

Future Special Operations Forces and Conventional Forces Interdependence

by LTC Casey Galligan and CW5 Dennis Castellanos

Before the Sept. 11, 2001 attacks, Special Operations Forces (SOF) and conventional forces (CF) operated independently, separated by both space and time. This operational mindset took us into Afghanistan and way beyond into the conflict for a long time.

Operations Enduring Freedom and Iraqi Freedom clearly accentuated the need for interdependence between SOF and CF. In the beginning, the war in Afghanistan allowed for a design to keep distinct separation between forces. Nevertheless, the nature of the conflict changed and required SOF and CF to nest their operations and better coordinate the effects.¹ In some cases, SOF and CF formations' lack of familiarity with systems resulted in reduced or limited integration. Challenges with communication systems and lack of familiarity with each other's planning techniques were chronic symptoms. However, combat served as a forcing function to set aside differences and established nested capabilities. When leaders were interested in achieving synchronization of effects, both organizations discovered how to work together seamlessly. The result is recognition of the need to institutionalize SOF/CF interdependence in training, doctrine and leadership.²

Although this initiative demonstrates senior-leader resolve to retain lessons-learned during the last 15 years of conflict within the Army, more may have to be done to fight and win in the anticipated complex environment. Future military operations will require tailorable and scalable solutions to enable building partner governments' forces, military and civil infrastructure to fight against internal and external threats.³

The new normal will deliberately demand persistent interdependence between SOF and CF and complementary regional expertise. Although the current episodic models of successful SOF/CF interdependence support retaining the gains made over the last 15 years, a more enduring approach must be implemented as the Army moves forward to secure global threats. SOF/CF interdependencies have to be persistent in training, deployments and ultimately combat rotations to truly develop the necessary synergies necessary to defeat future threats.

The U.S. military recognizes it must expand its ability to provide a small footprint capability with a high-impact security solution. President Barack Obama ordered the Army to advise-and-assist Iraqi Defense Forces in the fight against ISIL in Iraq. Similarly, the Army is conducting small-scale advise-and-assist operations in Ukraine to prevent further Russian expansion in the region.⁴ Although, unexplored at this point in time, the security-force assistance missions sets and the establishment of security-force assistance brigades (SFAB) may offer a connective platform for both SOF and CF to develop enduring integration, interoperability and interdependencies (I-3).

Opportunity

Currently, the Army's Force Modernization Directorate has asked the Maneuver Center of Excellence (MCoE) Concepts Development Division to provide a force design for SFABs with tentative dates for them to become operational in Fiscal Year 2018.⁵ The Army envisions the SFAB to perform security-force assistance tasks to the same degree of proficiency as Army Special Forces detachments in the conduct of foreign internal defense. SFABs will be expected to provide an economy-of-force solution to regional security problems much like Army Special Forces provided during the 1980s and 1990s in Central and South America by advising forces in El Salvador and Colombia to stop the spread of communism in the Western Hemisphere.

Much of the success achieved by Army Special Forces was accomplished by providing small-scale advisory solutions with Special Forces teams that were well versed in culture, language and regional expertise. As a result, Special Forces operational demands continues to increase, simultaneously creating opportunity for CF to share the train, advise and assist operational demands. SFABs potentially provide rapidly deployable and scalable solutions to develop partner capacity for foreign CF.

Focusing SFABs to work with foreign conventional forces will allow SOF formations to concentrate in developing SOF partner's capabilities. However, to implement a different paradigm of SOF/CF I-3, SOF and CF have to conduct persistent training, persistent deployment and persistent combat operations.

Challenges, recommendations

Episodic training opportunities exist at the combat-training centers (CTCs). However, training-center engagements are few and far between, which limits attaining realistic enduring SOF/CF I-3 maturation. Therefore persistent training solutions are required to increase the frequency for learning SOF and CF capabilities, processes and limitations. U.S. Army Special Operations Command is committed to SOF participation in all CTC training rotations for the next fiscal year. CFs can expect to begin coordination with SOF elements as early as 180 days prior to training execution.⁶ Organizations scheduled to participate at the CTCs should make every effort to explore home-station training opportunities with co-located Army SOF or operational Special Forces groups (SFGs) for increased operational familiarization.

The Army must consider the regional alignment of SFABs alongside with operational SFGs to increase the frequency of working engagements. Ultimately these organizations can establish habitual relationships by conducting pre-mission training as a precursor to CTC rotations and deployments. Persistent steady-state deployments for SFABs will provide geographical combatant commanders (GCCs) with a scalable and comprehensive advisory solution that goes beyond the tactical level. Since SOF resources are only committed at times against small tactical units, this limits the frequency and options for engagement at the ministerial level; by deploying SFABs alongside SOF organizations in support of steady-state requirements, SOF and SFAB leadership can leverage expertise and advice at the ministerial level.⁷ Also, regionally aligned and deployed SFABs will increase their understanding for the operating environment and improve the collaborative efforts with SOF. Ultimately, SOF and CF resources can be prioritized to best support the GCCs' endstate only if deployment schedules are aligned by dates and countries.

Persistent combat rotations for SFABs will only be successful through early integration during training and reinforced by steady-state deployments. Sustaining habitual relationships supports success during combat rotations by increasing SOF/CF I-3 competencies. SOF/CF I-3 competencies are achieved by learning each other's doctrine and processes. However, improving interdependence will require more than just exercising tactics and techniques. It is about establishing relationships to be able to visualize problems and then understanding how to solve these problems together.

The level of SOF/CF I-3 necessary to reduce friction is only achieved by maximizing every available opportunity to persistently train and deploy together. Developing operational relationships will be much more important in many ways than using the same types of equipment. Furthermore, as the political threshold for large-scale operations remains low, this collaboration will only increase the Army's effectiveness in Phases 0-2 while increasing our ability to operate together in Phase 3 if required.

In the past, several successful collaborative models help build SOF/CF interdependence by training and deploying together. For example, village-stability operations (VSO) showed how mutual reliance on each other's capabilities underscored the importance of early integration and collaboration.⁸ The VSO mission emphasized that early integration during pre-mission training, preceded by an academic week, increased familiarization with each organization's capabilities and processes ensuring mission success. However, this kind of mission achieved SOF/CF I-3 competencies by conventional force augmentation to SOF and not by mutually supporting each other and creating synergistic effects in the operating environment. Combining SFAB and SOF capabilities in a regional engagement strategy will provide optimal sourcing solutions conducive to achieving an economy-of-force during times when the Army no longer seeks to conduct large-scale deployments.

The regional alignment of SFABs with SFGs offers a unique opportunity for a different approach to achieve mutual reliance between SOF and CF capabilities. Past operational experiences reinforce the need to preserve the SOF/CF I-3 gains made over the last 15 years. However, Army institutional and organizational changes may be required to provide GCCs with scalable packages that assist in building partner-nation security forces capabilities and capacity.

For example, a permanent liaison officer (LNO) structure between regionally aligned SFABs and SFGs will sustain institutional knowledge of units' capabilities and processes. However, LNOs are typically temporarily assigned to other organizations. While LNOs are invaluable during the planning and preparations for CTC rotations, a consideration for integrating permanent CF LNOs into SFGs and, vice versa, SOF LNOs integration into SFAB staffs should strongly be considered.

It is important to note that there is a need to educate the CF on SOF capabilities, operational conditions for employment, required resources and possible effects SOF can achieve.⁹ In the past, friction between SOF and CF has emerged at CTCs and during combat rotations mostly due to the lack of understanding of SOF capabilities. Also the tendency to assume that all SOF units are primarily focused on the execution of direct-action missions creates false expectations for the CF leadership.

Concerns with the misunderstanding of capabilities go two ways. For example, SOF entities do not always understand the requirements associated with joint combined-arms maneuver and wide-area security. To improve existing SOF/CF operational relationships and to capitalize on the emerging opportunity that SFABs will present, it is useful to establish a forum where unit leaders and staffs share information and discuss collaboration opportunities.

Leader forum needed

A recommendation is to establish a quarterly SOF/CF leader forum event designed to serve as a vehicle to provide operational input on training, regional expertise and battlefield situations. SOF/CF units that successfully train together at CTCs and conduct successful operations in theater can share their lessons-learned, successes and best practices. Ultimately the SOF/CF forum will serve as a strategy for teaching, training and collaboration, providing an invaluable learning venue for the institutional Army.

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Notes

¹ Citing LTG Kenneth Tovo, "Opening remarks: Conventional Force/Special Operations Forces Interdependence," Association of the United States Army annual convention 2015; contemporary military forum, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IT14bDTwRZE>; accessed Dec. 5, 2016.

² Ibid.

³ Theresa Baginski *et al*, ***A Comprehensive Approach to Improving U.S. Security Force Assistance Efforts***, September 2009, <http://www.strategicstudiesinstitute.army.mil/pdffiles/PUB942.pdf>; accessed Dec. 4, 2016.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Headquarters Department of the Army G-3/5/7 Department of the Army Military Operations (DAMO) memorandum, "Optimization of Army Irregular Warfare (IW) Resources and Institutionalization of Capabilities," June 15, 2016.

⁶ Daniel Alder, SOF/CF I-3 discussion during the 2016 Maneuver Warfighting Conference, Sept. 14-17, 2016.

⁷ Baginski *et al*.

⁸ Linda Robinson, "The Future of Special Operations Forces," ***Council Special Report No. 66***, Council on Foreign Relations, April 2013.

⁹ MCoE memorandum, "Improving Army SOF/CF forces collaboration to identify interdependencies necessary to achieve readiness and win against a near peer," Dec. 2, 2016.

Acronym Quick-Scan

CF – conventional forces

CTC – combat-training center

GCC – geographical combatant commander

I-3 – integration, interoperability and interdependencies

LNO – liaison officer

MCoE – Maneuver Center of Excellence

SERE – survival, evasion, resistance, escape

SFAB – security-force assistance brigade

SFG – Special Forces group

SFODA – Special Forces Operational Detachment-Alpha

SOF – Special Operations Forces

SWTG – Special Warfare Training Group

VSO – village-stability operations