A Blueprint for Change

Transforming NATO Special Operations

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Former Supreme Allied Commander Europe and Commander, U.S. European Command Gen James L. Jones, USMC, discussing international commitments and deployments by USEUCOM, August 17, 2006

NATO

NATO antiterrorist training at industrial facility in Ukraine

The global threats we face pose a looming menace to the international community. This is especially true for the United States and its European partners. The nature of this complex contemporary operating environment highlights the necessity for operations across a broad strategic continuum. The old paradigms of static deterrence are anachronistic when we are faced with a foe that recognizes no national boundaries, shows open contempt for human rights, and refutes international rule of law. However, the United States cannot afford to act alone against these threats. The continuing march of globalization and its resulting multitude of economic, political, and resource linkages means that now, more than any time in history, there is a need to concentrate on alliance-building, coalition operations, and strategic partnerships.

This strategic emphasis is clearly reflected in the President's National Security Strategy,[1] and answering this call for long-term effect requires us not only to seek opportunities for forging new relationships but also to find ways to enhance present partnerships. The U.S. European Command (USEUCOM) area of responsibility presents multiple options to do both. However, our longstanding relationship with the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) offers a unique and timely opportunity both to improve the Alliance's operational capability and to enhance our collective ability to deal with the new strategic environment. Special Operations is one such capability. As President George W. Bush announced at the November 2006 Riga Summit, there is an opportunity to "launch a NATO Special Operations Forces Initiative that will strengthen the ability of Special Operations personnel from NATO nations to work together on the battlefield."[2]

Focusing on NATO

NATO has proven itself an enduring and vital contributor to the security of post–Cold War Europe and, with the recent inclusion of Afghanistan, the community of nations.[3] Despite its contributions, however, shortfalls and challenges persist that the Alliance must address in order to succeed in this changed strategic environment. As James Appathurai, writing in the *NATO Review*, notes:

> *At the practical level, NATO forces are working together in robust, complex and difficult missions, but the U.S. lead in military technology makes working together difficult for deployed forces. At the political level, the desire among Allies to work together is hamstrung by the growing complexity of doing so. At the strategic level, a growing transatlantic divergence in capabilities can perpetuate both legitimate grievances and unfair stereotypes over burden sharing and influence.*[4]

Even though these observations were made in 2002, they remain true today, as NATO continues wrestling with issues such as strategic airlift, enhanced expeditionary capability, command and control integration, interoperability of communications, information-sharing, and, at the political level, restrictive national caveats. While there are ongoing efforts to transform NATO in order to close these capability gaps, such as the recent Strategic Airlift Capability Initiative,[5] the pace of change is dampened by the rapidly evolving threats that the Alliance faces in Afghanistan

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and the real potential for NATO deployed operations elsewhere.

Although the majority of Allied operations have been centered on the conventional aspects of military power, today's convergence of multiple unconventional threats across the strategic continuum requires a new focus on transforming the unconventional aspects of Alliance military capability. Emphasizing the transformation of NATO Special Operations Forces (SOF) offers several significant opportunities to improve current and future Alliance capabilities. These include establishing an affordable venue for even smaller nations to make meaningful contributions to the Alliance, expanding NATO capability in conflicts, and increasing future capabilities and capacity.

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The transformation of SOF presents the ability to close some capability gaps at more affordable economic and political costs when compared to conventional forces; SOF are, by nature, small in number, easier to deploy quickly, and have much of the modern equipment required to foster better interoperability. In addition, SOF units, consisting of mature, highly trained, and skilled personnel, are designed to accept higher risk missions, resulting in less cumbersome caveats. These factors mean that, for many NATO nations, SOF may represent a more affordable niche contribution, yet one that offers tremendous benefits to succeeding against the enemies we face today and in the future.

On the battlefield, SOF units offer a wide range of options to enhance the joint commander's ability to influence conflict. From creating synergies with conventional force operations, to conducting SOF-specific missions, to working with indigenous personnel, SOF bring capabilities that belie their small numbers. The most recent evidence of what they can do on the modern battlefield is best demonstrated in Afghanistan.

As part of Operation *Enduring Freedom*, SOF continue to make vital strategic and operational impacts. Through special reconnaissance (SR) efforts, SOF teams work with conventional air and ground units to disrupt adversaries through facilitating kinetic attacks.[6] In conducting their own direct action (DA) missions, SOF continue to capture or kill high-value terrorists and insurgent leaders.[7] Meanwhile, they are conducting multiple foreign internal defense missions, working directly with the security forces of Afghanistan as an essential element in preparing them to assume responsibility for their own national defense.[8] Each of these examples illustrates a similar capability found in draft versions of NATO SOF policy and doctrine. However, despite having this foundation to work from, the majority of SOF contributions in Afghanistan have come through non-NATO coalition efforts.

While there are a few NATO Special Operations Task Groups (SOTGs) working in Afghanistan as part of the NATO-led International Security Assistance Force (ISAF), their ability to make significant gains has limitations connected to ISAF's conventionally focused design. To improve ISAF ability to assist the Afghan government in establishing a secure environment and promoting reconstruction efforts,[9] the force is organized into five regional commands.[10] This regional model establishes a straightforward means to concentrate security assistance operations and simplify coordination of reconstruction. However, this traditional construct also restricts the ability to achieve centralized SOF command and control, limiting freedom of maneuver and responsiveness for NATO SOTGs to conduct SR, DA, and military assistance (MA) missions across Afghanistan as a whole. A contributing factor to this command and control challenge is the reemergence of the Taliban.

Even as the ISAF focus has been on assisting Afghanistan's security and stabilization efforts, the fluid security situation caused by the reemergence of the Taliban has placed a new emphasis on dealing with this immediate threat and the direct risk that it poses to ISAF personnel. This has left little time and few resources for reexamining the role of NATO SOF and how they might be leveraged for better strategic and operational gains. Additionally, there is no NATO SOF organization to address this situation.

Although the NATO SOTGs in ISAF are highly capable, and the joint commands do have their own small Special Operations planning staffs, the overall structure of NATO SOF needs a standing entity dedicated to addressing the integration of SOF solutions at both the operational and strategic levels. Transforming SOF is an essential element to expanding this aspect of the Alliance's combat capability. However, beyond generating effects on the battlefield, a SOF transformational emphasis also has the potential to grow future capability and capacity.

NATO SOF offers an opportunity to increase military capability both directly and indirectly. An effective transformation of SOF requires improved interaction between NATO members' Special Forces organizations in areas such as doctrine, training, communications, and interoperable tactics, techniques, and procedures (TTPs). This allows nations with a more advanced Special Operations capability to enhance other member nations' SOF, even as it opens the possibility to share certain resources, such as training facilities, SOF educational opportunities, and lessons learned.

On a more concrete basis, one essential element of effective interoperability is communications. Currently, there is no standardized communications architecture for NATO SOF. While many nations have robust communications capabilities, there is no established reference point to enable all the SOF partner nations to be fully compatible. One way to address this problem is to establish common requirements for compatibility, secure capability, and modularization. These requirements would be used to develop equipment specifications for future procurement and specialized technical training needs. This standardization is important to ensure operational security and to develop doctrinal templates and TTPs for the full spectrum of SOF missions. Transformation would address this situation by establishing a SOF advocate for technical aspects of equipment specifications and supported NATO SOF TTPs.

In the conduct of special reconnaissance and direct action missions, effective TTPs, facilitated by efficient, secure communications, are essential. Transformation would provide the forum for developing a common reference of such TTPs. These TTPs would begin with establishing NATO SOF standards and setting minimum requirements for SR and DA missions. For example, SR mission baselines would include standard reporting procedures, day/night observation capability, and specific weapons systems and proficiency requirements. In a similar vein, standards for DA missions would outline minimum force

German armored vehicles participating in NATO amphibious exercise

NATO

requirements and capabilities, driving NATO SOF TTPs for objective area infiltration and exfiltration, actions on the objective, site exploitation, and after action reporting procedures for lessons learned.

Additional gains can be realized by emphasizing MA programs. By definition, *military assistance* is "a broad spectrum of measures in support of friendly or allied forces in peace, crisis, and conflict . . . and may vary from low-level military training or material assistance to the active employment of indigenous forces in the conduct of combat operations."[11] This characterization provides tremendous flexibility in helping to train and prepare NATO's partners rapidly in places such as Afghanistan. An aggressive MA program will not only produce synergies on the battlefield but also increase military capability and capacity by building indigenous security forces, freeing SOF and conventional forces for other missions.

MA programs may also be used to assist NATO aspirants in developing and improving their own nascent Special Operations capabilities as a potential contribution to future NATO operations. Beyond creating additional operational capacity, this approach has the added benefits of providing on-the-job training and MA experience for the SOF of current Alliance members, helping to refine MA techniques in preparation for future operations.

Challenge and Response

Despite the range of opportunities that a NATO SOF transformation offers—from providing a niche opportunity for some Alliance members, to increasing operational effects and growing capability and capacity—significant organizational obstacles must be overcome. Unlike NATO's land, maritime, and air components, SOF have no standing organization that provides the unity of effort, focus on interoperability, and common doctrine required to transform. As previously noted, even in today's ongoing operations, NATO SOF policy and doctrine are only in draft form. Furthermore, and again unlike the other components, there is no designated NATO SOF voice to guide such an effort.

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There are two main reasons for these shortfalls. First, the seriousness of the threat and the value of SOF as a viable means to address it have been recognized only recently. Second, historically, SOF have been retained by member nations as prized national assets under strict national control, in many cases uniquely shaped to address specific national security issues. However, the combination of an amorphous, global threat and the often complex, ambiguous nature of the contemporary operating environment mandates changes in this mindset. Despite the ability of SOF to make a difference, it takes significantly longer to develop Special Forces than it takes the enemy to produce new foot soldiers, even as the enemy becomes more and more capable of producing ever-higher levels of destruction. If we hope to reap the gains SOF can offer, we must begin now. The NATO Special Operations Forces Transformation Initiative (NSTI) can accomplish this mission.

Transformation Blueprint

As a truly transformational initiative, the NSTI will provide a complete SOF solution set at all levels: tactical, operational, and strategic. Achieving these objectives will not come without a price, not only because of the inherently small force pool of SOF, but also because of the immense value that these elite forces represent at the national level. Therefore, NSTI will not attempt to develop a standing NATO SOF combat force; instead, it will focus on such common areas of interest as proper integration of NATO SOF at the strategic and operational levels, doctrine development and promulgation, interoperability between member nation SOF organizations, and connectivity with NATO conventional forces and other Alliance agencies.

To accomplish all of this, NSTI will consist of three parts: an expansion of the Supreme Headquarters Allied Powers Europe (SHAPE) Special Operations Office (SSOO); the creation of a NATO SOF Coordination Center (NSCC); and the development of a federation of Special Forces training centers. Perhaps most importantly, NSTI will include the appointment of a flag-level SOF officer to lead this initiative and to provide a vital strategic voice for Alliance Special Operations issues.

While the SSOO has been in place for some time, it has been insufficiently manned to address the growing number of SOF issues within SHAPE. Expanding this office represents a significant step in addressing this shortfall, at the same time providing a more robust SHAPE staffing conduit for the centerpiece of NSTI, the NSCC.

The NSCC will be the organizational nexus for NSTI, serving as the home of the flag officer assigned as the NATO SOF advisor to the Supreme Allied Commander, Europe (SACEUR). As the NSCC director, this officer will serve as the direct link between SACEUR and Special Forces organizations across the Alliance, lending SOF-specific strategic advice as NATO's leading SOF advocate. In this role, the director will fulfill responsibilities similar to those of NATO's land, maritime, and air component commanders, but without command authority. At the operational level, the director will work

to ensure that the Alliance has sufficient, immediate Special Operations expertise for the development of operational estimates and the conduct of operations. At the same time, the NSCC director will provide flag-officer advice to the three NATO joint commands and serve as a functional liaison to Alliance nations' SOF leadership. To accomplish these multiple roles, the NSCC will be organized into three main divisions to address specifically many of the shortfalls already discussed.

The NSCC Operational Support Division will play a key part in synchronizing planning efforts, supporting the development of SOF requirements in the force generation process,[12] and providing assistance to the NATO joint commands. Currently, a small number of SOF staff members within the joint commands generate most SOF inputs to the operational planning process. However, the complex, rapidly changing environment suggests more to gain by establishing an organization that the joint commands could turn to for more advanced SOF planning advice. This capability would go far in improving support of ongoing operations, such as ISAF, and will be critical to emerging operations such as those that may fall to the NATO Response Force. Beyond defining SOF operational missions for specific plans, synchronizing such efforts is essential to establish the requirements for gaining appropriate operational capabilities and forces.

The Strategic Concepts and Interoperability Division of the NSCC will be responsible for supporting strategic planning at higher headquarters, producing policy and doctrine, developing common TTPs, and assisting with NATO education programs. In addition, this division will serve as the interface for NATO's Allied Command Transformation (ACT) on NATO SOF issues. While the primary functions of the NSCC are oriented toward operational aspects of NATO, a significant amount of effort for this transformational organization will involve close cooperation with ACT. As lead strategic command "for the continuing transformation of NATO's military capabilities and for promoting interoperability,"[13] ACT is responsible for NATO's Joint Warfare Center, education facilities, and most experimentation programs. By joining efforts with appropriate ACT offices, the NSCC will be better equipped to foster interoperability and will have access to a wide range of facilities and resources to support training and exercises.

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The NSCC Training and Exercise Division will concentrate on implementing SOF doctrine through NATO exercises and joint training opportunities. This division will also collect and disseminate lessons learned. A major role will be to develop standardized staff training for a NATO Combined Joint Force Special Operations Component Command. Establishing a universal model for this operational-level SOF headquarters element is an essential step in increasing Alliance capacity to provide a predictable baseline SOF command and control capability for rapid deployment in such rotational force structures as the NATO Response Force. Going hand-in-glove with building a deployable headquarters training regimen is the development of a NATO SOF tactical training program. This will be addressed by establishing a federation of training centers.

An integral aspect of the NSCC, this federation will leverage existing facilities and venues suitable for SOF training. Using multiple extant facilities offered by the nations for periodic training will present significant cost savings over a few dedicated facilities. This approach will leverage in-place resources and national subject matter expertise, providing variations in training and increasing utilization of potentially underutilized facilities. By linking these multiple training centers through NATO's Web Information Services Environment, it will be possible to develop synergies by synchronizing combined training opportunities and fostering communications across the Alliance SOF community.

Implementing Change

The essential components in successfully realizing the benefits of the NSTI are already in place. With the SSOO manning situation now being addressed, the next step is the establishment of the NSCC. Success can be found here, too: The United States has recently offered to be the Framework Nation for the NSCC, using U.S. Special Operations Command, Europe, as the nucleus for implementation. The key is gaining sufficient support from the nations to make the NSCC a truly multinational organization.

Several nations have already expressed interest in helping to establish the NSCC and being a part of this initiative for the long term. While there are many details to work through, this early enthusiasm bodes well for the future and is in complete accordance with

NATO

Multinational soldiers make up NATO International Security Assistance Force in Afghanistan

the multinational vision of the NSCC. While the United States will provide the framework, it will be the Alliance that will shape the future of NATO's Special Operations capabilities.

In today's dynamic environment of increasingly challenging threats—violent extremist networks, global terrorism, and failing states—it is more critical than ever to work with our allies and friends. The North Atlantic Treaty Organization continues to be a most valued partner in these struggles. However, the Alliance faces its own unique problem set as it endeavors to transform to become an even more relevant player in this new reality.

A key consideration in assessing the Alliance's transformational options is the need to balance the "three-legged milk stool" of acceptable economic and political costs, environmental fit of proposed solutions, and ability to make rapid impact in the operational environment. The transformation of Allied Special Operations capability is an ideal opportunity to achieve this balance while making an appreciable and formative difference in the capabilities of the Alliance. The price in both manpower and resources will not be inconsequential. However, it is well worth the effort in bolstering our collective ability to defeat the global threats of today and tomorrow. **JFQ**

NATO C–130 delivers humanitarian aid to Pakistan earthquake survivors

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Meeting of NATO Military Committee Chiefs of Staff session

NOTES

[1] *The National Security Strategy of the United States of America* (Washington, DC: The White House, March 2006), 8–13.

[2] George W. Bush, remarks in Riga, Latvia, November 28, 2006.

[3] George W. Bush, remarks at the Presentation of the Medal of Freedom in Washington, DC, November 12, 2003. During this event, President Bush highlighted NATO as "the most successful alliance in history."

[4] James Appathurai, "Closing the Capabilities Gap," *NATO Review*, no. 3 (Autumn 2002), available at <http://152.152.96.1/docu/review/2002/issue3/english/art1.html>.

[5] Jaap De Hoop Scheffer, press conference in regard to NATO's moving to acquire C–17 Strategic Airlift Aircraft, NATO Headquarters, Brussels, Belgium, September 12, 2006.

[6] See David E. Johnson, *Learning Large Lessons: The Evolving Roles of Ground Power and Air Power in the Post–Cold War Era* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND, 2006), available at <www.rand.org/pubs/monographs/2006/RAND_MG405.pdf>. See also Richard W. Stewart, *Operation* Enduring Freedom, *October 2001–March 2002* (Washington, DC: U.S. Army Center of Military History, 2004).

[7] Interview with Brigadier General Frank Kearney, USA, "SOCCENT Warrior—Leading the Fight in the Hot Spots: Iraq, Afghanistan and the Horn of Africa," *Special Operations Technology*, online edition, March 14, 2006, available at <www.special-operations-technology.com/article.cfm?DocID=1356>.

[8] Ibid.

[9] *NATO Handbook* (Brussels: NATO Public Diplomacy Division, 2006), 155.

[10] "History of the International Security Assistance Force," NATO International Security Assistance Force, November 21, 2006, available at <www2.hq.nato.int/ISAF/about/about_history.htm>.

[11] Draft NATO Military Committee 437/1, *Military Committee Special Operations Policy* (Mons, Belgium: Supreme Headquarters Allied Powers Europe, May 12, 2006), 4–5.

[12] "The Defence Planning Process: What Does It Mean in Practice?" NATO Topics, July 19, 2005, available at <www.nato.int/issues/dpp/in_practice.htm>. As defined by NATO, "Force generation is the process by which Allies indicate what forces and capabilities they will make available, for what period of time, against a list of requirements that the military authorities have elaborated for a particular operation, in the light of an operation plan, or for special needs like rotations of the NATO Response Force."

[13] *NATO Handbook*, 21.