



PARTNERSHIP THAI and U.S. Special Forces provide flood relief supplies to a local village. U.S. Army photo.

RELATIONSHIP BUILDING: BY LIEUTENANT COLONEL J. “LUMPY” LUMBACA

The Key Objective of U.S. SOF Phase Zero Engagement

The U.S. is overly focused on partner-nation *capacity* building when in reality *relationship* building is the key to strategic success.

This paper is focused on U.S. special operations forces’ activities in peacetime or semi-permissive environments short of war, referred to here as Phase Zero engagements. Phase Zero is admittedly an unpopular term with some because it implies that subsequent phases are to follow, like those found in a traditional military operation. The reality, however, is that the U.S. may never move beyond Phase Zero engagement in a given country or region. Nevertheless, I use the term here.

The words “building partner capacity,” are listed 25 times in the Department of Defense’s January 2012 publication, “Sustaining U.S. Global Leadership: Priorities for 21st Century Defense.”¹ In October 2013, members of Congress stressed the need for partner nations to strengthen their military capabilities to contribute more to their own defense, with specific emphasis on Asia.²

We are perhaps comfortable with building partner capacity because it’s quantifiable and can therefore be recognized when a certain degree of capacity is achieved. For example, Country A is capable of conducting X, Y and Z operations under certain conditions. For sure, capacity is much easier to measure than say, a relationship: Capt. Smith has an intimate, professional relationship in Country B with the Chief of Defense and can help to arrange 1, 2 and 3 in that country, under certain conditions.

Our Country Action Plans often lists certain degrees of partner-nation capacity that we hope to build after 5 years, 10 years, etc., with a desired end state. I would suggest that the term end state should not be used with regard to Phase Zero planning as it implies a culmination point rather than a continuous cycle that lasts into perpetuity, or until the U.S. changes its strategy. It is important to acknowledge that if some quantifiable level of capacity or interoperability is achieved in a partner nation, it requires constant attention to maintain, and always risks dropping below levels reached because of lapses in

time until follow-on U.S. engagements, loss of continuity among U.S. and partner-nation personnel and forecasted and unforecasted fluctuations in available resources for both the U.S. and the partner nation.

This is not to say that building partner capacity is unimportant. It is extremely important for obvious reasons. “Teach a man to fish...” as the saying goes, because the U.S. cannot and should not be in all places at all times to deal with threats and instability around the world. From the U.S. perspective; however, a *capable* partner nation may have a finite degree of effectiveness in the event of a contingency, or in shaping regional dynamics, if America has only limited *access* and with key leaders. Any shortcomings in partner capacity and interoperability can typically be mitigated by the ever-growing array of tools that the U.S. military, State Department and other interagency partners bring to the table when needed. On the contrary, if the U.S. does not have access and influence then options are limited, regardless of partner-nation capacity.

The means by which SOF and others assist in attaining these strategic objectives — access, influence, the ability to build capacity — is through Phase Zero relationship building. Genuine relationships, built over time and nurtured regularly, are what differentiate the U.S. from other countries which have only traditional, mil-to-mil cooperation with our partners.

People with Purpose

SOF plays a critical role in relationship building by putting the right people in the right places. An important component of SOF Phase Zero success is the long-term presence of U.S. special operators stationed in the countries where we operate, and in close physical proximity to the countries in which we desire greater access. As Lt. Gen. John F. Mulholland Jr., then Commanding General of U.S. Army Special Operations Command, wrote in 2010, SOF must invest in the line of effort known as “People with Purpose.”

Selecting the right people for the right jobs is a challenge. Our leaders must first contend with an antiquated DoD personnel-management system that does not adequately identify or assign people based on individual talents. After that hurdle is overcome, there are several key prerequisites that should then be met. Professional Military Education is an important foundation which lends itself to a greater understanding of U.S. national and theater strategic objectives. Combined/coalition experience, language training, joint qualification and a broad understanding of all U.S. SOF components and their missions is unquestionable. The human dynamic, however, will prove to be the most important when working in the diplomatic, interagency environment abroad. On any given week, SOF representatives assigned to the country team find themselves meeting with officials from the Department of State, USAID, other government agencies, visiting Department of Defense organizations, foreign diplomats, host-nation customs and

As uncomfortable a subject as it may be for some military professionals, understanding and planning within the political landscape of a particular country or region is necessary for success. To do otherwise is to create an ill-informed plan which will not be long-lived. Asia, just like anywhere else in the world, is an extremely complex network where regional competitors, non-state actors and each country’s internal dynamics influence politics. Politics influence the security forces with whom we work, and it influences what the U.S. is and is not able to achieve. For any forward-deployed special operator, it is not a matter of if, but when, he must navigate politically sensitive waters.

It is only after this all-encompassing synergy is achieved can the special operator then get to the difficult task of actually making SOF activities on the ground a reality. The importance of competent, motivated, mature, experienced, culturally-aware SOF personnel assigned to these positions cannot be overstated. Putting the wrong person on

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“Global ARSOF presence is a key supporting effort to the Department of State and combatant commanders’ strategies in semi-permissive and unstable areas of the world. The ARSOF investment line of action is primarily realized by small teams of Civil Affairs, Special Forces, and Psychological Operations personnel studying, living, and working for extended periods of time in overseas locations to gain understanding, acquire expertise, and develop relationships. These ARSOF elements provide a complementary capability in further developing U.S. interagency efforts to increase available human and technical information in select foreign countries against irregular threats. Additionally, the investment line of action allows for the development and sustainment of long-term relationships with indigenous personnel and enables/allows for a cadre of language-capable and culturally relevant Soldiers who provide Ambassadors, combatant commanders, and follow-on forces with critical capabilities should emergencies arise or contingencies develop.”³

immigration, contractors and vendors, partner nation and multinational military and law enforcement leaders and members of the host government’s ministries or departments. Functioning on a professional level with such a wide variety of people, from the most junior to the most senior-level, requires keen interpersonal skills and diplomacy.

Country Team “buy-in” to special operations is a requirement for any Phase Zero activity to occur abroad. Inside the embassies, SOF representative must be able to inform leaders, educate interagency colleagues and articulate to all the value of SOF contributions to Chief of Mission objectives. Linda Robinson, a senior policy analyst at the Rand Corporation with unique access to the SOF community writes, “...the special operations community’s vision is not entirely clear to other partners in government. Understanding and a common plan are more important than speed in these [SOF strategic] endeavors, in contrast to the urgency that undergirds many special ops undertakings.”⁴

the job can prohibit SOF from realizing its maximum effectiveness and spell disaster for relationships that take decades to develop but only days to destroy.

SOF Phase Zero Engagement and Relationship Building in Thailand

This final section provides insight into SOF Phase Zero engagement in the Kingdom of Thailand.

In 2013, the United States and Thailand commemorated 180 years of formal relations between the two nations. Thailand, designated as a major Non-NATO Ally, is America’s oldest ally in Asia. Security cooperation between the two nations continues to flourish through increased strategic dialogues, civilian and military senior-leader meetings, military and law-enforcement engagements and information sharing.

Through the United States Pacific Command’s Security Cooperation Plan, and Chief of Mission Bangkok’s Mission Strategic Plan, our leaders have articulated strategic



JOINT BRIEF A 1st SFG(A) Company Commander provides a mission approval brief to senior Thai and U.S. Commanders during a SOF JCS Exercise. U.S. Army photo.

guidance aimed at further developing the long-established friendship, trust and cooperation that the U.S. is honored to share with this regional leader in Southeast Asia. It is with this guidance and authority that Special Operations Command – Pacific develops its Country Action Plan for engaging the Royal Thai military and law enforcement in Phase Zero activities.

Despite the realities of sequestration and other recent hurdles confronting the U.S. government, SOF engagement in the Kingdom of Thailand has either remained at steady state, or in some cases increased compared to previous years. This is due in part to unique U.S. Special Operations Command funding authorities, a decrease in wartime deployments and because of the larger U.S. government’s realignment — or “pivot” — to Asia. The activities of U.S. SOF in Thailand, in concert with other tools of U.S. national power, provide our senior leaders with an instrument of consistency to be applied toward the achievement of strategic objectives.

SOF basically has two, non-doctrinal “models” for Phase Zero engagement. The first model is the long-term advisory mission. The second is the use of frequent engagements in countries where the U.S. does not have a permanent presence.

Special Forces Detachment 39 in the Republic of Korea, formerly known as Det-K, is an example of the long-term advisory

mission model. The unit is permanently stationed in Korea and has developed close relationships with its ROK counterparts with whom it continuously engages. As Robinson writes, “Special operations forces can easily be frittered away in tactical and episodic missions that have no enduring or strategic value. Thoughtful application of their capabilities generally means two things: persistent presence combined with either conventional and/or multinational partners...This [SOF] footprint does not have to be thousands or tens of thousands [of personnel on the ground] — most often a few hundred can have an enormous impact — if they are deployed in back-to-back rotations for five to 10 years. The key here is for policy makers and U.S. ambassadors, who are the gatekeepers for U.S. forces in non-war theaters, to embrace the value of these long-term advisory missions.”⁵

In Thailand, the alternative model utilizes frequent, well-planned engagements to develop capacity, but more importantly to build relationships. The training objectives of SOF events, whether they are focused on counterterrorism, doctrine development, military information support, small-unit tactics, humanitarian assistance, etc. — subject matter which considered alone speaks to capacity building and interoperability more than access and influence — are important. The fact that these training events occur on a

regular basis with habitual training partners, however, highlights the strategic value: Relationships are built and are more important than the actual tactical outcomes.

Phase Zero activities in the Kingdom of Thailand consist of joint and combined exchange training, counternarcotics training, subject-matter expert exchanges, Joint Chiefs of Staff exercises Cobra Gold and Tempest Wind, Military Information Support Team engagements, combined airborne operations, sponsorship of Exercise Related Construction projects, regional conferences such as the Pacific Area Special Operations Conference, Pacific Area Security Sector Working Group and SOCOM’s International SOF Week conference. The U.S. also dedicates several million dollars annually to sending Thai personnel, including SOF representatives from all services, to the U.S. for International Military Education and Training and Combating Terrorism Fellowship Program schooling. Finally, there is a robust U.S. SOF presence on the Thailand Country Team’s permanently assigned staff, and among other long-term augmentees, who synchronize special operations activities in support of strategic objectives.

One of the most visible SOF engagement tools utilized in Thailand is the JCET. Currently conducted by U.S. Army, Navy and Air Force special operations personnel, JCETs are executed almost 12 months out of every year, primarily alongside Thai SOF units. The JCET itself, however, is not without its limitations. In his book on *SOF Phase Zero Engagements*, U.S. Army Special Forces Colonel Brian Petit writes:

*Known as the workhorse of USSOF, the JCET itself is an “ill-suited mechanism to build partner capacity and capability.” A former TSOC operations officer, Colonel Greg Wilson, plainly stated, “JCETs are inadequate tools to build capacity. A new platform is needed.” JCETs retain their utility because they are convenient to program and resource for both USSOF and host nation units...The principle shortcoming is that JCETs are episodic events that are subject to wide variations in host nation hosting units, regions and desired capabilities.*⁶

With that arises the question of why the JCET remains one of the cornerstone special operations engagement tools in Thailand, and throughout Asia for that matter? JCETs nested under an inadequate country

plan and unsynchronized with other activities are counterproductive. In Thailand, however, these engagements are carefully programmed along with other U.S. SOF and conventional-force engagements, synchronized with host-nation requirements, and play a significant role in complementing the overall strategic landscape in which the U.S. operates. U.S. conventional military forces are neither trained, organized nor equipped to *routinely* deploy small, culturally oriented teams, with little to no logistical support and senior leadership, to engage host-nation security forces. Consequently, we come to an understanding of why the JCET remains a critical centerpiece of strategic engagement. There is currently no other tool like it that allows the U.S. military to develop relationships with the host nation on a routine basis in Asia.

The engagements discussed to this point are important but do not take full advantage of all that special operations can offer to strategic success in a country or region. Other activities must be implemented to complete the picture, such as developing command-and-control skills through JCS exercises and tabletop drills involving mid-to senior-level leaders. These events rise to the level of operational and strategic planning and leadership of SOF in a joint/combined/coalition environment which cannot be replicated anywhere else, short of war. Another important tool used often in Thailand and elsewhere is SOF senior leader engagement. Commanders from SOCOM, SOCPAC and all of the SOF components in the PACOM area of responsibility have engaged with Thai SOF and conventional leaders through regional conferences and professional and social meetings. These engagements give leaders an opportunity to articulate their objectives, discuss challenges and build relationships. By taking the time to send our senior leaders to meet with partner-nation representatives, the U.S. shows our allies how important their cooperation is to America.

Our friendship with Thailand is founded on trust and mutually agreed-upon objectives. It is built while conducting office calls in the daytime, training in the jungle at night and when friends gather off-duty for golf or dinner. Our cooperation is beneficial for both countries, which is why Thailand routinely consults with the U.S. When the Thais



JOINT BRIEF Members of the 1st SFG(A) conduct a firearms class with Thai soldiers during a Joint Combined Exchange Training (JCET). U.S. Army photo.

are considering ways to restructure their personnel- management system or create a counter-IED training center, they ask the U.S. for a model. When they are interested in redesigning their Special Warfare School's organization, doctrine or selection and assessment program, it is the U.S. that's invited to assist. Thai military doctrine, both SOF and conventional, is primarily U.S.-based as a result of decades of cooperation.

The U.S. relationship with Thailand is qualitatively different from that of other countries in the region that engage with this important ally of ours. The U.S.-Thai relationship is built on trust, and because of that the U.S. remains the partner of choice for the Kingdom of Thailand.

Conclusions

While we have examined the engagement in Thailand, the conclusions are universal for SOF Phase Zero. First, relationship building should be our primary objective. It fosters trust and leads to access, influence and the ability to build partner capacity. Second, precision programming of SOF Phase Zero engagement plays an important part in achieving Chief of Mission, geographic combatant commander and U.S. national objectives. Third, putting the right special operators in the right jobs overseas is an important precursor to developing meaningful relationships and maximizing the SOF contribution to U.S. strategic goals. **SW**

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Notes

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