

Sent: Thu, 05 May 2011 05:30:17 -0400

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From:

To: "Johnson, David" <davidj@rand.org>, Ira Haron <ilr@rand.org>, "Lacey, James G"

<jlacey@ida.org>, "Kurtz, James H" <jkurtz@ida.org>, Mark Schneider <mschneider@ida.org>

Subject: Over the Horizon: Time for an Independent Special Forces Branch?

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-----Original Message-----

From: David Maxwell

P6/b(6)

Sent: Wednesday, May 04, 2011 11:40 PM

To: David Maxwell

Subject: FW: Over the Horizon: Time for an Independent Special Forces Branch?

This ought to get a discussion going. SOCOM as a 6th service? Of course when the author says Independent Special Forces Branch he means Special Operations Forces as a separate service. I wish I could dig up the paper I wrote in 1989 on the pros and cons of just this argument! Interesting though that he says that the creation of SOCOM and JSOC are "cold war" legacies. Quote:

SOCOM and JSOC remain Cold War creations within what is essentially a Cold War security framework.

From the conclusion:

The survival of U.S. SOF capabilities is not at risk. The War on Terror in general, and the killing of Osama bin Laden in particular, have highlighted the unique roles that SOF play in modern visions of the use of American military power. The creation of SOCOM certainly helped establish a bureaucratic presence for SOF. Nevertheless, the idea of an independent service dedicated to special operations continues to warrant some attention. SOF are sufficiently distinct from all of the existing services in terms of strategic mission to justify a completely independent bureaucratic existence. Moreover, the most likely future U.S. security missions fit well with an SOF understanding of the world.

Rather than suffer through endless intra-organizational "COIN vs. conventional" arguments, it might make sense to give greater institutional voice to military organizations that concentrate on unconventional counterterrorist tactics and operations, thereby allowing the other branches of the military to focus on what they do best.

Over the Horizon: Time for an Independent Special Forces Branch?
special_ops.png

Robert Farley | <<http://www.worldpoliticsreview.com/authors/>> 04 May 2011

As details of the successful raid against Osama bin Laden's Abbotabad compound

<<http://www.worldpoliticsreview.com/articles/8701/bin-ladens-death-beginning-of-the-end-of-the-war-on-terror>>

<<http://www.worldpoliticsreview.com/articles/8701/bin-ladens-death-beginning-of-the-end-of-the-war-on-terror>> come to light, it is becoming clear that the assault was the most important, and probably the most successful, operation in the history of U.S. special operations forces. Instead of Air Force bombs or Navy missiles, President Barack Obama opted for the special skills and capabilities of a Navy SEAL team to eliminate the al-Qaida leader. The reason is simple: A bomb or missile might have more easily killed bin Laden, but only special forces could confirm his death, recover his body and capture a trove of materials associated with the terrorist group.

The high-profile success of this operation may reawaken a debate about the role that special operations forces (SOF) play in the U.S. military and in American strategic thought. Although the lot of special operators has improved substantially since the 1980s, and especially over the past decade, SOF still occupy a curious position among the traditional military services. While SOF act in many ways independently of their parent services, and have congressionally protected resource streams, they still depend on the traditional services for recruitment, training and other functions. As recognized in the 1980s, however, SOF often have more in common with each other in terms of culture and strategic approach than with their home services. Accordingly, it might be time to reconsider a proposal from the 1980s to give special forces their own independent military service.

Special forces have long had difficulty finding their rightful place in the American military. During the Cold War, differences between the organizational culture of the SOF and that of the Marine Corps and the Army made for an uncomfortable fit. The traditional services were committed to a vision of war that involved large-scale conventional combat against the Soviet Union in Western Europe. To the extent that the capabilities of SOF had value, it was in support of these conventional operations. Rather than take advantage of conceivably transformational SOF capabilities, or conceive of alternative missions that SOF might do quite well, the traditional services shoehorned SOF into the conventional battle plan. SOF were also given responsibility for missions that the conventional military branches were uninterested in undertaking. This included the early stages of counterinsurgency in Vietnam, but also a variety of counterterrorist operations.

In the 1970s and 1980s, special operations forces were recognized as a primary weapon <http://redteamjournal.com/2010/07/chuck-norris-tactics-the-70s-80s-revolution-in-counterterrorism-tactics-and-operations/> in the fight against terrorism. Led by the Israelis, several militaries developed special operations teams specifically for counterterrorist operations. However, such missions still fit poorly with the self-conceptions of the traditional military services. The failure of Operation Eagle Claw in Iran in 1980, and difficulties encountered in employing special forces during the invasion of Grenada in 1983, exposed serious problems in how the Pentagon managed SOF. Congress investigated, and a number of solutions were suggested to establish a proper place for SOF in the U.S. security arsenal. Some SOF advocates, perhaps strategically, floated the idea of creating a separate military service dedicated to special operations. A separate service would have solved several problems, including assuring a revenue stream for SOF, guaranteeing institutional attention for SOF needs and ensuring that SOF had a voice at the policy-planning table.

There is no single answer as to why particular military services exist and others don't. Some countries, among them Israel and Canada, don't have bureaucratically independent services. In other countries, service divisions don't have much political or institutional relevance. In the United States -- and even more so in the United Kingdom -- service boundaries and prerogatives are sharply drawn and bitterly contested. In the case of the U.S., service independence assures that a military branch enjoys political influence, bureaucratic heft and command of resources. Essentially, an independent service has a seat at the table within government and the ability to make its own case outside of government.

The deciding factors for whether or not to create a new service branch often involve prioritization and risk: How important to U.S. national security is a particular military capability? How "at risk" is that capability within the current bureaucratic structure of the U.S. military? Is the current structure conducive to the best and most appropriate use of this capability? When airpower advocates argued for independent services in the 1920s and 1930s, for instance, they made their case along these lines. Airpower, it was argued, was key to future military operations, but its potential was endangered by traditionalist views in the old military services. The old structure was not conducive to the development or employment of effective air assets, and accordingly national security suffered.

SOF did not win an independent service in the 1980s. Instead, USSOCOM, or Special Operations Command, took responsibility for joint special forces operations, eliminating much of the friction created by the boundaries between services. JSOC, or Joint Special Operations Command, came under the umbrella of SOCOM and is tasked with developing joint SOF tactics and operations <http://www.nationaljournal.com/whitehouse/the-secret-team-that-killed-bin-laden-20110502>. The creation of SOCOM remedied many of the problems identified in Eagle Claw and Grenada, and ensured that special forces would have an enduring role in the U.S. military arsenal. However, this solution also ensured the continued political predominance of the traditional services.

SOCOM and JSOC remain Cold War creations within what is essentially a Cold War security framework. While counterterrorism was certainly understood as important during the 1980s, it did not dominate defense considerations. After the attacks of Sept. 11, SOF again assumed a prominent role in counterterrorist operations. However, counterterrorism

itself now became the primary "problem" of U.S. security policy. So while special forces played key roles in the invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq, particularly the former, counterterrorism was redefined in more conventional terms. Fighting terrorists no longer involved small teams raiding terrorist hideouts, but rather large military operations geared toward regime change.

We can't know how the debate over the response to Sept. 11 would have played out had the U.S. armed forces been designed differently at the time. Nevertheless, the inclination to understand major security problems in traditional terms may be a consequence of the enduring structure of America's Cold War-era security institutions. In other words, as counterterrorism became the major mission of the U.S. national security apparatus, the traditional services came to interpret this mission in conventional terms. A different structure, one that privileged the skills and capabilities of SOF, might have come to different conclusions about the appropriate response to the attacks of Sept. 11.

The survival of U.S. SOF capabilities is not at risk. The War on Terror in general, and the killing of Osama bin Laden in particular, have highlighted the unique roles that SOF play in modern visions of the use of American military power. The creation of SOCOM certainly helped establish a bureaucratic presence for SOF. Nevertheless, the idea of an independent service dedicated to special operations continues to warrant some attention. SOF are sufficiently distinct from all of the existing services in terms of strategic mission to justify a completely independent bureaucratic existence. Moreover, the most likely future U.S. security missions fit well with an SOF understanding of the world.

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Dr. Robert Farley is an assistant professor at the Patterson School of Diplomacy and International Commerce at the University of Kentucky. His interests include national security, military doctrine, and maritime affairs. He blogs at Lawyers, Guns and Money <<http://www.lawyersgunsandmoneyblog.com/>> and Information Dissemination <<http://www.informationdissemination.net/>>. His weekly WPR column, Over the Horizon <<http://www.worldpoliticsreview.com/overthehorizon>>, appears every Wednesday.

Photo: Combined Joint Special Operations Task Force, Nangarhar Province, Afghanistan, April 2009 (Defense Department photo).

<http://www.worldpoliticsreview.com/articles/print/8729>

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"It is important that the adversary think you know more about him than you really do." William T. Sherman

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