

---

## Global SOF and Interagency Collaboration

Christopher Lamb

*Institute for National Strategic Studies, National Defense University, [lambc@ndu.edu](mailto:lambc@ndu.edu)*

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholarcommons.usf.edu/jss>  
pp. 8-20

---

### Recommended Citation

Lamb, Christopher. "Global SOF and Interagency Collaboration." *Journal of Strategic Security* 7, no. 2 (2014) : 8-20.

DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.5038/1944-0472.7.2.2>

Available at: <https://scholarcommons.usf.edu/jss/vol7/iss2/3>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Open Access Journals at Scholar Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in *Journal of Strategic Security* by an authorized editor of Scholar Commons. For more information, please contact [scholarcommons@usf.edu](mailto:scholarcommons@usf.edu).

---

## Global SOF and Interagency Collaboration

### Abstract

The United States Special Operations Command (USSOCOM) has emphasized the importance of international SOF collaboration, or what USSOCOM refers to as a “global SOF network.” It is difficult to achieve requisite levels of collaboration even among departments and agencies within a single country, much less on an international basis. Yet USSOCOM has been rightly praised for its trailblazing collaboration efforts in counterterrorism operations, so perhaps it can extend successful collaboration to its “global SOF network.” This article argues collaboration lessons from the past decade of counterterrorism operations can be used to facilitate better international SOF collaboration. Even if the lessons are well recognized they will be hard to act upon, especially when USSOCOM is using its indirect approach to SOF missions managed out of U.S. embassies overseas. But the first step in solving any problem is recognizing the nature of the problem and what is required to solve it. The rest is all disciplined, aggressive and intelligent implementation, which Special Operations Forces do well.

### Erratum

P. 10: Figure 1 in the published version shows an adapted diagram from the US Army Field Manual (3-60) with notations inserted in red to reflect the notations made on a hand drawn diagram that appeared on p. 153 of Stanley A. McChrystal's book, *My Share of the Task: A Memoir* (Portfolio/Penguin, 2013). The author originally inserted in the manuscript a captured image of the diagram that appeared on p. 153 of Gen. McChrystal's book. The notations were McChrystal's, not those of author (Christopher Lamb), and their representation in the published diagram was not intended to suggest otherwise.

## Introduction

Historically, special operations forces (SOF) have been the preferred military units for irregular threats like terrorism and insurgency. Such threats are increasingly transnational, threatening the welfare of multiple countries if not the international community as a whole. Accordingly, over the past few years the United States Special Operations Command (USSOCOM) has emphasized the importance of international SOF collaboration, or what USSOCOM refers to as a “global SOF network,” particularly for counterterrorism but other irregular threats as well.<sup>1</sup>

The value of counterterrorism collaboration across national boundaries is well recognized, as is the difficulty of international cooperation in areas as sensitive as special operations. While nations share a common goal in combating terrorism, their agendas frequently diverge and reconciling those competing objectives is challenging. Indeed, it is difficult to achieve the high levels of collaboration among national security organizations required for effective counterterrorism operations within a single country. Extending the level of required collaboration to multiple national SOF forces is even more difficult. USSOCOM has been praised for its trailblazing efforts in interagency collaboration in counterterrorism operations, and now it is equally determined to extend and strengthen its “global SOF network.” The argument made in this article is that lessons about collaborating across organizational boundaries from the past decade of counterterrorism operations can be used to facilitate better international SOF collaboration through USSOCOM’s global SOF network.

## Interagency Collaboration in SOF Counterterrorism Operations

USSOCOM is now widely recognized for achieving unprecedented levels of interagency collaboration in support of its counterterrorism efforts since September 11, 2001.<sup>2</sup> Prior to 2001, SOF counterterrorism operations often were hobbled by lack of “actionable” intelligence; i.e., intelligence considered reliable, comprehensive, detailed, and timely enough to justify the risks associated with launching SOF to attack terrorists. Following the September 11, 2001 terror attacks, the tolerance for risk skyrocketed, but SOF also had to solve the actionable intelligence problem. The SOF units with lead counterterrorism responsibilities, often referred to as special mission units by USSOCOM leaders, reasoned they had to build interagency teams in Washington, D.C. and in the field to tap, analyze, and exploit all the U.S. intelligence sources available for immediate support of SOF counterterrorism operations. They succeeded and in the process took counterterrorism operations to an unprecedented level of efficacy.

These combined teams of interagency analysts and SOF operators conducted network-based targeting. They used all-source intelligence, including intelligence

---

<sup>1</sup> McRaven, William H. Admiral, "Panel Discussion," National Defense Industrial Association (NDIA) Special Operations/Low Intensity Conflict (SO/LIC) Symposium, Washington, D.C., February 10-12, 2014.

<sup>2</sup> Unless otherwise noted, the following discussion draws upon Christopher Lamb and Evan Munsing, “Secret Weapon: High-value Target Teams as an Organizational Innovation,” *Strategic Perspectives, Institute for National Strategic Studies, National Defense University*, March 2011.

gathered during their own operations, to chart terrorist organizations and build target portfolios on key terrorists that the SOF teams could act upon immediately. They had to balance the risk of revealing information sources with the need to move quickly before their targets or their associates could be warned, which was difficult. However, co-locating representatives from all the U.S. intelligence agencies with SOF operators on a sustained basis greatly improved information sharing and thus enabled persistent surveillance of adversaries. The interagency teams eliminated the organizational seams that can delay intelligence sharing and inhibit momentum.

Too often counterterrorism operations operated on the basis of stale intelligence and slow approval processes. Before SOF could launch an attack, the target had moved on and escaped. Interagency field teams with good connectivity to parent organizations and their unique sources of information provided an “unblinking eye” for persistent tracking of high-value targets. They also allowed U.S. forces to make better decisions about what targets to take down and when. Over time, the special mission units’ counterterrorist operations were better coordinated with other U.S. forces conducting counterinsurgency operations, although tensions between the two types of forces and missions remained a problem.

As SOF gained an understanding of the requirements for successful interagency operations, it expanded the use of interagency teams in Iraq, Afghanistan, and elsewhere. SOF leaders also built interagency teams at higher levels of the national security system to support interagency coordination and counterterrorist campaign planning. Most of these organizational constructs are referred to as Joint Interagency Task Forces (JIATF). USSOCOM has become a major proponent and user of JIATFs, interagency education, and best practices. Among the many lessons from USSOCOM-sponsored interagency operations four are especially noteworthy.

### Lessons from Joint Interagency Task Forces

A few years ago little was known about SOF interagency teams, but there is an increasing body of literature now devoted to the topic, including General Stanley McChrystal’s memoirs. Excerpts from McChrystal’s memoirs demonstrate four key requirements for successful interagency organizations. The prerequisites for success can also be illustrated with examples from JIATF South, the highly successful U.S. counternarcotics organization that pioneered effective joint interagency operations.<sup>3</sup> It is easier to illustrate principles for effective interagency operations using examples from JIATF South because counternarcotics operations are not as highly classified as special operations.<sup>4</sup> SOF-managed JIATFs and JIATF South share many common elements, and not entirely coincidentally. USSOCOM was one of many U.S. national security organizations following the terror attacks on 9/11 that sent its leaders to visit and learn from JIATF South.

---

<sup>3</sup> Some sources date the first JIATF to 1989, but they may be confusing JIATFs with Joint Task Forces. JIATF South was evolved from a Joint Task Force but did not become a JIATF until 1994 when the director of the Office of National Drug Control Policy distributed the first National Interdiction Command and Control Plan, which created JIATFs.

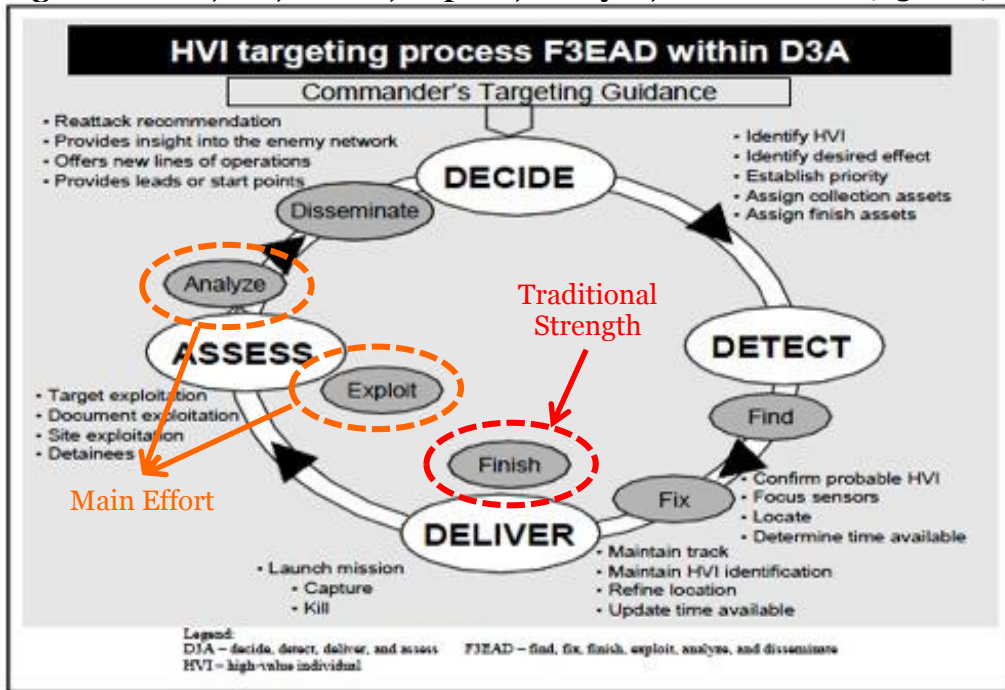
<sup>4</sup> The discussion of JIATF South is based on Evan Munsing and Christopher Jon Lamb, “Joint Interagency Task Force-South: The Best Known, Least Understood Interagency Success,” *Strategic Perspectives 5*, Institute for National Strategic Studies, National Defense University, June 2011.

### *Collaboration is the 'Key' to Success*

McChrystal dubbed the approach used by SOF special mission units “collaborative warfare,”<sup>5</sup> and the term was applicable. Interagency collaboration was the key ingredient for success. McChrystal saw the U.S. counterterrorism effort suffering for lack of interagency collaboration: “Early on, counterproductive infighting among the CIA, State Department, Department of Defense, and others back in Washington threatened [the] campaign [against al-Qaida].” The relationship between the CIA and Department of Defense was particularly frustrating: “At best we were fighting parallel, fractured campaigns against al-Qaeda; ours had to be a unified fight.”<sup>6</sup>

McChrystal accepted McRaven’s recommendation for “a true joint interagency task force” and experimented with various versions of it. The interagency task forces had to solve the fundamental problem of providing actionable intelligence to SOF counterterrorism units as depicted in the “F3EA” diagram below. The main effort was exploiting intelligence from operations and analyzing it rapidly, which could only be done with real-time, ongoing interagency collaboration in direct proximity to SOF units. Interagency collaboration was not just “important” but “central to our effectiveness.” As McChrystal notes, “finishing” the enemy had been SOF’s “traditional strength,” but exploiting and analyzing intelligence now became SOF’s “main effort.”<sup>7</sup>

**Figure 1: Find, Fix, Finish, Exploit, Analyze, Disseminate (F3EAD)<sup>8</sup>**



<sup>5</sup> Bob Woodward, “Why Did the Violence Plummet? It Wasn’t Just the Surge,” *The Washington Post*, September 8, 2008.

<sup>6</sup> McChrystal, Stanley A., *My Share of the Task: A Memoir* (New York: Portfolio/Penguin, 2013), 118.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, 131, 153.

<sup>8</sup> U.S. Department of the Army, *Field Manual 3-60: The Targeting Process* (Washington, D.C.: HQDA, November 26, 2010): B-2.

Often organizations pursuing missions that require interagency collaboration fail precisely because they consider interagency collaboration merely an advantage rather than an essential prerequisite for success. JIATF South receives more than 8,000 visitors a year who marvel at the level of interagency collaboration undergirding its counternarcotic operations. Unfortunately, the vast majority leave amazed but not enlightened. JIATF South representatives explained to the author that visitors who appear genuinely anxious to emulate its success nonetheless are prone to return to their parent organizations and fail to make the interagency the centerpiece of their operational focus. Thankfully, USSOCOM leaders did not make this mistake. McChrystal made sure his entire organization understood that “collaborative warfare” would be the order of the day.

### *Sponsoring Organizations Must Change First to Enable Collaboration*

It has been argued that what distinguishes leadership from management is the ability to change an organization’s culture.<sup>9</sup> McChrystal seemed to understand this. He realized that the great benefits from interagency teams “would also require changes equally significant ...physical, organizational, procedural, and—most important—cultural” in his own organization.<sup>10</sup> McChrystal had to make his SOF units “more accommodating to those agencies we were courting.”<sup>11</sup> To create trust between all the interagency partners he needed to support his field teams McChrystal had to first change his own organization, which was difficult.

McChrystal’s initiatives went against strongly held cultural norms in the SOF units he was leading. Yet he did not believe there was any alternative: “We were convinced the secretive and compartmentalized traditions of special operations forces, particularly [special mission units], would doom us.” Ultimately he and other SOF leaders were persuasive and the special mission units “deliberately craft[ed] our work spaces to channel interaction, force collaboration and ease the flow of people and information.”<sup>12</sup> They bent classification rules and “shared information until it hurt” in order to establish trust, which remained a fragile and perishable commodity on the teams:

“We instructed our people to share more information than they were comfortable with and to do so with anyone who wanted to be part of our network. We allowed other agencies to follow our operations (previously unheard of), and we widely distributed, without preconditions, intelligence we captured or analysis we’d conducted. The actual information shared was important, but more valuable was the trust built up through voluntarily sharing it with others.”<sup>13</sup>

In addition to information sharing and partnering, McChrystal shared his organization’s resources with others. He also allocated large numbers of his

---

<sup>9</sup> I am indebted to Jim Kurtz of the Institute for Defense Analyses for this observation, who found the assertion in Scroggs, Stephen K., *Army Relations with Congress: Thick Armor, Dull Sword, Slow Horse* (Westport, CT: Praeger, 2000), which cited Edgar H. Schein, *Organizational Culture and Leadership*. 2nd ed. (San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass, 1992), 12.

<sup>10</sup> McChrystal, *My Share of the Task: A Memoir*, 154.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, 149.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, 150-51.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, 154-55.

scarce and highly-trained personnel to liaison duties. All of these practices were counter-cultural for SOF special mission units, but essential for building trust and removing impediments to collaboration.

Earlier, JIATF South had come to the same realization: It would have to change itself before it could secure cooperation from other parties. When JIATF South was still a Joint Task Force led by the Department of Defense it gave priority to Department of Defense perspectives. The Department of Defense grudgingly accepted the counter narcotics mission, and wanted to limit its involvement after doing its part to detect drug trafficking. Department of Defense personnel were prone to heavily classify their intelligence rather than share it with interagency partners. Moreover, intelligence fusion and drug interdiction were largely kept separate, so there was none of the meshing of intelligence and operations that later become the hallmark of JIATF South. Gradually this all changed as authorities, assets, and intelligence programs were consolidated and the Joint Task Force became a Joint Interagency Task Force that transformed itself into a genuine interagency construct. The culmination was a broadening of the organization's conceptualization of the counternarcotics mission into a holistic, "end-to-end" construct from intelligence cueing in host countries to prosecution of narcotics traffickers in the United States.

### *An 'End-to-End' Mission Approach is Necessary*

All the elements of the F3EA chain of operational activities ultimately became interagency efforts. Each element of the chain is a complex and difficult task. Historically, SOF special mission units focus on the "finish" portion of the cycle; i.e., the movement to target, take-down, and exfiltration from the site. After years of operations against al-Qaida, however, SOF leaders realized they needed to take responsibility for the full F3EA cycle (which with the addition of *disseminate* later become F3EAD). They built teams that managed the entire cycle holistically and became operational juggernauts capable of rounding up numerous targets on a nightly basis. One knowledgeable British observer claims that the "templated industrial manner" U.S. special mission units used "set a pace of operations that probably removed from the streets most of the members of al-Qaeda in Iraq [AQI]."<sup>14</sup> Initially focused on eliminating key terrorist leaders, SOF special mission units began to aspire to wholesale attrition of the terrorist organizations:

"If we could apply relentless body blows against AQI [it] would be consumed with staying alive and thus have no ability to recruit, raise funds, or strategize. Instead of trying solely to decapitate the top echelon of leaders, we would disembowel the organization by targeting its midlevel commanders...we believed we could get the organization to collapse in on itself."<sup>15</sup>

<sup>14</sup> Urban, Mark, *Task Force Black: The Explosive True Story of the SAS and the Secret War in Iraq* (London: Little, Brown, 2010), 266, 271.

<sup>15</sup> McChrystal, *My Share of the Task: A Memoir*, 161-62; McChrystal seems conflicted over how much attrition of terrorist organizational structure should be valued. On the same pages he notes, "I had already concluded that a strict decapitation strategy was unlikely to work. Top al-Qaeda leaders were well hidden, and their capture or death was rarely decisive. Moreover, a string of effective operations could give us a false sense that we could slowly grind Zarqawi's network out of existence." He argues the important point was to control the tempo and take the fight to lower

The high pace of operations led some to hope that al-Qaida in Iraq would collapse from attrition. Others despaired that SOF operations were creating too many unintended casualties, too many enemies among otherwise neutral parties, and not enough strategic effects. Eventually, the SOF interagency teams broadened their understanding of second and third order effects to include the political and social impact of their kill and capture operations. It was a not a transition easily accepted by special mission units, but eventually SOF expanded the F3EA “end-to-end” conceptualization of the SOF mission to include partnering with conventional forces on counterinsurgency.<sup>16</sup> The result was greater strategic impact, and SOF operations were able to help reverse the deteriorating situation in Iraq in 2007.

In this regard, SOF followed the pattern that transformed JIATF South. JIATF South leaders could have continued to limit Department of Defense participation in the counternarcotics mission, a stance that would have been popular with their superiors. But eschewing responsibility for developing intelligence sources and successfully prosecuting traffickers meant ignoring the activities that were the focus of law enforcement agencies JIATF South that was trying to woo. So, JIATF South leaders broadened their “end-to-end” concept for the organization’s mission. The organization began to pay attention to the entire drug movement process, from how bulk shipments were paid for and moved, to who benefited from the shipments, to how traffickers were arrested, imprisoned, and turned into informants, which then produced more intelligence that JIATF South could use to improve interdiction and prosecutions. “This breadth of view made JIATF East a natural ally for every agency involved in counterdrug operations,” and finally “demonstrated that the whole-of-government approach to counter narcotics [could be] dramatically greater than the sum of its parts.”<sup>17</sup>

### *Delegating Responsibility for Local Best Practices*

The previous three prerequisites for success had to be led and supported by senior leaders. However, McChrystal understood that while he could set the conditions for success, he had to delegate responsibility for carrying out interagency operations to keep pace with an adaptive and fast-moving foe:

“Much of my and my command team’s time was spent solidifying the partnerships with the half dozen agencies involved in a single cycle of F3EA. I knew the creative solutions ...would originate from those closest to the fight—closest to the hiccups. So while most members of [special mission units] were self-starters by nature, I needed them to operate without waiting for detailed instructions or approvals. [We] tried to set a climate in which we prized entrepreneurship and free thinking, leaned hard on complacency, and did not punish ideas that failed. ‘As long as it

---

ranks of the terrorist organization. Later he reports that he could feel al-Qaeda cracking under the pressure of SOF’s relentless blows (p. 247), but admits some of that might have been wishful thinking.

<sup>16</sup> McChrystal, *My Share of the Task: A Memoir*, 244-46.

<sup>17</sup> Munsing and Lamb, “Secret Weapon: High-value Target Teams as an Organizational Innovation,” 30.



is not immoral or illegal,' went my frequent refrain, 'we'll do it. Don't wait for me. Do it.' ....we pushed authority down until it made us uneasy."<sup>18</sup>

The result was that McChrystal's general principles were applied to good effect by his team leaders in light of local circumstances. In addition, innovation began to well up from lower levels. McChrystal notes that "rarely did any one thing transform our capacity, and few ideas could be traced back to one person." Instead, after long periods of gestation and incremental changes, major improvements in performance occurred, which McChrystal documents in his memoirs. When a best practice was developed or stumbled upon, SOF leaders were quick to expand its use. They encouraged learning and made learning assets available (McChrystal notes that "How to Be a Liaison Officer" was one of the better instructional videos). Similarly, JIATF South learned to keep pace with its well-financed, creative and ruthless foes by delegating authority, quickly instituting best practices, developing a training program to get new arrivals up to speed quickly, and pushing authority down to the lowest possible levels of the organization. Visitors to JIATF South are often surprised to see relatively junior officers directing sensitive operations while more senior officers present watch.

These lessons from SOF interagency collaboration and other JIATF experience are useful for informing USSOCOM's approach to building a global SOF network. To make that argument it is first necessary to make a distinction between SOF's direct and indirect approaches. SOF progress on interagency collaboration has been a byproduct of its direct approach to counterterrorism. SOF leaders believe USSOCOM needs to focus more on its indirect approach in the future, something the global SOF network is expected to facilitate. Thus, before examining whether lessons from the past decade of interagency collaboration are applicable to SOF's indirect approach, we need to explain the distinction between the direct and indirect approaches.

## SOF's Direct and Indirect Approaches

USSOCOM is now "shift[ing] the focus from counterterrorism operations to more indirect activities in the human domain" through its global SOF network.<sup>19</sup> USSOCOM often makes a distinction between direct and indirect SOF approaches when making the case for a global SOF network to combat irregular threats. Typically, the direct approach means U.S. SOF engaging a discrete threat themselves. By contrast, the indirect approach usually refers to working with partners to "erode the capabilities of terrorist organizations and degrade their ability to acquire support and sanctuary."<sup>20</sup> The archetypical examples of the direct and indirect approach often cited are, respectively, the mission by U.S. SOF to kill Usama bin Laden and the advisory mission U.S. SOF have performed over the past decade in support of the Philippine government efforts to counter terrorism by Abu Sayyaf. Sometimes the direct approach is described as requiring intense interagency collaboration, while the indirect approach requires intense collaboration with foreign partners understanding that some countries

---

<sup>18</sup> McChrystal, *My Share of the Task: A Memoir*, 157.

<sup>19</sup> Col. Stuart W. Bradin, Chief of the Global SOF Network Operational Planning Team, "Interview notes," *Special Operations Technology* 11:7 (October 4, 2013).

<sup>20</sup> U.S. Department of Defense, *Joint Publication 3-26: Counterterrorism* (Washington, D.C.: Joint Chiefs of Staff, November 13, 2009): xv.

incorporate their SOF into the Ministry of Interior or Justice. For example, the current commander of USSOCOM, Admiral William H. McRaven, described the two approaches this way in testimony to the U.S. Congress:

“The direct approach is characterized by technologically-enabled small-unit precision lethality, focused intelligence, and interagency cooperation integrated on a digitally-networked battlefield....the impacts of the direct approach are immediate, visible to public and have had tremendous effects on our enemies’ networks throughout the decade. Less well known but decisive in importance, the indirect approach...includes empowering host nation forces, providing appropriate assistance to humanitarian agencies, and engaging key populations. These long-term efforts increase partner capabilities to generate sufficient security and rule of law, address local needs, and advance ideas that discredit and defeat the appeal of violent extremism” (*emphasis added*).<sup>21</sup>

Admiral McRaven noted the two approaches are complementary and both “build trust and confidence with our partners,” but “the indirect approach values local-led efforts to buy down our partners’ security threats.” He went on to associate the indirect approach with USSOCOM’s interest in a global SOF network:

“The indirect approach will be critical in the fight to deter, disrupt and deny sanctuary to our enemies. Therefore, we must use this approach to strengthen and foster a network of mutually supporting partnerships that are based on shared security interests. Through this network of relationships, SOF can provide a hedge against strategic surprise by identifying and working preemptively to address problems before they become conflicts.”<sup>22</sup>

The indirect approach involves working with foreign partners, and requires well-established and exercised relationships with those partners. McRaven led the effort to create a NATO SOF headquarters to improve SOF networking and interoperability among NATO allies and subsequently went on to lead USSOCOM’s effort to create a global SOF network. Other well-informed SOF observers agree with McRaven that SOF’s indirect approach will be more important in the future, especially after the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan recede. They reason that “operations outside designated war zones will necessitate greater collaboration with foreign forces and interagency partners.”<sup>23</sup> Hence, the central importance of the indirect approach and cross-organizational collaboration for McRaven’s global SOF network concept.

The distinction between direct and indirect SOF approaches can be applied to SOF in different ways, as depicted in Table 1 (SOF Approaches), potentially leading to confusion. Sometimes the distinction is used to emphasize different

---

<sup>21</sup> Admiral William H. McRaven, Commander, United States Special Operations Command, "Posture Statement," Testimony before the Senate Armed Services Committee, *U.S. Senate*, March 6, 2012.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>23</sup> See, for example, Thomas, Jim and Christopher Dougherty, *Beyond the Ramparts: The Future of U.S. Special Operations Forces* (Washington, D.C.: Center for Strategic and Budgetary Assessments, May 2013), available at: <http://www.csbaonline.org/publications/2013/05/beyond-the-ramparts-the-future-of-u-s-special-operations-forces/>.

SOF skill sets and which SOF units tend to specialize in skills more closely associated with the direct or indirect approach. Sometimes the distinction is used to highlight how different SOF missions are more closely associated with one or the other approach, and whether those missions are more often conducted in intense partnership with other U.S. Government agencies or foreign partners. Finally, the differences between the direct and indirect approach are also used to explain different SOF objectives, how they support national goals, and their respective strategic advantages and disadvantages.

Adding to the disarray is the fact that there are exceptions to every generalization that can be made about the direct/indirect approaches. Even if some missions are more commonly conducted directly or indirectly, SOF can execute all assigned missions themselves or through other forces. Similarly, any SOF missions may require intense interagency or international collaboration. Thus, even if it is generally true that the SOF direct approach to counterterrorism over the past decade has been interagency intensive compared to the indirect approach that has required more collaboration with foreign forces, the indirect approach in the future will need to be both intensely interagency and international in order to be successful.

**Table 1: SOF Approaches**

		<b>SOF Approaches</b>	
		<b>Direct</b>	<b>Indirect</b>
<b>Means</b>	<b>SOF Skills</b>	Superlative small unit close quarter combat skills	Political, cultural, and linguistic skills
	<b>Forces</b>	Air Commandos Special Mission Units Navy SEALs Rangers	Special Forces Civil Affairs Psychological Operations
<b>Ways</b>	<b>Missions</b>	Counterterrorism Counter proliferation Direct Action Strategic Reconnaissance Information Operations	Unconventional Warfare Psychological Operations Foreign Internal Defense Civil Affairs
	<b>Partnerships</b>	Interagency	International
<b>Ends</b>	<b>Supporting force</b>	Assist partners physically destroy the adversary	Advise partners on reducing sources of support until adversary collapses
	<b>Lead force</b>	Physically destroy the adversary	Reduce sources of support until adversary collapses

Because distinguishing between SOF direct and indirect approaches can be confusing or even misleading many in the special operations community do not find the terms helpful and have stopped using them. Yet, the distinction holds true in the main and is useful for describing and explaining SOF skills, forces and

missions. The distinction is also important for prescriptive purposes. If SOF's indirect approach will be more important in the future, then USSOCOM needs to develop the same cross-organizational collaboration skills for the indirect SOF approach that it has used to such good effect in its direct approach to counterterrorism.<sup>24</sup>

## SOF Interagency Collaboration and the Indirect Approach

For several reasons it will be harder for USSOCOM to act on collaboration imperatives while pursuing SOF's indirect approach. As already noted, SOF special mission units have more latitude to act independently against terrorists in war zones than they do in peacetime environments, so the inclination of other departments and agencies to follow SOF's lead will diminish. In addition, USSOCOM forces that are more comfortable with the indirect approach have less prestige and fewer resources to share with other departments and agencies to facilitate collaboration. The perceived need for interagency collaboration also may fall off. McChrystal understood he could not succeed without interagency assistance, but many confuse SOF's indirect approach with simply training foreign forces; something they believe the military—and even forces other than SOF—can handle alone for the most part. However, SOF's indirect approach is not equivalent to just providing military training. SOF work with foreign forces to achieve security objectives shared by foreign governments and ours in ways that are consistent with U.S. interests and values, something that requires intense interagency collaboration, particularly with the Department of State.<sup>25</sup>

Some may argue it will be impossible for USSOCOM to develop a refined interagency capacity to employ SOF indirectly against irregular threats through partnerships with other governments and their security forces. They will note the Department of State has the lead for security assistance, and that within embassies, the senior military representative on country teams is typically the defense attaché or security assistance officer, neither of whom typically come from SOF. Others may argue that special mission units are already taking the indirect approach to irregular threats in non-war zones and there is no need to see a similar capacity employed by Special Forces and others from the U.S. Army Special Operations Command. Finally, some may even argue that the Special Forces and U.S. Army Special Operations Command are not up to the task; that their culture is too insular and not innovative enough to emulate the interagency successes of special mission units.

None of these objections are compelling. It is true that USSOCOM's plans for a global SOF network have raised concerns in Congress and the Department of State.<sup>26</sup> McChrystal's initiatives also raised concerns. He "lacked a clear mandate to either build a network or get other organizations to join it," and "critics in different parts of the U.S. Government felt we were straying outside our traditional role." Yet he "saw no other organization weaving the kind of web that was needed" and he took responsibility for building a team that would embrace

---

<sup>24</sup> The author and others have made this argument in testimony to Congress.

<sup>25</sup> Christopher Jon Lamb, "The Future of U.S. Special Operations Forces," Testimony before the Emerging Threats and Capabilities Subcommittee, House Armed Services Committee, *U.S. House of Representatives*, July 11, 2012.

<sup>26</sup> Paul McLeary, "Lawmakers Skeptical of Global Spec Ops Plan," *Army Times*, August 10, 2013.

all activities necessary to generate desired outcomes.<sup>27</sup> Concerns in Congress and other national security organizations must be allayed, but in principle they are not insurmountable obstacles. For example, it is true that State has the lead for security assistance but there is nothing to prevent ambassadors from allowing SOF personnel to lead an interagency sub-group of the country team to deal with specific security threats in foreign countries. Ambassadors are also the senior U.S. officials in countries where special mission units operate using the direct approach, and that has not proven to be an impossible impediment.

Similarly, while it is true that defense attachés and security assistance officers traditionally are the senior military representatives on country teams, there is nothing to prevent the Department of Defense from recommending and sending SOF personnel to lead an interagency group charged with the mission of leading the overall U.S. support effort against an irregular threat in another country. While it may be true that special mission units are already operating against irregular threats in non-war zones, that does not mean they are the best choice to do so. Some even suggest special mission units pay lip service to the indirect approach to gain access in order to directly engage their terrorist targets. In any case, the argument made here is that the U.S. Army Special Operations Command would be a better choice for USSOCOM. It owns the SOF units best suited to the indirect approach, and should be the force providers for the Theater Special Operations Commands that oversee SOF operations for Geographic Commands. It remains to be determined whether the U.S. Army Special Operations Command and its Special Forces are inclined to take the lead in this area. If they are not, it should be a matter of some concern to USSOCOM since the indirect approach is an historic focus of Army Special Forces.

The Department of Defense and USSOCOM have detailed plans for implementing the global SOF network.<sup>28</sup> However, to emulate the interagency successes of the special mission units, they need to act upon the four prerequisites identified above. That means forging interagency relationships in Washington, D.C. to support greater collaboration in U.S. embassies between SOF and other departments and agencies, which McRaven is attempting to do through a Washington office dedicated to interagency collaboration.<sup>29</sup> It means having the U.S. Army Special Operations Command, which owns the SOF units best suited to the indirect approach, make interagency collaboration *the* critical priority for the command. It means making more resources available to that Command and in ways that would permit them to share resources with the Department of State and other U.S. national security organizations. It means that USSOCOM, and more specifically the U.S. Army Special Operations Command, will have to change their own organizational cultures to better support SOF's indirect approach and collaboration with other organizations like the Department of State. Finally, the nation, and perhaps SOCOM, would have to accept the risks associated with granting more latitude to embassy country teams and interagency groups operating out of them to achieve national objectives through indirect

---

<sup>27</sup> Ibid.

<sup>28</sup> Szayna, Thomas S. and William Welser, *Developing and Assessing Options for the Global SOF Network* (Santa Monica: RAND, 2013).

<sup>29</sup> Ibid; USSOCOM believes this office would be better able to work interagency collaboration than the extensive and somewhat unwieldy set of liaison officers parked in innumerable offices by special mission units.

means. All of these requirements would be difficult to pursue without the perceived collective urgency that was widely embraced after the terror attacks on September 11, 2001.

## Conclusion

The lessons from SOF and JIATF experience are much more easily identified than implemented. Many leaders, even those who have witnessed the efficacy of well-managed cross-organizational collaboration and understand its importance, would find it difficult to act upon the observations made here. Making collaboration the priority and changing one's own organization to facilitate collaboration is painful. It is far easier, and often safer, to promote the importance of collaboration without doing anything to irritate one's superiors or subordinates. Embracing an "end-to-end" mission approach that makes an organization and its leaders responsible for collective outcomes they cannot fully or easily control also is difficult and dangerous; as is delegating authority to lower levels where embarrassing mistakes may be made.

Yet these prerequisites for success are as necessary as they are difficult. Interagency success for SOF's indirect approach against capable adversaries is inconceivable without intense interagency collaboration, however difficult it may prove to be. To his great credit, General McChrystal realized this and had the leadership capacity to change his organization, its structure, processes and culture accordingly. It will be even more difficult for USSOCOM to achieve a similar success in its indirect approach to SOF missions through a global SOF network and interagency partnerships managed out of U.S. embassies overseas. But as is often observed, the first step in solving any problem is recognizing the nature of the problem and what is required to solve it. The rest is all disciplined, aggressive, and intelligent implementation, something USSOCOM, the U.S. Army Special Operations Command and Special Forces are capable of doing just as well as special mission units.

