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# COMMAND AND CONTROL IN THE GRAY ZONE: THE ADVANTAGE OF SOC-FWDs

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## THE CHALLENGE OF SOF C2

“The greatest single challenge facing special operations forces today is outdated command and control structures,”<sup>01</sup> according to *ARSOF 2022*. Among the primary challenges for special operations forces command and control is the need to operate across all phases of joint operations.<sup>02</sup> This broad spectrum includes Phase 0 *Shape* and Phase 1 *Deter* that characteristically do not involve major combat. Joint doctrine describes the *shape* phase as actions that “dissuade or deter adversaries and assure friends.”<sup>03</sup> The *deter* phase seeks to “deter an adversary from undesirable actions because of friendly capabilities and the will to use them.”<sup>04</sup> Both of these phases occur below the threshold of conventional combat and involve

maneuvering capabilities, relationships and access to gain a superior position before the event of war or to prevent war. Strategists have recently described this time-space below the threshold of violent combat as the Gray Zone that “involves the holistic application of a mosaic of civilian and military tools, short of combat operations, to achieve gradual progress toward political objectives.”<sup>05</sup> Further, SOF theorists have called for SOF to develop the ability to plan *special warfare* campaigns that are capable of synchronizing SOF efforts in the Gray Zone. Scholars succinctly describe special warfare as “political-military warfare or shaping and influencing environments and populations.”<sup>06</sup> Common to all of these descriptions is a time-space that is long in duration, does not involve large-scale combat and emphasizes in-

fluence via engagement that includes, but is not limited to, military efforts.

To meet the C2 challenge, SOF developed several C2 concepts that it employs concurrently today for a broad range of special operations. Chief among these concepts are the special operations joint task force and the special operations command-forward. Of these two, doctrine identifies the SOJTF as the “principal joint SOF organization tasked to meet all special operations requirements in major operations, campaigns or a contingency.”<sup>07</sup> The SOJTF is a relatively larger organization consisting of a “headquarters, SOF units, support forces and service-provided capabilities.”<sup>08</sup> A SOF unit headquarters forms the nucleus of the SOJTF staff. The SOJTF has the capacity to C2 large-scale SOF activities and is manned, trained and equipped to do so.

TSOCs construct and deploy many versions of SOC-FWDs. For the purposes of this paper, SOC-FWDs are a command cell led by a command-selected O-6, joint-qualified officer, subordinate to the TSOC commander, who works from the U.S. Embassy in his or her area of operations. This commander has a small, in-country supporting staff consisting of a senior enlisted advisor and two or three operations officers. A rotating company of Special Forces Soldiers often augments the SOC-FWD as staff serving at a separate location within the area of operations, typically on a partner force installation. These SOC-FWDs rely heavily on the TSOC headquarters staff located in the continental United States for non-operational staff functions.

In assessing these two forms of C2 for joint operations phases 0-1, SOF must consider the nature of special warfare in the Gray Zone. Special warfare emphasizes operations that have the following characteristics; leadership of the interagency and consequent cooperation, small footprints and low visibility, primacy of the partner nation and long duration. Understanding the nature of special warfare in phases 0-1, the SOC-FWDs are the SOF C2 structure most beneficial to the development and employment of special warfare campaigns to shape and deter. The principle virtue of the SOC-FWD are its ability to conduct interagency coordination and cooperation through its small, forward and networked construct.

## INTERAGENCY ADVANTAGES OF THE SOC-FWD

SOC-FWDs are the most beneficial SOF C2 structure for special warfare campaigns for their intimate interagency coordination capability. Special warfare campaigns demand an interagency approach. A recent report on the special warfare operational art states, “Special warfare efforts benefit from greater joint and interagency support when key partners are involved in the

planning process.”<sup>9</sup> More to the point, doctrine describes military involvement in foreign internal defense, a component of special warfare, to be one of the integrated efforts of a whole-of-government approach. “For FID to be successful in meeting a host-nation’s needs, the United States Government must integrate the efforts of multiple government agencies.”<sup>10</sup> Former SOC-FWD Yemen commander Rob Newsom stated unequivocally, “SOC FWDs must be and are integrated into the U.S. Country Team and a whole-of-government, interagency approach.”<sup>11</sup> This is necessary because the political nature of special warfare campaigns involves the whole-of-government and “are routinely reviewed and discussed by the National Security Staff and often require U.S. Presidential approval.”<sup>12</sup> Moreover, the risk of “policy fratricide” is high if interagency coordination does not balance lines of effort.<sup>13</sup> Scholars have pointed out that SOF has perfected interagency collaboration in regards to direct-approach, counterterrorism operations; however, collaboration in regards to indirect special warfare approaches remains an underdeveloped concept.<sup>14</sup>

SOC-FWDs achieve interagency integration primarily in three ways. First, their approachable size deflates militarization of foreign policy perceptions. Second, their physical location within a U.S. embassy increases planning opportunities. Finally, SOC-FWD commanders are valuable, if honorary, members of the country team with immeasurable worth in the Human Domain.

## SMALL FOOTPRINT

SOC-FWDs are the best SOF C2 model for interagency collaboration because their small size deflates perceptions of the militarization of foreign policy. Benefits are twofold. First, it facilitates special warfare campaign integration where the Department of Defense is likely not the lead department. Second, it reduces

strain on U.S. diplomatic efforts. DoD dwarfs other federal agencies. For example, “at 68,000, the Special Operations forces of the Pentagon are larger than the personnel of the civilian foreign policy agencies.”<sup>15</sup> This figure operates in the background of interagency collaboration where other government agencies tend to view the DoD as *everywhere* by virtue of its manning, budget and authorities gained during the Long War. Within a country, a SOJTF numbering several hundred will easily dwarf the staff of the U.S. embassy. Indeed, a SOJTF can be overwhelming to an embassy. A former SOC-FWD commander explained how the ambassador appreciated the SOC-FWD as a way to prevent the “invasion force” from arriving.<sup>16</sup> This anecdote also serves to illustrate how the embassy understood the SOC-FWD as distinctly different and acceptable from other large C2 nodes.

Small footprints are necessary for the low-visibility nature of a special warfare campaign. By definition, special warfare is attempting to influence the political nature of a place or event, not *lead* the change. Nor does special warfare seek to directly impress U.S. will onto an adversary or a partner. Special warfare is an indirect and persistent approach. It requires the primacy of the host political community. This necessitates a presence that is as small as possible while remaining effective. To accomplish this, former U.S. Special Operations Command commander Admiral William McRaven stated, “proactive, relationship-based approaches grow through effective, enduring partnerships and globally agile, forward-deployed or forward-based SOF.”<sup>17</sup> Essential to this perspective is the concept of SOF *in theater*, persistently based with the partner nation that enables the establishment of a trust-based relationship. Trust is essential. The SOC-FWD C2 construct meets this description by being located in the country with commanders serving for one year. Unlike large

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Special Forces team members assigned to SOC Forward-North and West Africa work with Senegalese Commandos during Flintlock 2016. A rotating company of Special Forces Soldiers often augments the SOC-FWD as staff serving at a separate location within the area of operations, typically on a partner-force installation.

U.S. ARMY PHOTO BY JENNIFER G. ANGELO

special-operations footprints, the SOC-FWD is able to remain small by placing additional personnel at the CONUS-based TSOC. This allows the SOC-FWD commander and his/her small team to remain on point for the low-visibility work of influencing relationships. For example, a SOC-FWD may require a more robust intelligence staff capability or a staff capable of conducting increased requests for forces. The TSOC is able to provide these functions and prevent growth at the forward location.

In contrast, SOJTFs can be intrusive. SOF researchers have written, “Contrary to both doctrine and perception, SOF have a record of operating with a large footprint.”<sup>18</sup> Deploying a division-size staff to a country sends a strategic signal of U.S., and specifically Department of Defense, leadership. Scholars have observed that this type of expeditionary activity often leads to mission creep because of its “political complexity.”<sup>19</sup> The result in the case of special warfare is the expansion of limited, political aims with larger conventional, military aims. Consider the example of Vietnam from 1963-1964. With the increasing requirements for special operations in Vietnam in terms of both personnel and infrastructure, a direct correlation in the need to improve protection and the other warfighting functions continued to increase requirements of SOF. The result was a *SOF culminating point* where special warfare was necessarily overtaken by conventional efforts. This led to an end to what some have argued was an effective special warfare-like campaign.<sup>20</sup> In the current environment, SOC-FWDs are a concept that hedge against mission creep.

The small size of the SOC-FWD also does not disrupt diplomatic or other interagency efforts. SOF theorist Brian Petit notes that within a host nation “visible military actions (DoD) improve security but strain diplomacy (DoS).”<sup>21</sup> For example, the arrival in a country of a large SOJTF may signal that the country is weak, or inflame anti-American sentiment in a population that views a large U.S. military presence unfavorably. These then become diplomatic and intelligence problems as the interagency adjusts to the shift in the political environment. In contrast, a small SOC-FWD team can conduct C2 functions with relative discreetness from within the embassy and pose no threat to adjusting diplomatic calculus for the country team.

## PRESENCE

SOC-FWDs are the best SOF C2 structure for integrating with the interagency because of their forward presence in the relevant U.S. Embassy. For example, Special Operations Command Central SOC-FWDs currently occupy office space in U.S. embassies throughout the Central Command area of responsibility. The embassies are able to accommodate the three to four members of the SOC-FWD team. This presence in the embassy gives the SOC-FWD direct access to the country team and to the ambassador. Subsequently, it allows the country team to see the SOC-FWD commander as a member of the team. Currently, SOC-FWD commanders are not under chief of mission authority and are thus not a statutory member of the country team. Despite this formal inhibi-

tor, current commanders have used their authorities derived from the Geographic Combatant Command to the advantage of the country team. For example, a recent SOC-FWD commander explained that his authorities gave the ambassador flexibility in integrating SOF into the country plan because of the SOC-FWD’s access to resources and his ability to engage other regional nations that influenced the security environment in her area.<sup>22</sup> This SOC-FWD commander was invited to country team meetings and diplomats understood him to be the SOF coordinator in the country similar to the way they understood the chief of station as the intelligence chief. A former commander of SOC-FWD Lebanon recounts a similar experience, “Although not formally a country team member under chief-of-mission authority, the SOF O6 SOC-FWD commander is afforded a seat at the invitation of the ambassador at weekly country team meetings and other country team director level venues.”<sup>23</sup> In unconventional warfare scenarios, the SOC-FWD may be located in a U.S. embassy in an adjacent country or with a government agency responsible for overseeing a failed state in which no U.S. political representation exists. Regardless of the physical location, the SOC-FWD commander is located with other U.S. government agencies conducting engagement in a given country. This physical location with the interagency facilitates constant integration with the interagency team. It allows the SOC-FWD commander to leverage direct relationships with interagency principles in his area. Most importantly, it allows the commander to identify opportunities as they materialize thereby accelerating the operational planning and execution cycle. In special warfare, seizing opportunities through understanding the operational environment in real time constitute retaining the initiative.

**SOC-FORWARDS OFFER A SMALL-FOOTPRINT, PERSISTENT PRESENCE, IN AN ENVIRONMENT THAT IS DOMINATED BY THE DISTINCTLY HUMAN INTERAGENCY AND MULTINATIONAL EFFORT**

## HUMAN DOMAIN

Finally, SOC-FWDs are the best SOF C2 model for interagency collaboration because they most readily operate in the Human Domain of interagency relationships. The embassy understands the SOC-FWD as referring to a *person*. This is difficult to quantify yet it remains essential to the effectiveness of the SOC-FWD model against other models. The synchronization and coordination of interagency special warfare lines of effort are “thoroughly human endeavors.”<sup>24</sup> Embassy culture is not military. The country team commonly understands military personnel as perpetually preparing for war. SOC-FWDs are politically sensitive commanders who, by virtue of experience and training, understand special warfare as civilian turf where diplomats and intelligence officers have traditionally worked to prevent the deployment of U.S. service members in major war. SOF must select talented, SOF-qualified officers to serve as SOC-FWD commanders. Their qualification gives them the credentials not only to command disparate SOF units, but also provides a baseline of credibility when working with the country team. Understanding the nature of interpersonal relationships and interagency agendas in an embassy goes a long way to framing the right mindset and attitudes that must characterize the SOC-FWD commander.



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## CONCLUSION

The ability to apply flexible solutions to complex problems is a trademark characteristic of SOF. In considering the C2 challenges for SOF operating in the Gray Zone, the SOC-FWD construct has virtues that align it more readily with the nature of conflict in the *deter* and *shape* phases. Primarily, SOC-FWDs offer a small-footprint, persistent presence, in an environment that is dominated by the distinctly *human* interagency and multinational effort. The SOC-FWD can rapidly identify opportunities and more immediately understand the situation in a given AOR. This provides SOF with the ability

to gain and maintain initiative in the Gray Zone where leaders recognize initiative less as seizing key terrain and engaging enemy capabilities and more as developing relationships, accessing positions of advantage and bringing to bear in deterrence well-coordinated interagency resources. SOF should continue to explore how to increase the effectiveness of SOC-FWDs to conduct C2 in the Gray Zone. **SW**

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SOC-FWD Eastern Europe team members meet with government and non-government officials at the Georgian Ministry of Defence.

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**NOTES** 01. U.S. Army Special Operations Command, “ARSOF 2022,” *Special Warfare*, April-June 2013, 22. 02. COL Mark Miller, e-mail message to author, April 28, 2016. COL Miller provided the idea to frame the C2 problem in terms of the joint phase model. 03. Joint Publication (JP) 3-0, *Joint Operations* (Washington, DC: The Joint Staff, 11 July 2011), V-8. 04. *Ibid.* 05. Michael J. Mazaar, *Mastering the Gray Zone*, (Carlisle, PA: Strategic Studies Institute, December 2015), 64. 06. Linda Robinson, *The Future of U.S. Special Operations Forces* (New York: Council on Foreign Relations, 2013), 1. 07. JP 3-05, *Special Operations* (Washington, DC: The Joint Staff: 16 July 2014), III-4. 08. *Ibid.* 09. Dan Madden et al., *Toward an Operational Art in Special Warfare*, (Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation, 2016), 72-73. 10. JP 3-22, *Foreign Internal Defense* (Washington, DC: The Joint Staff: 12 July 2010), xiii. 11. Rob Newsom, “Adapting for the ‘Other’ War,” *Small Wars Journal* (October 18, 2013): Available at <http://smallwarsjournal.com/jrnl/art/adapting-for-the-%E2%80%9Cother%E2%80%9D-war>. 12. *Ibid.* 13. Dan Madden et al., *Special Warfare: The Missing Middle in U.S. Coercive Options*, (Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation, 2014), 3. 14. Christopher Lamb, “Global SOF and Interagency Collaboration,” *Journal of Strategic Security* 7, no. 2, (Summer 2014): 17. 15. Gordon Adams, “The Institutional Imbalance of American Statecraft,” in *Mission Creep: The Militarization of US Foreign Policy?*, ed. Gordon Adams and Shoon Murray (Washington DC: Georgetown University Press, 2014), 2. 16. Interview with former SOC FWD Commander A, April 12, 2016. All interviews with SOC-FWD commanders were conducted under condition of anonymity. 17. U.S. Congress, Senate, *Posture Statement of Admiral William H. McRaven, USN, Commander, United States Special Operations Command, before the 113th Congress Senate Armed Services Committee*, 113th Cong., 1st sess., March 11, 2014, 4. 18. Michele L. Malvesti, *To Serve the Nation: U.S. Special Operations Forces in an Era of Persistent Conflict* (Washington D.C.: Center for a New American Security, June 2010), 2. 19. Geoffrey Till, *Seapower: A Guide of the Twenty-First Century* (New York, NY: Routledge, 2013), 257. 20. Andrew F. Krepinovich, Jr., *The Army and Vietnam* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1986), 73-75. 21. Brian Petit, *Going Big By Getting Small: The Application of Operational Art by Special Operations in Phase Zero* (Denver, CO: Outskirtspress, 2013), 75. 22. Interview with former SOC FWD Commander A, April 12, 2016. 23. Jack Jensen, “Special Operations Command Forward-Lebanon: SOF Campaigning Left of the Line,” *Special Warfare* 25, no. 2, (April-June 2012): 29. 24. Petit, *Going Big*, 84.