, where the Colombian Revolutionary Armed Forces have a 15 000-strong rebel army. This army has evolved from a classic guerilla group into a terrorist and drug-trafficking organisation and so presents a major threat to the

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[52] Of course SOF from many other nations have also played such roles—including the United Kingdom, Canada and New Zealand. Most NATO nations have also contributed SOF units on a small scale to operations in the Balkans and now in Afghanistan. France has repeatedly used its SOF units in many humanitarian missions in Africa.

[53] *Special Operations Force Posture Statement 2003/04*, *op. cit.*, p. 40.

[54] Major General P. J. Schoomaker, 'US Special Operations Forces: the way ahead' *Special Warfare*, Winter 1998, p. 5.

[55] J. Forero, 'Columbian rebel's capture was result of hunt aided by US', *New York Times*, 4 January 2004.

region. A possible model for combating drug cartels of this magnitude has been suggested by two American writers, Major General A. A. Valenzuela and Colonel V. M. Rosello. They envisage a military support commitment based on doctrinal Army SOF Mobile Training Teams. These teams were used successfully in El Salvador during the 1980s and early 1990s.[56]

Australian SOF have also begun to play a key role in major anti-drug operations. On 20 April 2003, Australian SOF boarded the *Pong Su*, a North Korean ship in Australian territorial waters suspected of drug trafficking. The ship was subsequently found to be carrying 50 kilograms of heroin, and the operation was a major success for the Australian SOF and the various law enforcement agencies with which they were cooperating.[57]

It is significant that only SOF assets were able to carry out such an assault, and at extremely short notice, with little or no preparation. The Special Air Service Regiment, in particular, has long been developing an offshore ship-under-way recovery capability in the context of its domestic counter-terrorism role. This capability is now of increasing appeal to state and federal law-enforcement agencies planning anti-drug operations. Even in the context of domestic crime, it seems that these forces will play a vital, and perhaps indispensable role, through the provision of a high-risk recovery capability.

Locating and Capturing Key Target Individuals

In the history of SOF, locating and capturing key target individuals during the course of a conflict has certainly been a major task. The most famous example of this type of mission is

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[56] Major General A. A. Valenzuela and Colonel V. M. Rosello, 'The War on Drugs and Terrorism: El Salvador and Colombia', *Military Review*, March–April 2004, pp. 28–35.

[57] P. Conford and B. Malkin, 'Seized: Ship They Hunted for Days', *Sydney Morning Herald*, 21 April 2003.

the kidnapping exploits of Germany's Otto Skorzeny during World War II. Both political and military leaders have also been the targets of such missions. An example is the capture of Ah Hoi, the Malay Chinese communist leader, by the British Special Air Service in the jungles of Malaya in 1958.[58]

More recently, however, SOF have been asked to perform a similar mission against two very different types of targets: international war criminals and international terrorist leaders. It is worth noting that, despite these historical precedents, this contemporary mission has several defining characteristics that make it unique. First, the task of finding and capturing these new targets most often does not take place in a well-defined area of operations, or even a single geographic region. Second, the requirement for intelligence leading to a successful mission is more likely to be interagency or international in nature, requiring high levels of coordination and cooperation. Third, SOF are most likely to be operating outside the normal legal conventions governing war, despite the often public and political rhetoric to the contrary. This environment affects both their own legal status and that of their targets.[59]

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[58] K. Conner, *Ghost Force—The Secret History of the SAS*, Orion Books, London, 2000, p. 50.

[59] The suite of International Humanitarian Law (such as the Geneva Conventions) that govern the conduct of armed conflict come to mind. Of note in this context are laws relating to the treatment of combatants and noncombatants, in relation not only to persons captured by Special Operations Forces, but also as they relate to the forces themselves—for example, the requirement to wear distinctive uniforms while on a military operation. For two interesting articles on this subject with opposing views, see R. J. Drone, 'Non-traditional Uniforms do Accord Prisoner of War Status for Special Operations Forces', thesis, George Washington University Law School, submitted 31 August 2003; and W. H. Ferrell, 'No Shirt, No Shoes, No Status: Uniforms, Distinction, and Special Operations in International Armed Conflict', *Military Law Review*, vol. 178, Winter 2003, pp. 94–141.

The role of SOF from various nations has been particularly notable in the former Yugoslav state of Bosnia-Herzegovina. The International Criminal Tribunal for the Former Yugoslavia indicted many war criminals in Boznia-Herzegovina, most of whom remained at large following the signing of the Dayton Peace Accords in 1995. The former NATO Implementation and Stabilisation forces in Bosnia, and now the new resident European Force, have remained acutely aware of the problems posed by Personnel Indicted for War Crimes. However, the task of finding and arresting them has been largely left to US and UK SOF. Typically, these forces have operated outside the NATO mandate in Bosnia, conducting national-level direct-action or special-recovery tasks. US Special Mission Units—such as SEAL Team 6 and Delta Force—have previously operated sporadically in Bosnia since 1997, mounting two major missions involving up to 300 and 100 operators respectively in that year alone.[60]

US SOF also demonstrated a substantial strategic-reconnaissance/special-recovery capability during operations in Somalia between 1992 and 1995. Despite the now-infamous casualties sustained during one such raid by Task Force Ranger on 3 October 1993, US Special Missions Units had already been conducting a series of successful raids and had apprehended key members of Mohamed Aideed's leadership infrastructure.[61]

The UK Special Air Service Regiment has also previously operated in Bosnia for some time, and the search for war criminals was a core task for them. Unlike the US SOF—whose Special Mission Units were flown in specifically for certain tasks—the Special Air

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[60] R. J. Newman, 'Hunting War Criminals', *World Report*, 6 July 1998, <www.specialoperations.com/Army/Delta_Force/bosnia>.

[61] For a detailed account of US SOF actions in Somalia, see Colonel J. D. Celeski, 'A History of SF Operations in Somalia: 1992–1995', *Special Warfare*, June 2002, pp. 16–27.

Service tended to maintain a small permanent detachment in Bosnia. This formation gave its members the distinct advantage of being able to gather their own intelligence over time, plan and train for specific missions, and also to react rapidly on any local information. Most notably, the Special Air Service captured General Stanislav Galic, the Serb commander who besieged Sarajevo during December 1999. In the period to 2000, the Special Air Service conducted eleven such operations in the British Sector of Bosnia alone. These operations resulted in the arrest of fifteen suspects and in the deaths of two more. However, the two most wanted personnel indicted for war crimes—Radovan Karadzic and Ratko Mladic—remain at large at the time of writing.[62]

More recently, the 2003 war against Iraq saw a much larger and more concerted effort to use SOF in the search for the Baathist leadership. A new unit, called Task Force 121, has allegedly now been created, to 'hunt down' former Iraqi leaders and key terrorist operatives across the region.[63] Much about this force remains classified. It is, however, clear that Task Force 121 is a unique and tailored SOF task unit that has been designed to act with greater speed on intelligence tips about 'high-value targets'.[64]

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62 'SAS Sweep on Serb Butcher', *Daily Mail* (UK), 21 December 1999, <www.specialoperations.com/Focus/butcher>.

63 At the time of writing, Task Force 121 is a unit of US Central Command and as such is responsible for tracking down terrorists within the command's geographic area of responsibility, of which both Iraq and Afghanistan are part. As the US Special Operations Command assumes responsibility for the global war on terrorism, it is possible that this element may come back under their command.

64 T. Shanker and E. Schmitt, 'Pentagon Says a Covert Force Hunts Hussein', *New York Times*, 7 November 2003. This force's involvement in the actual discovery and arrest of Hussein in December 2003 is unknown. See also S. Hersh, 'Moving Targets', *New Yorker*, 15 December 2003. Hersh has also revealed claims of US SOF being involved in covert operations against terrorist targets in as many as ten Middle Eastern nations. See S. Hersh, 'The Coming Wars', *New Yorker*, 17 January 2005.

Reportedly, US Special Mission Units have also recently returned to the south-eastern mountains of Afghanistan, along the Pakistani border.[65] This is part of a revitalised effort to find Osama bin Laden and his remaining leadership in Afghanistan, and to counter a resurgence of Taliban and al-Qa'ida forces in the border provinces. This Special Mission Unit is allegedly also part of the aforementioned Task Force 121, which at the time of writing was headquartered in Baghdad under the command of Rear Admiral William H. McRaven.[66]

Strong evidence as to the ongoing nature of these missions in Afghanistan has recently emerged in the tragic events surrounding the crash of a US Special Operations Chinook helicopter in the Kunar province, and the subsequent loss of all sixteen troops on board. Those Special Operations troops were engaged in a rescue mission for a smaller group of four US Navy SEALS, who were evidently involved in an operation to capture a key Taliban commander with close links to al-Qa'ida.[67]

These types of targeted operations against leadership figures will continue as the US-led Coalition seeks to identify and combat militant groups, particularly in that region of Afghanistan. The decision taken in July 2005 by the Australian Government to send a Special Forces Task Group based on the Special Air Service Regiment back to Afghanistan is a further indication of how central SOF are to success in that theatre of operations.[68]

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[65] B. Gellman and D. Linzer, 'Afghanistan, Iraq: Two Wars Collide', *Washington Post*, 22 October 2004, p. A01.

[66] *Ibid.* Readers should note that this is the same McRaven, cited *infra* note 7, who is the author of one of the key texts in special Operations theory.

[67] A. North, 'US Navy SEALS Afghan Disaster', 25 July 2005, <http//news.bbc.co.uk/go/pr/fr/-/2/hi/south_asia/4712885.stm>.

[68] See Media Release 113/2005 from Senator Robert Hill, Minister for Defence, dated 13 July 2005.

Unconventional warfare

Finally, one of the most interesting and challenging missions that SOF are increasingly assigned to perform is that of unconventional warfare. This constitutes a:

> broad spectrum of military and paramilitary operations … conducted by, with, or through indigenous or surrogate forces who are organised, trained, equipped, supported and directed by an external source.[69]

Ironically, unconventional warfare was one of the original missions that led to the establishment of standing SOF units in modern Western armed forces. This particular capability developed out of the extensive experience that the military personnel of the Allied nations gained during World War II in training and equipping partisan and guerrilla forces globally, ranging from France and Yugoslavia in Europe to Burma and Timor in Asia. [70]

Since the early years of the Vietnam War, however, most Western SOF have only rarely practised true unconventional warfare. Certainly by 1965 it had largely become a 'legacy mission' de-emphasised in favour of other operational priorities.[71] In the early

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[69] US Department of Defense Joint Publication 1-02, as quoted in K. D. Dickson, 'The New Asymmetry: Unconventional Warfare and Army Special Forces', *Special Warfare*, Fall 2001, pp. 16–17.

[70] G. M. Jones and C. Tone, 'Unconventional Warfare: Core Purpose of Special Forces', *Special Warfare*, Summer 1999, pp. 5–6. This paper does not contain any discussion of the origins of other SOF outside the major Western nations—for example, the Soviet Union.

[71] A. Erckenbrack, 'Transformation: Roles and Missions of ARSOF', *Special Warfare*, December 2002, p 8. Given the proliferation of armed conflict globally post-1954, this may seem to be a brash statement; however, in general most special operations after the early Vietnam War period were focused on counterinsurgency techniques against guerrilla forces, as opposed to the prosecution of 'guerrilla'-style operations themselves using proxy forces.

21st century, unconventional warfare is once again a focal point for SOF capabilities. This renewed focus is driven largely by the spectacular success of, predominately, US SOF in Afghanistan during late 2001 and early 2002 on Operation *Enduring Freedom*.[72]

In that operation, the attraction of using SOF in an unconventional warfare role was twofold. First, in the words of the US Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld, 'you don't fight terrorists with conventional capabilities, you do it with unconventional capabilities'—and the specialised combat skills that only SOF personnel could provide. Second, the US political and military leadership wanted to avoid repeating the past bitter experiences that resulted when large numbers of British and Soviet conventional ground troops had been deployed into Afghanistan in the past.[73]

During Operation *Enduring Freedom*, the most famous example of the success of SOF unconventional warfare was undoubtedly the liberation of the city of Mazar-e Sharif on 10 November 2001. During the liberation, members of the US 5th Special Forces Group helped the Northern Alliance defeat vastly superior Taliban

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[72] Several other Coalition partner nations contributed SOF to Operation *Enduring Freedom*—Britain, Canada and Australia being the largest. It is unknown to what extent these nations' forces participated in unconventional warfare tasks. It appears to have been restricted to US SOF in the main. Nevertheless, the importance of unconventional warfare would not have been lost on these other nations present.

[73] As quoted in H. Kennedy, 'Will Special Ops Success Change the Face of War?', *National Defense Magazine*, February 2002. The reader should not confuse Secretary Rumsfeld's use of 'unconventional' here with the prior definition of unconventional warfare offered in this paper. Clearly, he is referring rather to asymmetric strategy more broadly and the use of SOF in particular. See <www.nationaldefensemagazine.org/article.cfm?Id=721>.

forces.[74] This pattern of success continued, with Advisers from US SOF helping the Northern Alliance in almost every major city in Afghanistan, including Kabul, Jalalabad, Konduz and Kandahar.[75]

The 5th Special Forces Group had been conducting a similar unconventional warfare mission in another Central Asian country for about six weeks before the attacks of 11 September 2001. Its members were rapidly redeployed by mid-October when they subsequently linked up with Harmed Karzai and his Northern Alliance forces.[76] The members of this SOF unit all had significant operational experience in Central Asia, developed over many years of deployments, and many spoke local or regional languages. These attributes demonstrate the long-term approach and commitment required to develop the range of unconventional warfare skills and capabilities among SOF personnel.

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[74] S. Biddle, *Afghanistan and Future of Warfare: Implications for Army and Defense Policy*, US Army War College Strategic Studies Institute, Carlise, PA, 2002, pp. 8–10. For a detailed account of this operation, see 'The Liberation of Mazar-e Sharif: 5th Special Forces Group Conducts UW in Afghanistan', *Special Warfare*, June 2002, pp. 34–41.

[75] Kennedy, *op. cit*. Similar unconventional warfare missions were conducted in Operation *Iraqi Freedom* during 2003.

[76] P. Finn, 'Wounded Army Captain Details Offensive Against Taliban', *Washington Post*, 11 December 2001. The reader should note that these units were perhaps not the first SOF deployed into Afghanistan. Allegedly, UK Special Air Service teams were on the ground in Afghanistan as early as 20 September 2001. See A. Finaln, 'Warfare by Other Means: Special Forces, Terrorism and Grand Strategy', *Small Wars and Insurgencies*, vol. 14, no. 1, 2003, pp. 92–108. US CIA paramilitary operatives were also known to be in Afghanistan 'within days' of the attacks on New York and Washington, DC. See K. Stone, *'All necessary means'—Employing CIA Operatives in a Warfighting Role Alongside Special Operations Forces*, Strategy Research Project, US Army War College, Carlisle, PA, 2003, pp. 1–2.

In recent years, unconventional warfare has undergone a revival in terms of its place in US defence policy. In that context, SOF are now seen as 'Global Scouts' who serve to 'assure US allies and friends of US government resolve',[77] and who in the future will be used to defeat improved enemy 'means and methods of anti-access and anti-denial' activities.[78] Even before recent unconventional warfare missions conducted in support of the Global War On Terrorism, the United States was widely using its SOF in training and assistance missions worldwide. In 1997 alone, SOF were deployed to 144 countries.[79]

In Afghanistan, more recent unconventional warfare missions were so successful that the 'SOF-centric' campaign has been described as a possible future model for the conduct of warfare. Several commentators have speculated that this type of unconventional war could be applicable across a wide range of future conflict types.[80] An example of this is the highly prominent role once again played by these forces during Operation *Iraqi Freedom* in early 2003. In that operation, one of the key aspects of the overall operational strategy was the coordination of Kurdish forces in northern Iraq by the Combined Forces Special Operations Component Command. That task was clearly a classic unconventional warfare mission.[81]

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[77] *Special Operations force Posture Statement*, *op. cit.*, p. 28.

[78] Erckenbrack, *op. cit.*, p. 8.

[79] Schoomaker, *op. cit.*, p. 3. An average of 4760 US SOF personnel deployed per week in 1997.

[80] See, for example, T. Shanker, 'Conduct of War is Redefined by Success of Special Forces', *New York Times*, 21 January 2001; R. Scarborough, 'Pentagon Uses Afghan War as Model for Iraq', *Washington Times*, 4 December 2001; and S. Hersh, 'The Iraq Hawks: Can Their Plan Work?', *New Yorker*, 24 December 2001. The author acknowledges that not all commentators agree with this assessment. See Biddle, *Afghanistan and the Future of Warfare*, *op. cit.*, for a critique of the 'Afghan Model'.

[81] Fitzsimmons, 'The Importance of Being Special', *loc. cit.*, p. 207.

These examples are predominately drawn from the experience of US forces. However, the SOF of many other nations possess parallel or latent capabilities that may be associated with the conduct of unconventional warfare and the training of indigenous or surrogate forces. The Australian Special Air Service Regiment reportedly developed an 'UW Wing' in the early 1970s. It was modelled on the US Army SOF 'A' Team concept, and initially used US doctrine.[82] David Horner has documented the Special Air Service Regiment's involvement in pseudo-unconventional warfare missions throughout the 1970s and 1980s. Examples of these missions identified by Horner include Special Air Service Regiment personnel training army and security elements within Thailand and Indonesia.[83]

The Australian experience with training indigenous forces began in earnest during the Vietnam period. The Australian Army Training Team—Vietnam had an illustrious history during that conflict. Its tasking included long-term unconventional warfare operations training large indigenous forces.[84] While not an exclusive SOF task, more recent examples of Australian involvement in East Timor, Sierra Leone and Iraq have demonstrated the continued emphasis on the importance of training and advising indigenous armed forces more broadly in Australian Defence Force operations and strategy. It can be assumed that Australian SOF units such as the Special Air Service Regiment could undertake unconventional warfare operations on a larger scale if required.

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[82] D. M. Horner, *SAS: Phantoms of War*, *op. cit.*, pp. 398–404.

[83] *Ibid.*

[84] The most well documented unconventional warfare story from the Australian Army Training Team—Vietnam is that of Captain Barry Peterson, working for the CIA in the Montagnard highlands of Vietnam. See B. Petersen, *Tiger Men: an Australian Soldier's Secret War in Vietnam*, Macmillan, Melbourne, 1988.

Although the unconventional warfare mission may currently be overshadowed by the Global War On Terror and offensive counter-terrorism operations, it may still prove to be an extremely effective method of dealing with state-based threats, weak states, and even non-state actors into the future.[85] Dean Newman believes that, in the war on terrorism, unconventional warfare conducted by SOF attacking non-state actors is an extremely attractive alternative to traditional notions of applying military force. Newman highlights reduced resource requirements, economy-of-force advantages, manageable moral obligations and demonstrated historical successes among the reasons why an unconventional warfare approach can effectively interdict global targets without the need for massive conventional build-ups.[86]

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[85] An extremely important and interesting trend to note in this regard is the increasing use of private military companies. Governments in the United States and United Kingdom are now turning to these companies to provide training and assistance to foreign nations' defence forces on a contract basis. Former SOF staff many of these companies and, as such, make an interesting case of 'UW by proxy'. An example is the use of US company, Military Professional Resources International, to train elements of the Bosnian Federation Army.

[86] Major D. Newman, 'Operation *White Star*: A UW Operation Against an Insurgency', *Special Warfare*, vol. 17, no. 4, April 2005, pp. 28–36. Readers should note that Newman also makes the very important distinction in the article between Unconventional Warfare (UW) and Foreign Internal Defence (FID) missions in current US Army doctrine. He posits that the real value of UW today may be that SOF have the capability of using UW operations to destroy targets located within the sovereignty of a regime that does not necessarily need to be eliminated, and where those governments may have political or military limitations that prevent them from eliminating an organisation that is both within their sovereignty and antagonistic to the interests of the United States. UW operations can design surrogate units that are independent of host nation governments. Newman provides a historical case study of Operation *White Star* conducted in Laos during the period 1959–64 when this operation occurred.

SOF Organisation and Tactics

The second major element contributing to the transformation of SOF is how these forces are organised and trained, and some of the new ways in which they fight. The nature of special operations, at least since World War II, has generally demanded a combination of land, air and sea assets operating simultaneously in a multidimensional fashion. As such, while conventional armed forces worldwide still cling to their single-service doctrine and dogma, SOF in many countries have transformed themselves into truly joint-force organisations.

This new emphasis on joint forces means that, in terms of command and control (and even tactical cooperation at times), SOF now reflect units and task groups employed along capability, rather than service, lines. A very strong emphasis on interoperability with international SOF and even non-governmental organisations—as forged on numerous multinational missions during the 1990s—has accompanied this development. The result of this experience is that today these forces are at the forefront of the many truly coalition operations and combined missions conducted as part of the global war on terrorism and international peacekeeping.

An evaluation of concrete tactical developments shows that SOF, regardless of nationality, have generally continued to develop, and demonstrate, highly specialised combat skills in a wide variety of tactical procedures and high-risk environments. No new analysis is required to confirm their elite status, crafted around exceptional individual soldier skills and small-unit tactics. In this section the author examines two new and potentially revolutionary ways in which SOF now conduct tactical-level operations: the combination of SOF ground elements directing precision-guided/air-delivered weapons; and the concept of network-centric

special operations. Both these new methods indicate the rising importance of information in warfare—as opposed to information warfare—although the latter is also significant, and the increasing use of high-technology equipment at the individual-operator level.

Joint Organisations

The theory and practice of joint warfighting refers to the 'synergistic application of the unique capabilities of each service so that the net result is a capability that is greater than the sum of its parts'.[87] Two factors drive the desire for joint operations: the natural advantages of military efficiency and changes in the global strategic context. These changes are principally a blurring between the so-called 'levels of war' and 'military operations other than war'. These factors are driving a civil–political requirement for more precise applications of combat power globally.[88] Joint warfighting presents a series of 'interoperability' problems in four key areas: culture, technology, compartmentalisation and organisational structures.[89] Conventional forces have always struggled with these problems. In contrast, SOF are advantaged by already being inherently joint on several levels.

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87 M. P. Noonan and M. R. Lewis, 'Conquering the Elements: Thoughts on Joint Force (Re)Organization', *Parameters*, Autumn 2003, p. 31.

88 *Ibid.*, p. 33. This requirement continues to be evidenced by the character and content of both government and media reporting of current military operations worldwide, where constant references are made to 'precision strikes'.

89 Major C. D. Call, *US Army Special Forces Operational Interoperability with the US Army's Objective Force—the Future of Special Forces Liaison and Coordination Elements*, Monograph, School of Advanced Military Studies, US Army Command and General Staff College, Ft Leavenworth, KS, 2003, p. 8.

First, special operations are usually multidimensional by nature and therefore demand the involvement and cooperation of land, maritime and air power elements. Special Operations Forces therefore become increasingly interoperable with conventional forces in the true sense of the word, in that they 'provide services to and accept services from each other in a manner that enables them to operate effectively together'.[90] This interoperability has been achieved over time through the conduct of regular joint training and operations, both within the SOF community and with conventional forces. SOF therefore have a strong operational legacy of planning and executing joint missions across a wide spectrum of conflict types. Furthermore, they routinely operate in close conjunction with other civil government agencies (such as customs, national police elements and intelligence agencies) and international organisations (such as the United Nations or NATO, non-governmental organisations and private military companies).

Internationally, they have demonstrated their understanding of joint warfare concepts and doctrines, and their ability to practise these in training, and on operations, by implementing genuine, joint organisational structures. The US SOF community has been at the forefront of joint doctrine, training and organisation for well over a decade. In 1986 the US Congress expressed concern for the status of SOF within overall US defence planning. This concern arose largely as a result of shortcomings identified in the failed Iranian hostage rescue attempt in 1979, Operation *Eagle Claw*; and compatibility and unification problems from the Grenada invasion in 1983, Operation *Urgent Fury*. These concerns led directly to the creation of the US Special Operations Command, authorised by the Cohen–Nunn Amendment to the Department of

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[90] *Ibid.*, p. 7.

Defense Authorization Act of 1987.[91] This law mandated the creation of a unified command with 'service-like' responsibilities to oversee all SOF and report directly to the Secretary of Defense for all budget, equipment, training and doctrinal issues.[92]

US Special Operations Command is now also one of the nine 'unified combatant commanders'. As such, it is also responsible for planning, directing and executing special operations and providing SOF units to support the other Geographic Combatant Commander's theatre security cooperation plans.[93] There are approximately 49 000 service personnel—both active-duty and reserve forces—in Special Operations Command. They are sub-organised into three component commands, which comprise the major SOF units and training establishments, namely the US Army Special Operations Command, the Naval Special Warfare Command and the Air Force Special Operations Command.

One sub-unified command also exists—Joint Special Operations Command—which provides a joint headquarters to study special operations requirements, ensure compatibility between services and equipment standardisation, develop joint doctrine and tactics,

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[91] Schoomaker, *op. cit.*, p. 3.

[92] These are known as 'Title 10 Responsibilities', as codified in Title 10 US Code, Section 167. The Cohen–Nunn Act also established the Office of the Assistant Secretary of Defense for Special operations and Low Intensity Conflict (SO/LIC), which provides the immediate civilian oversight over many USSOCOM activities. See *Special Operations Force Posture Statement2003/04*, *op. cit*., pp. 8–10.

[93] This is the case with both Operation *Enduring Freedom* and Operation *Iraqi Freedom*, where SOF were provided to the US Central Command for the conduct of operations. See A. Feickert, 'US Special Operations Forces (SOF): Background and Issues for Congress', Library of Congress Congressional Research Service (CRS), *CRS Report For Congress*, 15 August 2003, p. 3.

and conduct joint exercises and training.[94] Since 1990, the US SOF have also implemented, at the lower tactical and operational levels, innovative solutions to the requirement for liaison and coordination with other conventional force elements. This approach has enhanced compatibility and synchronisation of all force elements.[95]

Since 2003 the Australian Defence Force has also transformed the way in which Australia's SOF are organised. The Australian Government created a new Special Operations Command that was launched by the Defence Minister, Robert Hill, on 5 May 2003.[96] The command's creation is part of the Australian Government's direct reaction to the Bali bombings in October 2002 and the direct influence of the National Security Committee of Federal Cabinet. That committee's determination confirms the Government's intention to enhance the Australian Defence Force's SOF capability and to meet the increasing need for an effective counter-terrorism and anti-terrorist capability that is joint, inter-agency and multinational in nature.[97]

The Australian Special Operations Command is a true joint headquarters, with command status equivalent to the Maritime, Land, Air and Joint Logistics Commands. The Special Operations Commander Australia reports directly to the Chief of the Defence Force for counter-terrorism operations, and to the Chief of Joint

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94 *Special Operations Force Posture Statement 2003/04*, *op. cit.*, pp. 12–13. For a detailed outline of official US Joint Special Operations Forces' doctrine, see US Department of Defense Joint Publication 3-05, *Doctrine for Joint Special Operations*, 17 December 2003, <www.dtic.mil/doctrine/jel/new_pubs/jp3_05.pdf>.

95 For a detailed description of synchronisation from a doctrine perspective, see Call, *op. cit.*, pp. 11–16.

96 Minister for Defence Media Release 47/2003, 'New Special Operations Command', Monday, 5 May 2003.

97 Lewis, 'Guarding Australians', *loc. cit.*

Operations for SOF support to all other operations.[98] The command consists largely of land SOF units and supporting elements, such as organic SOF logistic and aviation support. In addition the command maintains an element of its headquarters in Canberra to provide future capability development, strategy, and doctrine development support to the broader defence community. Moreover, the command acts as a coordination node for counter-terrorism operations and maintains an interagency link to other government bodies and organisations.[99]

Joint Warfighting

Perhaps the most striking example of the joint nature of Special Operations Forces, and their role in wider joint warfighting, may be found in the conduct of Operation *Iraqi Freedom* in early 2003. Special Operations Forces and US Ranger forces played a major role throughout this campaign. Analysts such as Anthony Cordesman have reported that between 9000 and 10 000 US Special Operations members were specifically deployed into Iraq by General Franks. This deployment accounted for approximately 8 per cent of the total combat forces.[100] Units from all three US Special Operations Command components were present in Iraq—including the previously mentioned Special Mission Units—as well as significant force elements from the Australian and UK SOF communities. These multinational forces were grouped into a Combined Forces Special Operations Component Command, which reported directly to the US Central Command as the geographic combatant command. SOF units operating in Iraq displayed and used joint warfighting doctrine and principles on several levels.

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[98] He also reports to the Chief of the Army for the 'raising, training and sustaining' of Army SOF units.

[99] *Ibid.*

[100] Cordesman, *op. cit.*, p. 362.

First, SOF units themselves were inherently joint organisations. Even multinational coalition partners were fully integrated into a single command structure, albeit with their own national command elements. Second, these units independently conducted specialised and small-scale joint operations—for example, the capture of airfields, the securing of offshore oil terminals, and the aforementioned search for Iraqi leadership targets. Michael Noonan has recently described these 'autonomous' operations as a defining characteristic of modern warfare. SOF are able to accomplish results disproportionate to their size. There are three reasons for this situation: the high performance standards set by SOF members, their collective experience, and the latitude that they are given to perform their duties.[101]

Third, SOF contributed, often as a key component, to wider joint operations at the theatre level in combination with air and land elements; and further through interagency cooperation with non-military organisations. Examples of such contributions include:

- the now-famous 'Scud Hunting' missions conducted by Australian and UK Special Air Services in Western Iraq;[102]
- the creation of unique combat teams comprising SOF with small elements of armour—in one case including main battle tanks;
- other major land force units, such as the US 173rd Airborne Brigade and the UK 45 Royal Marine Commando;[103] and
- missions working closely with, or attached to, the CIA.[104]

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[101] Noonan, *op. cit.*, p. 37. Noonan actually constructs a dichotomy whereby 'autonomous' operations are directly contrasted by 'centralised' operations—that is, those operations where forces are massed for greatest effect under strict command-and-control arrangements.

[102] T. Ripley, 'Iraq's Western Desert Special Forces Playground', *Jane's Defence Weekly*, 9 April 2003.

[103] Noonan, *op. cit.*, p. 31.

Recent combat operations in Iraq saw a maturing of joint force operations whereby:

> for the first time … integration enabled conventional [air, ground and sea] forces to leverage SOF capabilities to deal effectively with asymmetric threats and enable precision targeting simultaneously in the same battle space. Likewise, special operators were able to use conventional forces to enhance and enable special missions.[105]

Indeed, the Combined Forces Special Operations Component Command in Iraq was fighting on three fronts simultaneously, with each mission having different objectives and task-specific requirements. In northern Iraq, SOF units were the supported forces. Their mission was to prevent Iraqi units from reinforcing Baghdad. In western Iraq, the forces supported the air component mission to prevent SCUD launches. Finally, in the south, SOF also supported coalition land forces in their rapid advance to Baghdad. Performing supported and supporting roles concurrently required new approaches to joint integration, particularly joint forces integration. Because these approaches were so successful, they should be seriously considered as models for the future.[106]

SOF and Air Power

The ability of SOF to conduct joint operations has also led to concrete tactical innovations. Potentially the most important, and successful, advancement has been the integration of airpower with forces on the ground. This integration has involved the use of

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[104] Cordesman, *op. cit.*, pp. 362–3. For a detailed examination of the problems and advantages associated with SOF /CIA operations, see Stone, *All Necessary Means*, *loc. cit.*, below note 69.

[105] From ‘Statement of Tommy R. Franks Former Commander US Central Command’ to the Senate Armed Services Committee, 9 July 2003. Congressional Testimony by Federal Document Clearing House.

[106] For a detailed analysis of SOF and Joint Forces coordination in Operation *Iraqi Freedom*, see Major E. P. Braganca, ‘Joint Forces Evolution’, *Military Review*, January–February 2004, pp. 50–3.

numerous tactics, techniques and procedures developed to enhance SOF acting as 'human sensors' for strategic air missions—the so-called 'sensor-to-shooter' link. It also involves using air power to provide joint fire support to SOF acting as a manoeuvre force.[107] In terms of specific special-operations tasks, the US Joint Special Operations Doctrine specifies two missions that define Special Operations Forces' support to combat air actions: direct action and special reconnaissance.

In direct-action missions, strategic- and operational-level targets are designated or illuminated and then destroyed by air-delivered precision-guided munitions. In special reconnaissance missions the forces provide target acquisition, area assessment, and post-strike reconnaissance or Bomb Damage Assessment data.[108] Johnny Hester suggests another possible, and innovative, way to use Special Operations Forces. He believes that the joint-force commander can individually deploy these forces as a combat weapons system. Hester suggests that the combat capabilities of SOF be considered during the joint targeting process as an 'alternative option' to neutralising targets by aircraft or Tomahawk Land-Attack Missiles.[109]

The need for this ground–air capability stems from the reality that, while it may have become routine for air forces—particularly the US Air Force—to hit stationary targets with precision, locating and prosecuting attacks on mobile and time-critical targets remains a much more difficult task. Of course, using SOF to find

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[107] M. Findlay, R. Green and E. Braganca, 'SOF on the Contemporary Battlefield', *Military Review*, May–June 2003, p. 10.

[108] US Department of Defense Joint Publication 3-05.5, *Joint Special Operations Targeting and Mission Planning Procedures*, 10 August 1993, p. II-1.

[109] J. L. Hester, 'Integration of Special Operations Forces into the Joint Targeting Process', thesis, US Army Command and General Staff College, Ft Leavenworth KA, 2003, p. 3; see also pp. 21–50 for his detailed analysis.

and eliminate strategic targets as part of an air-power campaign is not particularly new. William Rosenau has written extensively on the use of US SOF 'behind enemy lines' to search for critical ground targets and call-in air strikes in both the Vietnam and 1991 Persian Gulf wars.[110] However, Rosenau also points out that, in both instances, the operations proved less successful than US officials had hoped. They were often severely disrupted by effective enemy countermeasures, shortfalls in technology, and a lack of environmental or situational awareness by the Special Operations units operating in vast areas of difficult terrain.[111]

The need for more human sensors on the ground was further demonstrated during Operation *Allied Force*—the air-centric campaign directed against Serbia in the late 1990s. Static targets such as bridges or factories were easily destroyed by Tomahawk cruise missiles, but aircraft-delivered weapon attacks to destroy or disrupt mobile or concealed Serbian forces, particularly in Kosovo, were more problematic. The United States and United Kingdom provided covert support, including Special Operations personnel, to the Kosovar Liberation Army during that campaign. Some sources attribute the limited success achieved by US air power in Kosovo, of which ground targeting for air strikes was a vital part, to that covert support.[112]

Since Kosovo, the tactics and technology associated with joint Special Operations Forces and combat air power operations have evolved significantly. This strategy has now been successfully proven in combat during both Operation *Enduring Freedom* and

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[110] For a detailed account of these operations, see W. Rosenau, *Special Operations Forces and Elusive Enemy Ground Targets: Lessons from Vietnam and the Persian Gulf War*, RAND Publication MR-1408-AF, RAND Corporation, Arlington, VA, 2001.

[111] *Ibid.*, p. 2.

[112] A. Cordesman, *The Lessons and Non-lessons of the Air and Missile Campaign in Kosovo*, Center for Strategic and International Studies, Washington, DC, 1999, pp. 250–6.

Operation *Iraqi Freedom*. Indeed, David Sullivan has recently assessed such operations in Afghanistan, and comments that the 'synthesizing [of] SOF and combat airpower is a transformation in the operational art of employing forces'.[113] For the United States, the origins of this new synergy may be traced to the *Joint Vision 2010* concept of effects-based precision engagement.[114] The air war, particularly over Afghanistan, demonstrates that US SOF and those of Coalition partners have made significant progress in joint operational integration. Sullivan points out that the change in the nature and conduct of air operations in Afghanistan—and now further demonstrated in Iraq—resulted directly from 'advances in technology and evolutions in joint doctrine'.[115]

This new approach to warfare primarily consists of precision weapons being delivered by aircraft operating at sanctuary altitudes, supported by SOF teams observing targets on the ground. These teams are equipped with optical lasing units, global positioning systems, laptop computers, and various types of secure communications equipment. SOF teams were able to identify targets unseen or undetected by airborne collection platforms, including unmanned aerial vehicles. This fact alone contributed greatly to the decisive effect of strategic bombing in both Afghanistan and Iraq.

Joint Command and Control

Tactical coordination, and command and control, of both SOF and combat air assets were also innovative. Targeting and fire support in a joint environment are normally highly complex processes. They are made even more challenging by the non-contiguous

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[113] D. M. Sullivan, 'Transforming America's Military: Integrating Unconventional Ground Forces into Combat Air Operations', paper submitted to the US Naval War College, Joint Maritime Operations Department, Newport, RI, 4 February 2002, p. iv (Abstract).

[114] US Department of Defense, *Joint Vision 2010*, p. 21.

[115] *Ibid.*, p. 9.

nature of the modern battlefield, especially as encountered in Afghanistan. During Operation *Enduring Freedom*, SOF teams and headquarters elements could not accurately predict the locations of opposition groups or mobile targets. This situation meant that interdiction missions could not be planned in advance and that there was no clearly defined area of operations in which targets could be pre-recorded. Throughout the operation, Coalition forces used several important strategies that contributed to overcoming these problems. These strategies are worth outlining briefly.

First was the use of gridded areas of operation and 'kill-boxes'. Traditionally, operational design has always included two fundamental components: a mission, and a designated area of operations in which to accomplish that mission. This neat battlespace geometry did not always exist in a non-contiguous battlefield such as that in Afghanistan. A series of fire support coordination measures were developed to overcome this lack of symmetry. These measures included no-fire areas, restricted-fire areas and kill-boxes.[116]

Second, rather than pre-planned fire support, there was an increased use of ground-directed interdiction initiated by Special Operations Forces. If individual teams came into unexpected contact with the enemy, they could expect to receive immediate close-air support. Alternatively, they would receive ground-directed interdiction of enemy forces that they could observe and for which they provided targeting data. Essentially, combat aircraft flew to the general area and received their targets as

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[116] Findlay *et al.*, *op. cit.*, p. 9. Another C2 measure used was the creation of Temporary Joint Special Operations Areas (JSOAs). For a detailed critique of the success of this and other aspects of SOF C2 in Operation *Enduring Freedom*, see S. A. Jackson, *Tactical Integration of Special Operations and Conventional Forces Command and Control Functions*, Monograph, School of Advanced Military Studies, US Army Command and General Staff College, Ft Leavenworth, KS, 2003.

ground teams found and reported enemy forces in real time.[117] This general tactical mode was followed in Operation *Iraqi Freedom*. In that conflict, one of the SOF core missions was conducting the strategic role of hunting for SCUD missile launchers and associated installations in western Iraq. Such targets were often mobile or well concealed. Their destruction was achieved by handing over coordinates to coalition aircraft only after locations had been confirmed by ground reconnaissance.[118] The ability to call on combat air support meant that SOF units could operate in remote areas without the need for heavy artillery or other land-based fire-support elements.[119]

The capacity of SOF to identify and destroy C2 and SCUD missile threats was enhanced by the use of other joint Intelligence Surveillance and Reconnaissance assets, such as unmanned aerial vehicles. These vehicles, from the Combined Forces Air Component Commander, routinely operated with SOF to find, fix, track and target such threats. Streaming video was then typically sent to other combat air platforms—such as the AC-130 'Spectre'—to provide targeting information during the engagement phase.[120]

Further, at the individual level, SOF teams used Blue-Force tracking devices extensively. These devices increase situational awareness and reduce the possibilities of fratricide. Blue-Force tracker is an automated transponder–beacon system that sends

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[117] *Ibid.*, p. 11.

[118] I. Bostock, 'Australian Forces go SCUD Hunting in Western Iraq', *Jane's Intelligence Review*, 1 July 2003.

[119] T. Ripley, 'Iraq's Western Desert a Special Forces Playground', *Jane's Defence Weekly*, 9 April 2003.

[120] Lieutenant Commander C. M. Bradley (USN), 'Intelligence, Surveillance and Reconnaissance in Support of Operation Iraqi Freedom: Challenges for Rapid Manoeuvres and Joint C4ISR Integration and Interoperability', paper submitted to the Joint Military Operation Department, Naval War College, Newport, RI, 9 February 2004.

coded messages every five or ten minutes, identifying units and their global-positioning system coordinates. Tracking devices allow SOF teams to be fully included in friendly battle plans. These devices also enable the teams to liaise more closely with other ground forces and, most importantly, to be identified, and avoided if necessary, by friendly aircraft.[121]

Network-centric warfare and technology

Unmanned aerial vehicles and Blue-Force Tracker devices are excellent examples of Special Operations Forces' increasing familiarity with, and hence reliance on, high-technology and communication devices. Individual operators and small teams now have access to unprecedented levels of battlefield communication, shared intelligence and situational awareness.

Network-centric warfare uses technologies and tactics that take full advantage of all available information on the battlefield. It enables the rapid and flexible deployment of all available combat assets. SOF have embraced network-centric warfare with great enthusiasm. Their support for this new strategic direction is such that the outcome of many special operations is now shaped—even at the individual-user level—by the use of high-technology devices. There is a common misconception that network-centric warfare is merely the electronic linking of various computer systems. In reality, it is far more than that. It comprises both human and technological factors.

A better way to conceptualise network-centric warfare may be to understand it as a 'powerful set of warfighting concepts and associated military capabilities' that involves:

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[121] Cordesman, *Lessons of Iraq*, p. 363.

> networking three domains of warfare (the physical, information, and cognitive domains) so as to generate increased combat power by: achieving greater speed of command; [and] increasing lethality, survivability and responsiveness.[122]

Looking beyond even that definition, Alberts, Garstka and Stein describe it as being about:

> human and organisational behaviour … [network-centric warfare] is characterised by the ability of geographically dispersed forces to create a high level of shared battlespace awareness that can be exploited via self-synchronization and other network centric operations to achieve [the] commanders intent.[123]

SOF epitomise that vision and make it a reality. The efficiencies of network-centric warfare result from extending the sensing ability of an individual entity—such as an SOF team—to the cumulative ability and reach of the entire 'network', hence increasing overall combat power and accelerating decision cycles.[124] Greg Gagnon recently analysed the impact of network-centric warfare on special operations. He found that it can improve the probability of mission success in three ways:

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[122] US Department of Defense, *Network Centric Warfare: Department of Defense Report to Congress*, Department of Defense, Washington, DC, 27 July 2001, pp. 3–10.

[123] D. Alberts, J. Garstka and F. Stein, *Network Centric Warfare: Developing and Leveraging Information Superiority*, Command and Control Research Program, Washington, DC, 2000, p. 88. This book is perhaps the seminal work on network-centric warfare.

[124] For a detailed examination of the levels of efficiency created by network-centric warfare, see E. R. Smith, *Effects-based Operations: Applying Network Centric Warfare in Peace, Crisis and War*, Command and Control Research Program, Washington, DC, 2002, pp. 65–97.

simplicity and innovation in planning; security and repetition in preparation; and speed, surprise and adaptability in execution.[125]

General Peter Cosgrove, the recently retired Chief of the Australian Defence Force, highlighted the significance of this synergy when he spoke about the real value of SOF and network-centric warfare capabilities. He observed that:

> the occasion, the means and the opportunity can come together to allow a tactical element to foreshadow and to achieve a strategic outcome—a situation improbable in warfare up until the Information Age in which we now live.[126]

Most of the specific network-centric warfare concepts and capabilities that SOF have developed and deployed on recent operations focus on shared situational awareness, robust communications and better sensor-to-shooter linkages. US and Coalition SOF deployed on Operation *Enduring Freedom* and Operation *Iraqi Freedom* achieved high levels of success. This success is largely attributable to network-centric warfare capabilities. This new strategy has become so important that even US Special Operations Command insiders believe that it has dramatically changed the way that SOF conduct their missions.[127]

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[125] For a full description of these three elements, see G. Gagnon, ‘Network-centric Special Operations: Exploring New Operational Paradigms’, *Air and Space Power Chronicles*, 4 February 2002.

[126] General Peter Cosgrove, Chief of the Australian Defence Force, ‘Innovation, People, Partnerships: Continuous Modernisation in the ADF’, speech to the ADO Network-Centric Warfare Conference, Tuesday, 20 May 2003, <www.defence.gov.au/cdf/speech200503.htm>.

[127] Comments by Brigadier General James Parker (USA), Director of United States Special Operations Command Centre for Intelligence and Information Operations, as quoted in R. K. Ackerman, ‘Special Operations Forces Become Network-centric’, *Signal*, March 2003, pp. 17–21.

Network-centric warfare is characterised by three operational realities: situational awareness, precision fires, and the growing transparency of the battlespace.[128] Since 1995 SOF have become increasingly prominent in resolving international conflicts. Major General Duncan Lewis, the former Special Operations Commander Australia, believes that this increased prominence—as demonstrated in Operation *Enduring Freedom* and Operation *Iraqi Freedom*—can be largely attributed to those three operational realities. SOF are now able to combine their traditionally high levels of resourcefulness and adaptability with a growing wellspring of battlefield awareness and technological links to conventional forces.

Special Operations teams from most nations now regularly deploy on operations with accurate digital maps, real-time information on the disposition of friendly and enemy forces in their area, and connectivity to supporting forces located throughout their own battlespace. According to Brigadier General James Parker, Director of the US Special Operations Command Center for Intelligence and Information operations, these systems contributed to a network-centric warfare approach. Several communications and information systems were big winners for US and Coalition SOF in Operation *Enduring Freedom* and Operation *Iraqi Freedom*.[129]

In terms of communications equipment, the most important item was the AN/PRC-148 Multiband Inter/Intra Team Radio, which provided embedded and secure communications between dispersed members in SOF teams. The Multiband Multimission Radio was also important. It is a single-channel, ultra-high-frequency satellite communications radio that transmits target locations to operational centres in theatre. Iridium handheld

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[128] Major General D. Lewis, 'Inside and Outside the Battlespace: Understanding the Rise of Special Operations in Australia', *Australian Army Journal*, vol. I, no. 2, December 2003, pp. 53–8.

[129] Ackerman, 2003, *loc. cit.*

satellite telephones with secure sleeves also proved to be invaluable for diverse SOF. They were used by units conducting split operations in rugged terrain and for communicating with other government agencies and local allied troops. In terms of information systems, commercial Inmarsat played an important role in providing connectivity in remote locations. The SOF Deployed Node-Light Terminal provided secure data and voice capability. It also permitted teams to dial into the US Department of Defense Secret Internet Protocol Router Network.

An unexpected requirement in Afghanistan was for a videoconference capability. Small, briefcase-sized units were deployed for this purpose. A ruggedised scaleable suite of computers, network gear and associated software was also essential to mission planning and situational awareness. The Tactical Local Area Network system formed the hardware base, and the SOF Digital Environment software package provided battlefield information, intelligence, collaboration and mission-planning tools. This online approach enabled field communication with systems maintained in the continental United States.[130] However, it must be noted that technological innovation has its own hazards, particularly for special operations. An example is the tragic death in Afghanistan of several US Special Operations personnel in late 2001. In this case, an operator typed in the global-positioning system coordinates of a target into his laptop but had to change the battery before he relayed the information. The battery installation caused a software glitch and the laptop gave the operator's position as the target to a circling US fighter, resulting in a tragic instance of fratricide.[131]

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[130] All technical information has come from the detailed analysis of Ackerman, *ibid.*

[131] Account related by General John Jumper, Chief of Staff of the US Air Force, in N. Cook, 'Military Priorities and Future Warfare', *Jane's Defence Weekly*, 11 September 2002, *passim.*

Conclusion and implications

The transformation of SOF over the past decade has occurred incrementally at the strategic, operational and tactical levels. This transformation has been so extensive that special operations now form the centrepiece of strategic planning, operational design and tactical execution in response to many contemporary national security threats encountered by the nation-state. The numerous unorthodox combat operations being conducted in the global war on terror—where forces are fighting an amorphous and elusive enemy on a global scale, in Afghanistan and in Iraq—are all demonstrations of this transformation.

As discussed in this paper, governments have asked SOF to significantly expand their capabilities and range of missions since the mid-1990s; and even more so since 11 September 2001. These forces now perform a range of new missions involving offensive counter-terrorism, homeland security, and even a resurgence of the traditional tasks of unconventional warfare. In the process SOF have further shaped their future by successfully and innovatively restructuring their organisations, and updating and adapting their doctrine, training and tactics. In order to facilitate these changes, SOF have remained flexible and resourceful, with much of this innovation coming from within. Further, innovation has not been driven by technology alone—though that has clearly been a powerful enabler—but more by the intellect and vision of internal personnel.

The significance of this transformation is manifested on several levels. The conduct of contemporary special operations—as seen in ongoing operations in Afghanistan and Iraq—may provide both military planners and politicians with a new model for prosecuting armed force against an opponent, be it state or non-state. SOF maintain capabilities that allow a strategic outcome to be achieved

with fewer troops and resources, a lower profile and more certainty of success. The combination of Special Operations teams with indigenous forces and precision combat air power is a case in point.

It is acknowledged that some commentators strongly disagree with this claim. They point either to the idiosyncratic nature of conflict in both Afghanistan and Iraq, or conversely to the fact that operations in those theatres are simply typical 20th-century wars relying on the basic principles of firepower and manoeuvre.[132] In the wider context of contemporary conflict, however, there are two important lessons to consider. First, that SOF are able to use their specialist capabilities in high-risk environments and in response to security issues much wider than major war. Second, the possibility of military force now being used in a domestic environment, or in non-warlike roles, is no longer a barrier to policy makers. SOF have now truly moved from being a marginal, though at times important, component of conventional military strategy to being a central and vital element of any warfighting or security calculus.

The second significant implication of this transformation is the successful adoption of joint structures, culture and doctrine by SOF in Australia and the United States. Such innovations may provide conventional forces—of both large and small states—with a template for the further development of joint warfighting. Innovation might also provide a working example of the benefits of a network-centric warfare approach, both in the technology used

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[132] See particularly Stephen Biddle, *op. cit.*, for this point of view. Another different, but equally critical view is presented by Anna Simons and David Tucker in ‘United States Special Operations Forces and the War on Terrorism’, *Small Wars and Insurgencies*, vol. 14, no. 1, Summer 2003, pp. 77–91. They argue that the unconventional warfare effort did not go far enough, and that the military failed to capitalise on the unconventional warfare skills of SOF after the toppling of the Taliban government. They are highly critical of the ‘conventionalization’ evident in Operation *Enduring Freedom*.

and through the tactics that SOF have developed and employed in combat. Thus, in addition to conducting operations, these forces also seem to function as a live 'battle lab' for future concepts and technologies that are later employed on a wider scale.

The danger in all this for SOF is that their strategic appeal and operational success have, in a way, been too good. Policy planners, particularly in the United States, are already calling for large numbers of the conventional forces to become 'more SOF-like'.[133] Steven Metz, among others, supports another prominent view. He advocates a significant expansion of these forces into a separate component of a future 'objective force', with sole responsibility for the prosecution of all indirect and intrastate wars.[134]

These concepts may seem like a strategic and defence-planning dream come true. However, the reality is that SOF numbers remain small. This is because it takes many years, and significant financial and physical resources, to select and train individual operators and small units to the necessary standard, and then to hone those skills on combat operations. Any forced expansion of Special Operations units beyond their natural capacity to train and retain members—or indeed any significant organisational convergence with conventional units—could be counterproductive. That type of approach could result in a loss of capability and a diminution of the culture that, paradoxically, makes these forces special. The problem of size presents defence

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[133] Vice Admiral Arthur Cebrowski, Director US Office of Force Transformation, has been one such high-profile proponent of this. See *Inside the Pentagon*, vol. 19, no. 36, 4 September 2003, <www.insideDefense.com>.

[134] Metz believes that SOF should form a separate 'track' to the transformation of the US Army; leaving the conventional component to fight direct, interstate war. See S. Metz, and R. A. Millen, *Future War/Future Battlespace: The Strategic Role of American Landpower*, Strategic Studies Institute Monograph, US Army War College, Carlisle, PA, 2003.

planners—both civil and military—and SOF themselves, with a significant future policy challenge. That challenge will be to ensure that future forces are large enough to meet the growing demand for their capabilities, and yet small enough to maintain their high standards of training, readiness and operational performance.[135]

[135] Fitzsimmons, *loc. cit.*, p. 216. Fitzsimmons makes this point with regard to the specifics of the US SOF community. However, this dilemma is present for any state that focuses on SOF as a strategic component of military power.

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