

December 2016

# Let SOF Be SOF

Kristen R. Hajduk

## Overview

Thus far, the incoming Trump Administration has expressed interest in [easing restrictions](#) and White House oversight on military decision-making. A willingness to place more agency in the hands of operators could provide breakthrough opportunities and flexibility for Special Operations Forces (SOF) as they continue to combat terrorism.

*The future of global security—from both non-state and state actors—will depend on preventing slow-burning and asymmetric threats from sowing instability abroad. Fully supporting the roles and resources of special operations is the best, most effective way to ensure America retains its strength and security.*

## Issue

The U.S. Special Operations Command's (USSOCOM) direct action missions provide immediate response capabilities during violent conflict. This includes counterterrorism (CT), high-value targeting, countering weapons of mass destruction, personnel recovery, and hostage rescue operations. These direct operations buy time for longer-term indirect approaches—including civil affairs, building partner capacity, information operations, and special reconnaissance—to take effect. Indirect operations address the sources of terrorism or instability by increasing partner nations' resilience and rule of law.

Military and civilian leaders have responded to the evolving threat of terrorism by emphasizing direct action missions. In 2006, USSOCOM was named as the lead command for all operations against al Qaeda (AQ). It was successful in severing AQ from its sources of power: people, money, and influence. This success and continued demand for special operations have led to slightly increased personnel numbers and larger budgets.

As USSOCOM became increasingly involved in CT operations, the demands on SOF created historically high rates of deployment. During any single year, SOF are deployed to nearly 75 countries around the globe, with some operations requiring up to a dozen raids each evening. The resulting demands on SOF have led to concerns for the chronic neglect of indirect missions and the future of SOF readiness. The following recommendations are designed to give the Department the flexibility to engage, support, and deploy SOF effectively and efficiently.

## Recommended Changes

*Equalize funding, resourcing, and personnel between direct and indirect SOF missions.* SOF's value has equal footing in direct action and indirect activities in support of Geographic Combatant Command (GCC) missions. Whereas direct action may effectively target terrorists, indirect operations support stability and counteract sources of instability, preventing conflict or enabling host-nation forces to prevent or address conflict themselves. Without equal emphasis on indirect missions, SOF will fall back on an unending target list—perpetually repopulated with new individuals—without any off-ramps to stabilization and political reconciliation.

Today, the DoD Unified Command Plan gives USSOCOM responsibility to lead direct operations for combatting terrorism, however, the command has no formal authority to coordinate the indirect DoD activities that counter the sources of instability. This gap should be closed, with the Secretary of Defense naming USSOCOM as the DoD operational lead command for all indirect activities in support of CT. USSOCOM could then develop a template for long-term, indirect operations based on past successes with partner countries.

*Decrease deployment rates to support the long-term readiness of the force.* Return SOF personnel to 1:2 dwell time (also referred to as “days at home”). SOF personnel have not achieved sufficient dwell rates since before 9/11, and SOF senior leaders have observed the force “fraying around the edges” since that time. Deploying at these historically high rates withholds much needed time for them to recuperate between deployments, receive additional training, and spend much-deserved time with their loved ones. Allowing for reasonable dwell time provides opportunities for operations to devote time to develop intellectual capital, maintain and improve foreign language skills, and generally foster a force of strategically-minded leaders. Leaders must not sacrifice the strategic readiness of SOF for short-term tactical or operational gains.

*Leverage the Army and U.S. Marine Corps to serve greater roles in indirect GCC operations.* The size of SOF cannot be quickly surged. The force can reasonably grow at a rate of 3-5% each year without sacrificing quality. Adding to this burden are GCC requirements for SOF, which continue to grow exponentially in order to meet the demands of their respective operational environments. Therefore, the best way to preserve the high quality of the SOF while meeting the increasing GCC demands is to leverage the conventional forces to fill non SOF-specific requirements. To provide this support, the Services may have to resist the singular focus on high-end warfighting at the expense of the urgent need for indirect operations.

In Operation Iraqi Freedom and Operation Enduring Freedom, the Army proved its ability to adapt conventional units to civil affairs missions with relative rapidity and ease. The Army's manpower, organizational reach, and historical experience can support this partnership by increasing the number of active duty civil affairs units and conducting the bulk of civil affairs operations and some information operations overseas.

Similarly, leverage the U.S. Marine Corps (USMC) to support building partner capacity and security cooperation activities. The USMC unit structures could be a substitute for USSOCOM's small-unit, indirect operations with host nations. The USMC already has manpower and resources—such as air, naval, amphibious, ground capabilities—integrated down to the tactical level. The USMC can draw upon its historical role in small wars, doubling down on USMC cultural and structural attributes that make them more efficient at indirect missions.

*SOF operational planning and synchronization should be pushed down to the Theater Special Operations Commands (TSOCs).* Each GCC has a TSOC responsible for meeting theater-unique special operations requirements. TSOCs should serve a greater role in operational planning in support of GCC-wide strategies and help coordinate activities with the U.S. embassies within the area of responsibility. They should ensure alignment of country-level planning across the various SOF units assigned within the GCC. TSOCs can be powerful influences within the GCC—especially when the GCC headquarters are not located within the GCC for security reasons—like U.S. Central Command and U.S. Africa Command. USSOCOM can realize the potential of TSOCs by ensuring the highest-performing personnel in command of and deployed to TSOCs.

*Strengthen SOF personnel and operational oversight.* Seek statutory adjustments to combine the responsibilities of the Assistant Secretary of Defense for Special Operations and Low-Intensity

Conflict with the Undersecretary of Defense for Intelligence into a unified Under Secretariat for Special Operations and Intelligence (USD(SO&I)). This will allow for more collaboration between covert and overt activities conducted by the Department. It will also create one point of contact for coordination of paramilitary activities between SOF and the intelligence community. Last, increase the manpower and resources that support the ability of USD(SO&I) to provide independent assessments and departmental oversight of USSOCOM, information, and intelligence activities.

The future of global security and the fight against counterterrorism—from both non-state and state actors—will depend on preventing slow-burning and asymmetric threats from sowing instability abroad. Fully supporting the roles and resources of special operations is the best, most effective way to ensure America retains its strength and security.

---

This report is produced by the Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS), a private, tax-exempt institution focusing on international public policy issues. Its research is nonpartisan and nonproprietary. CSIS does not take specific policy positions. Accordingly, all views, positions, and conclusions expressed in this publication should be understood to be solely of the author(s).

© 2016 by the Center for Strategic and International Studies. All rights reserved.