US Special Operations Forces: A Strategic Perspective

CARL W. STINER

We could easily end up with more than we need for contingencies that are no longer likely, and less than we must have to meet emerging challenges.

— President George Bush
2 August 1990

The post-Cold War international environment presents the United States with security challenges that are unprecedented in ambiguity, diversity, risk, and—opportunity. For the first time since the 1930s, no single power confronts the United States as a clear and present military danger. However, the failure of communism and the end of the Cold War do not eliminate threats to US interests, negate US responsibilities to friends and allies, nor void the necessity for potent US military forces.

In recent years, we have witnessed momentous events—dramatic progress in strategic arms control negotiations, the end of the Cold War, a stunning military victory in the Middle East by a coalition led by the United States, the withdrawal of Soviet forces from Eastern Europe, the collapse of the Warsaw Pact, and the demise of the Soviet Union as we have known it for the past 40 years. But in the midst of all this change, there remain certain constants which force us to temper hope with realism.

Improved relations with the countries of Eastern Europe and the republics of the former Soviet Union, and the accompanying reduced risk of global nuclear warfare, should not obscure the realities of a world that will continue to grow more uncertain. The only thing definite is that the United States no longer faces a large monolithic national force intent on defeating it. International turmoil and aggression, however, remain with us.

Drives for regional hegemony, resurgent nationalism, ethnic and religious rivalries, rising debt, drug trafficking, and terrorism will challenge the international order as it has seldom been challenged before. Widely available and sophisticated conventional, nuclear, biological, and chemical armaments, coupled with new means to deliver them, will render the international arena even more volatile. Within developing nations, dramatic increases in population and growing dissatisfaction with the perpetual gap between rich and poor will continue to be causes of unrest; the problems associated with rising political and economic expectations will be even more pronounced. Social upheaval could lead to the establishment of repressive regimes that may threaten the security interests the United States is trying to nurture and preserve.

As a result of these conditions, the number of prominent players in international politics will increase significantly. New combinations of power will develop while traditional international relationships will be called into question. In a world marked by competing political, social, and economic systems, there will always be those who consider their interests at odds with those of the United States.

These realities present diverse security challenges to the United States. These challenges range from immediate to long-term, from overt aggression to the latent fomenting of political instability, from the resurgence of powerful repressive governments to the continuance of a variety of renegade regimes and unstable rulers, from terrorism to narcotrafficking. Capabilities for countering one threat may be ineffective or unusable against another.

A primary objective of the United States in today's international system is to champion "a stable and secure world, where political and economic freedom, human rights, and democratic institutions flourish."[1] In this regard, the ability of the United States to provide leadership and exert military and economic influence globally is unmatched. International security cannot rest on the good intentions of individual countries and leaders; Iraq's bold invasion of Kuwait demonstrates the perils of such security approaches. The challenges to global stability are such that they are unlikely to be managed without active engagement by the United States. The distinctive role of the

---

General Carl W. Stiner is the Commander in Chief of the United States Special Operations Command, headquartered at MacDill Air Force Base, Florida. General Stiner graduated from Tennessee Polytechnical Institute in 1958 with a B.S. degree and was commissioned in the infantry. He served in Vietnam as an infantry battalion commander and brigade operations officer with the 4th Infantry Division. He has commanded the Joint Special Operations Command at Fort Bragg, the 82d Airborne Division, the XVIII Airborne Corps, and Joint Task Force South, in which he was operational commander of all forces employed on Operation Just Cause in Panama in December 1989. General Stiner holds a master's degree in public administration from Shippensburg State College and is a graduate of the Army War College.

United States is rooted not only in its power, but also in its values. The United States cannot solve all the world's security problems. However, it must remain the country to whom others turn in distress.

US Defense Posture and Special Operations Forces

The armed forces of the United States, in concert with other elements of US strategy, are an effective means for contributing to a stable world based on the rule of law, self-determination, political and economic pluralism, and regional cooperation. In this evolving international era, our military forces continue to support US and allied security interests with versatile and ready land, maritime, and air forces. The US military responds to threats to US interests with forward-based forces under unified commands, reinforced as needed with rapid-deploying forces from the continental United States. In addition, our military forces are employed in peacetime military activities requested by, and in support of, Third World governments aimed at fostering political legitimacy, democratic values, and civic infrastructures.

The special operations forces (SOF) of the United States, comprising special operations, psychological operations, and civil affairs forces from the Army, Navy, and Air Force, are essential to a balanced national defense posture in this complex international environment. Special operations forces are uniquely capable of operating in all political-military environments—from peacetime training, internal defense, and nation-assistance all the way up to full-blown conventional warfare. As such, our nation's special operations forces can be used as an instrument of US national policy in its efforts to promote international stability, foster economic and political pluralism, and alleviate conditions that create human misery and fuel insurgencies in various countries around the world. Language skills and regional and cultural familiarity enable special operations forces to make unique contributions toward protecting and promoting US interests across the entire operational continuum. Special operations forces offer the National Command Authorities and defense policymakers a low-cost capability for expressing US interest and resolve in every region of the world.

Today, in addition to the special operations forces that remain employed in the Persian Gulf Region in support of Operation Provide Comfort and who are caring for displaced Haitian refugees and supporting Operation Guantanamo at Guantanamo Bay, Cuba, there are special operations forces employed in 36 different countries in every region of the world. These soldiers, sailors, and airmen are professional instruments of US policy. They are forward-employed and performing their missions every day of the year, from the grass-roots level—where the problems are—up to the ambassadorial level, giving advice and assistance and coordinating requirements in behalf of American interests. Many of these employments provide a significant and

needed presence in areas where no other US military forces are stationed or regularly deployed.

Long before the end of the Cold War, growing nontraditional threats to US interests prompted the revitalization of special operations assets as an essential component of our nation's defense capabilities. The United States Special Operations Command has been given broad responsibility to maintain special operations forces to support theater unified commands and, if directed by the National Command Authorities, to exercise command of selected special operations.[2] US special operations forces provide the National Command Authorities and the theater unified commanders with the flexibility required to execute options ranging from specialized peacetime capabilities to equally specialized wartime support, while at the same time aggressively preparing for a demanding and challenging future.

Special Operations Forces—Versatile and Ready

Former JCS Chairman Admiral William J. Crowe, Jr., in 1987 set forth the prescription for bringing special operations forces securely into the military establishment:

> First, break down the wall that has more or less come between special operations and the other parts of the military. . . . Second, educate the rest of the military—spread a recognition and understanding of what SOF does . . . and how important that it is done. . . . Last, integrate SOF efforts into the full spectrum of our military capabilities.[3]

Those tasks have now been accomplished. Since December 1989 the United States has fought two major combat operations—Just Cause in Panama and Desert Shield/Desert Storm in the Gulf. Operating in conjunction with conventional forces in both cases, special operations forces contributed directly to the achievement of decisive victories. When employed properly and synchronized with other battlefield assets, special operations forces provide to commanders capabilities that extend their vision of the battlefield, increase their flexibility, and enhance their initiative.

While Operations Just Cause and Desert Shield/Desert Storm were underway, other special operations forces continued to serve worldwide in peacetime military activities involving foreign internal defense, security assistance, civic action, counterdrug and counterterrorism, and humanitarian relief operations. Using specific skills requested by and tailored to support host nations and theater CINCs, these special operations forces were employed to improve a host nation's capability to provide services and carry out other governmental functions. In the process, these special operations forces enhanced host-nation and international support for US regional objectives.

Simultaneous employment of special operations forces in these peacetime military assistance activities, in contingency operations like Just Cause, and in full-scale war like Desert Storm demonstrates the versatility and readiness that are the hallmarks of special operations forces.

Versatility

Versatility will be an essential characteristic of all US armed forces in the coming decades, not just special operations forces. Our nation's leaner military forces will be challenged by a growing number and variety of potential threats and opportunities. Each service offers unique capabilities to the National Command Authorities and the unified commanders that, when properly focused and integrated, advance US security interests.

Special operations forces offer their own brand of versatility particularly applicable in an uncertain international environment. The capability either to forward-employ special operations forces or to base them in the United States for rapid overseas movement provides significant flexibility to US defense planners.

In most developing countries, there are discrete economic, social, and security problems affecting both the quality of life and a regime's ability to carry out the basic obligations of governance. Helping a country meet the fundamental needs of its populace is the crux of any nation-assistance effort. Special operations forces are particularly adept at nation-assistance tasks that require cultural familiarity, linguistic skills, and long-term commitment. Characterized by small, flexible units with a wide variety of specialized skills and regional expertise, special operations forces provide numerous forms of training and assistance to host countries. US participation in nation-assistance initiatives often works best when it remains inconspicuous; the relatively low profile of special operations forces is especially appropriate when US presence is a sensitive issue with the host country. The use of special operations forces in focused nation-assistance programs, coordinated with country teams and in support of theater unified commanders, can advance the interests of the United States while assisting developing countries.

Special operations forces have been a critical ingredient in theater CINC efforts to implement country-specific programs that apply military resources to ameliorate conditions leading to subversion, lawlessness, insurgencies, and even regional conflict. For example, in Dominica, Navy SOF provided medical and dental care to over 300 patients, repaired local medical facilities, presented classes to Dominican health care providers, and gave basic health self-help instruction to the local populace. In Nepal, a small 13-person Army SOF team trained Nepalese nurses and medics in field medical and trauma tasks. Seminars were conducted on advanced trauma techniques for Nepalese doctors and nurse specialists. In both of these cases, host governments and US ambassadors were enthusiastic about the expanded role of the US military working

Special operations forces provide a low-cost capability for expressing US interest and resolve in every region of the world.

with host-country military and government officials as a means for providing essential services to the local populace and educating the military on the contributions it can make to society during peacetime.

In Bangladesh, Army and Air Force SOF continue to train the Bangladesh armed forces in disaster relief operations. The training, according to the US Ambassador, "has helped advance the interests of world peace . . . cement(ed) a solid relationship between the United States and the Peoples Republic of Bangladesh . . . enhanced Bangladeshi self-sufficiency for disaster relief operations . . . and raised the level of technical expertise in the Bangladesh military."[4] Thousands of Bangladesh's isolated villages are now within an hour of assistance in case of another natural disaster.

In several African and Central/South American countries, special operations forces are working with the host-nation military, government officials, and, where appropriate, police in civic action programs and internal defense. For example, in Zimbabwe, Namibia, Niger, and the Ivory Coast in Africa and in Colombia, Peru, Bolivia, and Ecuador in South America, special operations forces are training host-nation military and government officials in counterpoaching skills, basic soldier training, small-unit tactics and techniques, communications systems and procedures, basic medical skills, and programs for food and water distribution.

Special operations forces continue to be active in the ongoing war against narcotics trafficking. As a supporting command in the Department of Defense counterdrug effort, US Special Operations Command provides personnel and resources when requested. Typical counterdrug support includes communications support, training with host-nation forces on riverine and small-boat operations and military skills, and peacetime psychological operations training directed at gaining support for US counterdrug efforts, defeating narcotrafficking, and educating the local populace.

Additionally, special operations forces can be employed to counter terrorism, subversion, or insurgencies, consistent with the requirements of US national security policy and objectives. Special operations forces are also capable of conducting complex crisis-response contingency operations on short-notice with great precision—from personnel recovery missions to supporting larger operations.

Readiness

The international security environment exposes vital resources to threats that could jeopardize the US economy, the well-being of our friends and allies, and our overall national security position. Contingency operations in the future will most likely require some form of special operations early in execution, including special reconnaissance or direct-action missions, psychological operations, and either clandestine or forcible entry.

Special operations forces engaged in peacetime assistance programs in foreign countries may, with little warning, be required to transit to mid- or high-intensity combat in support of rapidly deploying conventional forces. In such cases, immediate demands for special operations skills and regional expertise will not allow time for retraining. Accordingly, maintenance of high combat readiness standards while special operations forces are participating in peacetime military assistance activities is imperative. Other special operations forces, normally based in the United States, are available to reinforce theater unified commanders on a timely basis, or to execute missions under control of the National Command Authorities. All special operations forces are organized and trained to operate in a mutual support posture vis-à-vis conventional forces.

Special operations forces also provide technologically advanced command and control capabilities to unified commanders. These communications and data processing capabilities operate at every level of joint and allied command. They are ready and rapidly deployable and can be tailored to specific requirements.

Sustainment of forward-employed special operations forces in conflict and peacetime military assistance activities contributes to a high state of national readiness. As the forward presence of conventional forces is reduced, special operations leaders will continue to work closely with the services to meet the essential sustainment requirements for forward-employed special operations forces.

SOF Support of Conventional Forces

Special operations forces perform their missions at the strategic, operational, and tactical levels to influence operations throughout the theater. SOF can no longer be placed in its own box or operational area on the battlefield, separate and distinct from other forces. Rather, special operations forces must be integrated into the campaign at every stage of planning and execution.

In Panama, special operations forces proved critical in providing the pre-combat intelligence necessary for commanders to successfully neutralize 27 essential targets during the crucial opening phase of Operation Just Cause. Additionally, Army and Air Force SOF worked together to secure critical bridges, communication sites, and terrain to deny access by the Panama Defense Forces. An excellent example of this was the Rangers' airborne

assault on Torrijos-Tocumen Airport during the early minutes of hostilities. By securing this airfield, the Rangers provided initial on-the-ground intelligence and prevented the PDF from interfering with future operations. Fire support for this mission consisted of an Air Force special operations AC-130 Spectre gunship and Army special operations AH-6 attack helicopters. Navy special operations forces played an equally critical role. Navy SEALs (Sea-Air-Land teams) and special boat units secured critical waterways and shore target areas to preclude PDF use.

These joint SOF operations were essential to prevent the PDF from sending reinforcing troops and materiel to critical areas in the theater of operations, as well as to isolate the PDF leadership. Integrated with conventional forces in support roles, special operations forces prevented the PDF from mounting effective resistance and contributed to the overall success of the combat operations.

In Operations Desert Shield and Desert Storm, the United States Central Command effectively employed SOF in support of its campaign plan. Army special operations forces and Navy SEALs were among the first contingents employed in the theater of operations, providing coalition forces training in individual and small-unit skills. This training program focused on nuclear, biological, and chemical techniques, integrating joint and combined arms into tactical plans, land navigation, beach surveillance and reconnaissance, and close air support. Additionally, special operations forces were the primary trainers for the reconstitution of the Kuwaiti armed forces.

With every coalition Middle Eastern battalion that went into battle in Desert Storm, there were special forces units with them. These were the same special forces units that had lived and trained with the coalition units since the beginning of Desert Shield in early August. Their role proved critical for the successful command and control of the coalition forces.

Just prior to the beginning of the ground war, special operations forces were inserted deep into Iraqi territory on special reconnaissance missions. The intelligence provided by these special operations teams supplemented the battlefield data previously received by the operational and tactical commanders—and proved essential to the success of the ground tactical plan. Additionally, Navy SEALs actively supported deception operations and maritime embargo operations, conducted area reconnaissance missions, and supported countermine warfare operations. Special operations direct-action missions were also implemented to support the Desert Storm campaign plan.

Although not normally considered a special operations mission, Army, Navy, and Air Force SOF were tasked by General Norman Schwarzkopf to conduct all combat search and rescue missions for downed pilots in the Kuwaiti theater of operations. Of the four pilots rescued, special operations forces rescued three of them, with the fourth being rescued by Kuwaiti

resistance forces. Throughout Operations Just Cause, Desert Shield, and Desert Storm, the operational leadership understood the capabilities and limitations of special operations forces during the changing phases, resulting in optimum employment.

Special Operations Forces—The Fundamental Principles

The distinctive characteristics of special operations forces rest on five fundamental principles that prepare the force for any mission:

- High-quality personnel
- Specialized training
- Advanced technology
- Forward-looking doctrine
- Versatile force structure

Let us examine each in turn.

High-quality Personnel

The most important of these fundamentals is the selection and retention of mature, high-quality soldiers, sailors, and airmen. High-quality people enable special operations forces to meet challenges across a broad spectrum of mission requirements. The long-term readiness of special operations forces requires the development of personnel programs, with the military services and US Special Operations Command working closely together, that promote the growth of a vigorous force.

Volunteers for most special operations units must first demonstrate their maturity, intelligence, combat skills, and physical toughness in their parent services, and then successfully complete a rigorous selection process. Such a selection process produces special operators ready to work under the most demanding conditions, often in circumstances where the reputation of the United States hangs in the balance. Experiences in recent years confirm that it is the caliber of the special operations personnel that proves decisive in mission accomplishment.

Specialized Training

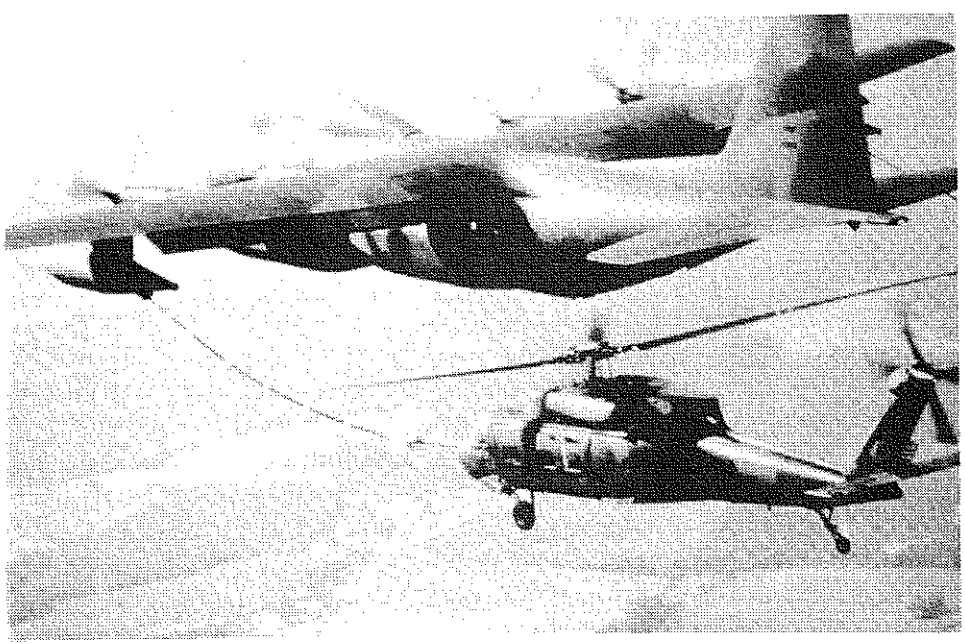
The second fundamental principle of special operations forces is the necessity for rigorous training to exacting standards in a variety of specialized skills. Only first-class training guarantees readiness for war. Training must include not only autonomous special operations exercises, but routine joint training with conventional land, maritime, and air forces. Special operations forces train for missions in contingency operations and war that, in accordance with joint and service doctrine, *only they conduct.* Therefore, special operations training in peacetime must prepare them realistically for the challenges they will confront in war.

Examples abound. A special operations soldier recently provided linguistic and information support for the US Ambassador to the People's Republic of Mongolia during a humanitarian/medical assistance operation. In Cameroon, a small team of regionally focused special operations civil affairs forces inoculated over 58,000 people against the deadly meningitis bacteria and treated an additional 1700 people for a wide range of ailments. For many of these Cameroonian people, it was the first time in their lives they had seen a doctor. These same skills serve well in conflict, especially in combined operations with allies and international partners.

Leader training, especially mid-career professional development, is of particular importance. In addition to the outstanding leadership training provided by the services, special operations leaders must refine their tactical and technical skills, sharpen their focus on the integration of special operations forces in joint operations, and increase their understanding of the unique requirements inherent in peacetime military assistance activities. Integrating special operations capabilities into computer-driven command post exercises and battle simulations will also enhance the cooperation and mutual understanding of conventional and special operations leaders.

Advanced Technology

The exploitation of emerging technology is vital to special operations forces because it can be decisive in offsetting enemy superiority in numbers, firepower, and mobility. High-technology R&D is a key component



DOD

An MC-130 Combat Talon refuels an MH-60 Blackhawk during a recent readiness exercise. Air and maritime infiltration/exfiltration systems are SOF R&D priorities.

in special operations modernization planning. Special operations and service R&D programs are closely coordinated to preclude wasteful duplications and to take advantage of shared capabilities. Special emphasis is given to developing improved mobility programs, flexible command and control systems, enhanced night-vision capabilities, and integrated communications systems for special operations and conventional forces at every level of command. These programs increase the ability of special operations forces to respond rapidly and to conduct deep penetrations in denied areas.

Technological exploitation is enhanced by the relatively smaller size of the special operations community, which permits quicker decisions and implementation. To develop and field the right systems on time, special operations R&D programs must be aggressively managed. A primary challenge in this area is to discriminate among emerging technologies and to select those that, through further development, provide the greatest benefit for the resources expended.

Forward-looking Doctrine

Doctrine for special operations forces must be sufficiently flexible to permit operations in a joint or combined environment, or as an autonomous joint force. Special operations doctrine must also focus on the coordinated integration of special operations capabilities with conventional forces to achieve maximum combat power and effectiveness. To successfully meet these requirements, it must address the broad range of special operations capabilities, from mid-high intensity conflict such as Desert Storm to humanitarian and security assistance programs symbolized by Operation Provide Comfort in northern Iraq. In these operations, special operations forces were required to transition overnight from a combat role to a provider of humanitarian and security assistance.

While special operations doctrine proved effective during operations in Panama, the Gulf, and northern Iraq, continuous updating is needed to provide a framework for future special operations force structure and modernization decisions.

Versatile Force Structure

An effective force structure must posture special operations forces to operate in the face of an uncertain threat environment, that is, to meet the entire range of potential requirements of the theater unified commands.

Reserve component special operations forces play an important role in enhancing the versatility of the total special operations force. In addition to combat capabilities, reserve component special operations forces possess individual and unit civil affairs and humanitarian assistance skills uniquely suited for peacetime military assistance activities supporting friendly governments. Force planning must continue to ensure that reserve component capabilities appropriately meet anticipated strategic requirements and modernization plans.

Adjustments may be needed in the active/reserve special operations force mix to reflect the changing requirements demanded by a different kind of strategic environment than that which served as a basis for force structure decisions during the Cold War. US Special Operations Command must have the active component capabilities to meet requirements for short- or no-notice contingency and humanitarian assistance operations in more than one theater of operations at a time. The simultaneous and widely separated employment of large contingents of special operations forces in the year 1991 alone demonstrates the need for this capability.

An area meriting particular concern is the requirement for in-theater logistical support. In the past, special operations forces have depended on the services' in-place logistical support structures to provide for the bulk of SOF sustainment. However, as service infrastructures are drawn down, it can be expected that forward-deployed logistical assets will be reduced. This will require SOF to deploy its own tailored support and sustainment organization with forward-employed special operations forces.

Maintaining an effective mix of active ground, maritime, and air forces, with a corresponding reserve structure to provide for sustainment and depth, is a cornerstone of US national security strategy and a tenet for special operations planners.

Conclusion

Today, the United States is in a position to influence positively the overseas security environment by fostering economic progress and political stability. In pursuit of such goals, special operations forces are an ideal instrument. The versatility and readiness of US special operations forces provide the National Command Authorities and defense policymakers with a wide range of feasible alternatives, including simultaneous operations on several fronts.

The United States must continue to field a robust special operations force capable of deterring and countering an unprecedented range of hostile threats to US interests. At the same time, the United States must field special operations forces for involvement in peacetime military assistance activities to promote the multiple objectives of US foreign and national security policies.

NOTES

1. George Bush, *National Security Strategy of the United States, 1991-1992* (Washington: Brassey's [US] Inc., 1991), p. 15.

2. Activated on 1 April 1987, USSOCOM was formed as a result of the Cohen-Nunn Amendment to the 1986 Defense Reorganization Act. Some of the tasks assigned to USSOCOM include: (a) responsible for all joint SOF doctrine, tactics, techniques, and procedures; (b) train assigned forces and insure interoperability of forces and equipment; (c) monitor preparedness of SOF worldwide; (d) develop and acquire unique SOF equipment, materiel, supplies, and services (RD&A authority); (e) responsible for SOF Program (MFP 11) and budget.

3. William J. Crowe, Jr., USSOCOM Headquarters Activation Ceremony, 1 June 1987, MacDill AFB, Florida.

4. William B. Milam, Ambassador to Bangladesh, letter to Commander, 3d Battalion, 1st Special Forces Group, 29 January 1991.