

Testing tempo: The role of special forces in the 21st Century

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With governments within NATO changing their attitude to conventional force intervention, special forces have become the immediate response for nations endorsing a new approach to regional security. However, there is concern that special forces cannot sustain the current high tempo of operations being asked of them. *David Reynolds* examines the political drivers behind the demand to employ such units

Special operations forces are facing a significant increase to their operational tempo as NATO nations embrace a new doctrine for conventional deployments that aims to deliver effect without committing substantial ground forces to warfighting. This results in governments relying on special forces units to offer a discreet footprint in sensitive areas of operation across the globe while remaining, where possible, anonymous. As a consequence they are bearing the burden of constant mission rotation.



US special forces personnel were deployed in more than 80 countries during 2017. (DPL)

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This new strategy to deliver regional security without exposing conventional forces to risk is focused mainly on providing military training for regional partners. Mentoring Iraqi forces and instructing Afghan officer cadets in Kabul are just two current examples. The approach has been adopted

following a combination of budget restrictions and public opposition across Europe to high-intensity campaigns in the Middle East/Southwest Asia that have had an impact on foreign policy. In recent years, for example, public opposition has influenced the UK decision to not intervene with ground troops in Syria and Libya.

The US Special Operations Command (USSOCOM) is the main driver of current US operations and directs air, land, and naval assets. Such is the pace of their battle rhythm that for the majority of 2017 they were operating in more than 80 of the world's 195 countries, according to the US Department of Defense (DoD). Current US special forces deployments include operations against the Islamic State and its affiliates, the monitoring of Russian aggression in the Baltics and Crimea, as well as the generation of new force capabilities to track weapons of mass destruction (WMD) and delivery of cyber-enabled information operations.

While other NATO forces do not have the combat assets and resources of the United States, special forces from across the alliance, including France, Germany, Italy, Poland, and the United Kingdom, are nevertheless equally overstretched across Africa, Iraq, Syria, and Yemen as they take on roles that would previously have been considered the domain of conventional forces.

Although new technology has enabled special forces units to do more, allowing these small forces to deliver influence, diplomacy, and kinetic effect, they inevitably cannot reach the scope and capability of a battlegroup or brigade. There is also apprehension that the rotation of special forces personnel is too high and their deployments too broad. As a result, the head of USSOCOM, General Tony Thomas, has suggested these forces are being used in roles for which they may not be suited.

Giving evidence to Congress at the most recent Senate Armed Services Committee on special forces operations in late 2017, Gen Thomas stated that there are 8,000 US special forces personnel deployed worldwide. These forces are largely arrayed against the threat from Islamic extremism, whether combating Al Qaeda- and Islamic State-affiliated groups in Iraq and Syria; undertaking operations in Afghanistan, Libya, Somalia, and Yemen; or constantly training with international partners. He cautioned, however, that special forces should not be the 'go-to' option in every situation.

"We are not the ultimate solution to every problem," he noted, "and you will not hear that coming from us. That has been misconstrued in some of the media circles, but special operations are more relevant now than ever to the current enduring threat facing our nation.

"We have been at the forefront of national security operations for over three decades," the general continued, emphasising, "We are a command at war and will be so for the foreseeable future. We must win the fight against Islamic terrorism, counter Russian aggression, and prepare for contingencies in Korea."

Political drivers

The US DoD approved the formation of USSOCOM in 1987 after a post-operational report (POR) on the ill-fated Desert One mission (Operation 'Eagle Claw') of 24–25 April 1980, during which the planned rescue of 52 US embassy staff held hostage in Iran ended in disaster when a C-130 transport aircraft collided with a CH-53 Sea Stallion helicopter at a remote desert staging location. The POR found that there was a lack of joint planning, with sub-units operating in isolation, and that some pilots selected for the covert operation had little operational experience.

During this time NATO was shaping its special forces for advanced operations to support conventional warfare while delivering a counter-revolutionary warfare (CRW) capability to conduct hostage rescue and terrorist response operations. Today, special forces units are the tactical solution for policy-makers across the alliance to manage a panacea of problems around the globe.

Primarily trained to deliver military covert operations, special forces personnel are also increasingly military trainers, nation builders, and diplomats. They are deployed to engage in areas where the presence of traditional ground troops has the potential to attract negative media attention and escalate into warfighting as witnessed in areas where an initial peace-supporting operation has evolved into a high-level military posture.

The cautious approach to large-scale intervention is as much the result of fiscal restraint as it is political apprehension, encouraging risk-averse administrations to shape political strategy accordingly. The financial cost to alliance governments in Afghanistan was significant, with the UK government estimating the cost of the British campaign (Operation 'Herrick') at GBP37 billion (USD52 billion). However, to understand the new approach to regional security, the past two decades of political and military strategy need to be considered.

The end of the Cold War and the optimism of enhanced relations in the 1990s and into the twenty-first century gave way to the stark reality of a new world order in which ethnic hatred, religious intolerance, and nationalism undermined international stability. The power vacuum left in Afghanistan, created when Russian forces withdrew in 1989, enabled the cultivation of a new extremism.

The Yugoslav wars in the 1990s and the 1988–89 Kosovo War were based on religious hatred. Then, after a series of attacks in Saudi Arabia and Somalia against US forces, Islamic extremists moved into the ungoverned space of Afghanistan, where they eventually dominated Kabul and the south of the country before forming training camps and launching the 9/11 attacks on the United States in 2001.

The coalition intervention in response to this (Operation 'Enduring Freedom') supported the opposition Northern Alliance and helped them secure Kabul from the Taliban. Political messages of intent to deliver change, provide stability and regional security across Afghanistan were widely heralded. However, combat estimates of the challenges and threats in Afghanistan and Iraq were quickly overwhelmed by events.

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