The Limits of Special Operations Forces

BY AUSTIN LONG

I n the early 1980s, the future of U.S. special operations forces (SOF) looked decidedly grim. The Vietnam-era boom in SOF had long since expired and the 1970s ended with the debacle of the attempted SOF-led rescue of U.S. hostages in Iran. After two decades of rebuilding, SOF were much more capable on the eve of the September 11, 2001 attacks, but were still only used sparingly and in the shadows.[1]

Now, nearly two more decades later, the SOF pendulum has fully swung in the opposite direction of the nadir of the early 1980s. SOF are routinely deployed in a variety of missions globally, from direct action missions against terrorists to training and advising both conventional and unconventional allied forces (often termed the "indirect approach"). The U.S. SOF community has expanded greatly in both size and missions and has become, along with remotely piloted aircraft (aka drones), the weapon of choice for small footprint counterterrorism and counterinsurgency operations as well as the projection of discrete and discriminate force.[2]

Yet, despite the current enthusiasm, special operations are not a panacea for all security challenges. Policymakers and analysts must remain cognizant of the limits of SOF while developing military strategy lest too much be asked of the force. This is particularly important as the security environment changes—a SOF-centric strategy might be appropriate for some challenges but inappropriate for others.

This article describes the limits of SOF and proceeds in four parts. The first describes some limitations common to all special operations. The second describes limitations on the direct approach for the employment of SOF (e.g. direct action and special reconnaissance), while the third describes limitations on the indirect approach (e.g. unconventional warfare and foreign internal defense). It concludes with recommendations to policymakers.

It is worth noting upfront that while this article will necessarily focus on the shortcomings of special operations it is not intended to denigrate the importance of special operations or SOF.

Austin Long is an Associate Professor in the School of International and Public Affairs at Columbia University.

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Instead, it should be read as an attempt to manage expectations for the force so it can be employed effectively and efficiently. While it is currently unimaginable that SOF could return to something like the dark days of the early 1980s, it is equally important to remember that the current prominence of SOF was equally unimaginable then. Remaining cognizant of the limits of SOF is crucial to preventing overreliance on the force, which could in turn lead to a significant reduction in willingness to support or employ SOF.

General Limitations of Special Operations

All special operations share some common limitations, the first being that special operations (and by extension SOF) almost never achieve decisive strategic success on their own. Special operations and SOF alone can often only achieve decisive tactical success. Occasionally, special operations can have some strategic effect on their own, particularly in terms of signaling commitment and capability through discrete operations. But absent other supporting elements—whether military, diplomatic, or economic—the achievement of decisive strategic effects by SOF is very rare.

For example, one of the most daring direct action missions of World War II was the German seizure of the massive Belgian fortress of Eben Emael in May 1940. Yet the German elite paratroopers' capture of the fortress and nearby bridges would have been only a tactical success without prompt link-up with the advancing 18th Army. By linking up quickly with the 18th Army, the rapid capture of the fort enabled German conventional forces to cross into Belgium before British units could reinforce Belgian defenses, a key element of Allied plans. A well-orchestrated combination of special and conventional operations thus allowed a decisive tactical success to have a decisive strategic effect as well.[3]

In contrast, the British effort to seize the bridge at Arnhem during Operation *Market Garden* (the so-called "bridge too far") was ineffective despite employment of a much larger force of paratroopers. While the intent of the operation was similar to that of Eben Emael, the British XXX Corps was unable to advance to Arnhem, leaving the British paratroopers stranded and eventually overrun. Without effective support from conventional forces, what should have been a tactical special operations success became a rout.[4]

The Israeli raid on Green Island in July 1969 further underscores the importance of orchestrating elements of national power to enable SOF success to achieve strategic effect. Green Island was home to important Egyptian intelligence and early warning installations during the war of attrition between Israel and Egypt. While the island could have been attacked using conventional means, Israeli command decided to use SOF to demonstrate Egyptian vulnerabilities, even in highly fortified positions.

The Israeli raid was a tactical success, despite the high number of Israeli casualties. By following up the raid with airstrikes exploiting the newly created gap in Egyptian air defense as well as diplomatic messaging, the Israelis ensured the raid's success contributed significantly to the strategic objective of ending the war. Absent this support, the raid might even have been viewed as a strategic failure, given the amount of Israeli casualties.[5]

The raid that led to the killing of Osama bin Laden by U.S. SOF in 2011 had a strategic effect in the sense that it was viewed as bringing some level of closure to the September 11,

2001 attacks. Like the raid on Green Island, it demonstrated to current and potential adversaries the capability of U.S. special operations forces.[6] Yet this strategic effect was far from decisive, either in the Afghanistan-Pakistan region or in the global war on terror. The Israeli raid on Entebbe, Uganda, was similar in demonstrating the long reach of Israeli SOF, while also rescuing hostages that would otherwise have been a strategic bargaining chip for terrorists.[7]

This limitation is not just applicable to the direct approach. British SOF were remarkably successful in helping Oman decisively defeat an insurgency in the province of Dhofar in the 1970s. However, SOF tactical success in leading and advising Omani units was aided by diplomatic efforts, which brought Iranian troops and support in to the conflict on the side of Oman. British intelligence launched a parallel effort to build and advise Oman's intelligence service. British advisers also helped Oman craft an economic policy to make the most of its valuable, but limited oil reserves. Absent this multidimensional support (and as noted below, Omani willingness to reform) the SOF tactical success would have been unlikely to produce such a decisive strategic victory.[8]

The U.S. SOF mission in El Salvador in the 1980s was likewise enabled by extensive whole of government support. Economic assistance and advice helped sustain an economy battered by war while the U.S. intelligence community provided important support in a variety of ways, including covert action. The U.S. Ambassador was particularly crucial, as U.S. support to El Salvador was controversial, and

Brian Harrington

British vehicles parked in a wadi in Oman during the Dhofar Rebellion, an example of successful cooperation with local forces.

absent deft management could have been suspended entirely.[9]

In stark contrast, recent SOF tactical successes were not well supported in either direct or indirect action in Yemen against al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP). Tactical successes did not yield strategic success as the government of Yemen collapsed into civil war, creating an opportunity for AQAP to fill the void created as U.S. SOF withdrew from the country.[10] It remains to be seen if the Saudi-led coalition, which relies heavily on SOF, will have greater strategic success than its predecessor.[11]

The second common limit of SOF is the inherent high-risk nature of special operations. While this risk can be managed, it cannot be eliminated. This risk is only of moderate importance when policymakers are heavily committed to achieving an outcome such as victory in a major war. Yet policymakers often turn to SOF when seeking a limited liability military option—one just short of major war or intervention. In such situations, policymaker commitment to the objective may be sufficient to deploy SOF, but insufficient to sustain that deployment after a negative event occurs as a result of required risk taking.

This environment produces a paradox, which limits SOF. If SOF are to continue being deployed in this environment, policymakers must either eschew necessary risk taking or assume risk, knowing a sufficiently negative incident could end the deployment. The former choice means operations will be suboptimally effective, while the latter choice means a single negative event could end an entire SOF campaign (often with severe consequences for SOF careers).

The events in Mogadishu, Somalia, in the fall of 1993 highlight this paradox. Task Force Ranger had been committed precisely to achieve U.S. objectives without employing a major military force. In conducting operations against Mohammed Farah Aidid and his militia forces, the task force commander, Major General William Garrison, assumed risk by necessity. A series of missions culminated in the events of 3-4 October, when an operation to capture senior supporters of Aidid encountered much greater resistance than anticipated. Despite an effective withdrawal by Major General Garrison against a vastly larger force, the operation still resulted in substantial and highly publicized American casualties. The task force was completely withdrawn soon after and Major General Garrison's career, exemplary to that point by all accounts, was effectively ended.[12]

Conversely, many indirect approach missions are sub-optimally effective as SOF are prohibited or discouraged from taking risk. After 1969, military advisors to the CIA-sponsored Provincial Reconnaissance Unit (PRU) program in Vietnam, one of the only effective indigenous direct action capabilities, were no longer allowed to accompany the PRUs on missions. This restriction was not only imposed because of the physical risk to advisors, but also because of the political risk to individuals in Washington. The latter was particularly important as the U.S. commitment to South Vietnam dwindled and allegations of U.S. and South Vietnamese war crimes grew after the events in My Lai. Keeping U.S. advisors at arm's length from an effective but ruthless military campaign (many PRU members were seeking revenge against the insurgency) became a political imperative. Unfortunately, the resultant negative impact on PRU morale and effectiveness was substantial.[13]

Similar restrictions were imposed on the U.S. military advisory group in El Salvador in the 1980s. Paradoxically, by limiting U.S. advisor participation in combat operations to limit political risk, it became very difficult to disprove allegations of human rights abuses by the Salvadoran military. Reducing risk thus limited the potential effectiveness of Salvadoran operations from both a military and political perspective.[14]

Limits on SOF in the Direct Approach

Beyond these general limitations, SOF face specific challenges when used in the direct approach (direct action and special reconnaissance). The first is related to one of the major applications of U.S. and allied SOF in the 21st century—the targeting of insurgent and terrorist leadership. The theory behind such "high value targeting" operations is that the loss of leaders will lead to the collapse or at least the serious degradation of the terrorist or insurgent leadership structure.

However, the effects of targeting leadership appear to vary widely and are highly dependent on the characteristics of the organization. Some organizations are highly dependent on a single charismatic leader or a handful of skilled organizers to provide organizational direction and cohesion. Others are much more institutionalized, with regularized procedures for replacing lost leaders—the latter being a common problem for any combat organization, whether insurgency or army.

For example, Sendero Luminoso (Shining Path) of Peru was highly dependent on its founder and leader Abimael Guzman (aka Comrade Gonzalo). After organizing in the 1970s, Sendero Luminoso began a successful (and brutal) guerrilla campaign in the 1980s—at one point controlling much of south and central Peru. Yet following Guzman's capture in 1992, the organization began to splinter, a process accelerated by the capture of a handful of other key leaders, including Guzman's eventual replacement in 1999. Subsequent loss of leadership in the 2000s further weakened the organization. While the loss of leadership was not the only factor contributing to Sendero Luminoso's decline and near total defeat, it is clear the capture or killing of a small number of leaders by SOF (in this case from Peru's elite counterterrorism police unit) had a very large impact.[15]

In contrast, the capture of Abdullah Ocalan, the supreme leader of the Partiya Karkerên Kurdistanê (Kurdistan Worker's Party or PKK), had only a modest effect on the survival of the organization. Ocalan's capture by Turkish SOF in Kenya did lead to a temporary PKK cease-fire with the government. However, unlike Sendero Luminoso, the PKK did not begin to lose cohesion after the capture of its supreme leader and has renewed its rebellion against the Turkish state on two occasions (roughly 2004-2012 and 2015 to present).[16]

Beyond targeting specific senior leaders, SOF can also be employed in a more comprehensive campaign against both senior and mid-level leaders and technical experts (such as bomb makers or financiers). Such campaigns are intended to remove key figures at all levels, eventually disrupting the organization by eliminating these individuals faster than they can be replaced. Such campaigns require substantially more resources, both in terms of intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance assets, as well as units to take action against the targets.

The U.S. and allied SOF campaigns against insurgents in Iraq and Afghanistan, including al-Qaeda in Iraq (AQI) and the Taliban in

Afghanistan are examples of these sustained and well-resourced high value targeting campaigns. In both cases, these campaigns have been remarkably successful at the tactical and operational level. Beginning with founder Abu Musab al-Zarqawi, the senior leaders of AQI have been killed on a number of occasions, with a replacement emerging each time.[17]

In Afghanistan, the coalition realized even greater tactical success against mid-level leaders. As journalist Graeme Smith notes:

A Canadian military intelligence officer looked back at his tour of duty [in Afghanistan] with satisfaction in the spring of 2008, believing that nearly all the middle ranks of the local insurgency had been killed or captured during his nine months in Kandahar. The elimination of those field commanders, he calculated, *would leave the insurgents with little remaining capacity for the summer fighting season.*[18]

Similarly, operations against AQI were sustained at a high level. This was enabled by the massing of intelligence and surveillance assets under a SOF task force, which then was resourced to undertake multiple actions per night.[19] As a report from the Joint Special Operations University notes, "Between 2006 and 2009 the task force maintained an operational tempo of 300 raids a month against AQI's networks in Iraq…"[20]

The impact of these sustained tactical and operational successes were, however, decidedly mixed. Against some insurgent organizations these campaigns had significant effect. The Fallujah Shura Council in Iraq was a powerful insurgent umbrella organization in the early

SPC Eli J. Medellin, U.S. Army

A car bomb set off by al-Qaeda in Iraq, an organization that is highly resilient to special forces high-value targeting campaigns.

days of the war. However, it soon disintegrated following the loss of its key leader, Abdullah Janabi, and several mid-level commanders in 2004.[21]

In contrast, AQI and the Taliban were able to survive and continue fighting on a significant scale despite massive loss of leaders. As Graeme Smith recounts of the Canadian military intelligence officer's claim that the Taliban would have little fight left in Kandahar:

Sadly, he was proved wrong: the summer of 2008 was the deadliest period Kandahar has witnessed during the latest war. It could be argued that the violence might have been worse if certain Taliban commanders had not been killed, but so far attacks on insurgent commanders have shown no signs of weakening the insurgency.[22]

Similarly, despite over 1,000 raids against AQI leadership in three years, along with a surge of U.S. conventional forces and the Sunni Awakening against AQI, in 2010 AQI was weakened but by no means crippled. Despite this weakening it was still able to launch multiple daily attacks across Iraq in January 2011;[23] and in March 2011, it was able to temporarily seize the provincial government buildings in Tikrit.[24]

Five years later, AQI's descendent, the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL), has seized substantial territory in Iraq and Syria. Though it is being degraded by a sustained air and military campaign, including SOF action against its leaders, it shows remarkable resilience as of this writing. Indeed, ISIL has been able to extend footholds into other countries, most notably Libya.[25]

The central limitation on these SOF campaigns is the nature of the adversary. AQI/ISIL and the Taliban are much more institutionalized organizations than Sendero Luminoso or the Fallujah Shura Council. Despite suffering massive leadership losses and tactical and operational setbacks, both organizations have remained coherent and combat effective.

SOF reconnaissance operations for targeting also face similar limitations. In 2001, SOF targeting support linked U.S. airpower to the indigenous ground forces of the Northern Alliance in Afghanistan. The result was devastating to the Taliban and its al-Qaeda allies.[26]

SOF reconnaissance linked to air power against North Vietnamese logistics in Laos produced a much less significant strategic effect. As part of a comprehensive campaign against the Ho Chi Minh Trail, SOF units conducted special reconnaissance missions to find and target U.S. airpower against trucks transporting material down the trail. This was supplemented by SOF units placing sabotaged ammunition in insurgent caches they discovered. Yet despite tactical and operational success against logistics, the supply of material into South Vietnam was not strategically disrupted.[27]

As with direct action, the pivotal factor for SOF reconnaissance and airpower is the adversary. In 2001, many local Taliban abandoned the fight quickly, shocked by the efficacy of the U.S. and allied offensive.[28]

The North Vietnamese and their insurgent brothers were more able to adapt to U.S. airpower by distributing lessons learned and using deception and other means to neutralize SOF and airpower.[29] Crucially, the Vietnamese were able to maintain the will to fight despite massive losses through a combination of revolutionary ideology, social control mechanisms, and relentless self-criticism.[30]

Limits on SOF in the Direct Approach

Whatever its limitations, one major advantage of the direct approach to using SOF is control. Policymakers have high confidence that, when directed, U.S. SOF will execute missions as briefed. They will not shirk responsibilities nor seek to derive personal profit from operations in almost all cases.

The same cannot be said of many forces SOF support in the indirect approach, which is a major limitation. As Daniel Byman has described, U.S. interests often diverge wildly from the interests of local allies in counterterrorism and counterinsurgency campaigns.[31] SOF efforts to work "by, with, and through" indigenous allies are constrained by the need to manage these divergences in interest.

Typically, indigenous partners come in two varieties: proxies (sometimes called surrogates) and partners. Proxies are defined principally as sub-state actors (e.g. militias) having a direct relationship with the United States and only a limited (or non-existent) relationship with the nation where they operate. Partners in contrast are an element of an existing nation-state's security apparatus.

Proxies offer the advantage of greater possibility of aligning U.S. interests with those of the proxy. With loyalty principally to itself, the proxy force may be resolute and motivated as long as support from U.S. SOF is central to achieving the proxy's goals. Good pay, combined with the lack of viable alternatives to U.S. support, will typically produce very reliable and effective proxies.

Though reliable and effective, proxies are still not the equivalent of U.S. SOF (or even regular military forces in some cases). For example, U.S. and allied SOF, in conjunction with the CIA, supported a variety of proxy forces in Laos in the early 1960s. The proxies, in most cases drawn from ethnic minorities, had been neglected by the Laotian government

Taliban fighters lay down their weapons in a U.S.-sponsored reintegration program. The willingness of the enemy to keep fighting is a major factor in the success of a Special Forces operation.

and viewed U.S. support as their principal alternative to continuing neglect. With proper training and advising from SOF, these proxies were very effective within certain constraints. As CIA historian (and former case officer in Laos) Thomas Ahern notes:

> *Whether firing a carbine or an M-l, nearly every Hmong volunteer needed only a few hours at the improvised firing range before the training team moved on to combat organization and tactics. The Hmong would not be mounting company or even platoon-size operations, at first, and [name redacted] trained them to operate in three-man fire teams. They immediately grasped the principle of fire-and-maneuver, in which one man or element fires from cover while the other advances, in a kind of leap-frog approach toward the enemy's position… A Pathet Lao unit of reported battalion strength moved to within 2 miles of the training base, and the Hmong irregulars went into action within a week of the first weapons drop. The guerrillas ambushed the advancing Pathet Lao, and in the two days of combat that followed killed a reported 17 enemy. Never to be renowned for their fire discipline, the Hmong exhausted their ammunition supply during this action…[32]*

This anecdote highlights both the strength of such motivated proxies—conducting an effective ambush within a week of being given the first modern weapons they had ever seen—as well as the limits—lack of fire discipline. For the next decade the proxies in Laos would perform well in ambush and other guerilla roles while never becoming particularly good infantry. Ahern concludes, "Motivated almost exclusively by the urge to protect their families,

these irregulars, even with more training than time and resources allowed, would never be regular infantry capable of a frontal assault."[33]

Partnering with proxies also face another substantial limitation, which is that in many cases SOF must manage a complex relationship between the proxy and the host nation. As the Laos example shows, many proxies are motivated precisely because they have a poor relationship with their own government. Whether the Hmong in Laos, or the Kurds in Iraq and Syria, the most motivated and loyal proxies are frequently drawn from groups with complex or adversarial relationships with their own government.[34]

This reality means proxies and host nation governments can end up in conflict. This is allegedly what happened when the Kandahar Strike Force, a proxy, had a tense stand-off escalating into a gun battle with the Afghan police in 2009.[35] In South Vietnam, U.S. forces faced a similar problem with ethnic minority proxies and attempted to create a stronger relationship with the government by including South Vietnamese SOF in their programs. This worked to a point; then one proxy force mutinied and massacred its Vietnamese SOF advisers.[36]

If proxies are potentially better aligned with the United States at the cost of friction with the host nation, partner forces are the opposite. As part of the host nation government, they have clear authority to use force and collect intelligence without risking conflict with other parts of the host nation security force (in most cases). At the same time, the partner force is subject to all the frailties, divergent interests, and political problems of the host nation.

In rare instances, this is not a problem. The British SOF fighting insurgency in Oman

were fortunate in having the British educated Sultan Qaboos as a partner. After deposing his unenlightened father, Qaboos became the model of an enlightened despot, making reforms to both his security forces and the overall nature of government in his country based on advice from the British. The result was an enormously effective set of partners, ranging from the reformed regular armed forces of the Sultan to the irregular *firqat*, composed of defectors from the insurgency.[37]

Yet the example of Sultan Qaboos is as dramatically positive as it is rare. More typical is Iraq, where partner units for U.S. SOF were often subject to a variety of political limitations. General Nomon Dakhil, commander of the Iraqi Ministry of Interior's elite Emergency Response Brigade, was widely viewed by U.S. SOF as an outstanding partner. Yet when Dakhil became too aggressive in targeting Shia militia elements, he was arrested on corruption charges and his unit became substantially less effective.[38]

In addition to the inherent limitations of control, the other principal (and related) limitation of SOF in the indirect role is the need for patience to achieve results. Whether with proxy or partner forces, the time required to achieve strategic effects is often long. Even in the ideal case of Sultan Qaboos in Oman, success took five years—most efforts take much longer.

In a more typical case, U.S. and allied SOF began partnering with Colombian SOF in the 1990s. It took more than a decade for this indirect approach to achieve strategic effects, ultimately helping bring the Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia (FARC) insurgency to the edge of defeat and subsequent peace negotiations.[39] The SOF mission to the Philippines required 13 years to achieve significant strategic success.[40]

Conclusions

Patience and a willingness to tolerate a lack of control are not characteristics common to U.S. policymakers—unless they have no other choice. It is thus unsurprising that policymakers have preferred the direct approach in many instances since 2001. Yet the limitations of the direct approach, principally its requirement for a significant commitment in terms of both political and physical capital, have often required policymakers to accept the exigencies of the indirect approach.

As a result, policymakers have simultaneously embraced SOF and become frustrated by their limitations. As with covert action conducted by the CIA, presidents often become enamored and then disenchanted with SOF. The ability to create tactical and operational effects with limited commitment and liability often fails to yield sufficient strategic results.

The central insights for policymakers regarding SOF were well captured by Colin Gray just before the post-September 11 resurgence in SOF. He noted, "SOF need an educated consumer, political and military patrons who appreciate what SOF should, and should not, be asked to do… SOF need protection from the fantasies of political sponsors."[41] Without sufficiently educated policymakers, SOF, regardless of approach, will not be able to realistically achieve policymaker's goals.

Future policymakers should be cognizant of the limitations of both SOF approaches. For the direct approach, the strategic effects are likely to be limited without additional supporting efforts. Direct action against terrorist and insurgent leadership can achieve tactical and operational effects, buying space and time

for other efforts. But absent additional effort, direct action can only manage and limit strategic challenges, disrupting plots and degrading capabilities, not fully defeat them.

For the indirect approach, policymakers must cultivate the rare virtue of patience. This will often require trying to get problems off the front pages of the newspaper (or digital equivalent). SOF support in Oman, the Philippines, and Colombia benefited from the fact that there was little attention paid to those operations. In contrast, the high visibility of the war in Syria and the political limitations on support to Syrian rebels ensured that patience—and success—were both unlikely. **PRISM**

Notes

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Photos

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