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BEYOND THE MOVIES: THE VALUE PROPOSITION OF CANADA'S SPECIAL OPERATIONS FORCES

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CTV News and the *Toronto Star* were recently granted access to a group of soldiers that had hitherto appeared only in grainy images, often shrouded in mystery and controversy.¹ Canadians got a rare glimpse of Canada's special operations forces (SOF) in action as they trained Kurdish *Peshmerga* near Erbil, in Iraq. The interview included a discussion with Canada's new Chief of the Defence Staff General Jonathan Vance on the role that these soldiers were playing. This was not a leak: the Canadian Special Operations Forces Command (CANSOFCOM) consented to and took part in a media event showcasing Canada's elite soldiers. In June, the same journalists were granted access to SOF training at CFB Petawawa and in November 2016 CBC's defence reporter was given a tour of SOF operations along the front in northern Iraq. Prior to this, CTV got an initial look at Canadian SOF activity in Niger in 2014.

Although Canadians served with SOF since the Second World War, Canada only established a dedicated SOF capability in 1993 with the creation of Joint Task Force 2 (JTF 2).² Canadian Special Operations Command (CANSOFCOM) was created in 2006 as part of then-Chief of the Defence Staff General Rick Hillier's expansion of operational-level headquarters and a more general effort to return a unified command structure to the Canadian Armed Forces (CAF).³

Moreover, at 10 years of age, CANSOFCOM is a comparatively young command within the CAF and represents a relatively new instrument in the security policy toolbox that Canadian political decision-makers have at their disposal. This uniqueness and youth means that a learning curve is to be expected in terms of how best to employ SOF to advance Canada's national security objectives. This is evident in the way SOF has been used and when it has been deployed: the political authority appears to have an inchoate understanding of how and when best to use and deploy this capability. More needs to be done to improve political decision-makers' understanding of SOF, to deploy SOF in a more timely fashion, and to shorten the decision-making processes and feedback loops to authorize SOF deployment.

Initially this brief explains key terms and concepts. It reviews the scant (open source) literature on the use of Canadian SOF as well as approaches taken by our allies. This study then presents the rationale for employing SOF as an instrument of Canadian foreign (and defence) policy. Finally, the paper frames three recommendations in accordance with an application of the emerging field of organization and management science within a military context. Policy-makers require a better understanding of what SOF is and what it can do; they should be cautious about expanding SOF *per se* and focus instead on emerging capabilities in support of SOF, such as air transport, fire support, and co-operation with conventional forces; and they need better and quicker decision-making for deploying SOF so it can be used to the full extent of its capabilities.

What makes SOF Special?

With large-scale deployments of conventional combat forces improbable in the foreseeable future,⁴ SOF has emerged as the force of choice to achieve kinetic and non-kinetic strategic effects – the former associated with the application of *lethal* force, the latter encompassing a much wider range of *non-lethal* effects (e.g., military training, cyberwarfare, psychological operations). Kinetically, SOF is yet another instrument of war as an extension of politics. Non-kinetically, however, it is an instrument of foreign policy to reinforce capacity-building in fragile states, especially to make them more resilient against terrorism and violent extremism.⁵ Groups such as *Daesh*, Boko Haram, Abu

Sayyef, and others employ irregular means that defy conventional responses (such as air strikes or large, ground-based combat formations). The contemporary operating environment, along with technological and industrial advances, has thus given rise to “the golden age of SOF.”⁶ As a result, in recent years demand for SOF capabilities – agility, precision, and discretion – has been outstripping supply.

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Small, agile, and rapidly deployable, SOF’s low public and political profile makes them a tempting alternative for foreign policy decision-makers seeking to contain and mitigate transnational and non-state actors. SOF is optimized for operations amongst the local population (e.g., human terrain). It maintains a high level of readiness at low cost and low signature. When deployed, SOF can rapidly build awareness and situational understanding. Its smaller footprint also makes SOF easier to pull out than conventional forces. And upon departure, SOF leaves in place local forces’ capacity to keep threats at bay (perforce also from Canadian shores). That often makes SOF the proverbial ‘easy button’ for government: limited engagement with precision at lower risk and cost (although SOF remain a finite resource).

SOFs conduct two broad forms of operations: 1) special warfare (largely non-kinetic) and 2) direct action (kinetic), traditionally associated with tiered units based on the distinction of tasks (see Table 1). Prior to Afghanistan, Canada had ‘tiered’ and aligned with ‘SOF nations,’ principally the United States, Britain, Canada, and Australia (ABCA) as well as France and Germany.⁷ This tiering system is used to differentiate tasks and drive budgetary allocations: most of the money went to Tier 1. Afghanistan was a turning point: too many tasks, too few units, so tiers were blended to meet demand and mission objectives.

As a result, CANSOFCOM – with 2,200 soldiers and civilians and about \$300 million in annual funding – now coordinates and synchronizes all tasks outlined in Table 1 and the enabling SOF: Canadian Joint Incident Response Unit (CJIRU), 427 Special Operations Aviation Squadron (427

SOAS), Special Operations Task Force (SOTF), Immediate Response Task Force (IRTF), Chemical, Biological, Radiological, and Nuclear Task Force (CBRNRF), and the Task Force Arrowhead SOTF (TFASOTF), along with the Canadian Special Operations Regiment (CSOR) and JTF 2.⁸

TABLE 1: SOF Tiers and Tasks

Tier	Tasks	Selection Rates	Example
1	Counter Terrorism, Hostage Rescue, Deniable Operations	10-15% success rate, frequently drawn from Tier 2 organization	JTF 2 (CAN) SEAL Team 6 (US)
2*	Unconventional Warfare, Strategic Reconnaissance, High Value Operations	20-30% success, frequently drawn from conventional forces	CSOR (CAN) SEALs and Army SOF(US)

*Unique to Horn's analysis, other sources do not consider a distinction beyond Tier 1 and 2, however CSOR conducts both. For this reason, we have omitted reference to Tier 3 SOF as mentioned in Horn. See Bernd Horn and Tony Balasevicius, eds., *Casting Light on the Shadows: Canadian Perspectives on Special Operations Forces* (Toronto: Dundurn Press, 2007).

The special warfare mission used to be classified as 'Tier 2': what American SOF refer to as foreign internal defence (FID)⁹ – building and reinforcing capacity of foreign states to deal with internal threats – and diplomacy, development, and military assistance (DDMA).¹⁰ There is no Canadian equivalent for these terms. Canadian (and allied) SOF commonly refer to Building Partner Capacity (BPC) and Advise and Assist.¹¹ These activities involve relatively small units deploying to contested theatres of operation in an attempt to engage with and assist local forces. The task to which the aforementioned reporters were privy was a special warfare task: advise and assist *Peshmerga* forces in Iraq. CSOR used to be considered a Tier-2 SOF organization. Instead, CSOR is now thought of as a special warfare and reconnaissance organization, and it needs to select, train, and be equipped accordingly. Numbering in the hundreds (and growing), CSOR operations address issues of significant strategic value to the country, as exemplified by deployments to Afghanistan, as part of Operation *Impact* in northern Iraq, as well as training Niger's army, the Jamaican Defence Force's counter-terrorism assault team, and Belize's Special Assignment Group.¹²

Tier-1 units – so-called National Mission Forces – are commonly associated with direct action, involve even fewer soldiers specialized in detecting, surveilling, and at times, striking high-value targets. Missions are short in duration, of immense strategic value, and can occur anywhere. They are at once very risky but with a tangible and meaningful payoff.¹³ Mission success is critical: failure is not an option and could result in considerable embarrassment for the government, as missions

tend to be authorized by the political executive of the day. Tier-1 missions are rarely disclosed. The killing of Osama bin Laden in 2011 by Seal Team Six – a Tier-1 SOF organization – is the (controversial) exception to the rule.¹⁴ Few countries have recognized Tier-1 SOF capabilities.¹⁵ As a Tier-1 SOF organization, Canada's JTF 2 is a member of this exclusive club and membership is vital to the success of JTF 2's mandate yet easily lost. Its estimated 600 personnel have been active in Bosnia, Haiti, Rwanda, the former Zaire, Peru, Kosovo, Afghanistan, and Iraq.¹⁶

SOF is a carefully cultivated asset that provides strategic impact with precise, risky, and discrete, tactical actions. Canada's ability to provide a *bona fide* SOF capability is a function of reputation

“Canada does not go it alone; it partners with allies, especially from the ABCA community, in SOF missions overseas. This cooperation is critical to the success of Canadian SOF in pursuit of Canadian objectives.”

among counterparts. Membership in the Global Special Operations Forces Network (GSN) allows JTF 2 and CSOR to leverage the capabilities of allied SOF organizations while deployed in a theatre of operations. Canada does not go it alone; it partners with allies, especially from the ABCA community, in SOF missions overseas. This cooperation is critical to the success of Canadian SOF in pursuit of Canadian objectives. If Canada's capability is perceived wanting, these synergies will be undermined. Canadian decision-makers could continue to deploy SOF. But, absent the synergies generated by deploying with allies, Canada's overall SOF effect will be greatly diminished. Canada would no longer be part of the club. Nowhere is the “fraternity-of-the-uniform”¹⁷ analogy more apt than among specialized environments.

Institutional factors constrain the realization of the full potential of Canada's SOF. First, the Royal Canadian Air Force (RCAF) is equipped with state-of-the-art tactical and strategic lift – CC-130J Hercules and CC-117 Globemaster III facilitate rapid deployment with global reach – as well as with CH-147H Chinook helicopters, of which SOF can avail itself. Yet these platforms are simply too few in number; they are in constant use, and putting them at SOF's disposal, especially on short notice, creates impasses and bottlenecks for the rest of CAF operations. Second, key enabling capabilities are missing from the Canadian arsenal, most notably a fire support system that can loiter over a target (such as an attack helicopter or a fixed-wing gunship). These capabilities are scarce among GSN partners to begin with. Left wanting, Canada's SOF has no choice but to rely on already strained resources of GSN partners. Third, specialization can erode the overall cohesion and effectiveness of the military in general. By increasing the structural differentiation within the military, it can engender turf battles, increase complexity and parochialism, depress mutual cooperation, and reduce control and transparency.¹⁸ Indeed, in Afghanistan, SOFs reportedly preferred to work with colleagues from other countries than with their own conventional forces.¹⁹

A Logic for Optimization

Given growing demand for SOF along with the relative novelty of the capability for Canada, we propose three broad policy recommendations. These recommendations are based on an organization's ability to shift from one task to another quickly and easily with little internal reorganization.²⁰

First, how and what SOF does needs to be better understood. Canadian decision-makers are (still) on a steep learning curve on how to leverage the capabilities that CANSOFCOM adds to the country's security options. Canadian decision-makers need to develop a new way of thinking about how to craft and assess options when dealing with national security issues. SOF offers options that are very different from conventional forces. Both are vital, but each has its own unique logic to optimize their organization and employment. To this end, we should think about SOF in terms of effects rather than tiers: direct versus indirect; lethal versus non-lethal, the ability to build strategic awareness and understanding quickly, and the way SOF can augment government objectives through non-kinetic effects it can bring to bear by leveraging the GSN.

Table 2 builds on the division of labour and tasks presented in Table 1 but distinguishes by SOF effects. The outdated distinction between Tier 1 and 2 is superseded by the distinction between National Mission Forces as opposed to Special Reconnaissance and Warfare tasks. In contrast to the tiered system, specific Canadian SOF units such as JTF 2 and CSOR are deliberately not listed in this matrix so as to avoid associating them categorically with specific effects.

TABLE 2: SOF Matrix

	Kinetic	Non-Kinetic
National Mission Forces	Counter Terrorism, Hostage Rescue	Deniable Operations
Special Reconnaissance and Warfare	Special Warfare	Strategic Reconnaissance, Advise and Assist, Accompany

Unlike GSN partner countries, Canada is a bit of an exception insofar as Canada's SOF also have a domestic counter-terrorism mandate.

Second, we have reservations about any rapid or large-scale expansion of Tier 1 SOF capability.

“A SOF mission consists of small units deployed into a contested theatre of operations with little direction beyond a set of objectives, with little publicity, and often in response to a crisis. Conventional forces, by contrast, operate with less agility, a greater footprint, and at higher cost...”

SOF cannot be mass-produced; expansion runs the risk of being watered down or having to compromise standards. The ideal profile of a SOF soldier has preoccupied psychologists and anthropologists alike.²¹ A SOF soldier, colloquially referred to as an ‘operator,’ possesses a distinct combination of technical expertise, tactical acumen, physical fitness, and cognitive and behavioural traits. These characteristics are rare and success rates among prospective applicants low. Attrition rates – meaning the number of candidates who drop out of the selection process – can range as high as 90 percent.²² However, actual selection rates are heavily force-contingent: Delta Force (officially known as 1st Special Forces Operations Detachment-Delta, or 1st SFOD-D) draws largely on US Army Rangers whereas Seal Team Six draws on the greater Seal community in the form of the US Naval Special Warfare Development Group (DEVGRU).

Selection and training of SOF operators is particularly acute in Canada. CANSOFCOM soldiers are not recruited from the civilian population; rather, they are selected from regular and conventional forces whose members have already undergone lengthy screening processes and training regimens.²³ Since the army supplies most SOF recruits it would “likely be hesitant to embrace plans that would deplete their ranks [...] A greater and quickly applied emphasis on SOF, if not handled delicately, serves to create potentially a substantial rift between the conventional and unconventional elements” in the CAF.²⁴ Absent an expansion of the conventional forces, the CAF’s capacity to increase the number of SOF operators available for employment is limited. Given the CAF’s authorized troop strength and the qualities of an operator being as unique as they are, a rapid expansion would necessitate recasting the combination of desirable characteristics. Standards would have to change, which in turn might compromise the stellar reputation Canadian SOF operators and the government’s certainty of mission success when employing that capability.

The GSN compensates for scarcity: as a member of the privileged group of select “SOF nations,” and through additional partner countries. However, expansion is needed not among operators but for emerging capabilities, especially Intelligence, Reconnaissance, and Surveillance (ISR) platforms. These need to be maintained, and flows and data they collect analyzed. SOF also needs greater support for cyber operations. And it needs general support, such as new vehicles and more mechanics to maintain them.

But are these capabilities best generated within the Canadian special forces? Or would it be better to train up conventional forces and give them the skills to work with SOF while allowing SOF to concentrate on its core capabilities? Recruiting more SOF operators, procuring more equipment to optimize their effect, or ensuring greater collaboration and cooperation with other forces – both

‘special’ and ‘conventional’ – runs the risk of *conventionalization*:²⁵ a natural by-product of organizational growth that would compromise the very agility that makes SOF unique (and useful).²⁶ In the words of one analyst: “[c]onventionalization is less than preferable for conventional forces, but for special forces it is disastrous.”²⁷ A SOF mission consists of small units deployed into a contested theatre of operations with little direction beyond a set of objectives, with little publicity, and often in response to a crisis. Conventional forces, by contrast, operate with less agility, a greater footprint, and at higher cost – both financial and political. SOF forces, once deployed, operate independently, employ special warfare tactics that are creative and exploit fleeting opportunities.²⁸ This organizational structure – or lack thereof – works because the units involved are small and exceptionally skilled.

Third, how SOF is enabled needs to be re-thought: the longer the time to reach a political decision, the fewer options SOF has to mitigate a crisis. Indeed, it needs to be re-cast in terms of how it differs from what conventional forces can do. Canada currently lacks the policies, national security culture, mechanisms, processes, and methods to optimize the use of SOF. As a result, Canada’s SOF is undersubscribed and under-utilized. The remedy is to connect the Canadian command authority better to the SOF tool: government assesses need but leaves it too late to hone in on SOF options, and when it does, it takes too long to arrive at any conclusion, let alone the decision to deploy SOF. Since SOF is smaller, can deploy quickly with minimal pre-deployment training, and leverage the benefits of membership in the GSN, it can be deployed against threats more expeditiously. The faster a decision-maker can respond to a threat, the wider the range of options.

Conclusion

Absent an injection of additional funding, these three recommendations ensure that Canadian SOF can continue to operate within the Global Special Operations Forces Network in a way that optimizes both capabilities and impact to achieve Canada’s national security objectives. While the direct action component in the form of National Mission Forces makes up an important SOF capability, actual SOF work is mostly in the non-kinetic realm, such as ensuring access, understanding the environment, and influencing senior leaders. Much of the time, they do the legwork that makes it possible for National Mission Forces to carry out their precision operations. They offer an opportunity for an ongoing dialogue by building relationships. That is exemplified by the special operations components embedded in US Combatant Commands (except US Northern Command). The same holds at the domestic level, where CANSOFCOM’s domestic counter-terrorism mandate enables it to build relationships and gain access to first responders.

The future security environment is neither black nor white. SOF needs expansion – but not so much

among operators. Instead, it runs up against institutional constraints that are manifest in lack of certain types of fire support, scarce RCAF assets, and support specialists as matériel and missions become more technical and specialized. Proper support also ensures optimal lifecycles for equipment at a time when tight government budgets constrain defence procurement. SOF does not need much “kit.” As a result, rather than buying ad hoc in small quantities, it can share matériel with conventional forces to ensure ready availability of support, equipment, and parts. Conversely, because SOF buys small, it offers a test-bed for new systems that the conventional forces may be considering. By way of example, its trial of sniper weapons added significant value for the army as a whole.

Canadian decision-makers are on a steep learning curve on how to leverage the capabilities that an organization such as CANSOFCOM adds to a country’s security options. This study nudges them to develop new ways of thinking about how to craft and assess options when dealing with national security issues. SOF offers options that are very different from conventional forces. Both are vital, but decision-makers need to consider how to get the most out of their respective capabilities.

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