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Special Operations Forces (SOF): The Integrators for Total Defense and Resistance

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Abstract: In preparation for gray zone or conventional warfare conducted by Russian or Chinese adversaries and their proxies, threatened nations can apply a Total Defense approach to safeguard their territorial integrity and political sovereignty. Two key components for any effective Total Defense concept are national special operations forces (SOF) and volunteer, citizen-soldier territorial defense forces (TDF). This article examines the role of special operations forces as significant multi-dimensional, entrepreneurial integrators in Total Defense. In particular, it demonstrates the symbiotic relationship between special operations and territorial defense forces in the complex mission of national resistance during crisis and occupation.

Keywords: special operations forces, territorial defense forces, resistance

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Introduction

In preparation for gray zone or conventional warfare conducted by Russian or Chinese adversaries and their proxies, threatened nations can apply a Total Defense approach to safeguard their territorial integrity and political sovereignty. Two key components for any effective Total Defense concept are national special operations forces (SOF) and volunteer, citizen-soldier territorial defense forces (TDF), also known as national guards, defense leagues, or home guards. This paper will first define Total Defense and then highlight the role SOF play as multi-dimensional, entrepreneurial integrators in such a national defense strategy with a particular focus on the SOF-TDF relationship. The essay will then examine several options for the integration of SOF with territorial defense formations in the mission of national resistance within occupied territory; an extreme scenario for the Total Defense system.

Total/Comprehensive Defense

Total or comprehensive defense is a national security strategy based upon whole-of-government and whole-of-society involvement in protecting a nation's sovereignty. In her article 'From "total" to "comprehensive" national defence: the development of the concept in Europe,' Dr. Ieva Berzina provided a comprehensive historical perspective to this framework, explained its derivation from the idea of Total War, and offered a differentiation between 'total defence', with an emphasis on military components, used primarily by non-aligned states during the Cold War,' and today's 'comprehensive national defence' that counters both conventional and hybrid threats with both military and non-military means (Berzina, 2020). Simply defined, Total or 'Comprehensive Defence is an official Government strategy, which encompasses a whole-of-society approach to protecting the nation against potential threats' (NATO Special Operations Headquarters, 2020, p. 15).

One of the key challenges in Total Defense is how to direct and harness the wide range of non-military stakeholders to achieve the promulgated national security goals. Unlike the military which can rely upon a clear chain of command, the Total

Defense effort requires cooperation, negotiation, and consensus-building among stakeholders to achieve alignment of activities. Since current and historical models for interagency operations are problematic, the conduct of effective interagency operations requires new mechanisms and approaches (Stringer, 2010). This assessment holds true for Total Defense initiatives. In fact, for success, Total Defense requires the elusive but essential unity of effort. Unity of effort—the coordination and cooperation toward common objectives, even if the participants are not necessarily part of the same command or organization—is the product of successful unified action (Joint Publication 3, 2018, p. A2-A3). This unity can be best facilitated by the special operations community in its integrator role. As Canadian Brigadier General Steve Hunter noted,

Notwithstanding the high demand for SOF in their traditional realms, SOF recognize that they will be asked to play a significant role in strategic competition. However, SOF will likely not be in the lead, but rather in support of larger whole-of-government efforts. SOF's ability to integrate with military and national security partners will become paramount dependent on its partnerships and operating relationships with Joint Force elements, other governmental departments (OGDs), and allies. (Hunter, 2021)

This practitioner's assertion is substantiated by academic research that demonstrates that SOF serve as connectors between diverse units within the military as well as assorted organizations outside of it. As Eitan Shamir and Eyal Ben-Ari wrote in their article 'The Rise of Special Operations Forces: Generalized Specialization, Boundary Spanning and Military Autonomy,' SOF exhibit a variety of boundary spanning roles within a plethora of 'alliances, coalitions, ad-hoc formations, and temporary organizational structures' (Shamir and Ben-Ari, 2018; Waard and Kramer, 2010).

The SOF Integration Role

In this light, SOF serve an increasingly valuable role as multi-dimensional integrators at both the operational and strategic levels. With integration understood as 'the arrangement of forces and their actions to create a force that operates by engaging as a whole' (Joint Publication 1, 2017, p. GL-8), SOF can place themselves at the nexus for connecting joint, conventional, multinational, and interagency

actions in a great power competition (GPC) context. Given the SOF unconventional mindset and approach, cross-cultural capabilities, and long experience gained in working with multinational and civilian entities during the decades-long counter violent extremist organization (C-VEO) campaigns, SOF are well suited to convene a wide range of stakeholders to address great power adversary challenges. These same qualities make SOF a significant integrator in Total Defense.

In most countries, SOF are inherently joint by nature, internally combining the national land, air, and maritime special operations components within a special operations command construct, and then connecting it to the wider joint force. For example, the joint Canadian Special Operations Forces Command cannot operate effectively without collaborating with the other Services, and therefore it naturally relies on the Air Force and Navy for strategic mobility, deployment, and insertion capabilities while operating closely with Army-provided enablers (Hunter, 2021). Similarly, for the United States, SOF associate to the wider joint force for both operational purposes and for service support and sustainment in areas like personnel management, logistics, and maintenance.

Broadly speaking, successful military contributions to irregular warfare require a deliberate and sustained integration of special operations and conventional capabilities (U.S. Department of Defense, 2020). Equally, against peer adversaries, future military operations will require an even closer cooperation between SOF and conventional forces for victory. SOF Commands contribute to this critical requirement through habitual liaison and coordination with conventional forces (Allied Joint Publication -3.5, 2019, pp 27–31). This author, in the article ‘Force Integration in Resistance Operations: Dutch Jedburghs and U.S. Alamo Scouts,’ closely examined the SOF role as an integrator with conventional forces, highlighting obstacles to attaining this goal, while also providing two World War II vignettes that demonstrated success in achieving this objective (Stringer, 2021a).

Similarly, SOF frequently enable multinational and interagency action beyond their mandated remit. In illustration, the Baltic SOF Intelligence Fusion Cell (BSIFC) is a Lithuanian-led intelligence center being stood up in Vilnius that is a joint project among Poland, Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, and the United States (Kaminski *et al.*, 2021). Tasked with providing synthesized intelligence and analysis on Russian

threats, the BSIFC is a Ministry of Defense level effort encompassing a number of significant interagency stakeholders from the relevant countries (The Economist, 2021). Interestingly, pertinent SOF organizations were the catalysts to convene the necessary stakeholders to establish this unique organization, which goes far beyond a traditional SOF mission or task. In this case, SOF move into an integrator-entrepreneur role, where ‘the entrepreneur responds to perceived threats and opportunities, seeking to change the organization (or the environment) to create new alignments between organizational capabilities and environmental opportunities’ (Bullis, *et al.*, 2012). This SOF behavior applies well to the complex theme of national resistance and the integration of territorial defense forces in such an unconventional warfare mission.

The SOF and TDF Symbiosis in National Resistance

As noted in the article, ‘Survival in the Russian Occupied Zone: Command and Organization in Resistance Underground Operations,’ ‘resistance capabilities provide a sovereign nation an additional element of national defense that contributes to deterrence against an adversary, imposes real costs on an occupier, and sets conditions for the liberation of occupied national territory’ (Stringer, 2021b). The co-published Swedish National Defence University/U.S. Special Operations Command Europe *Resistance Operating Concept* describes resistance as ‘a nation’s organized, whole-of-society effort, encompassing the full range of activities from nonviolent to violent, led by a legally established government (potentially exiled/displaced or shadow) to reestablish independence and autonomy within its sovereign territory that has been wholly or partially occupied by a foreign power’ (Fiala, 2019, p. 15). Viewing integration through the lens of national resistance and according to a Lithuanian Vice Minister of Defence, ‘SOF are the shaping function for the entire national resilience and resistance discussion’ (Abukevicius, 2021).

In this regard, SOF and volunteer, citizen-soldier territorial defense forces have a symbiotic relationship in this complex national defense mission. As noted, SOF are potentially the superglue that can bind the various interagency organizations and components in a Total Defense framework. Furthermore, guerrilla warfare, subversion, and sabotage are the core activities of resistance, and SOF can provide these capabilities or advise TDF in such activities. Finally, SOF serve a force

multiplier function – for example a single, 12-person U.S. Special Forces Operational Detachment A (ODA) is by doctrine capable of training, advising, and assisting an entire irregular or territorial defense force battalion. This ability amplifies the effect of a small number of special forces units across a TDF enterprise. Conversely, while SOF have the expertise for resistance as part of their unconventional warfare capabilities and experience in integrating the interagency, particularly law enforcement and intelligence organizations for this mission, they lack both mass and nationwide presence to effectively lead and conduct overall national resistance operations. This limitation is where the TDF relationship proves synergistic.

National TDF possess three indispensable attributes that make them an ideal resistance force. First, the TDFs' dual civil and military role provide an essential linkage to the civilian population which serves as the source for the resistance underground and auxiliary as well as offers potential for directed social mobilization for non-violent resistance measures. Not only do citizens have the opportunity to assume fighter, enabler, or amplifier roles in national resistance, but the civilian population also provides the critical intelligence screen that surrounds and protects the resistance (Lindsay, 1992, p. 198). In essence, TDF are a cross-cutting contributor to all the classic resistance components — underground, auxiliary, and guerrillas.

Second, territorial force geographical dispersion ensures presence throughout the nation and in all county or municipality jurisdictions which provides excellent knowledge of the population as well as close relationships with local leaders and communities. This comprehensive national presence empowers the TDF as local sensors that can detect imperceptible or clandestine gray zone operations at the community level. These adversary activities could range from the establishment of nefarious but legal motorcycle and airsoft clubs to the infiltration of church organizations and associations. Third, TDF are voluntary organizations of patriots who are motivated to serve and even defend the nation and local community, and they bring a broad base of civilian experience and skills that may be relevant in resistance situations. Pertinent skills could include experience in medicine, engineering, cyber security, and information technology.

SOF and TDF Collaboration Models

Given the interdependent nature of special operations formations and their territorial defense force counterparts in resistance operations, a critical planning factor is the structuring of the collaboration between the two entities in a Total Defense construct based upon existing military organization and culture, as well as assigned legal authorities in peacetime, crisis, and during occupation. This essay proposes three theoretical models of collaboration between SOF and TDF for the national resistance mission — the force provider (FP) option, the training and doctrine (TRADOC) option, and the advise, assist, and accompany (AAA) option. These possibilities are reference points for starting a discussion; they are not mutually exclusive nor comprehensive and can be tailored according to national frameworks.

Force Provider Option: In peacetime, the TDF organization recruits and prepares trained and ready forces to conduct and/or support resistance operations. The resistance specific training occurs in-house within TDF training facilities with the expertise derived from foreign partners and/or seconded SOF personnel. During crisis or in occupation scenarios, these formations and personnel are provisioned to and subordinated under another lead operational command, potentially even the national SOF command. In this model, the TDF headquarters serves in a service or depot-like function as a force provider.

TRADOC Option: In peacetime, special forces units under the national SOF command develop appropriate resistance doctrine and train territorial defense forces in this framework to develop the necessary skills for these missions. During crisis or occupation, partial or full, TDF units remain under TDF command and control and operate under the appropriate regional TDF headquarters. These forces would coordinate with SOF based upon battle-space requirements.

AAA Option: The SOF command treats territorial defense units as domestic “irregular” forces and assigns dedicated special forces units to develop resistance irregular warfare capabilities in these formations through ‘advise and assist’ activities. In case of crisis or occupation, the dedicated SOF units accompany the territorial defense forces in resistance operations until liberation. The appropriate

national command authority can assign these hybrid organizations to any relevant command node based upon the evolving operational situation.

While not conclusive, the aforementioned models serve as starting points for a number of countries who are in the process of establishing or expanding their existing territorial defense or national guard forces for the national resistance mission. Georgia, Ukraine, Poland, Taiwan, Mongolia, and others can evaluate the FB, TRADOC, and AAA theoretical models as they apply to their national situation and adjust accordingly.

Conclusion/Recommendations

Special operations forces take on significant integrator roles in total or comprehensive defense. They provide connection across joint, interagency, and multinational organizational boundaries, and are both a connector and symbiotic partner with territorial defense forces, particularly in the complex mission of national resistance during crisis and occupation. An important planning step for any country confronted by the threat of aggression with resultant full or partial occupation is to delineate the cooperation model and command and control relationships between national SOF and TDF in peacetime. While three potential models are offered in this essay, there may be more options to explore. This important step avoids ad-hoc and sub-optimal organizational arrangements established during an actual crisis. In retrospect, Winston Churchill's words from May 19, 1940, are still relevant today: 'Arm yourselves, and be ye men of valour, and be in readiness for the conflict; for it is better for us to perish in battle than to look upon the outrage of our nation [...]' (Churchill, 1940).

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