

A Gray Zone Option for Integrated Deterrence

Special Operations Forces (SOF)

By Kevin D. Stringer

In a speech delivered on April 30, 2020, U.S. Secretary of Defense Lloyd Austin reaffirmed that deterrence is still the foundation of American defense, but that with the current operating environment, deterrence must incorporate all elements of national power. His concept of integrated deterrence goes far beyond the traditional nuclear and conventional military deterrence, encompassing a wider range of capabilities and



Special Operations Forces train together at exercise Night Hawk 21. Operators from the Royal Danish Army's special forces, the Jaeger Corps, settle in to a German Army CH-53 helicopter during exercise Night Hawk 21 on 5 October 2021.

stakeholders.¹ An understudied and under-researched element of this integrated deterrence idea is the role of special operations forces (SOF) as an essential component of a multi-layer set of deterrence options for a nation-state. The inclusion of SOF in deterrence derives from its utility operating in the gray zone, defined as the region of "...competitive interactions among and within state and non-state actors that fall between the traditional war and peace

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duality. They are characterized by ambiguity about the nature of the conflict, opacity of the parties involved, or uncertainty about the relevant policy and legal frameworks.”² This gray zone setting frequently occurs prior to actual war and is a natural area for creating deterrent effects in the mind of an adversary. The inclusion of SOF in deterrence efforts is counterintuitive given that most SOF activities are clandestine by nature and purposefully hidden from public view to preserve secrecy and safeguard specialized tactics, techniques, and procedures. However, an appropriate and calculated level of visibility on SOF activities can supplement other types of measures in enhancing deterrent effects. Additionally, since special operations formations conduct tactical and operational level actions that typically have strategic outcomes, they would logically be valuable contributors to national level deterrence efforts.

This article provides a brief theoretical foundation and working definition for deterrence before delving into the practical use of SOF for deterrence using North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) SOF doctrine as a framing mechanism. The examination offers examples of SOF deterrence activities carried out within the three NATO SOF missions of military assistance (MA), special reconnaissance (SR), and direct action (DA). It then considers the risks and opportunities of using SOF for deterrence efforts. The objective of the article is to deliver a contribution to national security policymakers and military leadership that stimulates their practical thinking on the application of SOF in a field with sparse literature and minimal research.

DETERRENCE

Deterrence is an important mechanism in international relations, and its theories, both nuclear and conventional, played a significant role in shaping interstate conflict during the Cold War. The changed security environment of the 21st century

calls for a re-examination of this concept, with the goal of adjusting both theory and practice.³ For example, the French understanding of deterrence only applies to nuclear activities, which is limiting in the more ambiguous, 21st century multipolar world of great power conflict characterized by competition between China, Russia, and the United States and its Allies.

The classic definition of deterrence offered by Alexander George and Richard Smoke “...is simply the persuasion of one’s opponent that the costs and/or risks of a given course of action he might take outweigh its benefits.”⁴ This characterization emphasizes the strong cognitive and perceptual element of deterrence as a psychological effect and serves as the foundational operating definition for this article. In fact, having sufficient strategic empathy to understand the opponent’s psychological cost-benefit calculation for an aggressive action is a critical element for successful deterrence. With this starting point, the challenge is then to deftly shape and adjust the adversary’s perception of the cost-benefit calculation, and the intended action is not taken.⁵ This shaping action occurs by demonstrating the three elements of successful deterrence: capability, credibility, and communication. In other words, the actor “has the technical means to perform the operation, demonstrates the willingness to employ said capabilities, and ensures that the opponent clearly understands the parameters of behavior and the costs of violating those limitations.”⁶ Concerning the last point, deterrence theory holds that if the communicated costs are severe enough, the threatening activity will be discouraged.⁷

RAND scholar Michael Mazarr goes further and divides deterrence strategies into two categories: deterrence by denial and deterrence by punishment. The former seeks “to deter an action by making it infeasible or unlikely to succeed, thus denying a potential aggressor confidence in attaining its objectives, while the latter “threatens severe penalties...

if an attack occurs.”⁸ In this second case, clear communication of the tripwire mechanism that would trigger the punishment is critical. This step communicates the unbearable costs of crossing this red line. Recently, the United States and NATO posited deterrence by resilience as a subset of deterrence by denial, the premise being that building societal resilience endeavors to persuade “...an adversary not to attack by convincing it that an attack will not achieve its intended objectives” because the population is able “to withstand, fight through, and recover quickly from disruption.”⁹ For the examination of SOF in deterrence activities, this article will apply these categorizations supplemented by a distilled and synthesized definition of deterrence formulated as the prevention of an action by instilling a fear of consequences, supported by the tripartite model of capability, credibility, and will.¹⁰

SOF AS AN ELEMENT OF INTEGRATED DETERRENCE

There is little literature on SOF as an element of integrated deterrence.¹¹ The 2021 RAND study *Countering Russia: The Role of Special Operations Forces in Strategic Competition* noted this deficiency, highlighting that while some sources offer ways for SOF to enhance conventional deterrence, the recommendations are often vague and there is a need for more specificity and conceptual thinking on the employment of SOF in this role.¹² This article will propose the utilization of SOF for deterrence efforts using the NATO SOF doctrine as its guiding framework. For NATO, *Allied Joint Publication (AJP)-3.5 (B), Allied Joint Doctrine for Special Operations* is the foundational document for NATO SOF and defines the SOF core missions as military assistance (MA), special reconnaissance (SR), and direct action



NATO enhanced Forward Presence troops road march through Poland in support of NATO’s defence and deterrence measures. US soldier onboard Stryker vehicle.

(DA).¹³ While acknowledging that special operations are frequently classified and challenging to observe, there is still a need for pragmatic, unclassified, and thoughtful discussion on the employment of SOF as a deterrent. The following sections will elaborate on the use of SOF for deterrence in each of these distinct mission areas to illustrate potential SOF contributions to a multi-layer deterrence campaign.

MILITARY ASSISTANCE (MA): SOF DETERRENCE BY DENIAL AND PUNISHMENT

Military assistance encompasses the broad task of training, advising, mentoring, and partnering to support and enable friendly assets.¹⁴ Within this mission, SOF can contribute to deterrence by denial and punishment through the development of partner SOF, national territorial defense forces (TDF), conventional forces, and other volunteer organizations for comprehensive defense, specifically in the establishment of national resilience and resistance capabilities. Comprehensive defense is understood as an official government strategy which encompasses a whole-of-society approach to protecting the nation against potential threats.¹⁵

While all populations have the potential to resist, this population capability must be developed in peacetime for effectiveness. If a pre-crisis developed resistance organization does not exist, it cannot deter an aggressor.¹⁶ In many countries, volunteer territorial defense forces, also known as national guards or home guards, have a central role in this process. In peacetime, these forces contribute to societal resilience through crisis response work and civil population engagement, while during an occupation, TDF are cross-cutting and core contributors to all the classic resistance components—underground, auxiliary, and guerrillas.¹⁷ In the pre-crisis phase, national or allied SOF can train and advise territorial defense forces in core resistance activities such as subversion, sabotage,

and guerrilla warfare. This MA helps to build “a whole-of-nation, government-led resistance capability which provides ways to coerce, disrupt, and potentially defeat an occupier in wartime.”¹⁸ These resistance capabilities, both overt and clandestine, can make an occupation untenable and thereby affect adversary cost calculations to deter aggression. Such a resistance organization is not only a viable response to an incursion, but it should be considered a gray zone deterrence option, complementary and amplifying to conventional and nuclear deterrents.

Metaphorically, SOF feed and care for the “national resistance porcupine” to make it appear larger and more indigestible, thereby deterring aggressors. Credible and strategic communication is essential to ensuring the adversary views it as a porcupine and not a smaller hedgehog. This utilization of SOF in its MA role appears to be the most effective use of its unconventional warfare expertise, while also providing the greatest deterrent value against revisionist powers within a comprehensive defense national framework. This model is currently being used with encouraging results in the Baltics, Poland, Georgia, and other Eastern European countries, where national or allied SOF develop territorial forces and their resistance capabilities to augment overall deterrence measures and provide national defense options.

SPECIAL RECONNAISSANCE: SOF DETERRENCE BY DENIAL VIA AMBIGUITY OR PUNISHMENT

The second SOF mission for deterrence consideration is special reconnaissance. NATO doctrine describes it as “reconnaissance and surveillance activities conducted as a special operation in, but not limited to, hostile, denied, or diplomatically and/or politically sensitive environments to collect or verify information of strategic or operational significance, led by SOF using distinct techniques and modes

of employment.”¹⁹ These activities, carried out in sensitive regions or on the periphery of strategic nodes and made partially visible to the adversary, can contribute to instilling perceptions of deterrence by denial. The objective is not to compromise the core SR mission but to provide enough of a “visible SOF iceberg” to create anxiety or uncertainty in the minds of adversarial decisionmakers that they may lack the capabilities to address or suppress an opaque special operations threat, thereby increasing the costs of their aggressive intent. The use of SOF in the SR mode for deterrence also plays upon the mystique of special forces, justified or not, that they can conduct successful, high-risk operations that result in strategic effects.

Considering strategic empathy and adversary military culture, Russia is likely highly sensitive to such unknown or ambiguous special operations activities occurring on its borders, maritime or terrestrial, given its own military culture of indirect action that often uses SOF. In fact, using allied SOF in this SR role would actually mirror aspects of the Russian concept of strategic deterrence which relies heavily on proactive gray zone measures that include special operations units.²⁰ This Russian approach brought success in the Second Chechen War (1999-2009) and in Crimea in 2014, and hence the Kremlin would be wary of similar allied SOF activities occurring under the banner of SR near its strategic nodes or borders.

Concretely in SR mission mode, allied SOF units would operate in such maritime locations as the Baltic, Black, Caspian, Barents, and White seas to create ambiguity of intent and send deterrence signals to the Russian military and political leadership as part of their preparation of the environment, which includes information gathering, pre-targeting groundwork, and the mapping of enemy assets, decision-making processes, and infrastructure. These activities are holding the adversary’s assets at risk by conducting pre-targeting tasks to find and

fix objectives for rapid finish operations. Similar SR actions could occur on land near the Kaliningrad enclave, Transnistria, Abkhazia, South Ossetia, or along the long Central Asian border. As the article “Jomini and Naval Special Operations Forces—An Applied-Competition Approach to Russia” noted, such “overt activities, amplified by appropriate and supporting information operations, ...create uncertainty in the minds of adversary leadership, leading them to question what...special operations forces actually are doing in these sensitive regions.”²¹ These doubts are intended to create anxieties that will influence the Russian decision-making calculus and enhance an overall multilayer approach to deterrence. Because such operations are part of the Russian cultural and historical playbook, this particular application of SOF serves as a limited demonstration of force to communicate seriousness and play upon Russian psychology.

DIRECT ACTION: SOF DETERRENCE BY PUNISHMENT VIA PRE-EMPTIVE STRIKES

According to NATO SOF doctrine, direct action (DA) involves “a short duration strike or other small-scale offensive action by SOF to seize, destroy, capture, recover, or inflict damage to achieve specific, well-defined and often time-sensitive results.”²² This SOF mission has strongly characterized the Middle Eastern counterterrorist campaigns over the last two decades and is the most popularized special operations task in public media and even films. Several governments have used special operations direct action as a deterrence by punishment tool against non-state actors, often insurgent or terrorist groups, to exact revenge and to send warning signals to discourage future actions. This usage usually takes the form of pre-emptive strikes against significant terrorist actors or installations. A key element for this use of SOF in DA deterrence is the clear communication of “red lines” and the applicable punishment



Nahal's Special Forces conducted a firing drill in southern Israel with a range of different weapons. The firing course was part of their advanced training where they learn to specialize in a certain firearm.

principles prior to the action in order to achieve deterrent effect. Two examples, one purportedly Israeli and the other American, demonstrate the use of SOF DA as a deterrence by punishment measure.

On January 19, 2010, an alleged Israeli special operations team eliminated the Hamas functionary Mahmoud al-Mabhouh in a Dubai luxury hotel for his killing of two Israeli soldiers in 1989 and his role in procuring sophisticated weaponry for Hamas activities in Gaza.²³ Purportedly, a specialized Mossad task unit called “Kidon” (or “bayonet”) made up of former Israeli Defence Force special operators conducted the strike.²⁴ Although this strike was a covert action conducted by a specialized intelligence unit, its example illustrates potential SOF utilization in the direct action deterrence role. Apparently, Mahmoud al-Mabhouh was the beneficiary of a Mossad “Red Page” order, authorized by the Israeli prime minister and defense minister, for enemies of the state. These orders do not have an expiration date.²⁵ In this vignette, a direct action strike by covert SOF is used as a strategic signaling

device designed to dissuade terrorist group elements from future action. This SOF case fits into the broader Israeli concept of deterrence exemplified by the 2007 conventional Israeli airstrike on a suspected Syrian nuclear reactor, which was considered a “...strategic signal...about deterrence more than creating damage.”²⁶

Similarly, the January 3, 2020, U.S. drone strike that killed Qasem Soleimani, head of the terrorist-designated Iranian Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps—Quds Force in Baghdad, displayed elements of special operations direct action used as a deterrent. According to news sources, U.S. SOF sniper teams were emplaced at the Baghdad International Airport in a direct action backup role in case the Hellfire missiles did not destroy their target.²⁷ Already during the Bush administration in 2007, U.S. special operations forces planned a mission to capture Soleimani, but senior U.S. leaders declined to approve it.²⁸ As the official Department of Defense press release stated concerning Soleimani, “This strike was aimed at deterring future Iranian attack plans.”²⁹

Naturally, there are significant concerns about the effectiveness, risks, escalation, and legality of using SOF in such direct action roles for deterrence. These themes will be discussed in the following section. For great power conflict, discrete and selective SOF direct action missions remain an option for deterrence signaling after an appropriate risk assessment. In light of the current conflict in Eastern Europe, possible uses of SOF could include the elimination or capture of pro-Russian separatist leaders and politicians in contested areas. Such actions, while risking escalation, would potentially deter other collaborators from supporting Russian subversive elements in disputed regions such as Abkhazia, South Ossetia, and Transnistria or those in Ukraine's eastern regions while avoiding strikes on actual Russian personnel. There are historical precedents for such direct action SOF deterrence activities in occupation scenarios. During World War II, both the Norwegian and Polish governments-in-exile authorized targeted elimination of turncoats by either special operations forces or national resistance cells to deter traitors. The Norwegian government-in-exile published a prioritized list of collaborators for elimination, while the Polish state established an entire underground judiciary for authorizing tasked units to mete out justice to betrayers.³⁰

RISKS AND OPPORTUNITIES

According to the definition of deterrence offered above, SOF have both the capability and credibility to contribute to deterrence efforts. The open variable is the political will to commit SOF to such actions. A political decision to use SOF in deterrence must carefully balance risks and opportunities. For risks, three significant ones emerge: escalation; exposing clandestine tactics, techniques, and procedures (TTPs); and violating international law. Considering these three major risks and mapping them against the SOF deterrence missions,

military assistance seems to be the least problematic while providing good deterrent value in raising adversarial cost calculations through heightened societal resistance and resilience capabilities. This application would mirror the emerging deterrence by resilience concept. Special reconnaissance, through its generation of ambiguity near sensitive objects or regions, runs a medium risk of escalation and the potential exposure of TTPs. SOF direct action deterrence in the form of pre-emptive strikes appears to possess the highest risk level since it exposes the initiator to escalation and retribution, potentially bares TTPs to scrutiny, and provides the grounds for accusations of human rights and international law violations.

That said, the use of SOF in deterrence also provides opportunities. First, because of their small size and low cost, SOF are a cost-effective deterrent. Second, the high level of special operator training, coupled with organizational capabilities, enables a precision and nuanced application of deterrence activities in regions and areas sensitive to the adversary. Third, SOF deterrent actions can be easily combined with conventional deterrence activities such as exercises, shows of force, and rapid deployments, while also serving as a multiplier or amplifier of national deterrence efforts in other domains.

CONCLUSION

In the pre-crisis or competition phase, SOF can contribute to a multilayer deterrence campaign through the conduct of tailored military assistance, special reconnaissance, and direct action missions. All three SOF tasks have the potential to influence the conflict environment and the opponent's behavior and calculus. Military assistance to national volunteer or territorial defense forces is most likely the least risky deterrence option that can contribute to improved comprehensive defense, force readiness, and credible resilience and resistance capabilities. These abilities warn an aggressor that a military occupation will be

both costly and unwinnable. Special reconnaissance, which is slightly riskier, increases situational awareness by gathering intelligence and understanding in sensitive locations, while transmitting ambiguous yet potentially threatening signals to the adversary as a limited demonstration of force. Finally, direct action through pre-emptive strikes, with pre-communicated “red lines,” sends a sharp deterrent message that can either influence adversarial decisionmaking to change course or engender increasing levels of escalation and retribution. Regardless of mission employment and risk levels, SOF offer

viable gray zone deterrence options that can blend readily with conventional and even nuclear deterrence efforts. In the deterrence role, SOF provide policymakers with a precise, nuanced instrument for creating deterrent effects which “are strategic or political rather than tactical in nature.”³¹ The examples derived from the application of the NATO SOF doctrinal framework underpin a perspective that SOF can be an integral element of a thoughtful and layered national or Allied deterrence effort. This application demonstrates the versatility of SOF in this era of great power conflict. **PRISM**

Notes

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