Quiet professionals: NATO special operations comes of age

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In 2006 NATO quietly embarked on a determined effort to boost special operations forces (SOF) capability and effectiveness across the alliance.

Motivated initially by immediate needs in Afghanistan, requirements have since steadily grown to address a landscape of daunting challenges emanating from an increasingly troubled and changing world. Building on lessons from years of demanding allied joint special operations in Afghanistan, as well as a decade-plus of similar operations and training events in Africa and across Europe, a maturing SOF component command headquarters established in 2010 is now leading the way on force generation, standardisation, and integration.
The official mission of the NATO Special Operations Headquarters (NSHQ), located at Chièvres Air Base outside Brussels, is to serve as the primary point of development, co-ordination, and direction for all NATO special operations-related activities in order to optimise SOF employment and to provide an operational command capability when directed by the Supreme Allied Commander Europe (SACEUR).

While the NSHQ works hard to standardise and promote proven doctrine and training methods developed over decades by France, the United Kingdom, the United States, and other member states for export across the alliance, the certification of a deployable operational command capability in 2014 has taken NATO SOF to a new level.

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A US special forces intelligence sergeant assigned to Special Operations Task Force - South climbs over the ruins of an abandoned compound during a security patrol in Panjwai District, Kandahar Province, Afghanistan on 20 February 2011. (US Army)

The build-up

The origins of the NSHQ can be traced to the tenure of then Rear Admiral William McRaven, commander of US Special Operations Command Europe (SOCEUR) from June 2006 to March 2008. Over two years a team of SOCEUR staffers developed the concept and sold it to Rear Adm McRaven, who eventually sold it to NATO’s political and military leadership. The NATO SOF Transformation Initiative was endorsed during the November 2006 NATO Summit in Riga and in December Rear Adm McRaven was appointed as the first director of a new NATO Special Operations Coordination Center.

At the first NATO SOF Commanders’ Conference in February 2007, Rear Adm McRaven offered a draft vision for a mature and expanded NSCC able to rapidly generate multiple Combined Joint Force Special Operations Component Commands (CJFSOCCs) comprising well-trained and interoperable land, sea, and air
Special Operations Task Groups (SOTGs) that would execute all special operations in support of allied command operations. Eight years on that vision is now emerging.

Today's NATO SOF community grew up and established a professional identity on International Security and Assistance Force (ISAF) operations in Afghanistan, expanding from some 250 SOF personnel in two national task forces to about 2,200 NATO allied and partner SOF operating in support of the ISAF campaign plan. Initially focused on high value target interdiction, multinational ISAF SOFs adjusted to training and advising what became highly effective Afghan provincial response companies conducting evidence-based counter-insurgency (COIN) operations. Beyond building operator abilities and confidence, Afghanistan proved an unprecedented catalyst for intelligence sharing, multisource fusion, and cross-domain secure communication, facilitated by an NSCC SOF fusion cell.

In 2007 a detailed examination of SOF operations in Afghanistan led to several enhancements, including the establishment of an ISAF Special Operations Command and Control Element (SOCCE) led by a general officer, with nine subordinate SOTGs from eight nations, totalling 1,288 personnel.

In 2008 Rear Adm McRaven commissioned a more comprehensive study to frame the problem of developing national and NATO SOF. The admiral sought concepts applicable to member states across the alliance, with a view to developing "a world-class SOF capability, whether that is 12 guys or a battalion".

The study became a template for member states developing NATO-compatible national SOF, permitting forces from states as diverse as the Czech Republic, Denmark, Estonia, Ireland, Norway, and Poland to participate as partners, sharing capability and expertise within a network. According to Morrison, "The study also foreshadowed several key themes that over time have proven to be axioms of building a collective multinational SOF identity. The study found time and time again that relationships among SOF, and habitual interaction in training and other venues, were critical to fostering long-term trust and confidence." Expanding formalised multilateral SOF partnerships set the stage for repetitive interaction, which in turn enhanced collaboration.

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Into the breach

Today's NSHQ is a unique hybrid, with a multinational staff of about 200 personnel from 26 member states and 7 non-NATO partners. Headed by US Air Force Lieutenant General Brad Webb, with British Army Brigadier General James Stevenson as deputy, the NSHQ falls directly under the operational command of the SACEUR and operates as NATO's de facto allied joint special operations command.
A Polish special operations unit breaches a building during NATO SOF exercise ‘Noble Justification’, held in Poland and Lithuania in September 2014. (Polish Army)

The beating heart of the NSHQ remains training and education. Courses provided by the NATO Special Operations School (NSOS) cover the spectrum from logistics and operations to medical and intelligence, with specialty air and maritime angles.

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**Deployable SOCC**

With the deployable SOCC-Core concept fully approved and integrated into force planning in 2014, the next step for the NSHQ was to define and build a baseline model for assignment to the NATO Response Force (NRF). The NRF SOCC is formed on a rotational basis by those countries with more advanced SOF that
are able to provide the appropriate C4I capacity and capability to command allied joint SOF assets. The NRF SOCC is primarily provided by one nation, with staff augmentation from several others.

According to the NSHQ, "The subordinate special operations task groups under the SOCC come from different nations that proffer forces under a force generation process. NATO's requirement is to be able to generate a number of these SOF command-and-control entities, in theory to cover down on a number of large and small contingencies near simultaneously."

Over time the roster of countries capable of leading a SOCC will increase, as will the number of fully certified SOTGs available to deploy. For instance, Slovakia is on track to field a certified SOTG by the end of this year. Given the recently enhanced status of the NRF and the range of potential missions, the SOCC requires land, maritime, and air SOTGs, including fixed-wing and rotary-wing assets.

An Italian paratrooper assigned to NSHQ SOCC practices his shooting skills at the NSHQ training support centre range at Chièvres Air Base, Belgium, to maintain combat readiness for the deployable SOCC-Core. (US Army)

Meanwhile, the NSHQ itself provides the on-call SOCC-Core, which is generated from among the NSHQ multinational staff. The SOCC-Core is considered a short-term 'relief pitcher' to command SOF operations should the designated NRF SOCC be committed already, or for smaller-scale, short-duration missions such as a non-combatant evacuation operation (NEO) in Africa.

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Beyond Afghanistan

USAF Lieutenant General Frank Kisner was appointed as the first full-time NSHQ commander in 2010. Lieutenant General Marshall Webb took over command on 28 August 2014 as the ISAF mission ended in Afghanistan and the follow-on ‘Resolute Support’ operation got under way. Lt Gen Webb is a SOF Hercules pilot who has commanded Air Force Special Operations Command units at squadron, group, and wing level and previously served as SOCEUR commander.

During Lt Gen Webb’s tenure, increasingly capable and integrated NATO SOF will continue to mature. Building on the skills and experience gained in Afghanistan, SOF will tackle equally demanding missions, often overlapping, on the increasingly perilous frontiers of the alliance, from North Africa to the Arctic and along the eastern trace from Lapland to the Baltic states and Poland, through the Balkans and along the Black Sea littoral to the Dardanelles and beyond. The NSHQ will continue to serve as an important node among broader global SOF networks now emerging in Africa, Asia, Latin America, and elsewhere, for which it served as an important prototype.

The NATO SOF network now includes 26 allied nations, and, although not formally represented in the NSHQ, habitual relationships are maintained with the SOF of four other non-NATO nations: Australia, Ireland, New Zealand, and Switzerland. Quiet, unstructured, and informal in many aspects, the network is perhaps the most important feature of NATO SOF evolution, permitting professional growth and demonstrating relevance to NATO and to individual nations at minimal expense.
Chadian troops participate with Nigerian special forces in a hostage rescue exercise, while a US special forces soldier observes, during exercise 'Flintlock 2015' in Mao, Chad, on 7 March. (PA)
A Dutch special operations unit prepares to conduct an assault during NATO SOF exercise ‘Noble Justification’, held in Poland and Lithuania in September 2014. (Polish Army)

Nigerian special forces run past Chadian troops during a hostage rescue exercise at the end of exercise
'Flintlock 2015' in Mao, Chad, on 7 March. (PA)