

The Golden Age of Special Operations Forces

Written by Abigail Watson

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ABIGAIL WATSON, NOV 28 2017

Special Forces have long captured people's imaginations. Books, films, videogames and news outlets propagate an image of heroism and mysticism – only added to by governments' reticence to discuss their operations. The impact of this is that, while almost everyone knows or thinks they know what Special Forces are, few really know what they do. This article seeks to address this by giving an introduction to the operations of Special Forces, using the US Special Operations Forces (SOF) as a case study. The first section of this article will describe what SOF do, especially looking at their two core tasks in dismantling terrorist groups – direct and indirect operations – and their increasing role as the sole boots on the ground. The second section briefly describes the history of SOF, from their origins in World War Two to the Obama administration – where, attempting to balance tackling this threat with the political desire to bring troops home, they became his 'tool of choice'. The final section touches upon three dangers with the current use of SOF: the damage to democracy, given the secrecy of SOF and prominence of their use in US operations; the overuse what is a comparably small and specifically trained part of the US force; and the problems it could present for US's broader foreign policy goals.

There are two key points should be addressed from the outset. The first is that the US is far from a typical example of Special Forces use, however much of the debate has been dominated by discussion of US SOF. This is perhaps unsurprising given that in SOF as well as in conventional military capacity, the US far outstrips its allies in terms of expenditure, number of personnel and extensiveness of deployment (Fleurant et al., n.d.; Turse, 2017). The second is that, while the terms Special Forces and Special Operations Forces (SOF) are often used interchangeably, they refer to different things, at least in the US context. SOF is a predominantly US-based umbrella term used to cover all Special Forces units as well as units who are conventionally trained but who work with the Special Forces (Skovlund, 2017). This article will refer to SOF, but much of the discussion draws on examples from the narrower operations of US Special Forces, such as those of US Navy SEAL Teams.

Special Forces and Special Operation Forces

US SOF are 'small, elite military units with special training and equipment that can infiltrate into hostile territory through land, sea, or air to conduct a variety of operations, many of them classified' (Feickert, 2008). Under Title 10 of the United States Code, they have been assigned ten core activities: direct action, strategic reconnaissance, unconventional warfare, foreign internal defence [training local troops], civil affairs, psychological operations, counter-terrorism, humanitarian assistance, theatre search and rescue and special activities authorised by the Secretary of Defense or the President (Finlan, 2008, p. 8).

Compared to regular forces, US SOF are defined by their seniority; they are often trained in several different military disciplines, and their ranks are often filled with older more experienced troops drawn from the ranks of elite regular units (NATO, 2013, pp. 1–1, 1–2). Moreover, unlike regular combat forces, SOF are able to act under the radar, and can be deployed without the level of oversight that would usually come with the formal outbreak of hostilities (Finlan, 2008, p. 11).

Direct and Indirect Uses of SOF

In its efforts to dismantle terrorist groups, the US Government has tasked SOF with two key activities: undertaking

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direct strikes against terrorist targets and building the capacity of local forces. The first of these – also referred to as direct operations – are typically brief (although often involve extensive planning) and usually carry a higher potential for the use of weapons (Bucci, 2015). The most famous example of this type of operation is Operation Neptune, where SEAL Team 6 killed Osama bin Laden in Pakistan (Schaller, 2015). The second involves working ‘by with and through’ local and national military forces so that they carry out the brunt of frontline fighting (Bucci, 2015). This type of engagement is being used far more in the fight against terrorist groups, both as a way to avoid the deployment of large numbers of US forces and, longer term, as an attempt to build local and regional security capacity (Reeve, 2014; Robinson, 2017).

In recent years, with the drawdown of conventional troops, SOF have increasingly been the only US force in a number of conflict areas. While regular forces have been brought home, the more covert SOF units have been deployed more extensively than before; with this, their role has changed from a force multiplier to the sole US military presence. As General Raymond Anthony Thomas, Commander of US SOCOM, recently said, SOF are no longer a ‘mere ‘break-glass-in-case-of-war’ force, but are now proactively engaged across the battle space’ (Lodge, 2017).

History

US SOF trace their origins back to the Office of Strategic Services, or OSS, in World War II, which ‘was formed ... to gather strategic intelligence and conduct operations behind enemy lines’ (Special Forces Association, n.d.). Since, SOF development has ebbed and flowed between extensive use and expansion and then scepticism, often following controversy. For example, under John F. Kennedy in the 1960s and the former Army Chief of Staff, General Edward Meyer, in the 1980s SOF were seen as the best means to defend the US against present day threats because of their perceived aptitude for counterinsurgency and were expanded (Prados, 2015; Special Forces Association, n.d.). However, scandals have also tempered their use; such as Operation Eagle Claw in 1980, a failed attempt to rescue hostages in Tehran by Delta Force in which a helicopter crashed into a transport aircraft, killing eight servicemen, causing international and domestic uproar and, arguably, costing Jimmy Carter the 1980 US presidential election (Keller, 2017).

US SOF as we know them today were officially established by Congress in the 1980s. The Joint Special Operations Command (JSOC), which is tasked with ‘a highly classified unit at the joint headquarters for America’s Tier One Countering Terrorism (CT) Special Mission Units (SMU)’, was established in 1980 (Bucci, 2015; Kibbe, 2004). Then seven years later US Special Operations Command (USSOCOM) was established, to develop preparedness of forces, plan and conduct special (Feickert, 2008; Lin, n.d.).

SOF Wars in the post-9/11

In the post-9/11 wars, SOF have played a central role. Initially they were used to bolster conventional troops; in a move spearheaded by Defense Secretary, Donald Rumsfeld, SOCOM was tasked with leading the “Global War on Terror”, and given additional resources to do so (Fitzsimmons, 2003; Ryan, 2011). In this role, US SOF were a ‘substantial force multiplier’ (Finlan, 2008, p. 100). However, their greatest utility came during the Obama administration, with declining military budgets and a rising war-weariness. With ‘the continuing prevalence of irregular threats to U.S. national security’ but facing a greater domestic resistance to US troops on the ground, the Obama administration turned increasingly to its SOF to provide a light footprint of US troops on the ground (Robinson, 2017, p. 6).

As such, the withdrawal of troops from Iraq and Afghanistan, saw SOF play an increasingly central role. The US has brought home more than 200,000 troops and massively cut the military budget; yet, at the same time SOF continued to see increased resources (Philipps, 2017; Robinson, 2013). In 2001 there were 2 886 US SOF personnel deployed overseas and now there are, at least, 8 000 troops in 80 countries across the world (Turse, 2017). This is a form of remote warfare, where US SOF are enabling local troops to confront terrorist threats, rather than relying on the deployment of large numbers of US boots on the ground.

Drawbacks to Increased Use of Special Forces

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While Special Operation Forces represent highly trained and highly able individuals, there are a number of concerns with their increasing use. First, the fact that US SOF are subject to less oversight than regular forces is problematic when they are increasing being deployed in lieu of regular troops. The US does have more external oversight of SOF than some of its allies, such as the UK; for example, Congress, through the Senate and House Armed Services Committees, can oversee a number of aspects of SOF operations, for example there are a number of rules that require the executive to inform Congress, 'or at least some subset of Congress' about military and intelligence activities—though there are gaps among them, especially as the convergence between Title 10 (military, such as special forces operations) and Title 50 (CIA activities) authorisations are beginning to merge (Chesney, 2012). Despite this, a number of commentators have argued for more oversight. Following a trail of recent SOF scandals – including, a raid in Yemen at the start of the year where a number of civilians were killed and an operation in October this year in Niger which left four SOF soldiers dead – Lora Lumpe and Jacob Marx, of Open Society Foundation, questioned whether the US's oversight mechanisms have been working (Lumpe and Marx, 2017). They found that most lawmakers did not know these operations were even taking place; they concluded: 'Either the Pentagon has not been informing Congress, or it is sending updates and reports, but nobody is reading them.'

While a level of deniability can be useful, it can also be 'highly problematic for democracies, since deniable policies by definition lack the kind of accountability democracy requires' (Kibbe, 2004). There is talk of 'a growing disconnect between American society and the armed forces,' which has grown worse throughout the war on terror, 'in part because the Obama administration has been unwilling to level with the public' about what it is doing (Correspondent, n.d.). Forcing everything into a narrative of drawdown has meant ignoring the deep involvement of troops on the ground. In an interview with Dan Sullivan, a Republican on the Senate's Armed Services Committee, he said that 'the lesson that we've learned now in this country is that you have to level with the American... [b]ecause that's just the right thing to do, and that's the best way to get American support, but also because there's an issue with keeping faith with troops who are risking their lives to protect their countries' (Correspondent, n.d.).

Second, many are worried that US SOF – which only constitute less than 5 percent of total U.S. military forces – are being asked to do too much (Robinson, 2013). In May this year, Acting Assistant Secretary of Defense Theresa Whelan said to Congress, 'we have had to eat our young ... [and] mortgaged the future in order to facilitate current operations' (Lodge, 2017). Interviews with former and current special operations forces – and their relatives – have repeatedly found that the current tempo of operations is threatening troop retention, military effectiveness and the wellbeing of soldiers (Muñoz, 2013; Lohaus, 2016; Philipps 2017; Powell 2016). Even General Raymond Anthony Thomas, Commander of US SOCOM, called the current situation 'unsustainable' (Hennigan, 2017).

Third, given the political and economic costs of deploying conventional troops, many are concerned that the US has turned to SOF as the most politically expedient force, rather than the most effective one for the task at hand – potentially to the detriment of a larger strategy (Knowles and Watson, 2017). Matthew Johnson, of Missouri State University, argues, that in their efforts to destroy terrorist groups, leaders have 'latched onto the promises and even mystique of SOF. The temptation of limited investment with substantial return continues to make SOF an attractive offer to policymakers, even if this understanding sets up a false expectation' (Johnson, 2006).

Moreover, there are dangers that relying on SOF can undermine the US long-term strategy. There are many concerns that this happened with direct operations in Iraq and Afghanistan. Conrad A. Crane, a retired Army officer and historian, said, following a number of interviews with the military and civilians in both countries, that 'virtually everyone has a similar story to tell, of some special operations raid that might have been good counterterrorism but was terrible [counter-insurgency]' (Ricks, 2016). Nor are indirect operations immune from such dangers. Supporting groups who may not share the same long-term goals as the US can create spoilers and greater instability – as shown by the US support of the Peshmerga in its fight against ISIS, which many see as a key driver in the escalating tensions between the Kurds and its neighbours (Alaaldin, 2017; Burns and Baldor, 2017; Gould et al., 2017; Jaffrey, 2017; Tzemach Lemon, 2017).

These dangers have gained a new immediacy under President Donald Trump. While predictions are difficult, his administration looks likely to continue to rely on US SOF; he has readily praised their use, stating: 'no enemy stands a chance against our special forces' and looks set to increase their footprint (Lodge, 2017; Hennigan, 2017). Thus,

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given his inexperience, as well as his startling campaign and rhetoric, safeguards are more important than ever.

Conclusions

SOF have been a defining feature of US military engagement in its post-9/11 wars, yet few understand who they are, what they do and the dangers of their increased use. More worryingly, obsession with SOF appears to be undermining any objective discussion of the pros and cons of their deployment as one SOF officer said: 'Everyone is infatuated with SOF . . . to do anything against SOF would be absolute sacrilege on both sides of the aisle' (Johnson, 2006).

This article hopes to go some way to improving the discussion by providing an overview of who SOF are, how they formed. It also described their rise under President Barack Obama, who used SOF to deliver on his electoral promises of a drawdown of troops, while continuing to address the terrorist threat. It outlined three dangers of the current use of special forces: problems of oversight, overstretch of SOF and ensuring their deployment aligns with the US strategy. While, it has not provided an extensive overview of the issue, this piece hopes to challenge the mysticism around SOF, to open the space for a more objective and informed debate. As General Thomas has warned US SOF 'are not a panacea...We are not the ultimate solution to every problem' and treating them as if they can will only detriment US strategy, democracy and the soldiers themselves ("Special Operations Chief," 2017).

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