

# Testimony on Special Operations Forces

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## Hearing on The Future of Special Operations Forces

Chairman Thornberry, Ranking Member Langevin, and members of the subcommittee, thank you for the opportunity to appear before this distinguished panel. The purpose of my testimony is to provide thoughts on the future of U.S. Special Operations Forces to include recent initiatives being considered by U.S. Special Operations Command and the Department of Defense.

You have my full bio, but I would like to note that I have spent 27 years reporting on and researching conflicts, and in the past 13 years my research has included a great deal of time in the field and at headquarters with special operations forces at all echelons, much of that in Latin America, Iraq and Afghanistan. I have published numerous articles and books, co-authored a government-sponsored study on SOF command and control since 9/11, and served as the writer for the Irregular Warfare Joint Operating Concept 2.0. Currently, at the Council on Foreign Relations, I am conducting a study and a roundtable series on the future of special operations forces. As part of that study I have interviewed 50 senior and rising leaders in the SOF community as well as policy officials. The intent of this project is to take a broad look at what is needed to enhance the strategic impact of SOF going forward.

In addition I am researching my next book on special operations forces in Afghanistan. In the past two years I have spent 22 weeks in Afghanistan, much of that time following the implementation of the village stability operations and Afghan Local Police initiative, which as you know is the largest single SOF endeavor under way at this time with its projected expansion to 99 sites. I would also like to note that in the coming weeks the Special Operations Joint Task Force (SOJTF) will assume command and control of all SOF units in Afghanistan for the first time in the war. This is an important milestone in intra-SOF unity of command which should lead to greater synergy among the various "SOF

tribes.” These hearings are devoted to the larger questions about the development and employment of SOF worldwide, but I will refer to the Afghan case to illustrate some of my broader observations.

My remarks address these three topics:

- Is SOF achieving a balance between direct and indirect operational approaches to achieve strategic objectives?
- How should current authorities, resourcing, and force structure change to better enable SOF to deal with emerging challenges and integrate SOF into the Joint Force of 2020?
- What changes should be considered to U.S. Special Operations Command and the interagency to enable SOF to remain agile, globally persistent and aligned with national strategy?

There is no more important issue to national security than making sure that special operations forces are developed and employed in a way that maximizes their full potential because they will very likely continue to play a disproportionately large role relative to their size in ensuring U.S. national security in the years ahead. First, we are in a highly resource-constrained environment and security solutions employing small, scalable and highly skilled units such as SOF are cost effective. Second, the small footprint solution – if employed correctly – is often much more acceptable to friends and allies around the world than large-scale military operations. Third, SOF are designed to address many of the threats that will dominate the landscape, to include terrorists, insurgents, transnational criminal networks and other nonstate actors empowered by technology and other forces of globalization. They also play important niche roles in conventional conflicts, countering weapons of mass destruction and against adversaries that employ unconventional tactics. Indeed, one of the key challenges for the employment of SOF is to prioritize their use and develop innovative ways to extend their impact.

In the past decade, a great deal of attention and resources has been devoted to developing a world-class direct action or surgical strike capability as part of the special operations’ suite of capabilities. In particular, the national SOF or national mission force is highly optimized in terms of its organization and the enablers provided to it. I see two areas in regard to the direct approach that may warrant further development. One is a policy issue: I believe that an established standard procedure for systematically weighing the costs and benefits of employing unilateral raids or strikes via unmanned drones could improve the viability of this tactic over the longer run. This procedure and as much of the evidence or justification for such strikes as possible should be shared widely. It may also be advisable to institute a congressional or judicial review mechanism. Finally, outside theaters of war the use of the direct approach should be applied to imminent and dire threats to U.S. citizens, soil or vital interests. Measures such as these could shore up the long-term viability of the direct approach and ensure that potential second and third order consequences are deliberately included in each assessment. At a policy level this would help ensure that the right balance between the direct and indirect approach is struck. As both the current and former commanders of U.S. Special Operations Command have said repeatedly in testimony before Congress and elsewhere, the direct approach only buys time for the indirect approach to work, and such a process would help guard against overreliance on the short-term expedient that may be counterproductive over the longer term.

The second issue involving the direct approach concerns intra-SOF unity of command: such unity of command should be routine, in my view, as the primary mechanism for achieving the proper balance in the direct and indirect use of SOF at the operational level. The SOJTF in Afghanistan should ideally lead to greater synergy and mutual support among the three SOF tribes and their distinct missions: those under CFSOCC-A which are carrying out Village Stability Operations and training and operating alongside the Afghan Commandos and Special Forces, the coalition ISAF SOF which are training and advising the provincial response companies and special police units, and the national mission force, which is focused on high-value terrorist targets. This model could be applied to other theaters with the theater special operations command or an ad hoc command such as the SOJTF serving as the C2 node responsible for ensuring that unity and synergy.

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The indirect approach should be the primary area of focus for improvements at this time. It is my assessment that while incremental steps have been taken in recent years, the indirect approach is still suboptimized and the forces primarily charged with carrying it out are not properly resourced, organized or supported to fully maximize their potential. At this stage in my study, I have concluded that five baseline improvements are needed. I have framed these in terms of outcomes, because gaining clarity and consensus as to the desired results will help determine which of several possible pathways is preferable. The five urgently needed improvements are:

- Greater clarity as to what the indirect approach is and an overall vision for employment of SOF, through a greater emphasis on doctrine and ongoing education and outreach to policymakers, combatant commands and the national security community regarding the best uses of SOF;
- First-class theater special operations commands (TSOCs) staffed with sufficient numbers of highly qualified regional experts, human and technical intelligence specialists, expert planners and special operators who serve extended tours and receive career incentives for serving at TSOCs;
- Greater support from USSOCOM for theater special operations command and the indirect approach to include resourcing, coordinating and support for enduring SOF campaigns conducted by the TSOCs and subordinate units;
- Funding authorities that enable SOF to carry out sustained indirect campaigns as part of the theater campaign plan and embassy plans, which in many cases will require multiyear funding, support to non-military forces, and support for stability and security objectives other than counterterrorism;
- More flexible combinations of SOF and conventional forces to enable SOF to operate in more places or at larger scale.

Vague and confusing terminology, lack of emphasis on doctrine and operating concepts, and weak outreach to relevant partners in the government have all hampered the development and employment of SOF for maximum strategic or decisive impact. The indirect approach is an unfortunately vague term; in place of direct and indirect, the draft Army doctrinal publication 3-05 uses surgical strike and special warfare. To me, the distinguishing feature of the indirect approach (or special warfare) is partnered operations. The partner(s) can range widely from various government forces, to informal groups like tribes or community defense groups, or populations, which civil affairs and other units routinely interact with. The range of activities that SOF can engage in as part of the indirect approach is similarly broad (training, combat advising, intelligence and psychological operations, civil affairs projects) depending on the problem, the goals and the rules of engagement. But the key point is that the activities will always be with or through other entities, so that they are empowered and eventually enabled to enact the solutions on their own. To achieve lasting, decisive impact the activities cannot be episodic and unconnected but must be deliberately planned, linked and sustained via a campaign design that is nested in the larger theater and mission plans and overall U.S. policy goals.

Successful employment of the indirect approach requires both proactive involvement and patience for the effort to produce results. It requires placing SOF teams out in troubled regions for extended periods so they can gain familiarity, knowledge and relationships and then begin to execute solutions with the resident partners. This runs counter to a common tendency to wait until crises are full blown and action is imperative. This is not a criticism; Americans shy away from anything that smacks of imperial adventures or meddling in countries or conflicts we do not understand. But if the U.S. government can adopt a proactive approach where U.S. interests warrant and conditions permit, we have found that problems can be resolved primarily by others while they are still small enough to handle with minimal U.S. assistance. However difficult and time-consuming, it is possible for U.S. decisionmakers to reach agreement on the need for proaction and persistence if they understand the problem, carefully evaluate the risks and benefits, and articulate the case alongside host nation partners. Those of you familiar with the case of Colombia know that more than a decade of sustained, small footprint advisory assistance helped that country to greatly weaken the

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narcoterrorist insurgency known as the FARC, and that Colombia is today a valued ally helping with security assistance elsewhere. The Colombian government and its ambassador played vital roles in gaining and maintaining the support for this endeavor. The Philippines is another case worthy of study to build a template for successful application of the indirect approach and achievement of enduring results. Depending on the decisions made in the coming years, Afghanistan could join the case study annals for a small-footprint sustained effort that produces results over the middle term.

The most obvious and uncontroversial recommendation of the five is to shore up the theater special operations commands in a major and permanent way, so they are capable to performing the duties assigned to them. TSOCs are by doctrine the command and control entity charged with planning and leading special operations in theater, as well as serving as the geographic combatant commander’s adviser on special operations.<sup>1</sup> The TSOCs have chronically lacked adequate staff and resources to perform their doctrinal tasks. The chart below shows the current level of staffing with USSOCOM personnel; much of the staffing is funded by OCO funds that will end.<sup>2</sup> Some amount of service-provided funding and staff is reportedly used by some geographic commands for other purposes. Second, the quality issue must be addressed. TSOCs need to be a place where top staff go rather than be seen as a career-ending assignment. While the TSOC commanders’ rank has been increased in the past decade to one- and two-star positions and many of SOF’s best general and flag officers have been assigned to command TSOCs, the overall staffing and resourcing deficits have not been addressed and the commands have not as a rule been fully employed in their intended roles. Top flight talent, including the best planners and a variety of expert enablers, are needed to craft the SOF campaigns and interact with the broader GCC staff and country teams in the region. Under this vision the TSOCs should become the most desirable assignment and the epicenter for SOF operations. It is the place where SOF expertise and regional expertise should come together, as the two key ingredients needed for successful implementation of the indirect approach and its combination as needed with the direct approach.

<b>USSOCOM HQ &amp; Subunified Commands</b>	<b>USSOCOM Manning</b>
U.S. Special Operations Command (Headquarters)	2,606
Joint Special Operations Command	1,519
Theater Special Operations Commands:	
Special Operations Command – Central	400
Special Operations Command – South	213
Special Operations Command – Pacific	301
Special Operations Command – Korea	72
Special Operations Command – Europe	248
Special Operations Command – Africa	193

The current commander of U.S. Special Operations Command, Admiral Bill McRaven, has taken steps to reorient USSOCOM to provide greater support to the TSOCs. He has convened TSOC commander conferences, solicited their requests, and directed them to USSOCOM’s Global Mission Support Center. In my view much more can and should be done to ensure that USSOCOM headquarters as an institution prioritizes support for TSOCs. Perhaps the most critical role is to help advocate for and educate the policy community and the geographic combatant commands on the use of SOF and in support of specific SOF proposals and their resource requirements. Second, it can do more

<sup>1</sup> Doctrine for U.S. special operations forces states that the TSOC is “the primary mechanism by which a GCC [geographic combatant command] exercises C2 over SOF. See Joint Publication 3-05 *Special Operations*, 18 April 2011, (III-2, III-4), posted at [http://www.dtic.mil/doctrine/new\\_pubs/jp3\\_05.pdf](http://www.dtic.mil/doctrine/new_pubs/jp3_05.pdf).

<sup>2</sup> Data provided by U.S. Special Operations Command.

to assist in the design and implementation of SOF campaigns in support of the GCCs and their TSOCs in a reachback capacity. Particularly if campaigns need to be coordinated across more than one GCC, USSOCOM's role in this regard can be substantial. Third, the USSOCOM J-code sections in general should reorient to prioritize TSOC and indirect requirements, planning and resource support. Fulfilling all these tasks may require creation of a dedicated organization within USSOCOM, but the risk in doing so is that this mission becomes ancillary rather than one of the central missions of the command. Finally, USSOCOM could supporter a higher percentage of staffing of the TSOCs in the Joint Manning Document and shift some of its own 2,606 personnel to support TSOCs in temporary or permanent assignments.

The fourth issue, of funding authorities, is complex in its details. Sufficient and predictable funding is absolutely fundamental to the indirect approach, maximizing SOF's potential, and achieving the right balance in the direct and indirect approaches. Currently SOF activities are funded through a variety of authorities and this issue is entwined with a longstanding debate over security sector assistance. However, I believe this issue can be resolved by focusing on the basic outcomes that are desirable and have wide support. Persistent indirect SOF campaigns can only succeed if there is a sound plan implemented over a number of years; if this plan is not supported by predictable funding it cannot hope to succeed. In various instances Congress has approved 1) multiyear funding, 2) funding for SOF training and assistance to non-military forces, and 3) assistance for SOF security and stabilization missions other than counterterrorism. Those are the three key requirements. The State Department has the responsibility to ensure that all security assistance is consistent with U.S. foreign policy goals. That principle has been embraced by the USSOCOM commander, and current authorities include reporting requirements, oversight and chief of mission approval. What is needed is greater agility in the review and approval process, since it can take up to two years in some cases. If these goals are kept in mind, I think that a concerted interagency effort along with Congress can reach agreement on ways to improve the current funding authorities. Due to the patchwork of current authorities and the complexity of the details this may need to be an iterative or at least extended effort.

Regarding the fifth issue, over the past decade I have observed a great deal of progress in deconfliction and integration of SOF and conventional force operations on the battlefield. What is needed now is further progress on the institutional side of the house to provide more flexible combinations of SOF and CF that are tailored to the specific small-footprint missions that are likely to be the stock in trade of the future. As you know, two infantry battalions have been assigned to CFSOCC-A's operational command in Afghanistan to augment the Village Stability Operations, and in other cases infantry battalions have been assigned to special mission unit task forces. In other cases, the requirement is for even smaller units or even individuals, but the conventional forces often find it difficult or unpalatable to provide such scalable assets since their systems are designed to supply units. This is a broad topic involving numerous subissues, and both SOF and conventional forces are devoting attention to it. To provide more predictability regarding the types and numbers of enablers that SOF may need, work is being done on force generation models. And the Army is working on regionally aligned brigades, although for combined SOF missions much smaller elements are required; in addition the brigades may only be available for 8 months. Finally, some discussions have been held about a standing blended formation that could serve as the repository for counterinsurgency knowledge and the core of a large-scale effort should one be needed. The outyears of the U.S. effort in Afghanistan may serve as a test bed for some of these ideas, since it is generally conceded that SOF will play a significant role in the post-2014 assistance effort there.

#### Guidelines for evaluation of USSOCOM proposals

USSOCOM has proposed that TSOCs become subunified commands of USSOCOM rather than their respective GCCs. Admiral McRaven and his staff have argued that this change would make USSOCOM permanently responsible for the TSOCs and institutionalize the kind of support for them that has been historically lacking. This shift would confer combatant command (COCOM) authority over the TSOCs, but Admiral McRaven has said that

the GCCs would retain operational command of their operations as at present. According to doctrine as set out in Joint Publication 3-0, this operational command could only be shifted by a decision of the secretary of defense.

Two outcomes should be used as guidelines for evaluating this course of action. First, USSOCOM should become permanently more responsive to and supportive of the TSOCs as the primary arm for planning and conducting special operations. Is COCOM necessary to accomplish this? Is SOCOM prepared to take over all the administrative responsibilities involved? Are the budgetary impacts well understood? The second outcome that should be ensured is that GCCs become more rather than less inclined to use the TSOCs in appropriate ways and rely on them as useful entities that they understand and reap maximum benefit from in pursuit of their assigned objectives and overall national security strategy. A change in assignment and COCOM status must be seen as a net plus by GCCs rather than a loss or the desired outcome will not be achieved.

In addition, if GCCs do not at present understand or make maximum use of their TSOCs then reasons for this must be fully understood. Provision of a quality TSOC capability is one requirement; another requirement is that GCCs are educated in the full range of SOF capabilities and are prepared to employ them as part of their theater campaign plans and in support of U.S. national security strategy. Given that GCC staffs rotate on a regular basis, this education on SOF capabilities must be provided on an ongoing basis.

My current view is that an iterative approach may be the best way to proceed. USSOCOM can and should supply the needed support to TSOCs in terms of resources, institutional reachback and policy advocacy as a top priority. It should work with TSOCs and GCCs to create first-class TSOCs and well-conceived proposals for employment of SOF that are designed to achieve enduring results in key areas in a cost-effective way.

A formal review should then be conducted at the two-year mark to determine whether TSOCs and the indirect approach have been optimized by this step and whether USSOCOM as an institution is providing consistent and timely support. If not a decision to shift COCOM status could be made at that time.

I should note that a variety of organizational changes have been bruited over the past decade. Some observers as well as members of the community have recommended that a separate SOF command be created to employ the indirect approach, but it has always been my view that USSOCOM should regard this as a major responsibility to fully maximize SOF's potential impact. Some observers believe that USSOCOM is somehow congenitally resistant to embracing this priority. I would like to believe with the current commander, the support of Congress, and guidance from the Defense Department, this important objective can now be realized. To split USSOCOM components would drive in the opposite direction from greater synergy and optimization of the total force.

The other major proposals tabled by USSOCOM would explicitly give USSOCOM a global area of responsibility, allow it to initiate requests for forces, and via a global employment order allow USSOCOM to shift SOF assets among theaters with the concurrence of the geographic combatant command. (As I understand the proposal, if the gaining or losing GCC objected to the proposed shift, the matter would go to the Pentagon for adjudication.) The proposals have caused some stakeholders, to include geographic combatant commands and some in the Pentagon, to fear that their voice and vote would be overridden or eliminated.

The issue of who has a vote and who decides is straightforward at one level: ultimately the national command authority in the person of the secretary of defense or the president decides. USSOCOM has a legitimate role to play in advocating how its scarce resources are best employed, and it has stated that it does not seek to override the vote or voice of the GCC or the chief of mission. The current approval process for deployment orders is sequential and therefore time consuming; concurrent requests to the force provider would be one way to provide greater agility. (There are currently memoranda of understanding for shifting SOF among combatant commands for urgent

counterterrorism purposes.) There may also be merit in wider use of the mechanism currently used for urgent operational decisions regarding the national mission force, namely, secure video teleconferences in which all stakeholders participate and the national command authorities make the decision.

There are two other fundamental questions underlying these proposals that are worthy of further discussion and study. What is the appropriate operational role for USSOCOM? USSOCOM currently has a limited operational role in regard to global threats that transcend the individual GCC boundaries. It currently tracks global terrorist threats and writes the global counterterrorism plan. A wider operational role for USSOCOM may come into frequent conflict with the GCCs' own operational roles, so this matter must be parsed very deliberately to arrive at the right formulation. The terrorism threat is a blend of local and global phenomena; many threats are deeply rooted in the local cultures and causes, which should be the province of GCCs, country teams and SOF who have spent their careers in those regions. But there are also increasing interconnections among groups that use technology, global facilitation networks and far-flung alliances of convenience. A similar dilemma applies to cyber threats, which are the province of U.S. Strategic Command and its subordinate Cyber Command, although global cyber threats may have more global and technical than local and cultural aspects. It is my understanding that before making major changes, the Joint Staff would like to take time to explore all the implications and potential impact on the system set up under the 1986 Goldwater-Nichols Act.

The second, related question is what is the proper balance between USSOCOM's operational role and its responsibilities as a force provider charged with selecting, organizing, training, equipping special operators, writing doctrine and strategy, and procuring SOF-peculiar equipment? It is my view that maximizing SOF's potential to have strategic impact and make lasting contributions to national security in the decades ahead rest more on USSOCOM fulfilling the institutional development tasks at a higher level. It can do much better than it has in developing doctrine and strategy and in managing the careers and education of its SOF personnel, and ensuring that they provide leadership to the community and are viable candidates for senior joint and interagency assignments. To that end, USSOCOM's formation of a new force management directorate is an important and welcome step to developing strategic leaders and strategic vision in the SOF community, which has understandably been focused on tactical prowess for its first decades of development.