The Strategic Utility of Special Operations Forces

by Bernd Horn

The military has always been a key instrument of national power. Its strategic utility for defending the nation and furthering national interest through the use of direct military force or by assisting friends, allies, coalitions, and/or international organizations has earned it a voice in national security policy formulation and implementation. The three traditional services, the Navy, Army and Air Force, have, for a long time, been recognized as key players in this strategic context. The new millennium, particularly as a result of the terrorist attack on the Twin Towers of the World Trade Center on 11 September 2001 (9/11), has added special operations forces (SOF) to that list of strategic players. The ascendancy of SOF in the post-9/11 security environment, where SOF has played key roles in the counter-insurgencies in Afghanistan and Iraq, as well as in the ‘global war on terror,’ has prompted scholars, military analysts, and practitioners to generate new concepts to describe SOF’s strategic relevance and saliency. Specifically, ‘SOF Power’ and ‘Force of Choice’ have emerged as common terminology in the defence community. It fact, it is precisely because of SOF’s strategic utility that these new perspectives on SOF are well-deserved, and arguably, will continue into the foreseeable future.

Indeed, SOF have evolved constantly over time. The birth of modern SOF is generally accepted as having started during the Second World War. At the time, SOF was generally defined as consisting of ‘special men, special training and special missions.’ Central to the evolution of SOF was the fact that they were normally marginalized by the larger military institution until crisis, or a gap in military capability, was experienced. Then, normally due to champions in high-ranking political and/or military leadership and command appointments, SOF were relied upon to respond to the new threat or circumstances until, as a minimum, a conventional solution could be prepared, the crisis passed, or the requirement transitioned to a designated SOF capability (i.e., counter-terrorism). Not surprisingly, during the Cold War and subsequent post-Cold War eras, SOF continually evolved to match the constantly changing security environment, which morphed, based upon global shifts and societal changes.
As a result, SOF’s current structure in the Post-9/11 world is a dramatic departure in form and substance from their Second World War roots. The current Canadian definition of SOF is telling:

Special Operation Forces are organizations containing specially selected personnel that are organized, equipped and trained to conduct high-risk, high value special operations to achieve military, political, economic or informational objectives by using special and unique operational methodologies in hostile, denied or politically sensitive areas to achieve desired tactical, operational and/or strategic effects in times of peace, conflict or war.3

Encapsulated within the definition is the key to SOF’s strategic utility in the contemporary operating environment. SOF provide the government a wide array of cost efficient and effective capabilities and options outside the normal military context and capability set. Their ability to produce on short notice, courses of action in a number of domains, regardless of location, desirable outcomes with a high probability of success, give them great saliency to political and military decision makers. As the internationally renowned strategist, Colin Gray, asserted, “special operations forces are a national grand-strategic asset: they are a tool of statecraft that can be employed quite surgically in support of diplomacy, of foreign assistance (of several kinds), as a vital adjunct to regular military forces, or as an independent weapon.”4
Notwithstanding Gray’s statement, the true test of strategic utility is what an organization contributes to national power, and the ability to project or defend national interests. Strategy in essence is about ends (objectives), ways (courses of action), and means (resources). Military strategy specifically is commonly understood to mean the application of, or threat of the use of military force to achieve political ends. Therefore, for SOF to be a ‘force of choice,’ or to demonstrate ‘SOF Power,’ means that SOF must have substantive value in the exercise of national interest. In short, they must deliver capability complementary to traditional conventional capabilities delivered by the three services, and they must expand the option space for political and/or military decision makers.

Most would agree, based upon events around the world in the last decade or so, that SOF has demonstrated this capacity. They have achieved success through the nature of its characteristics, operating imperatives, and the emphasis SOF places upon the training and education of their personnel. In total, these factors produce SOF capability, or what many examining the subject call ‘SOF Power.’

In essence, SOF have been able to demonstrate their strategic utility through their ability to deal with crisis in a timely and responsive
manner, usually through innovation and adaptation. Central to this capability are individuals with the cognitive dexterity and agility to assess a situation, often with incomplete information and/or in conditions of ambiguity and chaos, and devise creative solutions not constrained by doctrine or convention. But, in a more ‘macro’ sense, ‘SOF Power’ speaks to SOF’s ability to provide government:

- High readiness, low profile, task-tailored Special Operation Task Forces (SOTFs) and/or SOF Teams that can be deployed rapidly, over long distances, and provide tailored proportional responses to a myriad of different situations;
- Highly-trained, technologically-enabled forces that can gain access to hostile, denied, or politically sensitive areas;
- Discrete forces that can provide discriminate precise kinetic and non-kinetic effects;
- A deployed, capable, and internationally-recognized force, yet with a generally lower profile and less intrusive presence than larger conventional forces;
- An economy of effort foreign policy implement that can be used to assist coalition and/or allied operations;
- A rapidly deployable force that can assess and survey potential crisis areas or hot spots to provide ‘ground truth’ and situational awareness for governmental decision makers;
- A highly-trained, specialized force capable of providing a response to ambiguous, asymmetric, unconventional situations that fall outside the capabilities of law enforcement agencies (LEA), conventional military, or other government departments (OGDs);
- A force capable of operating globally in austere, harsh, and dangerous environments with limited support. SOF are largely self-contained, and can communicate worldwide with organic equipment, and can provide limited medical support for themselves and those they support;
- A culturally-attuned SOTF or SOF team that can act as a force multiplier through the ability to work closely with regional civilian and military authorities and organizations, as well as with populations through Defence, Diplomacy and Military Assistance (DDMA)/Security Force Assistance initiatives;
- A force capable of preparing and shaping environments or battle spaces (i.e. setting conditions to mitigate risk, and to facilitate successful introduction of follow-on forces); and
- A force able to foster inter-agency and inter-departmental cooperation.
Notwithstanding the strengths and capabilities of SOF, it must be noted that, in accordance with the ‘fifth SOF Truth,’ most special operations require non-SOF assistance. In other words, in no way should SOF be viewed as a ‘silver bullet’ or panacea solution. Despite SOF’s attributes and characteristics, it relies upon conventional forces to assist in most of its mission sets, either through supporting functions, particularly combat enablers that are not already integrated into standing task forces (i.e., airlift, fires, Intelligence, Surveillance, Reconnaissance (ISR)), or with combat forces (i.e., follow-on forces). As such, SOF is simply another tool in the government’s military ‘tool box.’ It complements and supports the nation’s conventional military capability. Although able to work independently, SOF relies upon, enables, and works in close cooperation and coordination with the three traditional services.

In sum, SOF provide significant strategic utility in that they can provide political and military decision makers with a myriad of timely, precise, and tailored options in response to a complex, chaotic, and ambiguous strategic contemporary operating environment. The high readiness posture, small footprint, skill level, and deployability of SOTFs and SOF teams allow for a rapid and determined response, domestically or internationally. SOF teams also serve as a catalyst to unify, extend the reach, and maximize the effects of other instruments of national power. In the end, SOF has consistently proven to be a strategic resource that provides political and military decision makers with a wide range of precise kinetic and non-kinetic options to deter, pre-empt, disrupt, react to, or shape strategic or operational effects domestically or abroad. Importantly, SOF represent a highly-trained and educated, adaptive, agile-thinking force capable of dealing with the threat(s) that has not yet been identified. As such, SOF possess the ability to provide, and have shown their effectiveness in providing, substantive value to advancing national interests.

Colonel Bernd Horn, OMM, MSM, CD, PhD, an infantry officer, retired from the CAF Regular Force in 2013. He is currently the Director of the CANSOF COM Professional Development Centre, and is also an Adjunct Professor of History at the Royal Military College of Canada and Norwich University.

NOTES


5. SOF characteristics include:
   a. SOF generate a small footprint/operate as small team deployments;
   b. SOF can operate clandestinely, covertly, or overtly;
   c. SOF operations are often conducted at great distances from a supporting operational base;
   d. SOF utilize sophisticated means of insertion, support, and extraction to penetrate and successfully return from hostile, denied, or politically-sensitive areas;
   e. SOF employ sophisticated communications systems;
   f. SOF are proficient with, and enabled by, application of advanced technologies;
   g. SOF utilize unorthodox tactics;
   h. SOF often require development, acquisition, and employment of equipment that is not standard for others;
   i. SOF normally conduct operations ‘General Purpose Forces’ cannot perform;
   j. SOF are well-suited for operations in denied and politically-sensitive environments;
   k. SOF conduct operations, not only against military objectives, but also to support the application of the diplomatic, informational, and economic instruments of national power;
   l. SOF are capable of working independently, or in conjunction with conventional forces or other government agencies, or host nations/partner nations;
   m. SOF are proficient at inter-organizational coordination; and
   n. SOF missions are differentiated by physical and political risk, operational techniques, modes of employment, and dependence on detailed operational intelligence and indigenous assets.

6. For example, trends in military spending that are arguably indicative of effectiveness highlight the growth of SOF. The US Special Operations Command budget has been increased from $3.8 billion to almost $10 billion over the last decade. Quoted in Aki Peritz & Eric Rosenbach, Find, Fix, Finish. Inside the Counterterrorism Campaigns that Killed Bin Laden and Devastated Al-Qa’eda (New York: Public Affairs, 2012), p. 232. In addition, the US military newspaper Stars and Stripes publicly reported that the Pentagon is preparing to “unleash special operations troops worldwide as traditional operations are cut back.” Cited in Julie Levesque, “US Army Goes Underground: Special Ops Deployed Worldwide,” in Global Research, 27 January 2012.

7. The author of the five SOF Truths is American Colonel John M. Collins. Those ‘Truths’ are:
   a. Humans are more important than hardware; Quality is better than quantity;
   b. Competent SOF cannot be mass produced;
   c. Most Special Operations require non-SOF assistance.