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‘Scalpel’ or ‘Easy Button’? Neither – And Some Further Considerations

Dr. Anna Simons

OPINION PIECE

Research question: ‘Scalpel’ or ‘easy button’: what are the political risk implications of special operations forces?

Argument: This chapter questions current conventional wisdom and common assumptions about political risk and the prudent use of SOF. It draws distinctions between rescue missions and counter-leadership targeting, and contends that expeditionary Military Assistance (MA) rather than expeditionary Direct Action (DA) may prove the better expeditionary bet – but only under certain conditions. Also, rather than look to the U.S., it may be more useful to look to other countries (like Norway) for sensible concepts for how SOF can be put to better strategic, and less risky, operational use, particularly in the realm of MA.

Conclusion:

- Expeditionary DA is never as nice, neat, or tidy as is assumed.
- Expeditionary MA requires more strategic forethought than it has received, but any SOF should be able to be turned into a strategic-level asset through the strategic use of MA. However, this requires creative thinking by senior leaders, as well as more honest assessments of what SOF is (or is not) capable of.

Abstract

When examining the political risk implications of using SOF, it is important to acknowledge that political risks may be impossible to accurately calculate, since whether an operation or mission proves worthwhile will depend on who is doing the assessing, at what moment in time, and for what ends. Indeed, some missions may yield results whose value degrade rather than increase over time. This seems truer of expeditionary Direct Action (DA) missions than is commonly recognized. Expeditionary Military Assistance (MA) missions, on the other hand, can have a long-lasting strategic impact, but only if careful thought is given to how to employ MA and SOF strategically.

To be able to adequately answer the question – “scalpel’ or ‘easy button’: what are the political risk implications of special operations forces?” – requires posing a series of additional questions. Among these are:

1. Political risk – to whom or to what?
2. What type of SOF are we talking about (Army, Navy, special mission, covert, direct action-oriented, military assistance-capable, etc.)?
3. And, under what circumstances, or to address what problems, are SOF being deployed?

A cascade of further questions flows from each of these. For instance:

- Are SOF being used defensively or offensively?
- On behalf of fellow citizens or foreigners?
- Foreigners next door, or foreigners half a world away?
- In response to treaty obligations, or out of mercy – or for some other set of reasons?
- And, can those reasons be made public – or not?

Answering each of these questions matters because decision makers risk significantly different equities than do service members or their family members whenever SOF are deployed. The same can also be said for the military as an institution. All militaries face perennial retention, recruitment, and quality control challenges. The clarity, duration, and literal riskiness of operations inevitably impact who stays in, who gets out, and who does (or does not) sign up. Also worth bearing in mind is that risk *can* be alluring to some – especially to young males, and to ambitious professionals, whose tolerance levels may be much higher than those of their more cautious fellow citizens.

Meanwhile, once forces are publicly committed to an operation, so is the nation’s image. This can make the political risks seem even greater, which can lead some policy makers to prefer secrecy. Yet, secrecy may prove increasingly short-lived, as disclosures by Julian Assange, Eric Snowden, and state-sponsored hackers suggest.

Consequently, if there is a Bottom Line Up Front to my paper it is twofold: 1) To assume that political risks are calculable may be a pipe dream. This does not mean that SOF should not be used. But for those who worry about political risk, it does mean 2) there needs to be a far greater appreciation

for which types of missions are likely to yield results whose value will not degrade over time. For example, despite the apparent ease with which targeting operations can be launched, conducting unilateral direct action (DA) in someone else's country is especially problematic. Although such missions promise something neat, tidy, and "one-off," they are rarely neat and tidy because they are seldom "one-off."

Expeditionary Direct Action

It is important, too, to distinguish between using SOF as a scalpel for surgical rescues and applying it to targeting.⁵² Even when rescues fail, the blowback is minimal. This is in part because rescue operations consist of a well-defined beginning, middle, and end, something that is hardly the case with surgical strikes aimed at counter-leadership targeting (CLT).

Take, for instance, the 'deck of cards' targeting approach adopted by the U.S. post-9/11. It has been both reactive and opportunistic. SOF elements continually react to seize or eliminate targets as they pop up. Even today, bad actors are eliminated whenever and wherever they can be found *and* whenever the circumstances favor a strike (to include whenever there is little risk of civilian collateral damage). Unfortunately, this means that very little entrapment and no sequencing can be done. Thus, no deliberate shaping or strategic undermining of the adversary's future bench is – or can be – achieved.⁵³

More significantly, precision rarely if ever delivers game-changing effects. This is because by avoiding collateral damage, precision strikes have little impact on the populations among whom insurgents, terrorists, and others find willing support; the targeting of individuals does not change *collective* behavior. But also, if targeting did have a sufficiently strategic effect, SOF missions would not now be expanding – from Afghanistan, Iraq, and the Horn of Africa (Somalia and Yemen) to Libya, the Sahel, and beyond.

Of course, there are other factors contributing to the spread of jihadism. Yet, if one reflects on a key argument used to justify the need for surgical strikes – to buy 'time' for inept governments to become more responsive

(52) Unfortunately, both fall under 'surgical strike' in the new vocabulary US Army SOF has adopted.

(53) This is the partial focus of a "Strategic Ambush" project undertaken for the Office of Net Assessment (OSD) at the Naval Postgraduate School in Spring 2015.

to and/or legitimate in the eyes of their populations – the last 15 years should have made it amply clear that more than just time, or time + space + money + outside expertise (and other inputs) are required to achieve significant, let alone lasting effects. For state-building to work, people in the country where the targeting is done have to want to both accept a common social contract and a government. To *want* to share a government generally requires that people first share certain key sensibilities – which is not something the presence of non-Muslim foreign soldiers typically assists with in most Muslim countries (except to the extent that outsiders become a force to rally against).⁵⁴

However, my intent here is not to critique current counter-insurgency (COIN) or foreign internal defense (FID) practices. Instead, my aim is to underscore that when SOF operators lack sufficient insider/local knowledge, when civilian and military leaders provide wavering commitment (read: no clear strategy), and so long as Western publics remain ambivalent about assassinations, such that complicit state sponsors in places like Qatar, Karachi, and Tehran, or individuals who serve as facilitators and ‘fixers’ in Dubai, Abu Dhabi, and elsewhere, remain untouched, then the use of SOF to eliminate targets in warzones is likely to continue to remain marginally productive at best.⁵⁵

Still worse is that using SOF in this catch-as-catch-can/reactive fashion renders it a wasted asset. It also has a warping effect on SOF operators. Thus, for reasons to be elaborated on below, my contention is that expeditionary MA, rather than expeditionary DA may prove the better expeditionary bet for all involved – but, only under certain conditions and with eyes wide open.

The Significance of Perspective – and Other Caveats

I stress expeditionary in this paper on the presumption that DANSOF’s top priority should be to protect Danes and Danish national interests in and near Denmark. To be sure, commerce, humanitarianism, and tourism

(54) Case in point: support for al Shabaab in the face of Ethiopia’s invasion and occupation of Somalia.

(55) To be clear, I am not advocating the assassination of anyone. However, if you push the intent behind counter-leadership targeting to its logical conclusion, then why do we limit ourselves to only eliminating operators and their immediate facilitators in places like Afghanistan, Iraq, Somalia, and the Sahel? Why shouldn’t we go after financiers in Dubai? Why shouldn’t we go after heads of state when those heads of state are clearly implicated in supporting those bent on attacking us? These are third rail questions, all.

complicate where Danes and Danish national interests now extend. Likewise, decisions about how best to choose and then invest in reliable partnerships in a multipolar and increasingly protectionist world seem likely to grow ever more challenging. Even so, I would submit that *the* overriding caveat – one that should hold for any expeditionary use of any SOF – requires recognizing that as soon as SOF forces are inserted into other people’s problems, decision makers lose control over where those problems can take them, to include unanticipated blowback they and their country might experience. Nor is it possible to successfully predict which of those problems will prove most intractable – or for how long adversaries and interested others will be able to make use of them.

Take, for instance, Operation Restore Hope in Somalia during the early 1990s and the incident everyone refers to as ‘Blackhawk Down’ [aka Task Force Ranger]. The raid conducted by U.S. Army Rangers and other USSOF elements failed spectacularly even if the soldiers and pilots involved performed heroically. Not only was General Aideed (the Somali ‘warlord’) not captured, but American bodies were dragged through Mogadishu’s streets and the images were then broadcast worldwide. In the raid’s aftermath, U.S. President Bill Clinton faced considerable criticism and a number of choices: commit more troops to what seemed to be a losing proposition, or cut U.S. losses and withdraw. He chose to withdraw.

At the time, some in the SOF community condemned this decision since, in their view, if the mission wasn’t important enough to risk further sacrifice, why had the U.S. committed to it in the first place? Plus, didn’t withdrawal signal defeat – and defeat by ragtag Somali fighters, no less?

Or that, at any rate, is how things looked from one perspective. Fast forward in time and examine the raid’s aftereffects from another perspective, and no matter how tragic the ‘battle of Mogadishu’ was for participants, they did learn valuable tactical and operational lessons, which led to significant changes in tactics, techniques, and procedures (TTPs). In the realm of battlefield medicine alone, these TTPs have saved numerous lives in Afghanistan and Iraq. Nor could lessons learned about tourniquets or the import of turning soldiers into their own first responders have been acquired through any other means *except* failure and trial by fire, which is what TF Ranger provided.

If, then, we step back and try to assess the overall costs incurred by using SOF in Somalia we might conclude that risks that seemed justifiable when the mission only appeared to be a humanitarian effort to feed the starving became *unjustifiable* once establishing a modicum of new world order proved too difficult. Yet, those same risks have since proved sadly worthwhile. Of course, shift perspectives yet again, and the argument can be made that the U.S. retreat from Somalia also helped embolden Usama bin Laden (UBL), without whom 9/11 might never have occurred, and so, SOF advances in battlefield medicine would not have been required in either Afghanistan or Iraq because neither Afghanistan nor Iraq would have merited invasion.

Worth noting, too, is that in the immediate aftermath of the ‘Battle of Mogadishu,’ Task Force Ranger affected more than just changes in tactics. It impacted international decision-making about how to respond to contemporaneous events in Rwanda, Bosnia, Liberia, and Haiti (among other places).⁵⁶ Indeed, the remainder of this chapter could be devoted to cataloging all of the myriad downstream effects from just this one failed SOF raid – which leads to the takeaway that whether an operation or mission proves worthwhile will always depend on who is doing the assessing, at what moment in time, and for what ends. This is a takeaway that should be familiar to anyone who appreciates history.

Yet, the notion that perspective is always contingent is rarely mentioned in relation to assessing risk. Instead, one hears two tropes over and over in military circles. One has to do with the need to think in terms of second and third order effects. The second involves ‘end states.’ Both aphorisms are problematic because both presume a linear ‘C’ follows ‘B’ follows ‘A’ approach.

For instance, as the Task Force Ranger example illustrates, one problem with trying to think in terms of second and third order effects (or branches and sequels) is that there are fourth and fifth order effects, as well as second order effects *of* second order effects, etc. To map all possible contingencies accurately would yield something that looks like a cross between a Gorgon’s head and a Hydra’s head – a giant tangle.

(56) For example, fear of another ‘Mogadishu’ is said to have kept the UN from acting to stop the 1994 genocide in Rwanda, while 11 Belgian peacekeepers were purposely murdered in Kigali in order to get the Belgians to pull out, *pace* the Americans in Mogadishu.

This is why a simpler alternative for risk assessment would be to instead jump straight to worst case scenarios: what are the *worst* possible outcomes should X mission fail, or succeed? Is it possible to live with, or mitigate, those worst possible outcomes or consequences? If not, then X should probably not be executed, not with a scalpel or with a sledgehammer.

Risk: Take Two

Of course, adept politicians should be able to weather even the riskiest policy decisions in much the same way the military must, by adapting and overcoming, or, in current political parlance, by being able to pivot and ideally turn mistakes and mishaps to advantage somehow. For example, in the wake of Task Force Ranger, President Clinton *could have* invoked sacrifice, national honor, and the fact that the U.S. had staked its reputation on assisting in Somalia. Had he done so, he might have avoided withdrawing troops, and maybe Somalia would have avoided its fate as the world's longest-lived 'failed state.'⁵⁷ Again, some people did suggest that the President double down at the time, though for Clinton to have done so would have required him to have done a better job of managing the public's (and Congress's) expectations from the outset regarding what the military had been sent to Somalia to accomplish, which in turn would have required his being able to identify concrete and thus potentially attainable (not nebulous) objectives – which brings me back to the idea of 'end states.'

Despite the popularity of the term 'end state' in national security circles today, the truth is that when policy makers commit forces abroad without having first issued a clear declaration of war, then the only 'ends' that can be achieved will invariably be incomplete. Also, no matter what the term 'end state' might imply, no situation stays frozen and closure never lasts. Even when a mission seems cut-and-dry, even when an operation succeeds, pitfalls lurk.

By way of illustration, consider the much celebrated Abbottabad raid and the killing of UBL in 2011. Unlike Task Force Ranger, the Abbottabad

(57) As further proof that perspectives change, all depending: in the early 1990s, I argued that Operation Restore Hope was misguided. Thanks to additional mistaken efforts in Somalia since then, the U.S. has become a harbor for a sizable population of Somalis; many, but certainly not all of whom, feel no allegiance to the U.S. In retrospect, I would probably now argue that Washington should not have tried to wash its hands of Somalia – any more than it did of Afghanistan in the early 1990s. But nor should the U.S. have granted asylum to hundreds of thousands of people disinterested in assimilating or acculturating.

operation was a tactical and operational triumph. But how should it be judged strategically – how lasting or successful have its effects proven to be?

For instance, consider the tremendous amount of time, money, and effort devoted to hunting down UBL over a 10+ year period. This couldn't help but divert resources from other investigations. As with Plan Colombia (and the United States' 'war on drugs'), squeezing the balloon so hard in one location inevitably opens opportunities for others elsewhere. Meanwhile, UBL's death has not halted others' efforts to achieve his strategic objectives. Nor has his death impacted jihadism in any lasting way. At best we might say his demise delivered a sense of justice to those directly affected by the terrorism he sponsored. But – beyond this?

Arguably, the U.S. had little choice but to hunt down UBL in order to stop him from orchestrating further attacks. Yet, hard questions can still be asked about what was really gained and/or lost by killing versus capturing him. Similar questions can be asked about what was won or lost by publicizing information about the operation.

Immediately after the raid, political and military benefits certainly *seemed* significant. Thanks to sensitive site exploitation (SSE) important documents could be fed back into the Find, Fix, Finish, Exploit, Analyze, and Disseminate (F3EAD) process. The U.S. also showcased capabilities that had to have had a sobering effect on other adversaries and/or those willing to harbor adversaries.⁵⁸ However, the helicopter tail rotor left behind did reportedly get passed along to China, and the Pakistani doctor who helped pinpoint UBL's location remains in a Pakistani jail cell. This means that while the ruse he used to confirm UBL's presence may still be able to be re-used, vaccination drives in the region will likely be fraught in the future, which may not seem significant now, but could be deadly the next time influenza or some other epidemic sweeps from east to west.

As for the raid's further repercussions, two U.S. Navy SEALs have each come forward claiming to have been the man to shoot bin Laden. Not only has each divulged operational practices that should have stayed under wraps,

(58) Publicly, it is hard to gauge exactly how the raid has affected Pakistani-U.S. relations, or how allusions to the raid (violations of sovereignty from the Pakistani perspective; the tacit harboring of UBL from the U.S. perspective) will play out in future Pakistani-U.S., or U.S.-Indian/Pakistani, or Pakistani-Chinese/U.S. relations. Of course, too, the raid will have impacted CIA-ISL, mil-to-mil, and other relations in various ways.

but their quest for publicity has only further intensified public interest in SEALs, and in SOF in general. Attention of this sort might be considered beneficial for expanding budgets and boosting recruitment into SOF.⁵⁹ But one question it raises is: does braggadocio attract the right kind of SOF operator?

Another problem created by ongoing publicity about SOF capabilities is that this may over-inflate expectations.⁶⁰ The fact that fewer and fewer members of the policy-making American elite have any prior experience with or around the military makes today's decision-makers especially prone to placing confidence in and wanting to rely on SOF. Academics who concentrate on civil-military issues have been concerned about a widening expectation/reality gap for years. But I would submit there is also another set of factors, self-inflicted by the military, that contributes to the view that SOF are hyper-capable and thereby meet government's desire for a neat, clean, push-and-they-can-solve-any-problem 'easy button.'

What Policymakers See – and Don't See

Like all good military units, SOF units generally go out of their way whenever they host visitors. It stands to reason they would especially want to impress politicians and their advisers who control budgets and purse strings. Not surprisingly then, decision-makers and their advisors come away from their visits to military installations, forward operating bases, and other venues enamored with SOF's tactical and operational capabilities. They do so for a couple of reasons. First, to most civilians, what operators do *is* novel. Second, operators' performance *is* impressive – as in neat and 'cool'. Subliminally (or maybe not so subliminally), the message that SOF's feats of technical and physical prowess drive home is that the military *can* perform.

(59) And, as Matt Bissonette, one of the men who 'killed bin Laden, and others have argued, Naval Special Warfare Command itself set the precedent for publicizing SEAL exploits and capabilities by participating in the making of the Hollywood movie *Act of Valor*. From Bissonette's perspective, all he and others did was follow in the Command's slipstream. For more on this and related issues, see Crowell (2015).

(60) This is akin to SOF creating its own 'CSI effect.' Thanks to what members of the public see on television, many now believe that all crimes are eminently solvable, and that guilt or innocence is easy to prove through forensic science. Expectations of SOF may likewise be heading into the realm of the unrealizable. However, in contrast to the criminal justice system, where those who put criminals on trial still understand the limitations of criminal science, it is not clear that those responsible for helping the President devise and shape policy sufficiently appreciate the military's, never mind SOF's, limitations. For more on misconceptions by young policy types, see Brooks (2016).

Unfortunately, such displays of what SOF can *do* do nothing to redress the in-built bias that many civilians have about doers versus thinkers, with the military responsible for doing and civilians responsible for thinking. Add to this the civil-military relations rubric that dictates that it is civilian leaders' job to direct, and the military's duty to execute, and there is little impetus for already biased civilians to change their minds about who is generally smarter, as in who is better able to grasp the intricacies of national security strategy.⁶¹ One sees evidence of this bias in, for instance, the crafting of national security strategy documents. While members of the military may be asked to help inform policy, their views rarely carry the same weight as do those of political appointees, career bureaucrats, or think tanks consultants.⁶² When the attitude that "they do operations; we think strategically" is then reinforced by what policy makers and their understudies (from the National Security Council, the Department of Defense, the Department of State, and Congressional staffs) 'see' that SOF can do during, say, a field demonstration, a culminating event for an exercise, or in some other display, this only deepens or widens the unspoken status differential *and* the expectation-reality gap.

Here is why: civilians are seldom privy to the effort that goes into preparing for an operation, or even for a visit. Conceptualizing, planning, training, and rehearsing are done off-stage, and the hours devoted to preparing are never tallied or discussed. Instead, the only thing visitors or onlookers see is impressive *action* and *activity*.⁶³

(61) No finer summary of the way members of the policy-making elite *believe* the system should work exists than in the arguments Eliot Cohen makes in *Supreme Command* – about who should be in supreme command. From Cohen's perspective, it is decisively not the generals.

(62) Also, there remains an education gap. Numerous individuals on the National Security Council staff will be younger than those they interact with on military staffs. But nonetheless, these civilians might have PhDs. Also, despite the fact that more and more officers are earning master's degrees, civilians typically attend more prestigious universities. Given the fact that 'foreign policy' and 'national security' are thought to be a thinking person's game (and heavily weighted toward political science on top of that), officers without their civilian peers' intellectual polish become that much easier to dismiss as strategists – though not as operators. Compounding this is that leaders in USSOF generally play up their operator image, both for public *and* internal consumption (for a host of legacy and, I would say, increasingly outdated reasons).

(63) Another way to think about this: the military excels at putting on shows in much the same spirit as Hollywood makes movies, with outtakes left on the cutting room floor.

A decade ago, SOF operators used the term “feel the magic” to describe what drew journalists, civilians in the Pentagon, the White House, and elsewhere to want to visit SOF units and installations – and magic is a good description for what everyone was shown and continues to be shown. Otherwise, unless outsiders have the time and/or are granted the access to sit through days of tedious planning and training, it is difficult (and quite likely impossible) to appreciate how much effort is required to make the magic happen. Small wonder, then, that when policy makers think about risks, they typically fixate on repercussions should there be a performance glitch – should the operation become compromised and/or should something go wrong at the moment of execution. From what they see, nothing would impel them to have to consider more systemic risks, such as those that might inhere in flawed or incoherent strategy.

Risk: Take Three

The combination of operational security concerns that limit full awareness on the one hand, and confidence in SOF operators’ ability to accomplish whatever task they are given on the other, makes it easy to miss or overlook risks generated by incoherent strategy, a vague end-state masquerading as strategy, or overly complicated operations consisting of too many moving pieces and parts. Even when operators themselves raise objections these can be easy to downplay, whether on an operation like Operation Red Wings, made famous by Marc Luttrell, or in coalition warfare when countries operate under vastly different caveats and the whole adds up to less than the sum of the parts.

Here, too, policy makers are culpable without realizing it since nothing in the U.S. civil-military arrangement encourages officers at any level to want to say “no” to a mission or tasking. Worse, even when officers object to missions that are too dangerous and make no sense, that does not prevent other groups of SOF operators from volunteering to take on the mission instead, which is what happened after a Special Forces team rejected what ended up becoming the operation that made Marc Luttrell famous as a ‘lone survivor.’

Arguably, operators like Luttrell *need* to be wired to think (nay, believe) they can do the impossible; we should all want them to *want* to take daring risks. However, this means that they, and we, need some entity to serve as a reality check on their unbridled enthusiasm. Presumably this is what echelons of command exist to do – and sometimes they do. For instance,

whenever the number of U.S. casualties in Afghanistan (or Iraq) reached politically critical thresholds, commanders from the top-down became far more casualty averse; the political pressure to reduce casualties resulted in commanders reining in operators and tying their hands.⁶⁴ Tellingly, however, one rarely hears of the obverse, as in commanders' willingness to back up their subordinates' willingness to say "no" to policy makers, as in "no – what you are asking us to do is *not* executable."

To be sure, commanders' reluctance to say "no" to those above them in the chain of command reflects both the reality of life in a hierarchy and the status differential embedded in the civil-military relationship which subordinates the military to civilian authority. But senior leaders' unwillingness to say "no" to their civilian overseers may also reveal more. For instance, cynics often contend that generals who reach three and four star rank in the U.S. do not just possess political skills, but are themselves politicians. Some further describe the military's senior-most leaders as political 'yes men.' Again, the nature of hierarchy helps explain why senior leaders would be prone to say "yes", since 30+ years in uniform is bound to condition them to want to be as agreeable as possible to their superiors: how often in any hierarchy do successful subordinates ever say "no" to their bosses? But also, competition among the Services, and among branches within each Service, will often lead general officers to say "yes, we can accomplish the task," knowing that if they do not say "yes," others will (which is the Operations Red Wings problem writ larger).

Thus far, little that I have described can be considered unique to the military. But something that is peculiar to it (though perhaps this is only true of the U.S. military) is that for all the prominence the military accords 'strategy,' to include its investment in developing strong strategic thinkers – ergo the war colleges – the military does not do a particularly good job of taking the operator out of those it is grooming to be strategic-minded. Nor does it do a very good of impelling those it considers to be its strategic thinkers – namely, colonels and generals – to want to *exorcise* rather than exercise their

(64) Casualty aversion also waxed and waned under different commanding generals, and at different points in the arc of both conflicts.

inner operator.⁶⁵ Thus, the habit of liking to *‘do’* never really gets replaced by the habit of liking to *think*.

In other words, it is not just civilians who are set up to misperceive military capabilities. The military is itself shot through with mixed messages.

This, I would submit, poses yet another problem when it comes to triangulating between risk and how SOF can be used to strategic effect in the 21st century. For reasons that may well be beyond their control, many of SOF’s most senior leaders seem to lack the time, inclination, and/or unfettered ability to think sufficiently creatively at the strategic level.⁶⁶ To be sure, USSOF’s operational tempo since 9/11 has been unforgiving – though perhaps this, too, is a by-product of no one ever wanting to say “no”.

Without question, USSOF operators think creatively when it comes to all of the devious, clever things they could do to adversaries if only they were allowed to. But this is tactically and operationally-oriented thinking, often geared to egress and exit from dangerous DA situations.⁶⁷ What remains less well scrutinized is the extent to which expeditionary DA itself can help *strategically* alter the broader fight – which is not to suggest that expeditionary DA is never needed. Rather, it is to suggest that many more hard questions should be asked about its usefulness as an ‘easy button,’ a scalpel, or a silver bullet.

Expeditionary Military Assistance

For reasons described above, the U.S. is probably not the example other SOFs should follow when it comes to determining how SOF could be put to better

(65) Or inner tactician – ergo the lament about micromanagement by ‘tactical generals.’ Note: in the U.S. Professional Military Education (PME) system, the War Colleges teach ‘strategy’ to those selected to become colonels (Army, Air Force, Marines) and commanders (Navy).

(66) It would require another paper to explicate the reasons for this, which range from the pernicious effects of attempting to codify the unconventional via doctrine, to the antiquated personnel management system and dreadful talent management, to too many people in organizations that have grown too large, too top heavy, and too bureaucratized. Meanwhile, top SOF leaders might well be capable of creative strategic thinking – but this is not evident; it is not what they display during visits with subordinates, when they speak at PME institutions, etc.

(67) At the moment, in USSOF, there is puzzling revisionism underway at the highest levels, as if the U.S. really will be able to help orchestrate an updated version of WWII-style unconventional warfare in other people’s countries without internal security services either knowing or being able to turn the tables on us.

long-term strategic use. So, let me instead turn to another country's SOF: Norway, and here I am drawing on discussions with two Norwegian officers who recently completed a project in which they addressed how NORSOF can improve its military assistance capabilities in order to "increase the strategic utility of both NORSOF and MA" (Kristiansen and Hedenstrom, 2015).

Like many small countries with security concerns, Norway worries that it might not be able to defend itself without assistance. What, then, can it offer allies? How can it make itself indispensably useful to others so that they have a vested stake in Norway's security?

In their capstone, Marius and Andreas spun out three scenarios. First, NORSOF could serve as the link between U.S. Army Special Forces and the Norwegian territorial Home Guards. By inviting USSF to train the Home Guard, NORSOF could help 10th Special Forces Group gain valuable experience training in the Arctic; USSF's presence would signal to the Russians that the Norwegian-U.S. alliance is alive and thriving; the Home Guard would learn new TTPs; and Norway's "threshold defense" would be *visibly* strengthened.

In their second course of action, Marius and Andreas discuss ways in which NORSOF and RUSOF could engage in confidence-building exchanges and joint exercises. Norway maintains closer relations with Russia than does any other NATO country, and already conducts joint exercises with Russia (though neither NORSOF nor RUSOF participate). Scenarios in which both SOFs might find themselves needing to work together in the future include counter-terrorism and hostage rescue. If a partnership could be fostered on the basis of these, then over time the NORSOF-RUSOF relationship might be used as a bridge not just between Norway and Russia, but between Russia and NATO.

Finally, NORSOF could be used in an MA capacity to assist with Disarmament, Demobilization, and Reintegration (DDR) programs abroad, as well as with preparing the environment prior to humanitarian relief operations (HRO), to include escape and evasion (E & E) plans for participants involved in high risk conflict resolution and peace talk negotiations. By using NORSOF in this way, Norway's Ministry of Defense would be lending critical support to its Foreign Ministry, thereby furthering one of the Norwegians' most prized roles – to broker peace and resolve conflict.

In putting together these three nominal courses of action, Marius and Andreas sought to illustrate how NORSOFF could help Norway capitalize on its core strengths and unique Norwegian capabilities. Clearly, what NORSOFF would use to make itself indispensably useful to its global SOF, NATO, and Scandinavian partners would have to be based on both its inherent comparative advantages and whatever it might need to do to enhance its own security. Consequently, how a country like Estonia might make itself more obviously toxic so that Russia would not be tempted to think about re-absorbing it in the future would have to be grounded in Estonian realities.⁶⁸ Likewise, because NORSOFF's role in DDR and HRO ties directly into Norway's facilitation of peace deals in conflict zones, other SOFs could not duplicate Norway's exact approach. Instead, they would need to identify their own comparative advantages and unique capabilities – but, in theory, any SOF *should* be able to be turned into a strategic asset through the strategic use of MA. Though to do so requires making very careful choices.

For instance, two of the most salient criteria for deciding how to invest in MA are to build on ties that already exist *and* to identify which among these will produce a clear security dividend. Ties worth building on include historic, commercial, and/or diaspora/immigrant ties since any other basis for a relationship is likely to prove too shallow, as well as suspect in the eyes of those receiving the attention, who will ask: “why us? Why now?”⁶⁹

While it might seem tautological to suggest that MA relationships must endure if they are to have a lasting impact, one-off or episodic MA not only tends to fail over time but can have deleterious effects. Take Mali as a case in point. The U.S. helped train three different units in Mali post-9/11. The only one of the three to have performed well under fire during the most recent Tuareg revolt and AQIM ‘invasion’ in 2012 was the unit that received the most consistent attention. As Simon Powelson makes clear when he documents the recent history of USSF-Malian relations, episodic engagement is antithetical to building partner capacity. It is also short-sighted to expect trust to be rebuilt quickly in instances when relations have been previously abandoned or when new units and new people serially

(68) For more on toxicity as a method of deterrence (and preemptive self-defense), see Simons (2014).

(69) Maybe expedience is sufficient during the midst of war, but it invariably seeds problems for the future, which alliances with warlords (Afghanistan, Syria) should reflect in spades. For a related argument, see Rubin (2014).

try to re-initiate them.⁷⁰ Instead, continuity and return visits by the same (trusted) personnel are key, particularly in those areas of the world where trust is hard to earn.⁷¹

An additional reason to commit to persistent, enduring relationships when undertaking MA is to ensure that the assistance actually ‘sticks.’ This matters in a technical, or literal ‘crawl, walk, run,’ and then ‘train the trainer’ sense. It is especially essential when the technology and the processes being transferred (e.g., logistics) are not just complex, but culturally alien.

A less obvious, but perhaps more pressing reason to ensure that MA is done via a persistent presence is to help host nation counterparts keep their system honest. No question: corruption and willful neglect of equipment, salaries, maintenance, records, etc. hollow out any system. But regimes often also misuse or abuse SOF training (Spera, 2015). Sometimes the units SOF trains are re-flagged and used as praetorian guards. Or counter-terrorism forces are thrown into conventional fights. Alternatively, leaders will sometimes disband units they fear have become too proficient in order to coup-proof their regimes. When MA liaisons can remain in-country for years, host nation sleight-of-hand not only becomes easier to detect, but also (ideally) easier to deter.⁷²

Expeditionary MA: Concerns

If one impetus for SOF MA is to ‘build partner capacity,’ thereby helping countries shrink the spaces in which bad actors find sanctuary, another is to help them advance from being dependent recipients to bona fide partners. The question I want to raise in this section is whether the creation of partner SOFs is the right tool for these endeavors?

Given the prominence special operations have received over the past 15 years, it should be no surprise that leaders around the world now want their own SOFs, especially since having a national mission unit like SOF satisfies numerous needs. For one, SOF is a high prestige good; having one lends a regime an aura of military fierceness and sophistication. But also,

(70) Pakistani-U.S. relations offer an especially vivid example of rampant mutual mistrust despite decades of ‘partnership.’

(71) One clear, easy indicator of trust, but one that is exceedingly difficult to secure, is the *voluntary* sharing of sensitive intelligence.

(72) SOF presence should be neither large nor high profile, which is another argument for liaisons.

SOF forces can be put to myriad domestic uses as a praetorian guard, as light infantry, and so on.

However, if building partner capacity is to be taken seriously – and is not just window-dressing – it should build partners that can be relied on in a crisis. Here is where one sees a disconnect today. Despite the rate at which NATO SOFs are building partner SOFs in Africa, Central Asia, and elsewhere, it is not clear that the global proliferation of SOFs is yielding SOFs that can be relied on.

For instance, if we were to fast-forward a few years to the next mall attack, gas plant seizure, or hotel hostage crisis, here is how the scenario might unfold: *Let us assume dozens of casualties and hundreds of foreign hostages in Country X. And let us stipulate that Country X has its own NATO-trained SOF unit (or units) about which the president of Country X has routinely boasted. One reason he has had to boast is to justify their cost to parliamentarians, the public, and political opponents, among others.*

As the crisis intensifies, imagine the quandary the president of Country X finds himself in: can he afford to call on more proficient, Western SOFs for assistance?⁷³ On the one hand, time might militate against this. But so too might his political situation – especially if he continues to believe, because he has been led to believe, that his SOF forces are more proficient than they are. After all, it hasn't only been his SOF commander who has reassured him of this, but so have NATO SOF trainers and all sorts of visiting NATO generals with all of their praise. As for his SOF commander, can he now admit, at the height of the crisis, that he had been lying about or exaggerating his forces' capabilities all along?

As for Western partners' options during such a crisis, individuals who had previously worked to help build up Country X's SOF might think they still maintain good personal relations with their host nation counterparts. But at a distance and without being on the ground, how much leverage will they actually have? And what can they really do to prevent the SOF they 'trained' from turning chaos into a debacle?

(73) For a 1979 foreshadowing and variation on this theme, see Trofimov (2007). Saudi Arabia did not have an effective hostage rescue force, but could not call on the Jordanians (who had the most effective SOF in the region). Instead, the government eventually turned to France for assistance.

For more reasons than I can allude to here, the global proliferation of SOFs does not seem particularly prudent.⁷⁴ Yet, without policy makers pausing to think about the long-term implications, this trend in MA is likely to continue – in which case it would behoove Western SOFs at a minimum to embed full-time liaisons so that they can at least monitor as well as maintain and deepen relations. Anything less risks wasting whatever assistance has been provided – or worse.

Caveat Emptor – and Conclusion

While expeditionary MA should be a more risk-free option than expeditious DA, more forethought will be required if it is to be made strategically worthwhile, especially since it is a relatively new NATO SOF ‘mission.’ Among other things, it requires a different orientation in terms of who is selected to serve on MA missions. Just because someone has made it through SOF selection and is a superlative assaulter does not mean he has the temperament or maturity to be a good military advisor (Kristiansen and Hedenstrom, 2016).

Also, while military advising is inherently difficult under any circumstances, it is especially challenging in permissive and post-conflict environments. Such an assertion may seem counter-intuitive. But combat creates its own incentives for wanting to learn to ‘shoot, move, and communicate’ more effectively. In contrast, there is nothing immediately rewarding about learning better staff functions. Nevertheless, higher level staff functions, like learning how to plan, and mastering personnel and logistics systems, are essential to modern militaries being able to self-sustain. At the same time, processes and procedures have to be tailored to suit local conditions, which cannot be accomplished via drive-by, or episodic, advising. Instead, deep familiarity with local conditions, to include the political lay of the land both inside and outside the military, is paramount.⁷⁵ Again, this is why it is critical to keep advisors in place long enough to earn trust, allay suspicions of ulterior motives, and move both partners beyond superifice.

In the end, nothing is likely to force multiply security better, or more firmly, than carefully considered, expeditionary MA. Indeed, sending the right SOF

(74) Even if the intent is to primarily secure ‘placement and access’ in order to be able to stop threats at their source ‘over there,’ I would contend that the long-term costs are still not worth the expedient benefit.

(75) For more on why the political matters so much, see Giustozzi (2016) or Phillips (2008).

personnel to the right place(s) represents the most pro-actively preventive use of SOF there is since once a country's security forces prove capable, incorruptible, and apolitical (the iron triangle), that country should then be able to self-police. Self-policing matters because without a more concerted effort to compel governments elsewhere to live up to their sovereign obligations of being responsive to, and not just fitfully responsible for the populations they govern, Western governments will be left with little choice but to have to keep launching SOF units on expeditionary DA and rescue operations around the world. And though young operators might relish the risks associated with such missions, the rest of us should hope that politicians and senior military leaders will bear in mind the truism that the good that comes from serial, unilateral *expeditionary* actions seldom lasts.

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