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# Making the Most of Special Operations Forces

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In May 1944, Chinese Nationalist and U.S. Army troops converged on the city of Myitkyina, one of the last remaining obstacles to the opening of the Burma Road. Intelligence indicated that the Japanese garrison defending Myitkyina numbered no more than 1,000 soldiers, but the actual number was three times that amount. The American-Kachin Rangers, consisting of U.S. special operators from the Office of Strategic Services and indigenous Kachin tribesmen, prowled ahead of the conventional units to collect information and wreak havoc behind Japanese lines. Ranger reports on Japanese troop movements enabled Chinese and U.S. infantry to trounce the Japanese on the ground, and Allied bombers to plaster them from the air. A U.S. infantry officer observed that “without the assistance and support of the Kachins, we would have been licked before we even got started.” Myitkyina fell in August, and a few months later supplies were flowing up the Burma Road to China.

As one of the first U.S. special operations outfits, the American-Kachin Rangers exhibited many of the traits that would account for the successes and popularity of special operations forces in decades to come. By forging ties with the local population, a few Americans enlisted the help of local warriors who knew the physical and cultural terrain better than the enemy. The low American profile kept the Rangers from attracting the attention a U.S. infantry unit would attract. Emphasis on stealth and speed enabled the Rangers to sneak up on the enemy to slit throats and demolish bridges.

In the 75 years since the creation of the United States’ first special operations forces, the achievements of those forces have built up popular confidence in their capabilities to such an extent that their success is often taken for granted. The recounting of their numerous triumphs, however, can easily obscure the historical reality that their tribulations have often been as numerous. The Burma campaign of World War II is a case in point. Five of the first six special operations teams sent into Burma disappeared or were destroyed. Only the team sent into the Kachin territories found a sympathetic population that refused to betray it to the Japanese authorities.

To ignore the tribulations is to risk endangerment of today’s troops and missions. Before putting special operators in harm’s way, the makers of policy and strategy must give great thought to the factors that determine tactical and strategic outcomes. No foolproof methodology exists, but powerful insights are to be found by studying the history of U.S. special operations forces.

The Trump administration has inherited a world in which threats fester amid failed states and rogue regimes. Averse to large wars of occupation like those in Iraq and Afghanistan, the White House seeks other ways to contain and counter these threats. One of the most attractive options is the support of insurgent groups, a mission for which special operations forces are preeminently qualified.

It is tempting to presume that the talents of U.S. advisers will determine whether the insurgency prevails. High confidence in the clout of U.S. special operators has figured in some of the most notable disappointments in U.S.-backed resistance operations, such as the insertion of agents into North Vietnam in the mid-1960s and the Syrian rebel training program of 2014–2015 that fielded only a handful of fighters at a cost of \$580 million. In truth, the United States' ability to support resistance organizations, whether in Nazi-occupied France or in modern-day Yemen, has depended primarily on the quality and quantity of insurgents and counterinsurgents. Where the counterinsurgents held a firm military and political grip on the population, would-be insurgents and interloping foreigners seldom stood a chance of organizing a popular rebellion.

Successful resistance groups, such as the Kachins in World War II and the North Koreans of Hwanghae province in the Korean War, have almost invariably enjoyed strong indigenous leadership and a sympathetic local population. They have, moreover, possessed a realistic vision for a viable postwar government and society. As the Bush administration learned in Afghanistan and Iraq and the Obama administration relearned in Libya, destroying the old order is much easier than replacing it with a durable new order.

With anti-American extremists and criminals now running loose on every continent, another valuable special operations capability is the surgical strike, whereby special operations forces raid a predetermined location, usually for the purpose of apprehending miscreants. U.S. special operators honed their surgical strike skills in the infernos of Iraq and Afghanistan and employed them more recently on a reduced scale in such places as Yemen, Somalia, and Syria. Through surgical strikes, U.S. special operations units have captured or killed thousands of enemy leaders, obtained hard drives full of incriminating information, and freed hostages. In the future, the surgical strikers could be summoned to seize the nuclear facilities of rogue regimes or cut the fiber-optic cables of hostile powers.

Eliminating enemy personnel on an industrial scale is a potent weapon in counterinsurgency. Popular mythology notwithstanding, effective counterinsurgency requires not only protecting the local population but also defeating enemy combatants. In Iraq and Afghanistan, the United States was most effective when the surgical strikes of special operations forces supplemented the counterinsurgency operations of conventional forces. While Americans of all political stripes have vowed that the country will never again wage a large-scale counterinsurgency war, the United States has a habit of fighting wars it had previously foresworn.

Owing to the United States' recurrent wariness of committing its own forces abroad, it strives to empower friendly nations to combat terrorism, insurgency, illicit trafficking, and other scourges that imperil U.S. interests. Since the Kennedy era, special operations forces have helped partner countries increase their security capabilities, most often through training and education. The historical records

of those efforts reveal enormous variations in effectiveness—and patterns that recommend certain courses of action over others.

Because special operations forces are relatively small, they cannot train large numbers of people for long periods of time. They can train substantial numbers for short durations, but short-term training has consistently failed to inculcate the skills and attitudes that an effective fighting force needs. A poignant example is Mali, whose military crumbled in 2012 following years of intermittent U.S. training. That experience convinced Admiral William McRaven, then-commander of Special Operations Command (SOCOM), to shift from short and episodic training to long and persistent training.

If training is to be long and persistent, the recipients must necessarily be small in number. An alluring option is the focusing of training on a nation's elite forces. The small size of elite units, however, usually imposes severe constraints on their strategic impact. They may be able to conduct surgical strikes, but they cannot deny an enemy access to territory or people. If U.S. interests demand that an ally rapidly boost its internal security, then the United States will need to build capacity in a broader set of security forces and institutions—which will likely require the participation of U.S. conventional forces and civilian agencies.

In Yemen, the Obama administration pursued a strategy of surgical counterterrorism, while ignoring recommendations from U.S. special operators to train larger Yemeni forces for counterinsurgency. "You cannot hold the jungle back with a weed whacker," the senior special operator in the country protested in vain. The strategy ended in disaster, as insurgents consolidated control in the hinterlands and then overran the central government in September 2014, dismantling Yemen's security services and driving U.S. military and intelligence personnel out of the country.

U.S. special operations forces have made optimal use of small numbers when concentrating personnel at central institutions of training and education. In this way, a handful of Americans can influence the numerous officers who come through the institutions and at stages in their careers when they are still open to new ideas. The approach requires several decades to reach its maximum effect, because it takes that long for the students to rise into senior leadership positions. Centralized, long-term training and education programs were vital to the biggest special operations success in building partner capacity, Colombia.

Special operations forces, like conventional forces and the nonmilitary instruments of diplomacy and aid, are only as good as the strategies and policies in whose services they are employed. Strategists and policymakers must understand the capabilities of these and all other instruments of national power, as well as the strategic environment where actions will be orchestrated. They must, in addition, understand the capacity of the instruments—especially the special operations forces, given the recent remark from SOCOM commander General Tony Thomas that the nation is now using special operations forces at "unsustainable" levels. With the demand for special operations forces exceeding the supply, the new administration must determine where scarce special operations personnel can best be employed, and where other U.S. and allied capabilities can most profitably shoulder the burden.

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