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NUPI Working Paper

'Flipping the COIN'

Unity of Effort and Special Operations Forces

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[Abstract] This paper argues that unconventional methods and special operations should not be limited to military Special Operations Forces (SOF). It examines a potential role for SOF in a Counter Insurgency (COIN), with specific reference to Unity of Effort. It postulates that Special Forces are the sharpest instruments in the military toolbox available to policymakers, yet the great tactical success of these forces has not necessarily been translated into strategic success.

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Introduction

This paper argues that unconventional methods and special operations should not be limited to military Special Operations Forces. It examines a potential role for Special Operations Forces (SOF) in a Counter Insurgency (COIN), with specific reference to Unity of Effort. Special Forces are the sharpest instruments in the military toolbox available to policymakers, yet the great tactical success of these forces has not necessarily been translated into strategic success. The underlying argument is that the successes of unorthodox means for political ends learnt from Special Operations Executive (SOE) during the Second World War paved the way for today's SOF. The lesson learnt, however, was the wrong one. Rather, the principal lesson to be learnt from SOE activities during the Second World War is not one of employing unorthodox means for political ends, but of the need for a Unity of Effort towards international crises/conflicts/insurgencies that includes Unconventional Methods. In the present working paper, this will be done by:

1) contextualizing Unity of Effort
2) contextualizing COIN
2) contrasting COIN with SOF, as seen through SOF doctrine and practice
3) comparing SOF and SOE
4) exploring Unconventional Methods and Unity of Effort

Unity of Effort

Drawing on experiences from Somalia, the Balkans, Kosovo, and especially Afghanistan and Iraq, several states have sought to develop their own comprehensive approaches as a strategy for managing international crises involving stabilization and reconstruction efforts. Canada has its 3D

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approach – Diplomacy, Development and Defence. The UK has the PCRU – Post Conflict Reconstruction Unit. The USA has S/CRS – Office of the Coordination for Reconstruction and Stabilization. All these are examples of national, whole-of-government approaches. Also international organizations are working to forge comprehensive approach strategies. The UN has its System-Wide Coherence in a development context and Integrated Missions for a peace-keeping and peace-building context. NATO has laboured on its EBAO – Effects-Based Approach to Operations – for years. All these efforts are based, in way or another, on achieving a unity of effort between the various actors, agencies, and organizations.

There is, however, a gap between policy intent and field reality in all these comprehensive proposals and holistic endeavours. Ideally, the various actors involved in, for example, Afghanistan should share the same objectives: to stabilize the country, build central institutions, establish the rule of law, promote economic growth, and spread democratic ideals. Due to the complex arrangement of actors and the complex scope of activities, in managing international crisis there seem to be barriers between nations, agencies, departments, and organizations on how to engage each other effectively. The slow progress in conflicts such as Afghanistan is marked by a lack of cooperation, coherence and coordination between actors and agencies. In addition, there is a 'policy–policy' gap between different nations and organizations. In particular, there is no commonly agreed definition on what a, or the, 'comprehensive approach' is.

The cases of Iraq and Afghanistan have demonstrated how military means alone cannot quell an insurgency. The military response, which will be discussed later, has been to develop a counterinsurgency doctrine that embodies a more holistic approach. There is a realization in military circles that 'in a counterinsurgency, all efforts should be focused on supporting the local populace and host-nation government' because 'political, social, and economic programs are usually far more valuable than conventional military operations in resolving the root causes of conflict and undermining an insurgency.' (Vego, 2007: 5; see also Gompert & Gordon 2008) However,

one might well ask why the military should be responsible for developing a COIN doctrine with a comprehensive approach.

An interesting historic parallel, and explanation, can be found in the Vietnam War. Civil Operations and Revolutionary Development Support (CORDS) was an operating agency set up and tasked to support pacification efforts in Vietnam. It was organized so that it would have a single manager at each level, representing a single official voice, and that each level would be responsible for integrated military/civilian planning, programming, and operations (see Wells, 1991). In other words, CORDS sought to integrate horizontally a series of political, military, economic, and informational programmes to maximize the pacification effort in Vietnam. It did this in much the same way as a military commander would organize his efforts, rather than a coordinator or advisor, and it was led by a civilian. The breadth of CORDS was all-encompassing: '*With few exceptions, all American programs outside of Saigon, excluding American and South Vietnamese regular military forces and clandestine CIA operations, came under the operational control of CORDS*' (Scoville, 1982, cited in Wells, 1991). This example of unity of effort represents a national attempt at a comprehensive approach which, although it enjoyed considerable success, was criticized for coming too late in the US war effort in Vietnam.

The main challenge to unity of effort and a comprehensive approach in today's context involves leadership. Military leaders are not granted control of all the organizations in the theatre of operations. The complex diplomatic, information, military, and economic context naturally precludes that (Vego: 2007: 17), as does the multi-national aspect. Conversely, a comprehensive approach to the insurgencies in Iraq and Afghanistan is as much a military as a civilian process, because there can be no civil progress without constant real security. There seems to be a schism here: between those who see economic, social, and political development as a precursor to political stability, which would then naturally foster security; and those who see military security as the first requirement to establishing effective economic, social and political conditions. In the case of Afghanistan, the dire security

situation which restricts civilian aid efforts, the complex multi-national military effort (divided between ISAF and OEF), the limited role of the UN, and the lack of Afghan central power all add up to a situation where no single agency or force can solve the problems on its own.

Finally, the 'post-conflict' phase of operations in Afghanistan is nothing of the sort. A renascent Taliban is leading an insurgency, made all the more complicated by the influx of cross-border fighters from Pakistan and foreign jihadists from elsewhere. The central government of Hamid Karzai is struggling to provide basic amenities and security to the Afghan population, and the NATO-led coalition ISAF is present with an ever-larger conventional force, alongside SOF contingents, to aid the Afghan government. The need for stabilization is apparent, yet the continued belligerence of the Taliban necessitates a firmer response: counterinsurgency, or 'COIN'.

COIN

Insurgencies and counterinsurgencies are nothing new. Subduing insurgent populations has been a form of warfare since ancient times, from the Romans quelling Britannic and Gaul resistance to *Pax Romana*, through the French in Algeria, to the British in Malaya, and the USA in Vietnam. The definition of an insurgency varies as the phenomenon has continued to evolve, ranging from revolutionary war, guerrilla war, people's war, and so on. The US Joint Doctrine defines an insurgency as an organized movement aimed at the overthrow of a constituted government through the use of subversion and armed conflict (JP 1-02). According to the new US FM 3-24 Counterinsurgency: *'an insurgency is an organized, protracted politico-military struggle designed to weaken the control and legitimacy of an established government, occupying power, or other political authority while increasing insurgent control'* (US Army, 2006: 1–2).

Counterinsurgency, by contrast, is understood as those military, paramilitary, political, economic, psychological and civic actions taken by a government to defeat an insurgency (Miller, 2003: 9). It is a highly complex, resource-intensive and protracted effort, and its ultimate objective is mostly non-military (Vego, 2007: 5). In the case of Afghanistan, Hamid Karzai's government should be the instigator of the COIN campaign and use the full range of policy options available to combat the insurgency. This includes military operations by the ANA (Afghan National Army), upholding law and order by policing with the ANP (Afghan National Police), development projects to improve infrastructure and provide education to children, and a host of other government actions with one overarching aim: to prove its legitimacy to govern by creating and sustaining security and managing political, economic, and social developments (US Marine Corps, 2006: 14).

On a similar note, the government of Hamid Karzai is supported by international organizations (UNAMA), multinational military forces (ISAF), international government agencies, non-governmental organizations (NGO), and private volunteer organizations (PVO). The importance of non-military means in conjunction with military means cannot be overstated. As General Sir Frank Kitson (1997: 283) made clear, there 'is no such thing as a purely military solution because insurgency is not primary a military activity'. In this he is seconded by Dr Milan Vego (2007: 5), who says that 'a counterinsurgency is essentially a political problem'. In sum, to succeed in a counterinsurgency one needs to have unity of effort and a comprehensive approach to the problem.

A recent RAND report identifies three main factors which influence the outcome of an insurgency: governance, external support, and the quality of security forces (Jones, 2008). Essentially, the less governance a state has, the more external support the insurgents have, and the lower the quality of the state's security forces are, the more likely an insurgency is to succeed. One could therefore assume that a COIN strategy would be the converse: to strengthen governance, mitigate external support and upgrade the quality of

the security forces. In Afghanistan this is operationalized by supporting Hamid Karzai's central government through the 'five pillars' of the 2001 Bonn Agreement. The same report also suggests that there are other factors involved, such as the terrain, population size, and GDP, but these factors are outside the control of the counter-insurgent.

Military COIN strategy, if there is such a thing, traditionally places a premium on 1) learning and adapting; 2) minimal use of force; 3) a focus on static forces; and 4) empowering the affected nation, its forces and institutions (Håvoll, 2008). In other words, military forces used in COIN operations must be able to learn quickly learn about the adversary's ever-changing tactics and adapt their own tactics accordingly. The military forces must also show restraint in the use of military power. Excessive use of force and the resultant collateral damage – a trend on the rise in Afghanistan – is strikingly counter-productive for a counter-insurgent. Military forces should also leave a light 'footprint', yet be able to hold and protect areas from insurgent infiltration. Finally military forces can be used to train, support, educate and develop the host-nation's own security forces.

The importance and relevance of these four military COIN strategies will be discussed below, with specific reference to SOF. The next section will deal with whether 'SOF are tailormade for COIN', as some military commanders have claimed.

SOF

A leading role in the 'War on Terrorism' has fallen to Special Operations Forces (SOF) because of their direct-action capabilities against targets in remote or denied areas. This development was spurred by the idea that there existed a cost-effective 'SOF solution' after the successful (and spectacular) employment of a limited number of SOF personnel, in combination with overwhelming airpower and local war-fighters, to bring about the downfall

of the Taliban in Afghanistan in 2001/02[2]. One could argue that the early successes of SOF in Afghanistan came as a result of the correct employment of these forces. SOF should be used for strategic effects: effects that have a direct bearing on the outcome of the conflict. In that sense, the initial strategic effect in Afghanistan was achieved: the Taliban were swept from power, and Al Qaida no longer had its safe haven.

SOF is surrounded by myths, and normally keeps a low public profile. Specifics with regards to numbers, capabilities, equipment and missions are always classified. This paper will not delve into the secrecy that surrounds these forces, nor will it discuss the reasons behind this covert stature. Instead, it will use doctrine as a basis for understanding SOF. In many ways, doctrine offers the only official and genuine glimpse into SOF. While doctrines are generalist in their descriptions, they do define the capabilities to be fielded by SOF with regard to organization, training, materiel, leadership and education, personnel and facilities. Most of all, they provide guidance, for SOF and policymakers alike, on the application of SOF. Alexander Alderson, head of the panel which is currently updating the British Army's COIN doctrine, comments: 'doctrine provides the bridge from theory to practice based on an understanding of experience' (Alderson, 2007/08: 4). Reality/ground truth may not necessarily reflect doctrine, but the emphasis placed on different core characteristics and missions of SOF should indicate how these are being used in COIN operations today.

In military circles, SOF is unorthodox and strikingly different from conventional military forces. As Kilcullen (2007) notes: 'They are defined by internal comparison to the rest of the military – SOF undertake tasks "beyond the capabilities" of general-purpose forces'. As described in the US doctrine for SOF Task Force Operations (JP 3-05.1), 'Special operations forces (SOF) are small, specially organized units manned by people carefully selected and trained to operate under physically demanding and psychologically stressful conditions to accomplish missions using modified

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[2]   On the overthrow of the Taliban regime, see Schroen, 2005; Biddle, 2002; Berntsen & Pezzullo, 2005; Woodward, 2002.

equipment and unconventional applications of tactics against strategic and operational objectives' (US Joint Chiefs of Staff, 2007). On a similar note, Special Operations Commander Europe (SOCEUR) notes: 'Core characteristics of SOF include specialized skills, equipment and tactics, techniques, and procedures, including area expertise, language skills and cultural awareness' (SOCEUR, SOF Truths).

These broad definitions of SOF are then invariably narrowed down to core tasks or missions. The USA now has nine standard SOF missions: Direct Action (DA), Special Reconnaissance (SR), Unconventional Warfare (UW), Foreign Internal Defence (FID), Counter-Terrorism (CT), Psychological Operations (PSYOP), Counter-proliferation of Weapons of Mass Destruction (WMD), Information Operations (IO), and Civil Affairs (CA) (US Joint Chiefs of Staff, 2007, ch. 2). Thus, SOF are organized, trained, and continuously enhance their capabilities to be able to conduct these generic missions.

Grouping these generic missions into recognizable roles might further clarify what SOF actually does. The UK has a slightly different approach, narrowing their core tasks into three distinct roles: Surveillance and Reconnaissance, Offensive Actionand Support and Influence. These roles can be used in all phases (pre-, post- and during conflict), in isolation or to complement each other.[3] The point to note regardless of these SOF missions or roles, is that they should be employed for *strategic effect.* That is, identifying and attacking the enemy's Clausewitzian Centre of Gravity, commonly believed to be the enemy's long-term capacity and will to fight.[4] The main problem, however, is that it is not the enemy that is the Centre of Gravity in COIN: it is the people (Mattis, 2006: 7).

This represents the main problem with the employment of SOF in today's COIN campaigns. The perception that there exists a singular 'SOF solution', or that SOF are 'tailormade for COIN', is misguided. How can an elite

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[3] Private discussion with UK SOF officer in Afghanistan, June 2005
[4] Ibid.

military force like SOF win 'the people'? While SOF certainly represent a formidable military asset, composed as they are of extremely well-trained, selected individuals with impressive individual skills, they have in essence become more of a military SWAT team and less of an innovative, unconventional strategic asset. Today's SOF are trained and geared for achieving direct military effects, rather than civilian effects. This is seen through the heavy emphasis on typical 'hard-core military' operations, such as SR and DA, over more 'soft power' operations, such as IO, CA and PSYOPS. Another mental hurdle for all military forces in COIN, including SOF, is that military effects do not automatically translate into civilian effects: you may win all the battles, but still lose the war.

What we see in Afghanistan today is that SOF are used in their generic roles *in support of* the conventional military forces, with an emphasis on SR, DA and, to a certain extent, FID. As Rothstein remarks: 'SOF have become hyper-conventional, not unconventional.' (2006: 122) The tipping point of this development came with operation 'Anaconda' in March 2002. The graph below[5] is a visualization of how the Taliban went from being a more or less conventional force (in Afghan terms) at the onset of hostilities in November 2001 to today's more unconventional guerrilla force. At the same time, the deployment of, and operations by, US and coalition forces shifted from highly unconventional to conventional.
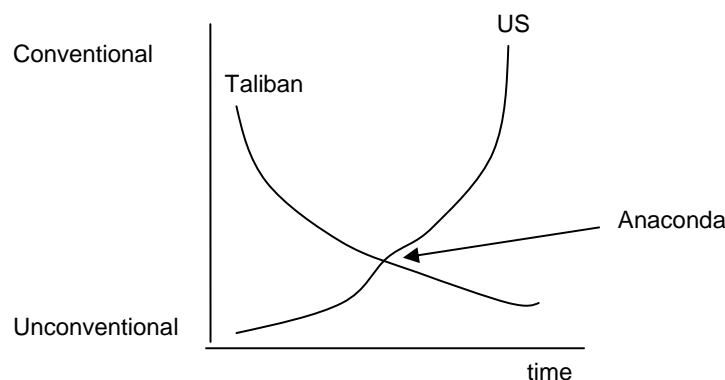
The fall of Kabul on 12 November, only five days after the start of the campaign, came as the result of a relatively small SOF (and CIA) contribution, operating in conjunction with the Northern Alliance and overwhelming US airpower. The ground forces were almost entirely local nationals, advised by US SOF and supported by US airpower. Other Taliban strongholds, such as Kunduz and Kandahar, fell in rapid succession. The fall of Kandahar was also marked by the first deployment of regular combat troops to Afghanistan. One thousand US marines were deployed in the desert south of Kandahar to set up a forward operating base. A surge of conventional units to consolidate the gains in Afghanistan would soon follow, and that marked the start of 'conventionalizing SOF' in Afghanistan. By December, sizeable Al Qaida and Taliban forces had retreated to the Tora Bora mountains, where they were protected in underground caverns. Once again, SOF in conjunction with local militia and US airpower proved a formidable combination, and the enemy were either killed or managed to flee to neighbouring Pakistan. It was not until March 2002, when a large concentration of Taliban fighters were discovered hiding in the Shahi-Kot mountains in Paktia province, that SOF lost its strategic unconventional 'edge'.

It was believed that the Taliban forces were planning to use their sanctuary in Shahi-Kot as a base for large-scale *mujahedeen* guerrilla attacks, much the same way the Afghans battled the Red Army in the 1980s. Operation 'Anaconda' was devised to route the Taliban from this sanctuary, and it was designed as an (overly complicated) conventional military operation, with conventional units such as the 10th Mountain Division and 101st Airborne Division in the lead. A sizeable contingent of SOF participated, but their role was no longer unconventional. They provided intelligence through SR and directed fire support, all in support of the conventional units fighting the Taliban in the mountains. The only unconventional aspect in 'Anaconda' was TF Hammer, a large force Afghan militia and a SOF advisory team. This force, originally intended for an assault from the west towards Shahi-Kot, was decimated by friendly fire, became demoralized from lack of promised air support, and took heavy casualties from Taliban forces before

even reaching its objective.[6] Priorities had, quite simply, shifted away from the unconventional to the conventional military forces – and yet the legacy of the early successes of SOF in Afghanistan has persisted. This is why many believe there is a 'SOF solution' and that 'SOF is tailormade for COIN'. If there is a 'SOF solution', then its success hinges on correct strategic employment, unconventionality, and local nationals.

One of the reasons for this belief is how Special Operations Forces seem to suit the four principles of military COIN mentioned above. SOF have the ability to use precise firepower, thus minimizing collateral. They are small and highly mobile, thus leaving a light footprint. They are much faster in implementing new tactics and techniques than their conventional counterparts, much thanks to their organizational mindset and small size. And finally, SOF are competent to train host-nation security forces through the FID portion of their doctrinal missions. To quote the new FM 3-24 COIN doctrine: 'For small-scale COIN efforts, SOF may be the only forces used. SOF organizations may be ideally suited for developing security forces through the FID (Foreign Internal Defence) portion of their doctrinal mission' (US Army, 2006: point 6-22).

The use of SOF for FID in Afghanistan is a strategically correct use of these forces under current circumstances. Capitalizing on their 'light, agile, high-capability teams, able to operate discreetly in local communities' (US Army, 2006: point 2-18) SOF 'emphasize training HN forces to perform essential defence functions' (ibid: point 2-20). This is a core SOF task and Special Operations Forces have long been the lead organization in training and advising foreign armed forces.[7] The main problem in Afghanistan is one of scale. As stated in FM 3-24 (point 6-13): 'While SOF personnel may be ideal for some training and advisory roles, their limited numbers restrict their ability to carry out large-scale missions to develop HN security forces.' This has spurred the development of various *ad hoc* training regimes for

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[6] For an excellent description and analysis of Operation 'Anaconda', see Naylor, 2005.
[7] FM 31-20-3 outlines Army Special Forces training programmes and tactics, techniques, and procedures. (US Army, 1994)

Afghanistan's security forces, ranging from OMLT (Operational Mentoring and Liaison Teams) to ETT (Embedded Training Teams) to outright basic military schools, where large Afghan National Army units rotate through. Most of these training arrangements are led by conventional units and do not function optimally due to complicated command relationships, national caveats, and lack of resources.

To sum up, in counterinsurgency efforts against an irregular adversary, the strategically correct and offensive use of SOF should focus on training the host nation's security forces. SOF excellence in special reconnaissance and direct action, which may provide extremely valuable intelligence or the capture of high-value targets, should by no means be dismissed. Although they are complementary activities, these endeavours remain more of a supportive, tactical nature in COIN operations, and are, in fact, defensive in an overall COIN strategy. At the latest NATO SOF symposium in 2008, Kilcullen offered some insights on this argument. He argued that keeping the insurgents unbalanced and on the run through SR and DA is essentially strategic disruption, a defensive strategy. The main purpose is to buy time for the strategic offensive, where military assistance through FID will be the most important SOF contribution. In Afghanistan today, SOF are extremely well adapted for SR and DA, with an impressive track record and a high success rate. Yet the lack of capitalization on FID means that the situation remains stagnant.

SOE

The Second World War may be a limited analogy, but some of the lessons identified have not become outdated. Despite the obvious and numerous differences compared to the current situation in Afghanistan, parallels can be drawn, and some aspects are more or less a direct consequence of the Second World War. Indeed, one of these consequences is the development of SOF itself.

SOF can trace their origin to SOE (and the OSS in the USA). Today's SOF are, as discussed above, elite military forces with highly specialized capabilities optimized for nine standard missions, whilst SOE was a mixed civilian–military organization that took on whatever missions were demanded, building capabilities as needed.[8] During the Second World War the British SOE (Special Operations Executive) carried out a broad range of operations against the Axis powers, on enemy soil. The SOE was, in this author's opinion, the true special force of the Second World War, and it should be recognized as an important aspect of the British war effort.

In the same way as SOF represent only one aspect of operations in Afghanistan, so does SOE represent only one aspect of the broader British war effort. The most substantial difference between the two lies in the comprehensiveness of the war effort. The British were forced to adopt a whole-of-government approach, by unifying their political, military, and civilian efforts in order to defeat Nazi Germany. It was a matter of national survival – but the same cannot be said of Western involvement in Afghanistan today. My point is that the British war effort was made all the more comprehensive by establishing an unorthodox organization tasked to undertake unconventional warfare against the Axis powers in conjunction with other government agencies, own and foreign military, own and foreign ministries, foreign governments, and local collaborators.

A broad description and discussion of SOE activities is beyond the scope of this paper.[9] Instead, I will focus on some of its roles, traits, and successes, contrasting it with modern-day SOF. The underlying premise is that objectives and techniques are not so different now from then. There has been a renaissance in the use of covert operations in international politics, not least those undertaken in the 'War on Terror'.

Often referred to as 'the Ministry for Ungentlemanly warfare', SOE was responsible to the Minister of Economic Warfare. It was also, initially, led

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[8] Inspired by Kilcullen, 2007.
[9] For more on SOE see Foot, 1999; and MacKenzie, 2002.

by Hugh Dalton, then minister of Economic Warfare, who acquired the additional title of Minister of Special Operations. It was formed from three different existing departments: Section D of MI6, Military Intelligence Research from the War Office, and the propaganda organization called Department EH ('Electra House'). It included a substantial number of civilians as well as military personnel; experts in a wide range of fields – linguistics, anthropology, physics, and so on. Finally, SOE was organized in two distinct sections: SO1 and SO2.[10] SO1 was tasked with 'black propaganda'[11] (information) and SO2 carried out 'special operations' (operations). The connection between 'special operations' and 'black propaganda' lay at the heart of SOE.

Three things stand out here: the connection between information operations (propaganda) and special operations; the role of local nationals; and the innovative strategic-effects thinking.

Firstly, SO1 operated numerous radio stations, broadcasting from mainland UK and occupied territories. F4 Radio Gaulle[12] is an example of the innovative information operations conducted by SO1. The speakers were members of the Free French, broadcasting a content intended to train the resistance groups. True innovation appears when one contrasts it with F1 Radio Inconnue,[13] another SO1 operation. Supposedly broadcasting from Paris, its subversive content was meant to promote passive resistance to the Nazi occupation of France. It was 'attached' to Pétain and the Vichy regime, and was kept secret from the Free French and de Gaulle. It was recognized that 'who' that was sending the message was more important than 'what' the

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[10] A third section, SO3, was an administrative unit.

[11] As to the difference between White, Grey and Black propaganda: Black propaganda is false material where the source is disguised. It is propaganda that purports to be from a source on one side of a conflict, but is actually from the opposing side. It contrasts with grey propaganda, the source of which is not identified, and white propaganda, in which the real source is declared. Source: www.wikipedia.org (accessed 23 September 2008)

[12] 426 programmes, 25.8.41 – 15.11.42. from http://clutch.open.ac.uk/schools/emerson00/s_o_epage%203.html (accessed 28 August 2008)

[13] 1145 programmes, 15.11.40 – 10.1.44. from http://clutch.open.ac.uk/schools/emerson00/s_o_epage%203.html (accessed 28 August 2008)

message was. SO2, on the other hand, supported the various national resistance movements more directly. SOE agents would train in Britain and be transported into occupied territories to organize, support, provide intelligence, and train local resistance groups. The combined effects of operations and information meant that SOE achieved a value-added effect. Radio broadcasts would encourage people to resist German occupation, support the Allied war effort, promote recruitment to resistance movements, and so on. They would also be used to send encrypted messages to operatives in occupied territories.

This is strikingly similar to how Al Qaida and other Islamic Jihadist groups operate in today's information world. They combine operations with information when they publish video clips of successful ambushes against Western military on the internet or against Danish caricatures. These clips serve the same objectives as SO1 radio broadcasts: they subvert the audience to their cause, they encourage recruitment to their cause, they boost morale for their cause, and so on. In addition, they have an added impact by the very nature of 'who' is sending the message. They rally/mobilize the Centre of Gravity, the people, to their cause by 'propaganda of the deed', whereby the 'political and emotional impact of the event is…achieved by the instruments of the virtual dimension, not by the physical circumstances of the attack itself' (Mackinlay, 2008: 37). Al Qaida also use the internet for communication, either to send encrypted messages to other cells or to communicate with operatives (Vego, 2007: 4), much as SOE used radio broadcasts and wireless operators in the occupied territories of Europe during the Second World War.

Secondly, SOE recognized, and used, the importance of local nationals in the same way that it was recognized and used by US strategic planners for the initial campaign in Afghanistan. To be able to operate discreetly and successfully in occupied territories or foreign states, SOE agents relied on local nationals for local and cultural knowledge. Such in-depth knowledge was crucial for collaboration with foreign resistance movements, gaining influence in the society, and remaining undetected by the enemy.

The principal challenge was how to gain access to such knowledge, because it can normally be acquired in only two ways: either by long-term immersion in foreign societies or by recruiting from those societies. Britain, as an imperial power with many colonies at that time, had a distinct advantage, with many expats and colonial officers living in foreign countries. These people not only had intimate knowledge of their 'turf', in many cases they were also empowered through their positions in local, colonial administration. In occupied Europe the situation was different, and SOE recruited its agents directly from those countries. These agents would be trained by SOE in a range of skills, from commando training to parachute training, demolition training, and so on. These skills would then be used in clandestine operations or transferred to local resistance groups. This bears more than a passing resemblance to how SOF is conducting FID in Afghanistan today.

Thirdly, the innovative strategic-effects thinking behind many SOE operations can provide excellent examples of how to think unconventionally and asymmetrically. As pointed out, special operations should have strategic effects, i.e. a direct impact on the outcome of the conflict, as opposed to a supporting impact. The Allied bombing of Germany was undertaken for the strategic effect of 'bombing the Nazis to surrender' – a concept that later research has shown had a marginal effect on the German will to fight. Interestingly enough, Bomber Command was not very fond of SOE and resented having to lend aircraft for 'unethical' clandestine missions. They wanted to win the war by bombing Germany to its knees (Morris, 2001) – an effort that would require thousands of aircraft, crew members, and explosives. By contrast, SOE operation 'Gunnerside', involving only six or seven SOE agents, effectively halted the Nazi nuclear-weapons programme to such an extent that Germany was never able to develop its own nuclear weapons, a prospect that definitely would have altered the outcome of the war.

One might object to the comparison between SOE and SOF. True, SOE was an insurgent force rather than a counter-insurgent force. It was, after all, tasked by Churchill himself to 'set Europe ablaze' by means of sabotage and subversion. Perhaps SOE became so innovative because it was an insurgent force, as opposed to a counter-insurgent force? Might SOE bear more resemblance to Al Qaida than SOF? SOE was an agency whose actions, not unlike today's operations in Afghanistan and Iraq, took place in public view. Its role was essentially that of a facilitator. Its success hinged on its ability to collaborate with foreign resistance movements or allied services, which pursued their own national, political or sectional interest with scant regard for the wishes of the British government (Wylie, 2005: 3).

To sum up, SOE was an organisation capable of operating in a wide variety of different contexts. According to Wylie,

> [i]ts methods went beyond the traditional realms of irregular warfare and embraced a raft of operations whose principal focus was political, economic, financial or even psychological. While clearly SOE was unable to demonstrate a proficiency in all those areas, all of the time, in mastering these arts, it showed itself very much in tune with the context of 'total war' into which it was born. In SOE 'special operations' became more than simply an adjunct to Britain's military operations, but instead came to embody a distinctly 'modern' approach to secret service activity, an activity which remains as central to a state's politico-military armoury today as it did 60 years ago. (Wylie, 2005: 11)

Unity of Effort and Unconventional Methods

Perhaps the chief lesson that should be learned from Afghanistan and Iraq is the limited capacity of conventional government machinery to cope flexibly with unconventional insurgency problems. Unified management of political, military, and economic conflict will produce the best results, both where policy is made and in the field (Wells, 1991). Thus, combining a unity of

effort between the actors with unconventional methods will enhance counterinsurgency efforts. This was tried with CORDS in Vietnam, but it represented a national effort, involving primarily US government agencies and US organizations.

The concept of multi-national, allied inter-agency cooperation, multi-agency coordination and whole-of-government approach emerged during the Second World War. As with all other conflicts, the conditions were unique, in that it was a fight for national survival and, ultimately, a global conflict. The way ahead should be to develop a comprehensive approach that could include unconventional means, used for strategic effects.

To this end, Special Operations should be regarded not only as an adjunct to military operations, undertaken by military SOF. Today's military SOF are ideally suited for only parts of a comprehensive approach to insurgencies, despite the apparent comprehensiveness of their nine standard missions. Special Operations should be regarded as those unconventional actions taken to affect the strategic centre of gravity in the conflict: the People. To be blunt: Special Operations should not be left solely to SOF, or the military.

One possibility is to establish an Unconventional Department, or a Ministry of Special Operations, to serve as an integral part of the strategic decision-making process, strategic planning, management, and evaluation, on the same lines as military forces, governmental organizations, and so on. The idea is not new, but it is a bold one. Senior Fellow in National Security Studies Max Boot (2006) has argued that we again need something like the Office of Strategic Services (OSS) of the Second World War, which included analysis, intelligence, anthropology, special operations, information, psychological operations, and technology capabilities. He is seconded by Dr Kilcullen in his 'New Paradigms for 21st Century Conflicts' (2007), where he underlines the importance of developing 'Capabilities for dealing with non-elite, grassroots threats (that) include cultural and ethnographic intelligence, social systems analysis, information operations, early-entry or high-threat humanitarian and governance teams, field

negotiation and mediation teams, biometric reconnaissance, and a variety of other strategically relevant capabilities.' Such a strategic service does not, however, represent a multi-national effort. The USA, for instance, would be an example of a state with the capacity to build such an organization, whilst other, smaller nations would not.

CORDS sought to integrate horizontally a series of political, military, economic, and informational programmes to maximize the US pacification effort in Vietnam. One should not neglect two crucial aspects: leadership and unconventionality. CORDS was led in much the same way as a military commander – rather than a coordinator, facilitator, or advisor – would organize his efforts. Unconventionality, on the other hand, was achieved by having a civilian leader, who was on par with the military commander, working closely together and unifying their efforts, drawing on the same resources, sharing intelligence, and synchronizing efforts to vanquish irregular adversaries in Vietnam.

Finally, let us recall that this paper set out to explore a potential role for Special Operations Forces in a counterinsurgency. Have SOF been flipped away from COIN? Absolutely not. Doctrine may already have an answer. After describing the many complicated, interrelated, and simultaneous tasks that must be conducted to defeat an insurgency, the new US Counterinsurgency Field Manual (FM3-24) states: 'Key to all these tasks is developing an effective host-nation (HN) security force.' And, as argued by Nagl (2005: xiv) foreign forces cannot defeat an insurgency; the best they can hope for is to create the conditions that will enable local forces to win for them.

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