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JOURNAL

What Can Be Done About SOCOM?

By *Sadcom via Happycom*

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What Can Be Done About SOCOM?: Part Four of Four of “What’s Wrong with SOCOM?”

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[What’s Wrong With SOCOM? \(Part I\)](#)

[What’s Wrong with SOCOM? \(Part II\)](#)

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It is anyone’s guess as to what the incoming administration will ultimately do in the areas of foreign policy and military affairs. One thing, however, that seems to be an initial theme is cutting waste and redundancy. Businessmen and DC outsiders are coming in with an anti-establishment mandate and a distaste for conventional wisdom. If they are really sincere about changing things, then perhaps the entire DoD structure will be one thing they look at. For starters, someone might want to look at how much the establishment of SOCOM as a headquarters has really helped the United States. When talking to old-timers, they all recall the days when SOF were ignored, ill-used, ill-equipped, and almost done away with. It is true that SOF teams are very well-equipped these days. And one can make a career out of SOF instead of hurting one’s future by going to a SOF unit for a little while.

These benefits, however, have arguably come with a lot of costs. Careerist officers and senior NCOs make life above the team level hell for many. Many SOF have been corrupted in the fight for resources game as they turn to trying to kill terrorists and other short-term activities that potentially sow instability and make our nation less safe in the long-term. Lastly, the bureaucracy has taken the “special” out of much of special operations above the team level: there are huge risks to being innovative and telling things like one sees them. “Go along and get along,” the joke goes, “is the only real SOF principle these days.” It might seem paradoxical, but there is much conventionalization within the special operations community, and a large part of that conventionalization is the way in which SOF personnel (above the team/squad level) think.

Ultimately, however, SOF should be judged by their results. Since 9/11 and corresponding with a large growth in SOCOM, the country has suffered defeat after defeat, unless stalemate and bleeding of resources is something better than “defeat.” SOF had the lead in Afghanistan and refused to steer the leadership of our country towards something realistic, feasible, and attainable. SOF became hyper-conventionalized in Iraq as each SOF unit attempted to outdo the other in killing. This focus spilled over into Afghanistan as the rotating SOF units became fixated on competing with one another. Finally, no SOF leader or headquarters has been able to offer anything new or different than the conventional headquarters normally in place. Claims that SOF would “do it better,” have not been shown to be true in those areas in which SOF have had a headquarters or de facto control of certain areas. This makes sense,

as has already been argued, since SOF officers get their education from their respective conventional services and SOF concepts largely toe the line with conventional doctrine and wisdom. Except for some arguments on whether to rename the *Human Domain* concept: “Human Aspects of Military Operations,” or “Operations in the Human Domain,” the fundamental ideas within the concepts are pretty much the same.

What I offer here are some recommendations that will not be heard within SOCOM, will definitely not be heard by any SOF senior leadership, nor will it conform to the conventional wisdom within DoD or the establishment at large. For that reason alone, these recommendations may be entertained by some in the incoming administration. I will first, however, offer a theory about special operations that will provide some grounding logic for the recommendations.

A Theory of Special Operations

Many have offered a theory on special operations, although few, if any, have caught the imagination of the community. Admiral McRaven offered principles for special operations in his book *SpecOps*, but it was largely about raids or direct action. I will offer up a theory which should be somewhat apparent to most from a quick reading of history: “*Special operations are best used by free countries in context-dependent ways, and, when the need for such forces ceases to exist, they should be disbanded.*”

Now, of course, this goes against two of the so-called SOF Truths: the one that says “SOF cannot be mass produced” and the one that goes, “competent SOF cannot be created after emergencies occur.” Of course our own history proves these “truths” to be wrong: SOF grows and shrinks as the nation sees fit and there were plenty of examples of special operations units that were stood up during specific wars and then disbanded afterwards. After 2003 and the growth in demand for SOF, SOF grew tremendously. After Operation Iraqi Freedom ended, SOF started to shrink. This shouldn’t be surprising to anyone within SOCOM, since the enterprise violates the first two truths (“humans are more important than hardware” and “quality is better than quantity”) all the time: a simple glance at what SOCOM spends money on will show that hardware is valued much greater than humans and only quantity is measured and, thus, rewarded.

Standing SOF are bad for a free country in many ways. First, there is the transparency issue. SOF are inherently more classified and less transparent than conventional forces. Second, SOF are paradoxically harmed themselves from having a standing force, since bureaucracy creeps in and undermines the force. Third, SOF develop mission creep to the extent that they both cease to be SOF and try to prove they can do just about anything. SOF, today, have developed into a very powerful constituency within DC and in some ways drive foreign policy as a derivative of the bureaucratic need to argue for more resources.

Before the Cold War, SOF were stood up when needed and disbanded afterwards. That allowed SOF to be tailor-made to the context at hand. During the Cold War, arguably SOF were set up for the context of that period and contributed in some ways to the success of the West against the Soviet Union and communism. Since the end of the Cold War, however, it is hard to justify much of what SOF does today and its numbers, budget, and influence on foreign policy. What, exactly, are the requirements the country has in terms of SOF today?

Current Requirements our Nation has for SOF

One requirement is, to be sure, the hunt for terrorists which serve as a clear and present danger. These terrorists, however, do not exist in a vacuum, and to prioritize their killing above a larger, more long-term picture is a terrible idea. There are also many options to dealing with a clear and present danger. There are legal options. Watching and collecting more information is many times more preferable to killing

someone and then having to learn about the person who takes their place. Drone strikes are sometimes necessary. Thus, it remains to be seen whether or not “countering terrorism” (CT) should really be a SOF mission, since to truly counter that phenomenon in the long run may actually severely limit how many individuals we kill today. Surely SOF can be used in support of CT, but, just as countering an insurgency is not only a military responsibility, so should CT be looked at in terms of a broader and more long-term effort. If anything, we should look at CT within the military as a supporting function to a larger foreign policy or influencing effort (one reason that CT might need to be subordinated to Psyop in some instances). Regardless, CT should not be simply about hunting and killing/capturing terrorists. It should be about the greater supporting effort behind any one individual or cell.

Another requirement is rescuing hostages (HR) who have been taken by, for the most part, terrorists. In this instance, it may be necessary to field a standing force that specializes in such activity. For this, the Joint Special Operations Command (JSOC) can be retained. Combining them with the FBI’s CT force or placing them under the CIA are other options that should be looked at, since leaving them within DoD has resulted in their growth in numbers, expansion of responsibilities (today they mainly do CT), and their outsize influence on foreign policy. That they normally trump ambassadors, the State Department, and even Geographical Combatant Commanders (GCCs) should be heavily reviewed by the incoming administration if they want to avoid undue influence on their agenda. If JSOC was limited to HR, then whatever support they needed would probably be much more limited, thus the Special Operations Aviation Regiment (SOAR) might be done away with, or, at least severely decreased in size. Likewise, the 75th Ranger Regiment could be transferred back to the conventional army, as their support to JSOC would be much less needed, if at all. Since this is all I argue JSOC should do, the command could be cut down to a one-star command, if not an O-6 command, much of the growth in the force scaled back, and much of their support cut.

In the realm of Foreign Internal Defense (FID), that is, assisting other countries in the training of security forces and other areas, many different units can be utilized depending on the type of training or development needed. If, for instance, a country requests conventional mortar training for a conventional unit in a permissible environment, it might make more sense for a conventional Army unit to provide that training. If, instead, that training needs to be provided to a force in a denied or politically sensitive area or the training or force is irregular in any way, then Army Special Forces (SF) may be the best unit to conduct the mission. Likewise, if the training requirement is for ship-to-ship operations, then perhaps a SEAL unit would be the best for that mission. A simple survey of the last 10-20 years of FID missions, with constant updates to prioritize the most recent years and foreseeable future should give DoD sufficient justification for how many SOF and non-SOF units must be established for this type of mission. This mission would justify some SF, some SEALs, perhaps some MARSOC, and some conventional force structure. Very few other SOF would be needed for this requirement.

Related to FID, but perhaps not the same, is the requirement for regional and country-specific relationships. Currently this is accomplished through mainly FID or FID-type missions, but this requirement necessitates so many different and unique capabilities, I think it should be differentiated from FID or perhaps be a subcomponent of FID. The requirement to build relationships within certain countries and regions is sometimes called FID, other times tied to Preparation of the Environment (PE), and sometimes classified as Unconventional Warfare (UW). Regardless, it requires individuals and teams who spend a large amount of their time in the same regions, countries, or even specific areas of countries. It requires language skills, and not just skills that one can practice every now and then and score a 2/2 on the DoD language test. It requires persistence of presence.

It requires a force and individuals who are managed very differently and uniquely than the average SOF

individual, much less the average conventional service member. This mission set would justify some SF, a lot of Psyop, a lot CA (surely more than we have today), a lot of Foreign Area (FA) officers, but, more importantly, a lot of senior SOF. This is because there is a huge requirement for senior SOF personnel to stay in certain countries and regions and maintain important contacts, relationships, and environmental awareness. Currently, senior SOF personnel have to command units (especially in ARSOF) to advance in rank and stay in service. If, however, there was an approved requirement to have these personnel working in these countries and regions for most of their career, if not all of it, as I think there is if the GCCs, embassies, and State Department were canvassed, then that would change how SOF are managed and justify keeping some, mainly ARSOF, as part of a SOF standing force.

This would not, however, require huge ARSOF or other subordinate SOF commands, these teams might need a small battalion-level and Group headquarters in the rear to assist with administration, but for the most part the vast bulk of these forces would be at the team and company levels and then, at the senior rank levels, individuals would be cut to embassies or Interagency Task Forces as needed. This would most likely result in half of SOCOM and its subordinate headquarters being cut in terms of active duty personnel, with the other half sent to the senior positions described and probably all, or at least 3/4ths of all civilians done away with. This would also allow the State Department and DoD to cut many of the training contracts they have overseas, as these duties could be largely filled by these personnel. As most of these headquarters personnel spend their time trying to assist in justifying SOCOM and subordinate requirements, they are really just acting as middlemen, directing the GCC requirements through multiple bureaucracies wherein they become transformed into what the various headquarters want, rarely being the same thing as what the GCCs need.

A third mission requirement that is related to SOF is the one of Unconventional Warfare (UW). It is arguable whether or not UW is a requirement today. UW, especially as it relates to U.S. SOF, and especially U.S. Army Special Forces (aka, the "Green Berets"), must be understood within the context of this country, post-World War II and the legacy of the OSS and other similar units, and the development of U.S. Army Special Forces. UW as it is categorized and understood by DoD has its traditions in the examples in World War II of the French Resistance, Merrill's Marauders in China, and the support Wendell Fertig gave to the Filipinos. This is captured in both the doctrine on UW as well as the way in which SF thinks about UW.

UW, is defined by the U.S. Army as "those activities conducted to enable a resistance movement or insurgency to coerce, disrupt or overthrow an occupying power or government by operating through or with an underground, auxiliary or guerrilla force in a denied area." There is great debate within SF as to whether or not disrupting, say, the Taliban in Taliban-owned territories of Afghanistan, constitute "UW." Although this seems trivial, in today's context there is a huge difference between attempting to overthrow the government of a country which has a seat in the United Nations and fighting insurgents, even if those insurgents de facto control a large swath of territory. The latter can be done largely explicitly and in the open. The former implies some sort of covert or clandestine activity.

Taking all of that into account, there is another debate within SOCOM as to whether or not UW is a feasible option for today's policy makers. One argument is that it should be an option, no matter the current proclivities against covert operations. This argument goes further to say that in case a policy maker wants to conduct UW in a covert manner, it is the military's responsibility to be as prepared as it can be to conduct those operations in as many of the most likely countries we would have to in the near future. If this argument has merit, then there is a need for SF to specialize in the conduct of UW and would justify force structure for such an endeavor.

Needless to say, however, a long-term preparation for a covert UW operation would require significant

fencing of assets (to keep them in their regions), permissions that do not currently exist for the DoD and SF (any ambassador can override even the smallest of preparation for UW unless the President intervenes), and a very heavy interagency effort that currently the NSC is incapable of providing without a Presidential Finding. Today there is no one entity that could manage such an effort (corralling all of the different required agencies together towards one direction). SOCOM cannot do it, as it is part of DoD. The NSC might be the likely choice to some, but the NSC was not set up to do that.

The other argument within SOCOM is that UW is not feasible. This argument provides various reasons: the U.S. populace would not support covert activities against a recognized government, Congress would not authorize such activity without a vote, and the requirements for said efforts currently do not exist without a Presidential Finding and that is most likely not going to happen or would happen too late (and then the operation would be much like Operation Enduring Freedom- with an overt invasion). If, indeed, it is not likely that the U.S. would need, even just as a deterrent, a UW option, then SF would only need to exist for those missions that require irregular FID efforts or those missions that are intent on building long-term relationships in specific countries and regions. Thus, SF could likely be cut by about one-fifth, if that were the case.

If, however, UW is an option the policy makers require, SF would need to grow somewhat. If SF gets out of the rat race for terrorists killed, SF would still need to grow some, by about 1/5th, to properly conduct FID, relationship-building, and be prepared for UW. If, however, SF would still need to cover down on every mission in a combat zone (for now: Syria, Afghanistan, and Iraq) and conduct FID, relationship-building, and be prepared for UW, it would need to double. This, of course, is most likely impossible, since to double in size would take a lowering of standards. Suffice it to say that currently SF cannot maintain the combat zone deployments within DoD operational deployment guidance of 2 days' home for every 1 day deployed. Worse, its UW and FID-conducting forces are not fenced to their regions, thus regional expertise, language capability, and relationship maintenance continue to be at an all-time low.

The areas of Special Reconnaissance (SR) and Direct Action (DA) are missions that do not need a standing force to conduct. DA, as much as SOF will not admit it, is really just a raid, and many units can do raids. If a specific raid requires a specific capability, specialized units can be stood up and specially trained and equipped to handle such a mission without much effort. Likewise, SR can be conducted by many SOF units with some specific preparation based on each mission's requirements. These two missions are so different in nature to the other SOF missions that one wonders why they are even included in the SOF mission set list. If needed, specialized company/platoon-level units or teams/squads can be designated as DA or SR units, either in addition to their normal missions or as their primary specialty. Obviously, a DA specialized unit would not necessarily need to maintain language proficiency as much as a unit that engages mainly in UW or FID. These requirements, however, must be tied to something in a war plan or in a standing activity to be validated and drive structure requirements. SOCOM simply stating they are required is not enough, the GCCs must validate the requirement in the form of a demand for those units or as noted in a war plan.

In conclusion, I find it valid that the U.S. today requires SOF for Hostage Rescue, Foreign Internal Defense, Relationship-building/Regional expertise, and Unconventional Warfare. As such, for those specific mission sets a force of about triple the amount of Psyop, triple the amount of Civil Affairs, 10-20% more SF, a decrease of 3/4ths at JSOC, half as many SEALs, half as much AFSOC, and very little, if any, MARSOC. The growth mentioned in ARSOF, would be offset by the reductions in the other areas and the disestablishment of the various headquarters. The gains would mostly be realized at the team level and be offset by the reductions in the other forces and in the reductions of the headquarters. This would require the restructuring of the personnel system to be conducive to the conduct of these missions, vice

spending time at massive headquarters justifying their resourcing. In fact, even with the growth mentioned, the net amount could actually be much less than the current force amount, even more so if one counts civilians and contractors. It takes a lot of people to support general officers.

SOF and Their Relationship to Foreign Policy and Strategy-making

I must offer a caveat to all of these recommendations: no organizational change will solve all problems and, in fact, many more problems are surely to emerge. This is why whatever entities are established must be institutionally and organizationally flexible to expand and contract based on the current demand for said forces. Obviously policy makers will have to decide what is most likely and take some risk when they do cut forces based on a perceived or real lessening of demand signal. Regardless, I argue that keeping SOF focused on clear and present dangers as seen by others, outside of SOF, will keep SOF “special,” or at least more special than the current construct. In that vein, it is worth mentioning some additional reforms needed within DoD that would support special operations efforts and national security in general.

For starters, the Geographical Combatant Command (GCC) structure must go. Currently structured for the Cold War period, today the GCCs are in effect silos of excellence wherein all problems in their respective geographical locations are the most important and wherein there is little, if any, incentive for the commanders and especially their staffs to cooperate across regions. Today it is quite humorous to watch SOCOM attempt to synchronize efforts across GCCs, as ordered to by multiple SECDEFs, since the synchronization involves numerous four-star generals and multiple agencies, none of which are known for cooperating on anything. SOCOM has suggested the Joint Staff or another entity be established to synchronize across the interagency, but the reality is that the GCCs are their own imperial governors and they are very difficult to herd.

Instead, the GCCs could be dissolved and DoD could establish Interagency Task Forces by Presidential order that are problem-focused, assigned necessary resources, and ultimately drive justification for money, force structure, equipment, training, education, and personnel management. Currently I see the need for five such structures, each to manage a different problem set: Iran, ISIS, North Korea, Russia, and China. Each of these Task Forces (TF) could be granted the authorities and permissions necessary to prepare and, if necessary, conduct UW. They could manage FID and other SOF missions that would have an impact on their problem sets. These TFs’ on-going requirements would make up the bulk of the requirements for DoD, the other requirements coming from Joint Staff war plans. Consolidating war planning within the Joint Staff would allow synchronization across the GCCs for such things as multiple theater wars, which today get very little, if any, analysis. There are multiple war plans, for instance, that few, if any, have seen outside of the GCCs. It is very likely that many of them would be impossible to resource, given other operations or simply the reality of available forces, which, since the plans are close-hold, is unknown to the GCCs.

The current situation with the GCCs is that strategy is not focused on problem sets, most problem sets (if not all) cross regional boundaries, there are huge disconnects between GCCs and Presidential-level guidance, and there is very little, if any, interagency, much less SOF, influence on the regional strategies. This results in both SOF and ambassadors doing things that are either in contradiction to many of the GCC strategic objectives or are, at best, unrelated. Worse, there is no check on whether a GCC’s activities are meeting their own strategy, much less the President’s or anyone outside DoD. This is because there is no one entity or person in charge of a problem set. There are literally at least 7 that I know of, different, internal-to-DoD efforts that are geared towards the defeat of ISIS, none of which are coordinated, and that’s not counting the ones outside DoD or even the DoD entities who do not see ISIS as a threat. This would not be the case if there was an established Interagency Task Force with one person designated as the TF leader and held accountable by the President for progress against a certain problem set. To put it in

business terms, if the National Security Council was a car company, they would be trying to build a car with a sales force that doesn't believe in building cars, an inventory group that didn't think they needed an upgrade to digital tracking because the research group already had an in-house tracking spreadsheet, a factory floor that excelled at making very good parts, but whose parts didn't fit together, and a personnel unit that moved everyone around every 2 years "just because."

Conclusion

The purpose of this paper was to provide some out-of-the-box recommendations that one would never hear from the establishment. I defined the problem as a large bureaucracy set up to solve a problem that involved a very small force during Operation Eagle Claw that couldn't even get to their target during a hostage rescue operation because they hadn't trained with their support forces (air crews). All SOF were attached to this bureaucracy, even those who were not really considered SOF. Since 9/11 this bureaucracy has prioritized hunting terrorists and has corrupted the rest of the force so that that is either what you concentrate on or you are marginalized. The headquarters and its subordinate HQs are mostly engaged in justifying what they think they need in terms of resources and, like any good bureaucracy, the answer is always "more." The HQs has little to show for all of these extra resources as Afghanistan, Iraq, and increasingly Syria show. Some argue that we could add Russia, China, North Korea, and Iran to those examples.

SOCOM's main argument today (and has been for some time now) for why things don't seem to be going all that well is that the NSC is not corralling all the different entities within the Interagency to get everyone to row in the same direction on any one national security problem set. Other gripes are that there is very little or very bad guidance coming out of DC in terms of strategic direction. This does not, of course, keep SOCOM from arguing that it needs more resources and that it should be granted more permissions and authorities. Obviously to this hammer, every problem looks like a nail.

Instead, the solution is not to give SOCOM more resources and more authorities and permissions. This will not fix the problem, in fact, given SOCOM's penchant for hunting terrorists, it could make the problem worse (the problem being U.S. national security). If my theory on SOF is valid, and having a standing SOF organization paradoxically makes that organization less "special," more bureaucratic and misaligned as to U.S. strategic priorities, then a thorough analysis of current requirements should be undertaken. If, as I have asserted, there is found to be a need for a specially selected, equipped, and trained (and, I'd add: "managed", which is not what we do today) group of personnel, then what those personnel are required to do should be explicit and should not be redundant. Those forces should then be fenced for those explicit mission sets. Guiding those forces while deployed should be Interagency Task Forces, instead of regionally-aligned bureaucracies that serve as the final tours for most of their commanders, a way-station for star-chasing officers in search of a joint job, and a place to dig-in bureaucratic fighting positions for civilians who many, though definitely not all, are simply chasing their next GS level promotion or are content on just treading water until they retire for a second time.

I argue that there is a need for SOF today, but that need is limited to Hostage Rescue, Foreign Internal Defense, something I call Relationship-building/Regional expertise (requiring persistent presence), and UW. Limiting SOF to these missions and having them aligned to specific units (HR: JSOC, FID: SF, CA, Psyop, and some SEALs and possibly MARSOC (and a significant amount of conventional forces), Rb/Re: SF, CA, Psyop, and other SOF as necessary (based on personalities and personal qualifications, excellence, and context), and UW: SF and Psyop.

I argue that Army Special Operations Aviation can mostly go away, the Rangers can go back to the infantry, JSOC can be drastically cut, and AFSOC should only be its Special Tactical units. MARSOC can

go away unless there is a requirement for Marines to conduct FID with a Marine slant in denied or politically sensitive areas. If there is a requirement for that, I would imagine it would be small. The SEALs could be cut as well and re-focused back on just doing what they were meant to do: ship-to-ship or ship-to shore-and back operations as well as some limited FID that is ship-to-ship/shore and back-focused. I forecast that there would be a net loss of personnel if these forces were cut in addition to a growth in SF, CA, and Psyop tactical units and the dismantling of the SOCOM HQs and its subordinate HQs (AFSOC, USASOC, NAVSPECWARCOM, and MARSOC). Coupled with the cuts in civilian and contractor support, I would predict SOCOM's budget could be cut by at least 25%, maybe as much as 50%.

Lastly, I recommend that the Geographical Combatant Commands be done away with and problem-focused, and non-standing Interagency Task Forces be established to manage current problems, with war planning going to the Joint Staff. These two activities would drive all requirements and there wouldn't need to be large organizations all around the country and overseas spending massive amounts of time and money trying to justify what they want.

These recommendations, of course, will come with their own sets of problems. That is why they must not be fixed in stone, but must be constantly revalidated based on current and foreseeable problem sets that are defined by the National Security Council through their Interagency Task Forces and the Joint Staff. The forces cut to these problem sets, especially the SOF, must be managed specifically for those problem sets, to include how long they stay in a certain job and region/country, what kind of education they should have, and what kinds of pay they should get. All of that should be contingent on assessments of how things are going by the National Security Council, as opposed to a personnel system that promotes people based on a cookie-cutter approach and how many are needed in any given year group. SOF should be fenced for their specific mission sets and not deployed into combat theaters just to get combat experience or to be able to say they hunted terrorists.

A senior SOF officer once told a group I was in, "We are getting our asses handed to us intellectually by JSOC at SOCOM." His advice was to get educated. Of course, his advice ran contrary to what Branch and what general officers were saying: which was that education was secondary to a bunch of other things: to getting key tactical-level jobs, getting top-blocked on evaluations, and to staying on one's career timeline. The only way to change JSOC's grip of SOCOM, SOCOM's and its subordinate's bureaucratic focus on securing more resources, the deplorable outcome of every major military operation since 9/11, and the decreasing "specialness" the further one gets away from the team/squad level within SOF I assert is to do away with a standing SOF altogether and only keep those forces that one needs today (current demand) or that one can see needing tomorrow (war plans). Couple that with problem-focused task forces instead of the current regionally-focused GCCs, and we might well see some progress against the issues we seem to have largely been unable to tackle sufficiently of late. Or stay with the conventional wisdom of the establishment and get ready for some backlash in 2-4 years.

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