Testimony

Special Operations Forces Culture and Climate

The Future of the Force

Linda Robinson

CT-A1302-1
Testimony presented before the House Armed Services Subcommittee on Intelligence and Special Operations on March 26, 2021

RAND CORPORATION

For more information on this publication, visit www.rand.org/pubs/testimonies/CTA1302-1.html

Testimonies

RAND testimonies record testimony presented or submitted by RAND associates to federal, state, or local legislative committees; government-appointed commissions and panels; and private review and oversight bodies.

Published by the RAND Corporation, Santa Monica, Calif.

Limited Print and Electronic Distribution Rights

Special Operations Forces Culture and Climate: The Future of the Force

Testimony of Linda Robinson[1]
The RAND Corporation[2]

Before the Committee on House Armed Services
Subcommittee on Intelligence and Special Operations
United States House of Representatives

March 26, 2021

I view the issue of special operations forces (SOF) culture and climate through the lens of what the nation asks of its SOF, which shapes who they are and what they do. SOF are a unique asset to serve national security interests. As the array of assigned missions in Title 10 U.S. Code Section 167 indicates, SOF are relatively flexible which places considerable responsibility on policymakers to carefully determine their appropriate uses. This challenge is compounded at historical inflection points (such as the current one), when strategic conditions dictate a reprioritization. The 2018 National Defense Strategy elevated interstate competition while continuing to articulate robust counterterrorism objectives.[3] Two decades of high operational tempo and frequent combat by SOF have exacted a toll that requires ongoing remediation. Systemic issues that are critical to the future of the force, prominently including the lack of gender, racial, and ethnic diversity in the force, also merit sustained attention.

A Time of Transition and Transformation

First, we must look at where we have been. Twenty years of counterterrorism focus have unbalanced the force and overused it. Contributing factors include actions and inaction that prioritized counterterrorism, did not sufficiently oversee the effects on the force, and did not adjudicate the demand for SOF from geographic combatant commands, as well as the counterterrorism machinery and the White House process that was created after 9/11.[4] Compounding these factors was a special operations culture of separateness and even entitlement that was accentuated by this prioritized counterterrorism focus. By contrast, when I first engaged with the community 20 years ago, the culture of the quiet professional predominated.

A touchstone for course adjustments may be found in the SOF Truths, coined in 1988 and adopted by the newly formed U.S. Special Operations Command, particularly the first two truths:

---

[1] The opinions and conclusions expressed in this testimony are the author's alone and should not be interpreted as representing those of the RAND Corporation or any of the sponsors of its research.

[2] The RAND Corporation is a research organization that develops solutions to public policy challenges to help make communities throughout the world safer and more secure, healthier and more prosperous. RAND is nonprofit, nonpartisan, and committed to the public interest.

[3] U.S. Department of Defense, *Summary of the 2018 National Defense Strategy of the United States of America: Sharpening the American Military's Competitive Edge*, Washington, D.C., 2018.

[4] Linda Robinson, Austin Long, Kimberly Jackson, and Rebeca Orrie, *Improving the Understanding of Special Operations: A Case History Analysis*, Santa Monica, Calif.: RAND Corporation, RR-2026-A, 2018.

"Humans are more important than hardware" and "Quality is more important that Quantity." A focus on personnel and the quality of the force is required to transform SOF to meet current objectives and to address systemic issues that have languished as operational priorities took precedence over institutional ones.

Senior leaders have taken initial steps to address command climate and culture issues. The Comprehensive Review published in 2020 identified some important causal factors, and GEN Richard Clarke has begun to implement solutions.[5] RADM Collin Green laudably called for a deep look at the sources of the abuses and crimes in the SEAL community. The most urgent steps required to continue this course correction include (1) rapidly meeting the dwell-to-deployment ratio and (2) ensuring strict application of the Uniform Code of Military Justice, which will help restore the professionalism of the SOF community as its core value. Three other suggestions are, first, to hold every officer accountable for the appropriate command climate at all echelons. Senior noncommissioned officers are the backbone of every tactical unit; they must be models in all respects. Second, selection and promotion precepts must prioritize promulgation of the values, character, and service ethic above all else. Third, the community would benefit from a shift to seeing itself, and acting, as part of the joint force and of the wider interagency team, not an entity apart.

The joint headquarters U.S. Special Operations Command (USSOCOM), as I wrote in a 2013 study published by the Council on Foreign Relations, can usefully elevate its focus on institutional over operational issues.[6] As part of this effort, it should shed extraneous missions (for example, synchronizing counter–weapons of mass destruction [WMD] efforts across the government). SOF has vital but niche tactical roles in the WMD mission, but synchronizing roles distract from its pressing internal duties. Other adjustments can ensure that USSOCOM focuses on its core responsibilities to organize, train, and equip the force and fold its strategy and concept development into the larger joint process.

SOF roles and missions, as noted above, are changing with the strategic global circumstances. Rather than solely critique USSOCOM for lagging adaptation and a continued focus or overfocus on counterterrorism, it is more intellectually honest to acknowledge that, in recent years, higher guidance has lacked the needed specificity regarding the metrics to scope the counterterrorism mission and has lacked a concomitant acceptance of the risk implied in doing so. The counterterrorism enterprise should become smaller, and this should be clearly directed from above. The guidance documents, starting with the National Defense Strategy, introduced a great deal of ambiguity in maintaining the objective of "defeating terrorism," which is unrealistic and results in the nonstrategic use of SOF. In my view, the stated priorities in the current National Counter-Terrorism Strategy should be adjusted to emphasize the priorities that will permit the needed rebalance: (1) to rely heavily on our allies and reliable partners and (2) to focus on stemming recruitment into terrorist organizations. The procedure for authorizing strikes requires both legal rigor and operational effectiveness.

---

[5] U.S. Special Operations Command, *United States Special Operations Command Comprehensive Review*, January 23, 2020.

[6] Linda Robinson, *The Future of U.S. Special Operations Forces*, New York: Council on Foreign Relations, Council Special Report No. 66, April 2013.

A more general requirement to ensure proper development and use of SOF, including proper sizing of roles and missions (as Congress has been aware of and is actively engaged in addressing), is the needed strengthening of civilian oversight for both policy and resources, which has never been adequate and has been compounded since 9/11 with massive growth in USSOCOM, the force, the budget, and operations. As Section 901 of the fiscal year (FY) 2021 National Defense Authorization Act (NDAA) acknowledges, there is no simple organizational formula to accomplish this requirement. The Secretary of Defense should sufficiently empower and entrust the Special Operations/Low-Intensity Conflict lead civilian to fulfill the dual roles for policy and resources, and that lead civilian must work closely with the Under Secretary of Defense for Policy to ensure the synchronization of policy.

Rebalancing Special Operations Forces Roles and Missions

Carefully circumscribing the use of SOF for counterterrorism missions should go hand in hand with careful delineation of appropriate roles for SOF in interstate competition. A 2018 RAND study I led, *Modern Political Warfare: Current Practices and Possible Responses*, surveyed competitors' irregular tactics and reliance on measures short of war and concluded that SOF have distinct contributions to make in this realm.[7] As our current work as well as exercises and the rotations at combined training centers indicate, most of these missions are conducted in tandem with other joint forces and with interagency partners. Force structure and capabilities need to adapt significantly for these new missions involving peer and near-peer competition. The critical capabilities in great-power competition include new language, culture, communications, and cyber and electronic sensing capabilities and a much greater investment in information operations, which have been critically under resourced for years.

However, to avoid creating a new formula that results in overuse of the force, this rebalancing of SOF missions must occur within a finite cap to ensure that dwell-to-deployment ratios are met as the first priority. The health of the force requires that this reset for readiness be the governing metric. Formalizing criteria to determine what is and is not an SOF mission can help. There is already a yardstick that can be converted to a decision tool: Is it a politically sensitive mission? Does it occur in a contested or denied environment? If not, another element of the joint force can do it.

The Irregular Warfare Annex to the current National Defense Strategy contains some useful guideposts, particularly in locating SOF roles within the context of what the rest of the joint force will do and what the interagency partners have the authorities and capabilities to do.[8] SOF are part of this constellation of actors, who all need to do their parts. When they do not, SOF often step in to fill the vacuum.

---

[7] Linda Robinson, Todd C. Helmus, Raphael S. Cohen, Alireza Nader, Andrew Radin, Madeline Magnuson, and Katya Migacheva, *Modern Political Warfare: Current Practices and Possible Responses*, Santa Monica, Calif.: RAND Corporation, RR-1772-A, 2018.

[8] U.S. Department of Defense, *Summary of the Irregular Warfare Annex to the National Defense Strategy*, October 2020.

A final point is that every operation should be subjected to a checkup. Sometimes, legacy missions continue on autopilot. It is obvious to me, having spent a great deal of time on assessments, that a better job needs to be done in evaluating all operations. Sometimes, data collection is not even mandated, making valid assessment impossible. Where data are sparse, innovative techniques can help.[9] But even when assessments are conducted, they are often not used to make decisions about whether to continue, adapt, or stop a program.

Addressing Systemic Issues

The transformation of the force is needed, as just noted, to meet the challenges of a changing strategic environment. Transformation is also vital to strengthen SOF's ability to conduct all missions, legacy or new. When I was first introduced to the SOF community 20 years ago, one of the first generals I met talked at length about the need to integrate women into the force. We have made little progress since then. The same critique applies to every other diversity metric. We are fighting with one hand tied behind our back if we do not use the full talents and diversity of our population. It is just that simple.

Diversity challenges continue to plague SOF. Although two women have proceeded through selection, and one has earned the Green Beret to serve in the U.S. Army Special Forces, this agonizingly slow progress suggests ongoing procedural barriers as well as cultural resistance. Changing these attitudes is the job of all senior leaders and should be their top priority. Selection and promotion should be contingent on this metric. In 2016, a RAND study found that 85 percent of special operators surveyed were opposed to letting women into their specialties and 71 percent opposed women in their units.[10] Respondents stated that standards would be lowered and unit cohesion would suffer. At the same time, four in ten agreed that women could be helpful in sensitive operations and engaging with local populations. Other studies found similar attitudes. Notably, a recent commander of the Army Special Warfare and School strove to adapt training and selection standards to remove outdated and unnecessary components that actively deselected desired competencies and prejudiced women candidates. But obstacles remain.

Ethnic and racial diversity is also lacking, and although this too has been recognized as compromising the effectiveness of the force, barriers to diverse recruitment, selection, and retention remain. A RAND study documented this underrepresentation more than two decades ago and found that such barriers as swimming requirements, test scores, and an absence of role models affected recruitment efforts.[11] The Army and Navy adopted measures to address those barriers, but they clearly have been insufficient. This year, Congress has mandated an

---

[9] Linda Robinson, Daniel Egel, and Ryan Andrew Brown, *Measuring the Effectiveness of Special Operations*, Santa Monica, Calif.: RAND Corporation, RR-2504-A, 2019.

[10] Thomas S. Szayna, Eric V. Larson, Angela O'Mahony, Sean Robson, Agnes Gereben Schaefer, Miriam Matthews, J. Michael Polich, Lynsay Ayer, Derek Eaton, William Marcellino, Lisa Miyashiro, Marek Posard, James Syme, Zev Winkelman, Cameron Wright, Megan Zander-Cotugno, and William Welser IV, *Considerations for Integrating Women into Closed Occupations in U.S. Special Operations Forces*, Santa Monica, Calif.: RAND Corporation, RR-1058-USSOCOM, 2016.

[11] Clifford M. Graf II, Margaret C. Harrell, Sheila Nataraj Kirby, Jennifer Sloan McCombs, Curtis Askew, *Are There Barriers to Minorities Joining Special Operations Forces?* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation, 1999).

independent study, in Section 557 of the FY 2021 NDAA, to galvanize additional remedial action.

Opportunities exist for progress across the range of issues that this committee and subcommittee are examining, and it is my hope that Congress will find eager and willing partners in both the civilian and uniformed members of the administration.