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SOF vs. SOF-like

Bennet Sacolick

Recently, there has been significant discussion regarding the need for America's conventional military forces to be more like Special Forces or "SOF-like". I completely endorse this proposition, assuming it is not a knee-jerk reaction to our current conflicts but a conclusion drawn from our potential 21st century adversaries. There have been numerous forecasts describing our future environment- an environment without any peer, or near-peer competitors, one in which our most likely threats will resort to an alternative to conventional military confrontation such as irregular warfare.

Special Operations Forces are specifically trained and equipped to conduct irregular warfare, so I can't argue with our leadership when they propose the requirement for additional small combat and advisory teams along the Special Forces model. Neither can I quarrel with the need for additional troops who are culturally adept and comfortable working outside the conventional structures of the Army or Marine Corps. Joint Forces Command recently created a Joint Irregular Warfare Center, headed by a retired Special Operations officer (Navy SEAL), to guide their efforts in shifting general purpose force capabilities more towards a Special Operations Forces approach to fighting. The Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff reinforced the necessity for more SOF-like forces when he said, "the one requirement that jumps off the page is the requirement for all services to be SOF-like--to be netted, to be much more flexible, adaptive, faster, lethal, and precise".

From my vantage point, that of a career Special Operations officer, I thought it would be helpful to describe the complexities associated with creating those Special Operation Forces and the unique role they are prepared to play in the execution of an American foreign policy predicated upon Global Engagement. I chose Special Forces, commonly referred to as Green Berets, as a representative example of SOF because they represent the largest single component assigned to the United States Special Operations Command.

In order to attend the Special Forces Qualification Course you must first pass a 19-day Assessment and Selection process where we evaluate three important qualities: character, commitment, and intellect. Character goes to a candidate's moral and ethical foundation; commitment determines the soldier's level of physical and mental preparation, and intellect is indicative of their ability to conceptualize and solve complex problems.

Those few Soldiers who eventually become Green Berets have demonstrated the highest standards of discipline, dedication, integrity and professionalism. That is why approximately 77% of the young men who try out for the challenging year-long, Special Forces Qualification Course rarely make it past the first few months. We demand that each Special Forces Soldier

master hundreds of tasks specific to his specialty, plus an array of advanced war-fighting skills that are critical for survival on today's complex battlefields. If this was not enough, every single Green Beret learns a foreign language - hard languages like Russian, Chinese, Korean, or Arabic, and then must pass a language proficiency examination before they graduate. But most importantly, Green Berets must demonstrate maturity, judgment, courage, initiative, self-confidence, and compassion beyond what we expect from members of any other profession.

In order to appreciate why these qualities are so important, we need to put them in the context of our assigned mission which is to defeat Terrorism. Recently, the Secretary of Defense said that “the most important military component in the War on Terror is not the fighting we do ourselves, but how well we enable our partners to defend and govern their own countries.” Special Forces are specifically trained and equipped to assist the indigenous security forces of troubled countries and to build their capacity to defeat terrorism before these conditions become a threat to our country. This has been a core task of Special Forces since our inception in 1952 and nobody does it better. However, in order to accomplish this task, we need access to these troubled countries, and this access requires a continued policy of Global Engagement - the strategic use of development, diplomacy, and defense to advance our political agenda in areas like economic prosperity and international cooperation.

The U.S. intelligence community agrees that our foreseeable future guarantees to be one of persistent conflict between third world countries, insurgencies and terrorist organizations fueled by poverty, illiteracy, injustice, expanding Islamic extremism, as well as competition for energy, food, water, and other resources. Although our homeland has not been attacked recently, international terrorism is still spreading, and, similar to the Cold War, there will never be one decisive battle that will win the war and bring stability to the world. But a strategy of Global Engagement, employing Special Forces Soldiers, may be our best bet at defeating international Terrorism. Organizations like the Taliban, Al-Qaida, Hamas, and Hezbollah must be defeated at the local, grass roots-level by a combination of development, diplomacy and defense, hence Global Engagement.

Green Berets are the United States' only trained warrior-diplomats, the only force we have that intuitively understands the balance between diplomacy and force, and the only force that possesses the judgment to determine which actions are most appropriate in any given situation. We specialize in coaching, teaching, mentoring, motivating, and training local security forces, and we do this with the patience of a diplomat and in their native tongue. Special Forces Soldiers understand that the key to success is through “the indirect approach” - working “by, with, and through” host-nation forces, because ultimately the most powerful message is one delivered by our partners to their own people.

It is the ability to instinctively understand the equilibrium between the two opposite notions of diplomacy and force that makes our Soldiers so remarkably valuable and quite possibly our best military solution Terrorism.

Currently, we have Special Forces Soldiers conducting various Global Engagement activities in several dozen countries. Special Forces soldiers are not just training host-nation forces, but they are teaching their military personnel about democracy, human rights, freedom and dignity - all

while eating, sleeping, living, working, planning, and, if necessary, fighting with them. Our Soldiers, our warrior diplomats, are building a coalition of partner nations around the world to help share the burden of global stability.

We send our Special Forces Soldiers to the most dangerous countries in the world, working in their 12-man operational detachments, isolated and far removed from any support or protection, other than that provided by the forces they are training. Consider that responsibility - consider the trust required to train those who provide the blanket of security under which you live, work, and sleep. The men of the Green Beret live that reality every single day. This is the expectation that our country places upon our Special Forces Soldiers, and this is what they have been trained to do.

Our future may produce more challenges than Special Operations Forces alone can effectively respond, hence the critical requirement for more SOF or SOF-like forces. However, despite the doomsday forecast we see in the media, the United States remains the most prosperous, powerful nation in the world. But with this greatness comes responsibility. Many Americans believe that our continued engagement in the affairs of our foreign partners is counterproductive. However, our security and prosperity, as well as the safety of our families and our homeland, are inextricably linked to the international community who consistently turn to the United States for their own security guarantees. Right or wrong, the mantle of leadership has been thrust upon us and there is no other nation more trusted, more capable or better suited to assume that role than the United States.

It is in our best interest to serve as the guardians of democracy, while protecting trade, promoting finance, and maintaining our own access throughout the world. This all translates into a sustained and continuous process of Global Engagement and nobody in any military does this better than the United States Special Forces.

Brigadier General Bennet S. Sacolick is the Deputy Commanding General of the John F. Kennedy Special Warfare Center and School based at Fort Bragg, N.C. He has commanded Special Operations Forces at the detachment, troop, squadron and group level. He has had various staff assignments to include Chief of Current Operations at the Joint Special Operations Command and the Deputy Director for Defense at the CIA's Counter Terrorism Center. He has completed tours with 1st Battalion, 509th Airborne Battalion Combat Team in Vicenza, Italy; 3rd Battalion, 7th Special Forces Group (Airborne) in Panama; Military Advisor in El Salvador; and more than 12 years in 1st Special Forces Operational Detachment – Delta, culminating as both the unit and Task Force Commander during Operation IRAQI FREEDOM. BG Sacolick has participated in combat operations in El Salvador, Peru, Colombia, Bosnia, and Operations JUST CAUSE, DESERT STORM, RESTORE HOPE, ENDURING FREEDOM and IRAQI FREEDOM.

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