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THESIS

**STRATEGIC USEFULNESS OF CONVENTIONAL
FORCE/SPECIAL OPERATIONS FORCE
INTERDEPENDENCE IN IRREGULAR WARFARE**

by

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June 2017

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**STRATEGIC USEFULNESS OF CONVENTIONAL FORCE/SPECIAL
OPERATIONS FORCE INTERDEPENDENCE IN IRREGULAR WARFARE**

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ABSTRACT

Over the past 15 years, the United States has been involved in many irregular conflicts worldwide. The most prominent of these conflicts occurred in Iraq and Afghanistan, where both conventional forces (CF) and special operations forces (SOF) were deployed on a large scale. As the United States attempted to figure out how to deal with these insurgencies and irregular threats, CF and SOF were often interdependent with one another. These interdependent operations often had tactical success, but strategic gains have proved elusive and it is unclear what effect these actions have had on SOF and their ability to counter irregular threats. Other conflicts, such as Operation Enduring Freedom-Philippines (OEF-P), only saw the employment of SOF to counter the irregular threats. This independent operation allowed SOF to remain flexible and bolster the Philippine government through an indirect approach. While interdependence is being applauded by both CF and SOF leaders from experiences in Iraq and Afghanistan, this thesis suggests that SOF may gain the greatest strategic utility in irregular wars when operating independently against irregular threats.

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LIST OF ACRONYMS AND ABBREVIATIONS

ASG	Abu Sayyaf Group
AUMF	Authorization for the Use of Military Force
BCT	Brigade Combat Team
CENTCOM	Central Command
CF	Conventional Forces
CIA	Central Intelligence Agency
COIN	Counterinsurgency
DOD	Department of Defense
EKIA	Enemy Killed in Action
GWOT	Global War on Terrorism
HN	Host Nation
IO	Information Operations
ISIS	Islamic State of Iraq and Syria
JI	Jemmah Islamiyah
JOPEs	Joint Operating Planning and Execution System
JRTC	Joint Readiness Training Center
JSOTF	Joint Special Operations Task Force
JTF	Joint Task Force
NATO	North Atlantic Treaty Organization
NCA	National Command Authority
OEF-A	Operation Enduring Freedom-Afghanistan
OEF-P	Operation Enduring Freedom-Philippines
OIF	Operation Iraqi Freedom
OIR	Operation Inherent Resolve
OND	Operation New Dawn
PACOM	Pacific Command
PSF	Philippine Security Forces
SECDEF	Secretary of Defense
SFG	Special Forces Group
SO	Special Operations

SOCOM	Special Operations Command
SOF	Special Operations Forces
SOTD	Special Operations Training Detachment
SR	Special Reconnaissance
TF	Task Force
U.S.	United States
USASOC	United States Army Special Operations Command
USSF	United States Special Forces
UW	Unconventional Warfare
VSO	Village Stability Operations
WAS	Wide Area Security
WMD	Weapons of Mass Destruction

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I. INTRODUCTION

There has been much discussion about the necessity of conventional forces (CF) and special operations forces (SOF) to be interdependent at the tactical and operational levels to accomplish strategic goals as the United States (U.S.) military begins to adapt to changing threats in the world. Sacolick and Grigsby note that the lack of interdependence “impedes the Army’s ability to operationally leverage the unique cultural capabilities of special operations and inculcate them across the conventional force.”¹ They state that CF/SOF interdependence will provide a seamless front to the adversaries of the United States.² The purpose of this thesis is to examine the impact on SOF strategic utility of interdependence with CFs at the tactical and operational levels. Our research question is: to what extent does CF/SOF interdependence enhance or undermine special operations (SO) effectiveness?

A. INTERDEPENDENCE DEFINED

While the Department of Defense (DOD) lacks an official definition of the term “interdependence,” this thesis defines the term as a relationship between entities that “rely on each other’s capabilities to maximize their respective capabilities.”³ This is an Army initiative focused on Army SOF and Army CF maneuver units only. Today at the Army’s Combat Training Centers, CF/SOF interdependence is often used to describe the close relationship between CFs and SOF at the tactical level and is often thought of as the “mission” itself. Interdependence is often a higher priority than other training objectives during major training exercises.⁴ An email from the Special Operations Training Detachment (SOTD) at the Joint Readiness Training Center (JRTC) to the U.S. Army

¹ Bennet S. Sacolick and Wayne W. Grigsby Jr., “Special Operations/Conventional Forces Interdependence: A Critical Role in ‘Prevent, Shape, Win,’” *Army Magazine* 62, no. 6 (June 2012): 39.

² *Ibid.*, 42.

³ Joint Chiefs of Staff, *Special Operations* (JP 3–05) (Washington, DC: 2014), I-6, http://www.dtic.mil/doctrine/new_pubs/jp3_05.pdf.

⁴ Both authors served at JRTC from March 2014 to December 2015. During their time as both Observer/Controller/Trainers and SOF planners they observed that CF/SOF interdependence was the top priority for SOF during training exercises. This interdependence most often occurred at the tactical level.

Special Operations Command (USASOC) titled, “ARSOF 16–04 JRTC Storyboard/ Rotational Summary,” discusses the importance:

In my assessment, AOB [Advanced Operating Base] 1230, 1st SFG [Special Forces Group] (A) delivered the best SOF effects I’ve seen at JRTC in the past two years. AOB 1230 Integration with the 4/25 IBCT [Infantry Brigade Combat Team] was excellent from the start, with the AOB commander constantly displaying a comprehensive understanding of the BCT commander’s intent and how SOF could contribute complementary and reinforcing effects ISO [in support of] the Joint Force Commander’s overall plan. Additionally, 4/25 IBCT commander enabled SOF to include providing fires, AWT [attack weapons team], and logistics. I believe key to this successful SOF-CF relationship started with enthusiastic AOB leadership attendance at IPCs [initial planning conference], Leader Training Program, and effective early LNO [liaison officer] exchange. Overall, a superb rotation that accomplished all ARSOF [Army SOF], CF, and I3 [interdependence, integration, and interoperability] training objectives.⁵

In the official storyboard for Rotation 16–06 created by the SOTD at the JRTC under the section “What,” it states, “Conducted SOF Mission Command, Unconventional Warfare (UW), Network Development, Operational Preparation of the Environment, *SOF/CF Interdependence*, Integration, and Interoperability (I3).”⁶ This shows the level of importance that interdependence is given. It is placed on the same level of importance as the conduct of UW. The training summaries for these exercises often stress CF/SOF interdependence over core mission training objectives.⁷ Interdependence is often used as a task to be accomplished instead of a command relationship based on a mission requirements. For the purposes of this thesis, interdependence will be used to describe the relationship between SOF and CF maneuver units. While SOF may utilize non-SOF assets and support units for transportation and logistics, the term CF/SOF interdependence primarily refers to the relationship of SOF and other CF maneuver units.

⁵ Special Operations Training Detachment, email message to USASOC, March 2, 2016.

⁶ Special Operations Training Detachment, “Special Operations Training Detachment Storyboard JRTC 16–06,” personal communication, April 2016, emphasis added.

⁷ Special Operations Training Detachment, “ARSOF JRTC Rotation 16–06 UW/DATE,” personal communication, April 2016.

B. SOF ROLES

SOF, according to USASOC, has two critical capabilities: special warfare and surgical strike. Special warfare, is defined in ARSOF 2022, as:

The execution of activities that involve a combination of lethal and non-lethal actions taken by specially trained and educated forces that have a deep understanding of cultures and foreign language, proficiency in small-unit tactics, subversion, sabotage and the ability to build and fight alongside indigenous combat formations in a permissive, uncertain or hostile environment.⁸

The key to this definition is the phrase “fight alongside indigenous combat formations.” This implies that SOF is interdependent with their partner forces and relies on them for mission accomplishment.

SOF also conducts unilateral, surgical strike missions, often deep in denied territory like the Osama bin Laden raid in Pakistan or counterterrorism raids in Yemen. “Surgical strike” is defined as “The execution of activities in a precise manner that employ SOF in hostile, denied or politically sensitive environments to seize, destroy, capture, exploit, recover or damage designated targets, or influence threats.”⁹ Due to the time sensitivity, secrecy, and strategic value of these operations, they tend to be independent of CFs. This independence has allowed surgical strike elements, specifically Joint Special Operations Command to become very effective and efficient in their application of force at the tactical level.

SOF conducts a broad range of missions. Special reconnaissance (SR), defined as “reconnaissance and surveillance actions normally conducted in a clandestine or covert manner to collect or verify information of strategic or operational significance, employing military capabilities *not normally found in CF*,” is normally conducted independent of CFs.¹⁰ Although SR may support CF operations at the strategic level, there is little to no tactical dependence on CFs to conduct the SR mission. UW is defined

⁸ United States Army Special Operations Command, “ARSOF 2022,” *Special Warfare* (April – June 2013): 10, http://www.soc.mil/SWCS/SWmag/archive/SW2602/SW_2602.pdf.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 10.

¹⁰ Joint Chiefs of Staff, *Special Operations*, II-5 – II-6, emphasis added.

as “activities that are conducted to enable a resistance movement or insurgency to coerce, disrupt, or overthrow a government or occupying power by operating through or with an underground, auxiliary, and guerrilla force in a *denied area*.”¹¹ Implicit in both of these missions is a recognition of a high degree of independence from CF units due to the fact that these operations can be compromised by the presence of CFs.

C. CF ROLES

CFs represent one view of, as Russell Weigley described it, “the American way of war.” This involves using brute force to crush an adversary on the battlefield.¹² As FM 3–0 states, “These operations aim to defeat the enemy’s armed forces and eliminate the enemy’s military capability.”¹³ CFs use their two core competencies, combined arms maneuver and wide area security, to accomplish their missions.¹⁴ This type of warfare is predominantly fought involving nation-states and coalitions.¹⁵ Due to CF’s organizational structure, they deploy much larger elements, with the BCT being the smallest element that can be deployed independently.¹⁶ FM 3–90.6, states:

Heavy Infantry, and Stryker Brigade Combat Teams are the Army’s combat power building blocks for maneuver and the smallest combined arms units that can be committed independently. BCT’s conduct offensive, defensive, stability and civil support operations. Their core mission is to close with the enemy by means of fire and maneuver to destroy or capture enemy forces, or to repel enemy attacks by fire, close combat, and counterattack.¹⁷

¹¹ Ibid., II-8, emphasis added.

¹² Russell F. Weigley, *The American Way of War: A History of United States Military Strategy and Policy*, (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1973), 475.

¹³ Department of the Army, *Operations* (FM 3–0), (2008), 2–2.

¹⁴ Department of the Army, *Unified Land Operations* (ADP 3–0), (October 2011), 5.

¹⁵ Department of the Army, *Operations*, 2–2.

¹⁶ A typical Infantry BCT consists of three infantry battalions, a cavalry squadron, an artillery battalion, an engineer battalion, a support battalion, and a BCT headquarters company. The total number of personnel in an infantry BCT is approximately 4,400.

¹⁷ Department of the Army, *Brigade Combat Team* (FM 3–90.6) (Washington, DC: Department of the Army, 2010), 1–1, http://www.apd.army.mil/epubs/DR_pubs/DR_a/pdf/web/fm3_96.pdf.

D. INTERDEPENDENCE DISCUSSION

As previously noted, there is rarely an advantage for interdependence in surgical strike. Why is there a need for interdependence in special warfare? Lamb and Tucker make the argument that direct action missions have more in common with conventional force operations.¹⁸ If this is the case, why would two forces, with very different missions, need to depend upon one another?

Even though SOF units conducting special warfare have different missions, specialized training, and equipment, they have integrated at all levels with CFs. Since September 11, 2001 (9/11), SOF and CFs have been closely tied during operations. In Iraq, Marine and Army CFs “owned” the battlespace while SOF often lived and conducted direct action missions inside this area.¹⁹ In Afghanistan, CFs, down to the battalion level in some cases, had operational control of SOF for certain missions.²⁰ While this relationship is applauded by both SOF and CF leadership, little has been done to examine whether this is good for national defense. As FM 3–0 notes, “Major combat operations, for instance, differ distinctly from counterinsurgency operations...Different themes usually demand different approaches and force packages.”²¹

Interdependence implies that SOF are reliant upon CFs to complete their mission and vice versa. It is hard to imagine that they must always be tied to one another, especially before a mission analysis has been accomplished. Interdependence may not be the best organizing principle in all situations. This thesis will explore the utility of CF/SOF interdependence.

Interdependence ties SOF to the Joint Operation Planning and Execution System (JOPES) and the CF planning cycle. Joint military operations use JOPES to plan and

¹⁸ David Tucker and Chris Lamb, *United States Special Operations Forces* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2007), 159.

¹⁹ Kevin A. Christie, “Synchronizing Chaos: Command and Control of Special Operations and Conventional Forces in Shared Battlespace,” (monograph, Naval War College, 2006), 7 – 8.

²⁰ Grant M. Martin, “Special Operations and Conventional Forces: How to Improve Unity of Effort Using Afghanistan as a Case Study,” (monograph, School of Advanced Military Studies United States Army Command and General Staff College, 2009), 20.

²¹ Department of the Army, *Operations*, 2–3.

execute their deployments and operations. This system is the integration of computer software systems, policies, procedures, and formats for conducting operations.²² The *User's Guide for JOPES* states, "JOPES governs all aspects of conventional joint military operations planning and execution."²³ This system uses an extended timeline and is generally used for conventional warfare, planning, and training, but may not be useful in the conduct of defeating or deterring irregular threats.²⁴

E. THREATS

For the purposes of this thesis, we will focus on the relationship of SOF and Army CF maneuver units during the Global War on Terror (GWOT). While the term "overseas contingency operations" is currently used in place of GWOT, the GWOT will be used as an umbrella term to describe the case studies analyzed in this thesis. The GWOT encompasses many operations after 9/11 that involved both conventional and irregular warfare. According to the *Irregular Warfare Joint Operating Concept*, conventional warfare is "a form of warfare between states that employs direct military confrontation to defeat an adversary's armed forces, destroy and adversary's war-making capacity, or seize or retain territory in order to force a change in an adversary's government or policies."²⁵ Irregular warfare is "a violent struggle among state and non-state actors for legitimacy and influence over a population. This broad form of conflict has insurgency, counterinsurgency, and unconventional warfare as the principal activities."²⁶ Irregular warfare can also occur as state-on-state conflict. Hybrid warfare is generally thought of as the application of both conventional and irregular warfare. The *Irregular Warfare Joint*

²² Joint Chiefs of Staff, *User's Guide for JOPES* (Joint Operation Planning and Execution System) (Washington, DC: 1995), ii, <http://www.dtic.mil/doctrine/doctrine/other/jopes.pdf>.

²³ Ibid., i.

²⁴ The User's Guide for JOPES describes the use of JOPES as a tool primarily for conventional forces. Due to their larger footprint, logistical considerations, and budget concerns, JOPES is a system that is useful in planning and executing conventional joint operations. There is not mention of SOF utilizing JOPES in the User's Guide for JOPES, JP 3-05, and JP 3-35. The irregular nature of SOF operations, small footprint, and potential necessity for non-standard deployment techniques require greater flexibility for SOF deployments.

²⁵ Department of Defense, *Irregular Warfare Joint Operating Concept* (Washington, DC: 2007), 7 – 8, http://www.dtic.mil/doctrine/concepts/joint_concepts/joc_iw_v1.pdf.

²⁶ Department of the Army, *Operations*, 2–9.

Operating Concept states that most conflicts involve elements of both conventional and irregular warfare.²⁷

1. Current Threats

Due to the advanced technology of the U.S. military, its large budget, and the geographical location of the country, the United States faces more irregular threats than ever before. Most adversarial nations do not want to confront the United States in a state-on-state conventional conflict. Vietnam, Iraq, and Afghanistan all increased their chances of success against the United States by employing irregular and hybrid strategies.

Currently the United States and the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) are facing threats from both nation-states and non-state actors that use irregular warfare. Russia has been conducting hybrid warfare in Eastern Europe against non-NATO members such as Ukraine using all elements of national power.²⁸ Russia also conducted threatening acts against the U.S. Navy and, according to intelligence agencies, even attempted to influence the presidential election in 2016.²⁹ While Russia's attempt to weaken NATO is being conducted by a nation state, they are utilizing political, hybrid, and irregular warfare and tactics to accomplish their strategic goals. Concurrently, the conflict in Iraq and Syria continues against Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) and other rebel/insurgent groups vying for power in the region. ISIS, specifically, has expanded geographically through a massive information operations (IO) campaign and has gained loyalty from other terrorist organizations such as Boko Haram in Nigeria and Abu Sayyaf Group (ASG) in the Philippines.³⁰

²⁷ Department of Defense, *Irregular Warfare*, 10.

²⁸ Michael Kofman, "Russian Hybrid Warfare and Other Dark Arts," *War on the Rocks*, March 11, 2016, <https://warontherocks.com/2016/03/russian-hybrid-warfare-and-other-dark-arts/>.

²⁹ Larry Diamond, "The Most Urgent Questions about the Russia Hacks," *The Atlantic*, December 21, 2016, <https://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2016/12/russia-hacking-election/511379/>.

³⁰ Fred Lambert, "Nigeria's Boko Haram pledges allegiance to Islamic State," *UPI*, March 7, 2015, http://www.upi.com/Top_News/World-News/2015/03/07/Nigerias-Boko-Haram-pledges-allegiance-to-Islamic-State/4641425760604/.

2. Future Trends

In an article in the *Military Review*, Paul Scharre argues that there will be a decrease in traditional maneuver warfare and an increase in counterinsurgency (COIN), stability operations, “hybrid threats,” and counter Anti-Access/Area Denial operations.³¹ There certainly has been a general trend in recent decades where conventional conflicts are rare. The article also states, “Traditional maneuver warfare against conventional militaries is not the most sophisticated challenge U.S. forces may face.”³² This also may be true if current trends continue. The article argues that there will be a rise in irregular warfare, insurgency, and terrorism.³³ All of this is occurring now with Russian aggression in Europe, terrorism by al-Shabab in Somalia, and by ISIS in the Middle East and North Africa. Conventional conflicts are on the decline and U.S. forces will need to contend with low to mid-intensity conflicts with actions including: direct action, COIN, training and advising, and anti-terrorism operations.³⁴

³¹ Paul Scharre, “Spectrum of What?” *Military Review* 92, no. 6 (November – December 2012): 73 – 79.

³² Ibid., 75.

³³ Ibid., 76.

³⁴ Joel P. Ellison and Daniel G. Hodermarsky, “Conventional and Special Operations Forces Integration at the Operational Level,” (master’s thesis, Naval Postgraduate School, 2012), 7.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

The DOD's mission is "to provide the military forces needed to deter war and to protect the security of our country."³⁵ While the DOD has multiple services, Army, Navy, Marines, Air Force, and Coast Guard (during wartime), they also possess special capabilities and expertise in functional commands, (e.g., Special Operation Command [SOCOM], Transportation Command, and Strategic Command). Each service and function was created for a specific purpose. A thorough mission analysis should result in a plan specifically developed to meet military objectives to include the forces and other resources necessary for success. Deciding force structure prior to a mission analysis can lead to doing the wrong things on the ground.

In 1986, the U.S. Congress saw the need for better integration of the armed services and passed the Goldwater-Nichols Act. This act flattened the chain of command and essentially gave civilian leadership greater oversight over the military. This act was passed after the mission failure and national embarrassment of Operation Eagle Claw, the hostage rescue attempt in Iran in 1980, and the invasion of Grenada that saw many inter-service rivalries play out. The role of the Joint Chiefs of Staff changed from one of command to the primary military advisers "To the President, the National Security Council, the Homeland Security Council, and the Secretary of Defense."³⁶ Additionally, the act also reorganized the chain of command from the President to the Secretary of Defense (SECDEF) to the combatant commanders. This allowed combatant commanders to command elements from all services without concerns about service equities. In 1987 the Nunn-Cohen Act, an amendment to the Goldwater-Nichols Act, created the U.S. SOCOM as a functional combatant command. Because of the uniqueness of training, equipment, and mission, SOCOM now has combatant command authority of all SOF forces from all services, around the world.

³⁵ "About the Department of Defense (DOD)," *United States Department of Defense*, <http://www.defense.gov/About-DOD>, accessed August 16, 2016.

³⁶ Joint Chiefs of Staff, 10 USC Ch. 5 §151. <http://uscode.house.gov/view.xhtml?path=/prelim@title10/subtitleA/part1/chapter5&edition=prelim>.

A. INTERDEPENDENCE AS A PRIORITY

Interdependence between CFs and SOF is more prevalent now than at any other time since the creation of SOCOM. As CFs in Iraq and Afghanistan withdrew, military leaders began to codify lessons and tactics used over the last 15 years. Guidance, such as SOCOM 2020, ARSOF 2022, Force 2025, and the Chairman's Strategic Direction to the Joint Force all place a heavy emphasis on the interdependence between CFs and SOF. JP 3–05 states, "SOF and CF often share the same operational areas for extended periods when they are mutually reliant on each other's capabilities."³⁷ The Chairman's Strategic Direction to the Joint Force states, "We are also increasing our effectiveness by more deliberately integrating Special Operations Forces."³⁸ ARSOF 2022 has also placed SOF/CF/Joint Interagency Intergovernmental Multinational interdependence as its second priority for USASOC.³⁹ This need for interdependence is largely driven by the military's focus on attempting to counter hybrid threats that employ both regular and irregular means of warfare.

The predominant literature discussing CF/SOF interdependence comes from within the military ranks. As Combat Training Centers, such as the JRTC and the National Training Center, begin to incorporate more opportunities for interdependence in their training exercises, more literature is written on how to successfully integrate the two entities.⁴⁰ These recommendations are often made without identifying a scenario in which interdependence may or may not be necessary. In 2014, the JRTC Special Operations Training Detachment published an article, "Institutionalizing Interdependence: the Mindset Change for the Future Operational Environment." While this article mentions the reason for CF/SOF interdependence "to present a seamless front

³⁷ Joint Chiefs of Staff, *Special Operations*, III-23.

³⁸ Joint Chiefs of Staff, *Chairman's 2nd Term Strategic Direction to the Joint Force*, 6, http://www.jcs.mil/Portals/36/Documents/CJCS_2nd_Term_Strategic_Direction.pdf.

³⁹ United States Army Special Operations Command, "ARSOF 2022," 18.

⁴⁰ Most of the literature discussing CF/SOF interdependence address how to do it better. There has been little to no literature addressing whether interdependence enhances SOF's strategic utility.

to adversaries,” it largely focuses on the “how?” interdependence should be conducted.⁴¹ This view on the integration of the two forces does not specify an endstate and does not address the need for interdependence. The article also assumes that CFs are needed whenever SOF is employed to address a potential threat. This article, like many others, draws guidance from the previously mentioned articles and moves forward with ways to better integrate CFs and SOF, as opposed to examining the effectiveness of the interdependence.

In 2012, Joel Ellison and Daniel Hodermarsky wrote a master’s thesis on “Conventional and Special Operations Forces Integration at the Operational Level” while at the Naval Postgraduate School. Ellison and Hodermarsky came to three conclusions:

1. Integration should be determined by the task, not the unit.
2. Integrated operations require a dedicated staff at the JTF [Joint Task Force] level.
3. The supported/supporting command relationship is most appropriate and should be determined by task.⁴²

The research assigned ratings (-1 negative effect, 0 no effect, and 1 positive effect) to each task that could be integrated by CF and SOF. These ratings determined the benefit on the overall mission by integrating the forces. The two hypothetical examples in this work produced only 1s and 0s, implying that there was no downside to interdependence.

B. INDEPENDENT OPERATIONS

In an article in *Parameters*, U.S. Army War College Journal, Jeffrey Record asserts that the United States has a fairly consistent track record of combatting large conventional foes well but fails to see the same success when the United States combats a “weaker” irregular force.⁴³ CFs are largely organized to fight conventional wars and SOF is largely designed to combat irregular threats. This does not preclude CFs from

⁴¹ Henry Lawrence, “Institutionalizing Interdependence: The Mindset Change for the Future Operational Environment,” *Special Warfare*, April-June 2014, http://www.soc.mil/SWCS/SWmag/archive/SW2702/APR-JUN_2014.pdf.

⁴² Ellison and Hodermarsky, “Conventional and Special Operations Forces,” 61.

⁴³ Jeffrey Record, “Why the Strong Lose,” *Parameters: U.S. Army War College Quarterly* 35, no. 4 (Winter 2005–06): 16.

supporting SOF in an irregular conflict when mission requirements dictate. Record references Arreguín-Toft's claim. He also asserts that because the guerrilla or insurgent can use the population as "camouflage" and therefore "shields irregular forces from the potentially catastrophic consequences of the enemy's firepower superiority and compels the enemy to inflict politically self-defeating collateral damage on the civilian population."⁴⁴ As a consequence of this inverse relationship of power and advantage in a guerilla war, Record states, "the guerilla can win simply by not losing, whereas the counterinsurgent power can lose simply by not winning."⁴⁵

In the history of the United States, there are examples of CFs successfully combatting irregular threats. The United States did fairly well against the Native Americans during the 17th – 19th centuries, and in the Philippines and Central America during the 19th and early 20th century.⁴⁶ Their record in the GWOT against irregular threats appears to be less successful. Due to the complexities of irregular warfare, coupled with a high reliance on technology, the conventional military does not possess the "special skills" and mindset to defeat an enemy in an irregular or unconventional manner.⁴⁷ In the same article Record notes that a 2005 RAND study stated that if the U.S. military wanted to conduct COIN then they would need to do it with a force trained for SO.⁴⁸

Ivan Arreguín-Toft claims that the reason the "weak win wars" is that both sides of a conflict, the strong side and the weak side, have only two potential strategies.⁴⁹ The strong side can conduct attacks against the weak side's military strength or conduct aggressive acts of violence that demoralizes the weak side's will to fight. The weak side can conduct the same attacks against the strong side's military strength or conduct

⁴⁴ Ibid., 20.

⁴⁵ Ibid., 20.

⁴⁶ Michael O'Hanlon, "America's History of Counterinsurgency," Brookings, accessed June 10, 2017, https://www.brookings.edu/wp-content/uploads/2016/06/06_counterinsurgency_ohanlon.pdf.

⁴⁷ Record, "Why the Strong Lose," 26.

⁴⁸ Ibid., 30.

⁴⁹ Ivan Arreguín-Toft, "How the Weak Win Wars: A Theory of Asymmetrical Conflict," *International Security* 26, no. 1 (Summer 2001): 107 – 109.

protracted guerilla warfare and erode the strong side resources and political will to continue. He states four hypotheses and tests his theories with historical evidence.

Arreguín-Toft Hypotheses:

1. When strong actors attack using a direct strategy and weak actors defend using a direct strategy, all other things being equal, strong actors should win quickly and decisively.
2. When strong actors attack with a direct strategy and weak actors defend using an indirect strategy, all other things being equal, weak actors should win.
3. When strong actors attack using an indirect strategy and weak actors defend using a direct strategy, all other things being equal, strong actors should lose.
4. When strong actors employ barbarism to attack weak actors defending with a GWS [Guerrilla Warfare Strategy], all other things being equal, strong actors should win.⁵⁰

Arreguín-Toft's conclusion is that the United States must prepare its population for protracted wars when they are asymmetrical in nature, even though the United States may have a technological and force advantage. He states that the United States must be prepared to conduct COIN operations and that SO are best suited for this kind of conflict because of their self-reliant and discriminate nature.⁵¹ He additionally notes that "The United States must be prepared to fight and win both conventional and asymmetric or 'small' wars. The strategic interaction thesis shows why the two missions demand two kinds of armed forces: one to defend U.S. interests in conventional wars, and one to defend the United States in asymmetric wars."⁵² The United States often prefers to fight using a quantitative approach with large CFs using overwhelming firepower to defeat an enemy, regardless of the context.⁵³ While CFs are often the obvious choice to defeat conventional adversaries, Arreguín-Toft's hypothesis seems to indicate that the deployment of CFs in a conventional manner to combat an irregular threat would be the wrong strategy.

⁵⁰ Ibid., 107 – 109.

⁵¹ Ibid., 123.

⁵² Ibid.

⁵³ Hy S. Rothstein, "Less is More: the problematic future of irregular warfare in an era of collapsing states," *Third World Quarterly* 28, no. 2 (2007): 276.

Edward Luttwak notes that there are two types of warfare, “attrition” and “relational-maneuver.”⁵⁴ In attrition warfare there is a more inward focus for efficient internal processes to more effectively train, equip, deploy, and resupply forces to combat the enemy. Attrition-based militaries are less flexible and tend to fight based on doctrine and standard operating procedures. In relational-maneuver, there is much more focus externally. In this form of warfare the forces focus on adapting to the enemy, terrain, and the political environment. Luttwak argues that U.S. CFs are largely attrition based while U.S. Special Forces (USSF) is a relational-maneuver force. His solution is to address the threat with the proper force in the most appropriate manner.⁵⁵

Colin Gray describes the strategic importance of special operations as equal to that of any of the other traditional kinds of military power, (e.g., land, sea, or air). He states that this is “to indicate a distinctiveness for these operations which warrants the treatment accorded them here.”⁵⁶ He offers a definition for special operations activities as, “an infinite realm of missions for which special operations forces provide the capabilities most likely to achieve tactical success for strategic utility.”⁵⁷ The unique nature of SOF provides the national command authorities (NCA) with a variety of options to accomplish U.S. strategic objectives. In an article in *Parameters* he identifies eleven “Categories of Conditions for Success,” one of these conditions is an “absence of alternatives.”⁵⁸ Gray claims that, “SOF prosper when conventional operations are prohibited by political factors, ruled out as too expensive, or otherwise deemed inappropriate.”⁵⁹ This would appear congruent to the previous statements by Gray about the unique role that SOF play in national security issues. Many factors such as time constraints, political restrictions imposed by the United States or other countries, or

⁵⁴ Edward Luttwak, “Notes on Low-Intensity Warfare,” *Parameters: U.S. Army War College Quarterly* 13, no. 4 (December 1983): 333 – 342.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 339 – 341.

⁵⁶ Colin Gray, *Explorations in Strategy*, (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1996), 145.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 151.

⁵⁸ Colin Gray, “Handfuls of Heroes on Desperate Ventures: When do Special Operations Succeed,” *Parameters: U.S. Army War College Quarterly* 29, no. 1 (Spring 1999): 3.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 11.

perhaps the nature of the mission itself may not lend itself to the strengths of CFs. He states that SOF should thrive when traditional warfare wanes, but offers a sobering conclusion, “Of course, an America convinced that it will enjoy ‘dominant battlespace knowledge’ for the near-immaculate conduct of precise, information-led, ‘networked,’ conventional war for the next half century or so may well be an America underpersuaded of the cost-effectiveness of irregular operations.”⁶⁰

Lamb and Tucker assert that SOF provides more strategic utility when they operate independent from CFs.⁶¹ “These observations suggest that over the past decade SOCOM’s strategic concept for SOF should have put relatively more emphasis on independent SOF missions rather than support to conventional force operations.”⁶² They also argue that the original concept for SOCOM was to preclude a large scale war involving CFs. In chapter 5 they quote John Collins, who is referencing a Department of Defense Authorization Act:

The Congress finds that...the special operations forces of the Armed Forces provide the United States with immediate and primary capability to respond to terrorism; and the special operations forces are the military mainstay of the United States for the purposes of nation-building and training friendly foreign forces in order to preclude deployment or combat involving the conventional or strategic forces of the United States.⁶³

They acknowledge that SOF can be either in a supported or supporting role to CF. SOF’s strategic value is greater when operating independently. When SOF is in a supporting role, CF leaders tend to use them in a direct action manner that degrades their overall strategic effectiveness because only tactical level effects are enhanced. SOF’s indirect missions provide much more strategic contribution, when supporting CFs, than

⁶⁰ Ibid.

⁶¹ Independent SOF operations do not preclude CF support to SOF when SOF is the supported command. This includes direct support to maneuver elements, close air support, close combat aviation, transportation, and logistics.

⁶² Tucker and Lamb, *United States Special Operations Forces*, 164.

⁶³ Section 1453, Department of Defense Authorization Act, 1986 (P.L. 99–145; 99 Stat. 760) (July 1985): quoted in John M. Collins, *Special Operations Forces: An Assessment* (Washington, DC.: National Defense University Press, 1994).

the direct approaches because it is not easily substituted by CFs.⁶⁴ No other military force possesses these unique skills and therefore the potential for greater strategic utility. In summary, whether using the direct or indirect approach, SOF provide greater strategic utility when conducting operations independent of CF. Also, the greatest strategic utility arise when independent SO are conducted in an indirect manner.

C. SUMMARY

The literature review shows a variety of thoughts on the notion of CFs and SOF conducting interdependent operations. The two perspectives offer differing points of view on the application of force across the spectrum of conflict and the methodologies for fighting and winning the nation's wars and conducting other operations. While CF/SOF interdependence offers advantages, there are also disadvantages to integrating these forces, especially for SOF.

Advantages of CF/SOF interdependence include enhanced effectiveness and situational awareness for CFs. Because SOF is often on the ground in many countries prior to the beginning of hostilities, the knowledge and intelligence gained by SOF can greatly improve CF's operational capability if deployed to defeat an adversary. Their ability to collaborate, share information, and provide lessons learned can have a positive effect and give CFs an operational edge. This is usually accomplished at the strategic level and does not require interdependence. When SOF are deployed prior to hostilities, they are working independent of CFs in almost every instance. Closing the "seam" that could be exploited by the U.S.'s adversaries is also a top priority of the NCA. Interdependence is seen as a way of combining forces to provide a seamless front to those adversaries. SOF can be used in a supporting role to enhance CF operations and SOF can also be used in a supported role, primarily against irregular threats.

Arreguín-Toft makes the case that when a strong actor attacks, using a direct strategy, against a weak actor, using an indirect strategy, that the weak actor should win.⁶⁵ Luttwak argues that USSF is a relational-maneuver force and they are properly

⁶⁴ Tucker and Lamb, *United States Special Operations Forces*, 161.

⁶⁵ Arreguín-Toft, "How the Weak Win Wars," 107 – 109.

designed to counter irregular threats.⁶⁶ He states that they should operate independently in order to properly counter unique threats. Colin Gray discusses the “absence of alternatives” and how the lack of options may provide strategic utility for SOF operating in irregular warfare environments.⁶⁷ Based on this literature review, we have derived three hypotheses to examine the impact of CF/SOF interdependence on SOF’s strategic utility.

D. HYPOTHESIS

The recent experiences in Afghanistan and Iraq propelled CF/SOF interdependence to the forefront of military doctrinal modernization. The latest literature published within SOCOM and other sources state that interdependence is as a priority for presenting a “seamless front on the battlefield.”⁶⁸ It is rarely articulated why it must be done and what operational need CF/SOF interdependence fills. In determining whether SOF and CF should conduct interdependent operations, this research will determine what strategic utility, if any, is gained or lost by SOF when interdependent with CFs.

This thesis poses three hypotheses:

1. Interdependent CF/SOF operations conventionalizes SOF and results in increased tactical utility over strategic utility.
2. Independent special operations against irregular threats have the greatest likelihood of success resulting in high strategic utility for SOF.
3. Irregular threats are usually best countered by irregular strategies and capabilities.

These hypotheses will be tested in each of the case studies to determine their validity.

⁶⁶ Luttwak, “Notes on Low-Intensity Warfare,” 340 – 341.

⁶⁷ Gray, “Handfuls of Heroes,” 3.

⁶⁸ Sacolick and Grigsby, “Special Operations/Conventional Forces,” 42.

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III. METHODOLOGY

CF/SOF interdependence has become a bedrock belief without and serious analysis or discussion regarding its necessity.⁶⁹ This thesis will focus on the potential outcome CF/SOF interdependence has on SO effectiveness. Has the focus on CF/SOF interdependence increased or decreased the ability of the U.S. military to offer flexible options to the NCA? Interdependence between CFs and SOF can provide enhanced tactical effects, but those tactical effects may undermine SOF's strategic utility.

A. CASE STUDY SELECTION

The creation of SOCOM in 1987 gave SOF the command and control capability to conduct independent and supported operations. Since the beginning of the GWOT, this capability has been exercised multiple times as well as SOF being the supporting command. The conflicts during the GWOT were the first campaigns, of a long duration, that saw the heavy use of both CFs and SOF operating in the same battlespace. This wide variety of operations during the GWOT, may provide the most relevant cases to examine SOF's strategic utility when interdependent with CFs under the SOCOM structure.

The growing demand for CF/SOF interdependence took on great importance as a result of the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. During Operation Enduring Freedom Afghanistan (OEF-A) and Operation Iraqi Freedom (OIF), CFs and SOF operated in the same battlespace. The length of the conflicts (still ongoing in both theaters) also played a role in the relationship between CFs and SOF. CFs and SOF would often train together during pre-mission preparation prior to deployments. Since the demand for more interdependence grew out of these conflicts, the case studies selected will focus on campaigns associated with the GWOT: Afghanistan, Iraq, and the Philippines. The campaigns in both Iraq and Afghanistan were very visible conflicts that saw the heavy use of both CFs and SOF. The campaign in the Philippines, on the other hand, was less

⁶⁹ The storyboards and rotational summaries from JRTC, presented in CH. I, provide evidence that CF/SOF interdependence is being programmed into training exercises and scenarios throughout the Army. JRTC is tasked to provide the most realistic and relevant training for Army BCTs. JRTC will incorporate new trends and guidance provided by the Forces Command and the Chief of Staff of the Army.

visible to the public. CFs did not participate in Operation Enduring Freedom-Philippines (OEF-P) due to force constraints imposed by the Philippine government.⁷⁰ All three cases have unique characteristics that will help provide a balanced approach for the analysis.

B. RESEARCH APPROACH

The cases will be analyzed using the three hypotheses identified in Chapter II and a structured focus comparison analysis.⁷¹ By using this comparison model in the three distinct cases, an effective and objective analysis can be undertaken. Each case study will provide multiple scenarios where both SOF and CFs were employed both independent and interdependent with one another. The thesis will then analyze the effects that interdependence had on SOF's strategic utility.

Depending on the type of conflict: conventional, irregular, or a combination, one may choose to use CFs, SOF, or a mixture. This thesis will examine if SOF is most effective when operating independent or interdependent with CFs.

⁷⁰ Rothstein, "Less is More," 283.

⁷¹ Alexander George and Andrew Bennett, *Case Studies and Theory Development in the Social Sciences* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2005), 67 – 68.

IV. GLOBAL WAR ON TERRORISM CASE STUDY

Shortly after the attacks on the United States on 9/11, President George W. Bush began referring to the fight against al-Qaeda and their associates as the “war on terror.” This name was quickly adopted throughout the Pentagon and other agencies and so began the GWOT. The idea solidified so strongly that a special medal was created to award military service members participating in the conflict: the GWOT Service Medal. The president also received an Authorization for the Use of Military Force against Terrorists (AUMF), which became law on September 18, 2001. This authorization gave the president a wide berth to conduct military operations against al-Qaeda, its affiliates, and the nations or organizations that harbor them throughout the world.⁷²

The AUMF generated several new and different campaigns: OEF-A, OIF, and OEF-P. There were also smaller, less visible campaigns such as OEF-Horn of Africa, OEF-Caribbean and Central America, etc. Some ongoing missions even changed their names to reflect a fight against terrorism in order to garner support and funding for their cause. As the United States was still reeling from the attacks on 9/11, President Bush and the Pentagon had overwhelming support from the American people and Congress to find and eliminate terrorists and enemies of the United States wherever the government saw fit. The President and SECDEF wanted a swift and aggressive response against al-Qaeda and the Taliban in Afghanistan.⁷³

To include a wide array of force employment, strategy, and tactics, this thesis will focus on three campaigns of the GWOT: Afghanistan (OEF-A), Iraq (OIF, Operation New Dawn [OND], and Operation Inherent Resolve [OIR]), and the Philippines (OEF-P). The GWOT is largely responsible for creating the desire for more interdependence, therefore assessing the validity of this decision requires a look at the evidence. These conflicts give many examples of the employment of only SOF, SOF and CFs working in

⁷² To authorize the use of the United States Armed Forces against those responsible for the recent attacks launched against the United States (Joint Resolution), Pub. L. No. 107-40 (2001), <https://www.gpo.gov/fdsys/pkg/PLAW-107publ40/pdf/PLAW-107publ40.pdf>.

⁷³ Rothstein, “Less is More,” 287.

different battlespace, and SOF and CFs working closely in the same battlespace. This will provide a balanced analysis of the strategic utility of CF/SOF interdependence in irregular warfare.

A. AFGHANISTAN

Immediately following the attacks on 9/11, the U.S. military began developing plans to invade Afghanistan, overthrow the Taliban, and take away the safe haven provided to al-Qaeda and its leader, Osama bin Laden.⁷⁴ The first plan presented to the SECDEF, Donald Rumsfeld, called for a six-month prep time and a deployment of around 60,000 conventional troops.⁷⁵ Special Operations Command Central had little input in the initial plan. Not happy with the initial plan presented by Central Command (CENTCOM) and wanting boots on the ground immediately, Rumsfeld and President Bush approved a “bold strategy that would rely on massive amounts of U.S. air power and small numbers of U.S. commandos to strengthen the Northern Alliance, which had been fighting the fundamentalist fanatics of the Taliban for years with scant results.”⁷⁶ This plan was developed by the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) but it was CENTCOM who had to implement it.⁷⁷

1. Initial Invasion

The plan approved by the president and SECDEF entailed a largely UW campaign involving the CIA ground branch, USSF, Navy SEALs, U.S. Air Force Combat Control Teams, and supported by air power. The CIA was the first on the ground to make initial contact with the Northern Alliance, followed by a Joint Special Operations Task Force (JSOTF) from 5th SFG that would operate in northern Afghanistan. The Navy SEALs

⁷⁴ Dwight Jon Zimmerman, “21st Century Horse Soldiers-Special Operations Forces and Operation Enduring Freedom,” *Defense Media Network*, September 16, 2011.

⁷⁵ Ibid.

⁷⁶ Max Boot, *War Made New: Weapons, Warriors, and the Making of the Modern World* (New York: Penguin Group, 2006), 353.

⁷⁷ Ibid., 365.

established a JSOTF in the south and conducted independent operations to “destroy al Qaeda’s ability to conduct operations in the country.”⁷⁸

In October 2001, USSF infiltrated into northern Afghanistan and linked up with the Northern Alliance, which at the time controlled little territory, had outdated equipment, and few personnel compared to the much larger and better equipped Taliban. The USSF operated with the Northern Alliance formations and rapidly defeated the Taliban in the major city of Mazar-e Sharif and other Taliban strongpoints.⁷⁹ Through the use of SOF, and supported by air power, the United States was able to maintain a small footprint while achieving battlefield effects normally associated with a much larger organization. The USSF improved the Northern Alliance morale and prospects for winning the war. SOF’s role as “warrior-diplomats” was also essential in attaining military success while assisting in establishing a new government.⁸⁰ USSF brought money, air support, and the full commitment of the United States to remove the Taliban from power and eliminate the safe havens provided to al-Qaeda.

In southern Afghanistan, JSOTF-South was busy conducting operations aimed at degrading al-Qaeda’s leadership and infrastructure. Conducting independent operations, the SEALs were able to kill 115 Taliban and al-Qaeda leaders, capture 107 more, and destroy more than 500,000 pounds of explosives and weapons in seven months.⁸¹ Their mission was largely direct action in nature, except for a few Special Forces Operational Detachment Alphas that were tasked to conduct foreign internal defense and UW.⁸²

During the initial invasion of Afghanistan, SOF, the Northern Alliance, and other anti-government groups were successful in removing the Taliban from power. USSF also helped to install the interim president of Afghanistan, Hamid Karzai, and send al-Qaeda

⁷⁸ Dwight Jon Zimmerman, “Task Force K-Bar Special Operations and Operation Enduring Freedom,” *Defense Media Network*, September 19, 2011.

⁷⁹ John D. Gresham, “Outcomes and Consequences-Special Operations Forces and Operation Enduring Freedom,” *Defense Media Network*, October 2, 2011.

⁸⁰ Tucker and Lamb, *United States Special Operations Forces*, 150.

⁸¹ Zimmerman, “Task Force K-Bar.”

⁸² Leigh Neville, *Special Forces in the War on Terror (General Military)* (Oxford, United Kingdom: Osprey Publishing, 2015), 27.

on the run by the end of December 2001.⁸³ The speed of USSF's success was not anticipated, even by the creators and executors of the plan, the CIA's Cofer Black and the 5th SFG commander, Colonel John Mulholland.⁸⁴ Although most of the U.S. objectives had been accomplished, the United States wanted retribution for the attacks on 9/11, so the hunt for Osama bin Laden and his associates continued. This ultimately led to Operation Anaconda and the introduction of ground CFs into Afghanistan.

2. The Introduction of CFs

The deployment of ground CFs into Afghanistan started with Operation Anaconda in the Shah-i-Kot Valley in Paktia Province. This joint and combined operation saw more than 2,700 United States and partner troops battle an estimated 500 – 1000 Taliban and al-Qaeda fighters. CFs were in the lead for this operation and SOF was in a supporting role. The United States suffered 15 killed in action during the operation and estimated 500 enemy killed in action (EKIA). This was the largest operation to date in Afghanistan, and while it had some successes at the tactical level, its strategic value was questioned. Some even debated the military relevance of the operation, as some SOF personnel viewed it as a way for the CFs to get into the fight at the division level, and not derived from actual military necessity.⁸⁵ There were also accusations that CENTCOM exaggerated the total number of EKIA to cover what was seen by some as an “inherent failure.”⁸⁶ The United States wanted payback for 9/11, and although the SO campaign had been largely successful, the United States wanted more. The effectiveness of the strategy used by CFs was questioned, thousands of coalition troops killed approximately 500 Taliban and al-Qaeda members.⁸⁷ During the initial invasion only a handful of

⁸³ Dwight Jon Zimmerman, “Eleven Men at the Gates of Kandahar-Special Operations Forces and Operation Enduring Freedom,” *Defense Media Network*, September 18, 2011.

⁸⁴ Gresham, “Outcomes and Consequences.”

⁸⁵ Robin Moore, *The Hunt For Bin Laden: On the ground with Special Forces in Afghanistan* (New York: Random House, 2003), 273.

⁸⁶ *Ibid.*, 294.

⁸⁷ *Ibid.*

USSF, partnered with the Northern Alliance and supported by air power, were able to kills tens of thousands of fighters.⁸⁸

After Operation Anaconda, the CFs began to exert their control over SOF and other allied and partner forces in the country. In June 2002, Lieutenant General (LTG) McNeill, a career infantry officer and commander of the XVIII Airborne Corps, became the commander of JTF 180.⁸⁹ McNeill was now responsible for executing the war in Afghanistan.⁹⁰ He would answer directly to the CENTCOM commander, General Tommy Franks, a career field artillery officer.⁹¹ He then asked for and was granted operational control of Combined Joint Special Operations Task Force-Afghanistan.⁹² By inserting CFs into Afghanistan, the military changed its method of operation.⁹³

The threat posed to Afghan and U.S. forces after the initial ousting of the Taliban was fundamentally irregular in nature. The Taliban's military infrastructure was largely destroyed during the intense air campaign led by the USSF. The Taliban could no longer mass forces without the threat of being destroyed by overwhelming firepower. Their tactics had to change and by late 2002 the Taliban begin to wage low level insurgency against the occupiers and central government of Afghanistan. The presence of a large CF made the central Afghan government look illegitimate to part of the population and gave the Taliban an opportunity to gain their support. Their method was to use the population for sustainment, safe havens, and staging areas for directly attacking coalition troops.

The newly formed Afghan central government, led by Hamid Karzai, was strong in Kabul but had limited influence and legitimacy in remote areas where the terrain restricted communications and transportation. This lack of legitimacy gave room for the

⁸⁸ Ibid.

⁸⁹ "Commander ISAF: General Dan K McNeill," *International Security Assistance Force*, August 27, 2007, <http://www.nato.int/isaf/structure/bio/comisaf/mcneill.html>.

⁹⁰ Richard G. Rhyne, "Special Forces Command and Control in Afghanistan," (master's thesis, U.S. Army Command and General Staff College, 2004), 43.

⁹¹ "Tommy Franks," *U.S. Central Command*, accessed April 20, 2017, <http://www.centcom.mil/ABOUT-US/LEADERSHIP/Bio-Article-View/Article/904773/tommy-franks/>.

⁹² Rhyne, "Special Forces Command and Control in Afghanistan," 43 – 44.

⁹³ Ibid., 40.

Taliban, Tehrik-i-Taliban Pakistan, and Haqqani to establish control over a significant portion of the population. The U.S. and Afghan forces were now engaged in a COIN campaign. In and around Kabul, where the central government maintained control, insurgents were attempting to undermine, coerce, and ultimately overthrow the government. A clear COIN campaign was needed in this area to counter the threat. In the remote areas, the U.S. forces and Afghan government maintained little to no control over the population. Insurgent elements established control and were the authorities in these areas. This situation required the United States and its Afghan partners to conduct a more irregular warfare campaign to defeat the threat and legitimize the central government.

Both of the previous scenarios posed an irregular threat where the objective of both sides was to gain and maintain control over the population. To counter insurgent threats, the U.S. and Afghan governments had to gain the support of the population first. This strategy would require close partnering between U.S. and Afghan security forces. As Seth Jones notes, “It should be a key objective of the United States to give primacy to indigenous security forces as much as possible.”⁹⁴

After the introduction of CFs, SOF, unfortunately accepted a more direct action approach. This type of warfare did not bode well in a situation where the insurgents had an information advantage and the United States maintained a force advantage. The information advantage meant that the insurgents had the advantage of knowing the location of the U.S. forces, but did not have the forces to strike a decisive blow. The U.S. forces, conversely, had the ability to decisively defeat the Taliban but could not find or effectively target the Taliban due to their information disadvantage.⁹⁵ As the number of U.S. troops increased, their force advantage grew, but the insurgents’ information advantage also grew as they mostly continued operating from large bases.

To mitigate the information advantage held by the insurgents the United States needed to imbed and partner with local security forces. The success of COIN operations

⁹⁴ Seth G. Jones, “Counterinsurgency in Afghanistan,” (Santa Monica, CA: RAND, 2008), 112.

⁹⁵ Gordon McCormick, “Guerilla Warfare,” (lecture, Naval Postgraduate School, Monterey, CA, January – March 2016).

largely depends on the effectiveness and legitimacy of host nation (HN) security forces, the capacity of the government, and denying the enemy external support.⁹⁶ These factors were largely neglected as the United States took the lead in most operations while insurgents could freely move across the porous borders with Pakistan. As Jones notes, “Support from the Pakistan government, Pashtun tribes, al Qaeda, and the global jihadist network was crucial to the survivability of insurgent force.”⁹⁷

SOF’s focus had also changed and they were largely direct action focused. Thomas Johnson notes that after 2002 the U.S. adopted a strategy of attrition, using clearing operations as the method of execution.⁹⁸ He describes the similarities between operations in Vietnam and those in Afghanistan and asserts that they are not working in Afghanistan.⁹⁹ This continued until later in the war after the insurgency picked up momentum. After years of a stalemate, SOF once again had to change their method of operations. Programs, such as Village Stability Operations (VSO), began late in the war showed promise. VSO was conducted in “strategically important rural areas, in villages and in village clusters, and focused on security, governance and development, to undermine insurgent influence and control.”¹⁰⁰ VSO included Afghan local police, who were locals and were trained by SOF to defend their villages from outside influence and attack. Unfortunately, VSO was too little, too late, and was short lived as forces were drawn down and SOFs focus changed to building capacity within Afghan commando units. This was done partly because President Karzai did not like the idea of arming locals. He feared that this would lead to the type of civil war that occurred after the Soviet Union withdrew from Afghanistan.

⁹⁶ Jones, “Counterinsurgency in Afghanistan,” xii.

⁹⁷ Ibid., 117.

⁹⁸ Thomas H. Johnson and M. Chris Mason, “Refighting the Last War: Afghanistan and the Vietnam Template,” *Military Review* 89, no. 6 (November – December 2009): 7.

⁹⁹ Ibid., 7.

¹⁰⁰ Ty Connett and Bob Cassidy, “VSO: More Than Village Defense,” *Special Warfare*, (July – September, 2011), 24.

3. Analysis

The war in Afghanistan is a starting point for CF/SOF interdependence as it is currently practiced. After the initial invasion and ousting of the Taliban, CFs were deployed into the country and the fight quickly took a different approach. SOF was largely in a supporting role to CFs. The direct action approach that the United States took undermined the Afghan government that was already struggling to gain support from the population. As Lamb and Tucker note, “SOF direct action that only augments the conventional force plan of attack rather than critically enabling it makes a tactical rather than strategic contribution.”¹⁰¹ The larger CF footprint began to minimize the effectiveness and strategic utility of SOF as CFs controlled all battlespace and provided oversight on SOF operations. The CFs were also seen as an occupying power that aided the Taliban in exploiting CF presence to rally the population for the removal of the foreign power. The CFs also created a target rich environment for the insurgents.

The initial invasion of Afghanistan was a success due to SOF’s freedom of action, their partnership with indigenous forces, and effective use of air power. Their indirect approach of working through the Northern Alliance resulted in defeating the Taliban and ousting al-Qaeda from the country. The reliance of the United States on the Northern Alliance meant that the United States maintained a small footprint while building an enduring solution for the country. At this time, the United States, was also not seen as an occupying force by the population.

Viewing this case through the lens on the three hypotheses mentioned earlier, we feel that the employment of CFs and SOF working side by side reduced SOF’s strategic utility. While the conflict is still ongoing, it is safe to say that the central government of Afghanistan is not fully capable of fending off the Taliban as they do not have the full support of the population and the government is riddled with corruption. This is partly the result of the large CFs presence in Afghanistan through the majority of the conflict. The CF presence undermined HN legitimacy and made them dependent on U.S. firepower, logistics, intelligence, and command, control, and communications. CFs largely withdrew

¹⁰¹ Tucker and Lamb, *United States Special Operations Forces*, 159.

from Afghanistan leaving approximately 8,400 troops, including SOF, in 2017. SOF currently conducts the majority of combat operations, but a CF headquarters is still responsible for the execution of the conflict. SOF's method of operation has not changed either. SOF's primary mission is direct action with and through the Afghan Commando Kandaks. SOF's ability to advise the Commandos is limited due to the difficulty of the approval process.¹⁰² These missions do not focus on engaging and securing the population and as a result leave room for the Taliban and other groups to exert their influence.

While there is no way to tell in hindsight how the conflict would have progressed under SOF leadership, it is safe to say that SOF's reliance on indigenous forces would have likely advanced the legitimacy of the Afghan government by letting Afghans take the lead in the war. Focusing on enduring solutions could have had an impact on the war's outcome. Working as advisors, mentors, and providing logistical support, the United States might have been able to put the onus on the Afghans who would have either taken responsibility for their security or allow the Taliban to prevail.

a. Hypothesis 1-Interdependent CF/SOF Operations Conventionalizes SOF and Results in Increased Tactical Utility over Strategic Utility.

After the introduction of CFs, the nature of military operations changed from a special warfare campaign into a campaign led primarily by the U.S., not Afghan security forces. In mid-2002, SOCCENT was tasked to begin planning for an invasion of Iraq and gave operational control of SOF to the JTF Commander.¹⁰³ This change in command relationship solidified SOF's supporting role and placed them under the purview of CFs.

At the onset of CFs and SOF integrated operations in Afghanistan, there were many mistakes made by the two organizations. Beginning with Operation Anaconda, CFs began to limit their indirect warfare approach. CFs placed greater emphasis on using U.S.

¹⁰² Thomas Gibbons-Neff, "Not their job: Turning Afghanistan's special forces into regular troops," *The Washington Post*, October 7, 2016, https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/checkpoint/wp/2016/10/07/not-their-job-turning-afghanistans-special-forces-into-regular-troops/?utm_term=.eaeff11b2cbb.

¹⁰³ Rhyne, "Special Forces Command and Control in Afghanistan," 45.

and NATO troops to conduct operations as opposed to using indigenous forces.¹⁰⁴ SOF's operational characteristics, which emphasize bottom-up planning and independent execution, were often challenged by CF top-down directions.

As SOF was placed in a supporting role to CFs, they were often used in a direct manner. SOF required approval for operations from CF commanders who often hindered their ability to be adaptive and develop creative solutions to counter the insurgency.

b. Hypothesis 2-Independent Special Operations Against Irregular Threats have the Greatest Likelihood of Success Resulting in High Strategic Utility for SOF.

SOF's special warfare missions are inherently conducted with and through HN forces and are often outside the purview or range of CF operations. COIN, specifically, relies on the ability to gain support from the population. This support requires a functional government and security force to protect the population. To gain support from the population the United States should focus on building capacity in the indigenous government and their security apparatus.¹⁰⁵ This capacity building was largely undermined by the CFs who prefer "large concentration of manpower and firepower...regardless of the necessity."¹⁰⁶

SOF was very successful at the beginning of hostilities in Afghanistan working with their partner forces. Independent of CFs, SOF was able to quickly and effectively remove the Taliban from power using indigenous forces that could take credit for the victories. Their bottom-up planning and decentralized approach allowed them to make quick decisions, while their partnership with the Northern Alliance and small footprint facilitated Afghans, not foreigners, defeating the Taliban and legitimizing the effort. SOF was also successful in JSOTF-South working independent of CFs and conducting direct action missions. Their surgical strike operations degraded Taliban and al-Qaeda

¹⁰⁴ Moore, *The Hunt for Bin Laden*, 273.

¹⁰⁵ Jones, "Counterinsurgency in Afghanistan," xi.

¹⁰⁶ Moore, *The Hunt for Bin Laden*, 274.

infrastructure. The use of independent, direct and indirect strategies using SOF was a successful formula in the invasion of Afghanistan.

After Operation Anaconda, SOF became a supporting entity to the CFs who had command of forces in Afghanistan.¹⁰⁷ SOF followed the lead of CFs and became more direct action focused. This change undermined SOF's strategic utility. In 2009, when SOF began VSO as part of a larger COIN campaign to protect the population, it was largely overshadowed by the presence of CFs who continued to be viewed as an occupation force. CFs did work with HN forces as well, but they lacked the training, partnering ability, and organizational structure to truly be effective and build HN capacity. Their large footprint can often, by itself, be a hindrance in irregular warfare by undermining popular support and legitimacy.¹⁰⁸

c. Hypothesis 3-Irregular Threats are Usually Best Countered by Irregular Strategies and Capabilities.

There is no doubt that the strategy used for the initial invasion of Afghanistan was irregular. The United States wanted an immediate response and SOF was their only viable option. The key to the U.S.'s success early in the war was its decentralized nature, reliance on host nation forces, and SOF's ability to exploit U.S. air power. The most important component of this success was SOF's ability to assist HN forces to fight and win.

Although the Northern Alliance was "outnumbered, outgunned, and undersupplied," they knew the terrain and they knew the Taliban.¹⁰⁹ This, combined with the USSF's ability to precisely target Taliban military capabilities, was a powerful mix that would allow them to overthrow the Taliban government in a matter of what John Gresham called, "49 amazing days."¹¹⁰

¹⁰⁷ Rhyne, "Special Forces Command and Control in Afghanistan," 42.

¹⁰⁸ Jones, "Counterinsurgency in Afghanistan," xii.

¹⁰⁹ Zimmerman, "21st Century Horse Soldiers."

¹¹⁰ Gresham, "Outcomes and Consequences."

While the north had the Northern Alliance, the south had no rebel factions that could stand up to the Taliban. Karzai thought that the people in the south only supported the Taliban out of fear for their lives and he went there and raised a militia to fight.¹¹¹ The United States was willing to support Karzai, who had been in exile, to replace the Taliban government.¹¹² Karzai had the support of a large portion of the population and was successful in mustering local fighters in the south. Karzai and supported by USSF were able to capture Tarin Kowt, “the heart of the Taliban” as Karzai called it.¹¹³

Many militaries have gone to war in Afghanistan, only to be defeated. The United States managed to accomplish many of their strategic objectives in a matter of months using SOF. These successes could not have happened without SOF and their partner forces. It appears that SOF working independent of CFs and with HN forces adds up to something that is greater than the sum of its parts. It is hard to see how SOF, interdependent with CFs, could have had the same results.

B. IRAQ

After Operation Desert Storm in 1991, the United States and coalition partners imposed strict sanctions on Iraq to prevent them from becoming another regional or international threat. One of these sanctions was the United Nations’ enforced resolution to monitor Iraq’s potential acquisition of weapons of mass destruction (WMD).¹¹⁴ After Operation Desert Storm, Iraq had been delaying the United Nations weapons inspectors.¹¹⁵ This eventually led to Operation Desert Fox, where in 1998 the United States and Great Britain attacked approximately 100 weapons manufacturing-related locations and other military targets through the use of aerial bombing.¹¹⁶ This solidified

¹¹¹ Zimmerman, “Eleven Men at the Gates of Kandahar.”

¹¹² Ibid.

¹¹³ Ibid.

¹¹⁴ “Iraqi Ceasefire,” BBC, accessed May 9, 2017, http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/shared/spl/hi/middle_east/02/iraq_events/html/ceasefire.stm.

¹¹⁵ *The Encyclopedia Britannica*, s.v. “Iraq War,” accessed May 9, 2017, <http://www.britannica.com/event/Iraq-War>.

¹¹⁶ “Operation Desert Fox 16 – 19 December 1998,” BBC, accessed May 9, 2017, http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/shared/spl/hi/middle_east/02/iraq_events/html/desert_fox.stm.

Saddam Hussein's resistance, and he refused to allow UN weapons inspectors back inside Iraq. Succeeding President Clinton, President Bush continued applying pressure to Hussein.¹¹⁷ Toward the end of 2002, the U.S. Congress passed an authorization to use military force against Iraq.¹¹⁸ In 2003, based on mistaken intelligence reports indicating that Iraq did possess WMDs, President Bush issued an ultimatum to Saddam Hussein: leave Iraq within 48 hours or the United States would invade Iraq. When Saddam Hussein failed to comply, the United States invaded on March 20, 2003.¹¹⁹

The conflict in Iraq officially consisted of OIF, OND, and OIR. The U.S. led operations in Iraq will be described and analyzed in three separate phases: the initial invasion, the insurgency and the "surge," and the withdraw and return to Iraq.

1. Invasion

The invasion of Iraq began with a series of air strikes and the attack by both U.S. and British CFs from the south. JSOTF-North partnered with Kurdish forces and attacked from the north. The original plan consisted of the 4th Infantry Division attacking from the north, but due to the tight timeline and political sensitivities in Turkey, this was not possible. The United States chose to use SOF as the primary effort in the north in the absence of a CF option.¹²⁰ SOF in the north were operating independently and indirectly against Iraq CF formations.

In western Iraq, JSOTF-West conducted SR and counter-Scud missile operations.¹²¹ John Gresham notes, "From the beginning, the most strategically important SOF task was to prevent Iraqi missiles armed with WMDs from being launched from

¹¹⁷ "Inspectors Barred 1998 – 2002," BBC, accessed May 9, 2017, http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/shared/spl/hi/middle_east/02/iraq_events/html/inspectors_barred.stm.

¹¹⁸ Authorization for Use of Military Force Against Iraq Resolution of 2002, Pub. Law 107 – 243 October 16, 2002.

¹¹⁹ Gregory Fontenot, E.J. Degan, and David Tohn, *On Point: The United States Army in Operation Iraqi Freedom, through 01 May 2003*, (Fort Leavenworth, KS: Combat Studies Institute Press, 2004), 86.

¹²⁰ Linda Robinson, *Masters of Chaos: The Secret History of the Special Forces*, (New York: Public Affairs, 2004), 297.

¹²¹ Fontenot et al., *On Point*, 402.

western Iraq into Israel and other nations.”¹²² This strategically important mission came with a large number of close air support and other conventional indirect fire capabilities in support of SOF.

In southern Iraq, 5th SFG elements conducted SR to support British and other U.S. CF operations.¹²³ Two special operations task forces (TF), TF-52 and TF-53, were created to assist V Corps, 1st Marine Expeditionary Force, and the British 1st Armored Division’s advance to Baghdad. Both task forces saw battlefield success, but they were primarily used as a division level reconnaissance force in support of CF operations. They used air strikes to facilitate the CF move into Baghdad and provided intelligence on enemy leadership locations for CFs.¹²⁴

By early April, JSOTF-North and the Kurdish Peshmerga forces had moved south and had cleared the cities of Irbil and Kirkuk.¹²⁵ JSOTF-West was successful in keeping the Iraqis from firing any theater ballistic missiles. At the same time, the 3rd Armored Division was already near Baghdad and would see its last major offensive before the capital was secured.¹²⁶

During the invasion, SOF and CFs were providing complementary effects at the operational level. Their combined actions contributed to the successful defeat of the Iraqi military and the ousting of Saddam Hussein. SOF was used during the invasion in both a supporting and supported role. President Bush announced an end to major combat on May 1, 2003.¹²⁷

2. Insurgency and Surge

Shortly after occupation by coalition forces, an interim provisional government was in power under the supervision of L. Paul Bremer, U.S. Administrator of Iraq. Under

¹²² Gresham, “Operation Iraqi Freedom,” 122.

¹²³ Robinson, *Masters of Chaos*, 224 – 225.

¹²⁴ Gresham, “Operation Iraqi Freedom.”

¹²⁵ Fontenot et al., *On Point*, 251.

¹²⁶ Ibid., 347.

¹²⁷ Ibid., 427.

his leadership, the Sunni minority Ba'ath party, who held key positions in government and security forces was disbanded. This left a power vacuum within Iraq and coalition forces were now charged with security of the entire country. This eventually led to the continued occupation and the rise of the Shiite insurgency.¹²⁸

Under Saddam's rule, the Sunni minority exerted control over the Shiite majority. This created conflict and tension between Sunni and Shiite groups that U.S. leadership was unprepared to handle and the poorly-crafted transition plan did not help.¹²⁹ CFs were then tasked with providing security to a country increasingly under threat of insurgency that grew significantly in 2003 and 2004. The insurgency in Iraq was not a wholly unified effort, but a myriad of groups discontented with the occupation.¹³⁰

It was not until the Sunni Awakening, begun in Anbar Province in September 2006, that the al-Qaeda in Iraq strongholds were able to be degraded. Growing tired of the violence produced from al-Qaeda, Sunni leadership and governance began to fight the insurgency with coalition support.¹³¹ In 2007, the Sons of Iraq were created out of the Sunni Awakening with support from both CFs and SOF.¹³² This group consisted of Sunnis who took up arms to protect their villages from foreign fighters and insurgents who were attempting to seize control. The Sunni awakening coincided with General Petraeus's "surge" and the stand-down of the Mahdi militia. After several clashes within the Shiite group, the Mahdi Militia's leader, Muqtada Al Sadr, unexpectedly ordered a six-month stand-down.¹³³ A transition plan between the U.S. and Iraqi forces was

¹²⁸ Donald P. Wright and Timothy R. Reese, *On Point II: Transition to the New Campaign The United States Army in Operation Iraqi Freedom, May 2003-January 2005*, (Fort Leavenworth, KS: Combat Studies Institute Press, 2008), 156.

¹²⁹ Bruce Hoffman, "Insurgency and Counterinsurgency in Iraq," (Santa Monica, CA: RAND National Security Research Division, 2004), 2.

¹³⁰ Wright and Reese, *On Point II*, 87.

¹³¹ Nicholas J. Kramer, "Waking up to the Truth about the Sunni Awakening," *War on the Rocks*, November 23, 2016, <https://warontherocks.com/2016/11/waking-up-to-the-truth-about-the-sunni-awakening/>.

¹³² Mark Wilbanks and Efraim Karsh, "How the 'Sons of Iraq' Stabilized Iraq," *Middle East Quarterly*, (Fall 2010): 57 – 70.

¹³³ Carol J. Williams, "Sadr Orders his Militia to Stand Down," *Los Angeles Times*, August 30, 2007, <http://articles.latimes.com/2007/aug/30/world/fg-sadr30>.

approved by the Iraqi parliament and the drawdown of troops began in 2009. On August 31, 2010, President Obama announced the end of combat operations in Iraq and the end of OIF.¹³⁴ The sectarian violence between Sunni and Shia Muslims continued throughout OIF and continues today.

During most of the insurgency, SOF focused its efforts on direct action raids on high-value targets. They partnered with the Iraqi Counter-terrorism Service and other specialized forces throughout the country. They proved themselves highly effective at partnering and developing the capacity of their HN partners. David Petraeus claims these operations were a key component to the decrease in violence after the “surge.”¹³⁵ Although SOF’s partnerships with Iraqi forces were successful, it was largely overshadowed by the CFs that steadily maintained over 100,000 troops in Iraq until the drawdown. SOF was often reliant upon CF consent for mission approval.

CFs, partnered with Iraqi security elements, focused their efforts on attempting to provide security for the population. One method, called “outpost and outreach,” correlated with a drop in violence in 2007.¹³⁶ This method involved partnering platoon-sized elements with Iraqi forces in areas of high violence. These methods focused on working with and through Iraqi security forces while engaging the population.

3. The Drawdown and Current Operations

OND, an effort to assist the government of Iraq with its continuing security issues, officially began on September 1, 2009. The violence did not stop during this period and included high profile attacks such as the bombing of the Iraqi National Bank in Baghdad. OND also marked a significant drawdown of U.S. troops in Iraq, aside from several advise-and-assist brigades. An agreement with the government of Iraq ensured

¹³⁴ Barack Obama, “End of Combat Operations in Iraq,” (speech, The White House, Washington, DC, August 31, 2010).

¹³⁵ David Petraeus, “How We Won in Iraq,” *Foreign Policy*, October 29, 2013, <http://foreignpolicy.com/2013/10/29/how-we-won-in-iraq/>.

¹³⁶ John Arquilla and Douglas A. Borer, “Strategic Dimensions of the Iraq Conflict,” in *The Three Circles of War: Understanding the Dynamics of Conflict in Iraq*, ed. Heather S. Gregg, Hy Rothstein, and John Arquilla, (Washington, DC: Potomac Books, Inc., 2010), 183.

that U.S. troops would be gone by December 31, 2011, and Iraqi security forces would take over.

John Arquilla and Douglas Borer argued that a sudden and complete withdrawal of troops would completely destabilize Iraq and likely lead to a civil war.¹³⁷ This proved to be the case, as the U.S. withdrew troops, the sectarian violence between Sunni and Shia only seemed to escalate. Car bombs, suicide bombers, and even massive prison outbreaks left Iraq in a state of almost complete chaos. With no one effectively in control, a radical Wahhabi Sunni group called ISIS filled the void. By 2014, they controlled large swaths of territory north of Baghdad, along the Tigris and Euphrates rivers.¹³⁸

In response to the alarming number of Iraqi towns being conquered, OIR began on October 15, 2014, to combat the threat of ISIS in the countries of Iraq and Syria. In a multi-nation conference in October 2014, NATO concluded that ISIS was indeed a threat to global security and determined that an international coalition would be formed to fight this threat.¹³⁹

U.S. and Iraqi forces continue to combat ISIS in an effort to restore governance to the country, although with a much smaller footprint, mostly consisting of SOF focused on ISIS strongholds in northern Iraq. They are primarily partnered with Kurdish Peshmerga forces from Kurdistan. There are still CFs heavily involved in the fight as well, providing air power, indirect fire as well, and working with the Iraqi Army to build capacity. The XVIII Airborne Commander, LTG Townsend, is in charge of OIR.

4. Analysis

Initially, most SOF operated very independently, with CFs supporting JSOTF objectives.¹⁴⁰ Most notable was the employment of JSOTF-North. The short timeline and political climate in Turkey would not allow the 4th Infantry Division to stage inside

¹³⁷ Ibid., 185.

¹³⁸ Ali Khedery, "How ISIS Came to be," *The Guardian*, August 22, 2014, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2014/aug/22/syria-iraq-incubators-isis-jihad>.

¹³⁹ "History," *Combined Joint Task Force Operation Inherent Resolve*, accessed March 08, 2017, <http://www.inherentresolve.mil/Portals/14/Documents/Mission/History.pdf?ver=2016-03-23-065243-743>.

¹⁴⁰ Fontenot et al., *On Point*, 250.

Turkey for their attack into northern Iraq. SOF, however, with its small signature, would be allowed to infiltrate from Turkey.¹⁴¹ This “absence of alternatives” allowed SOF to operate independently and indirectly which resulted in high strategic utility during the invasion of northern Iraq. Once the insurgency began, SOF’s strategic utility was minimized as they were now in a supporting role to CFs.

a. Hypothesis 1-Interdependent CF/SOF Operations Conventionalizes SOF and Results in Increased Tactical Utility over Strategic Utility.

During the invasion of Iraq, SOF mostly operated independent of CF, except for TF-52 and TF-53 whose missions were to support the CF advance towards Baghdad. In this role, they were largely used to augment conventional missions such as reconnaissance and as forward observers for indirect fire. According to Tucker and Lamb, this use of SOF provides tactical, not strategic, contributions.¹⁴² Their relationship with CFs was also complicated as commanders were ignorant of what SOF could provide in a conventional fight.¹⁴³ Many of SOF’s contributions could have been accomplished by organic CF units.

During the insurgency, SOF focused on direct action missions. From 2006 – 2009 SOF conducted approximately 300 raids a month.¹⁴⁴ While these raids were often tactically successful, they alone did not produce the results needed to defeat an insurgency. Violence dropped during this timeframe, but the Sunni Awakening and Mahdi Militia stand-down also occurred simultaneously. Many factors may have had a role in the drop of violence. Having to gain approval for missions from CF commanders, SOF became conventionalized. This direct action focus took away their ability to develop unorthodox approaches, necessary to defeat an insurgency.

¹⁴¹ Robinson, *Masters of Chaos*, 297.

¹⁴² Tucker and Lamb, *United States Special Operations Forces*, 159.

¹⁴³ Robinson, *Masters of Chaos*, 225.

¹⁴⁴ Austin Long, “The Limits of Special Operations Forces,” *Prism* 6, no. 3 (December 2016): 40, http://cco.ndu.edu/Portals/96/Documents/prism/prism_6-3/long.pdf?ver=2016-12-06-101056-937.

b. Hypothesis 2-Independent Special Operations Against Irregular Threats have the Greatest Likelihood of Success Resulting in High Strategic Utility for SOF.

During the fight for Kirkuk, Task Force Viking faced a desperate situation. Linda Robinson notes, “That city was the tripwire for Turkish involvement, however, because the vast oilfields lay just beyond.”¹⁴⁵ The Kurds already had a large network in place within the city and were waiting for the right time to retake it. After much of the Iraqi combat forces had been roused by the USSF and Peshmerga, they occupied the city and ensured it was secure. SOF and their partner force worked with the local leadership to help report on enemy activity and get essential services resumed within a few days.¹⁴⁶ By operating independently of CFs but with HN forces, SOF were able to secure key population centers, navigate the political intricacies of Turkey’s concern with the Kurdish population, and negotiate terms of peace with warring factions.¹⁴⁷

The CF primary mission is to destroy the enemy by fire and maneuver.¹⁴⁸ SOF missions requires unique employment.¹⁴⁹ Even in a conventional warfare scenario like the invasion of Iraq, SOF’s greatest contribution was in northern Iraq, separate, but providing complementary effects at the operational level. JSOTF-West also had strategic utility operating independent from CFs. They were able to move quickly through western Iraq, destroying long range missile sites, due to their long range mobility capability and the freedom to maneuver unencumbered as the mission demanded.¹⁵⁰

Once Baghdad fell, Iraq was largely under the control of CFs, who maintained an overwhelming presence. SOF was largely in support of CF operations during this timeframe. A RAND study on the Iraq counterinsurgency noted that it became typical for

¹⁴⁵ Robinson, *Masters of Chaos*, 325.

¹⁴⁶ Ibid., 325 – 327.

¹⁴⁷ Ibid.

¹⁴⁸ Department of the Army, *Brigade Combat Team*, 1–1.

¹⁴⁹ Joint Chiefs of Staff, *Special Operations*, I-1.

¹⁵⁰ Fontenot et al., *On Point*, 252.

SOF units to live and operate in areas under the control of CFs.¹⁵¹ By the nature of this arrangement, SOF had to synchronize operations with CF.¹⁵² This relationship made independent SOF operations increasingly difficult. The study warned that this kind of dependence could be a detriment to the capabilities and strategic effects that SOF can provide, recommending that, “Army Special Forces should be allowed to focus on training and operating together with their indigenous counterparts.”¹⁵³

c. Hypothesis 3-Irregular Threats are Usually Best Countered by Irregular Strategies and Capabilities.

Two of SOF’s greatest strengths, language capability and cultural awareness, are paramount when living and working with indigenous populations and HN partner forces. Pirnie and O’Connell note in their study of counterinsurgency that, “Indigenous forces are central to successful COIN, especially in view of the fact that the ultimate goal is allegiance to the legitimate government.”¹⁵⁴ The twelve man Special Forces Operational Detachment-Alpha is built around the concept of partnering with a host nation battalion sized element. This partnership can build capacity within the HN government and set them up for enduring success. To partner with CFs detracts from this capability and removes options for SOCOM and the NCA.

As previously mentioned, the short timeline and political climate in Turkey at the time of the invasion of northern Iraq would not allow the 4th Infantry Division to stage inside Turkey for their attack. The task was then assigned to USSF who, working with Peshmerga forces, was able to rout Iraqi forces in northern Iraq.¹⁵⁵ While the Iraqi conventional units were not an irregular threat, JSOTF-North was conducting unconventional warfare.¹⁵⁶ This highlights a very important issue: if those SOF units had

¹⁵¹ Bruce R. Pirnie and Edward O’Connell, “Counterinsurgency in Iraq (2003 – 2006),” (RAND Corporation, 2008) vol 2, 76, https://www.rand.org/content/dam/rand/pubs/monographs/2008/RAND_MG595.3.pdf.

¹⁵² Ibid., 76.

¹⁵³ Ibid., 95 – 96.

¹⁵⁴ Ibid., 80.

¹⁵⁵ Tucker and Lamb, *United States Special Operations Forces*, 156.

¹⁵⁶ Robinson, *Masters of Chaos*, 296 – 303.

been interdependent and therefore tied to conventional forces, they would not have been available to facilitate operations in northern Iraq. Additionally, SOF's unique capability to work through HN counterparts efficiently and effectively took the place of U.S. troops. A small number of USSF, partnered with HN forces, were able to accomplish what would have fallen to the entire 4th Infantry Division, and they did so with fewer U.S. troops, cheaper, and with fewer casualties. This highlights that interdependence below the strategic level may detract from SOF's strategic utility.

The invasion of Iraq was an example of high strategic utility for SOF in the north (as well as CFs attacking from the south). The quick defeat of the Iraqi army and ousting of Saddam Hussein was the U.S.'s primary objective prior to the invasion. After the Iraqi government collapsed and the United States was in charge of security, an insurgency began. The United States was not able to change their method of operations quickly enough to adequately address the insurgency. The country was dominated by CFs, and SOF largely fell under their control. SOF also worked in a more direct manner during the insurgency, which produced tactical success, but still failed to address the root causes of the insurgency. U.S. forces taking the lead in most operations delegitimized the Iraqi government and their security forces.

It took several years until the Sunni Awakening occurred and the insurgency was suppressed. Both SOF and CF had a role in the Sunni Awakening and the creation of the Sons of Iraq. This was an irregular solution to an irregular problem. This strategy proved successful in taking away the safe havens provided to the insurgents by the population.

C. PHILIPPINES

The U.S. history in the Philippines history dates back to when the Philippines was ceded to the United States through the Treaty of Paris that ended the 1898 war with Spain.¹⁵⁷ Following the treaty, the United States was successful in defeating an insurgency waged by the Moro people against the U.S. occupation in the southern Philippines. The United States established strong defense and economic ties in the

¹⁵⁷ *The Encyclopedia Britannica*, s.v. "Philippines: The 19th Century," accessed April 25, 2017, <https://www.britannica.com/place/Philippines/The-19th-century>.

Philippines after their liberation from Spain in 1898 and leading up to the recognition of their independence in 1946.¹⁵⁸ After their independence, the Philippines struggled with political instability and insurgencies within the country.

During the Cold War, secessionist groups such as the Moro National Liberation Front began to take root in the southern part of the country.¹⁵⁹ This area, specifically the Mindanao Province, was home to the majority of the country's Muslim population. This Muslim minority, in a largely Christian nation, "has long been plagued by unrest and socioeconomic problems."¹⁶⁰ These problems fueled the resentment of the minority population toward the central government. This population, in turn, supported insurgent and terrorist organizations. As the Philippine government attempted to reconcile with some of these groups, splinter groups emerged, such as the Moro Islamic Liberation Front. There were also transnational terrorist organizations such as Jemmah Islamiyah (JI) and the ASG. These groups were more religious and radicalized than their predecessors, and also had ties to al-Qaeda, who shared training and lessons learned with the Muslim insurgent groups.¹⁶¹ Al-Qaeda used their relationship with these groups as a means of establishing a foothold in Southeast Asia.

Just prior to 9/11, the United States made a large security commitment to the Philippines. After the kidnapping of U.S. citizens by ASG, the United States conducted an initial assessment of the physical and human terrain in the Philippines.¹⁶² This assessment was done in preparation for sending troops to assist the Philippine security forces (PSF) in defeating the insurgent and terrorist organizations that resided in the southern Philippines. After 9/11, JTF-510 was sent to the Philippines. Later, a JSOTF was established to execute OEF-P. The U.S. lines of operation for OEF-P were:

¹⁵⁸ *The Encyclopedia Britannica*, s.v. "Philippines: The early republic," accessed April 25, 2017, <https://www.britannica.com/place/Philippines/The-early-republic>.

¹⁵⁹ Linda Robinson, "SOF experience in the Philippines and the Implications for Future Defense Strategy," *Prism* 6, no. 3 (December 2016): 152, <http://cco.ndu.edu/PRISM-6-3/Article/1020239/the-sof-experience-in-the-philippines-and-the-implications-for-future-defense-s/>.

¹⁶⁰ *Ibid.*

¹⁶¹ Gregory Wilson, "Anatomy of a Successful COIN Operation: OEF-Philippines and The Indirect Approach," *Military Review* 86, no. 6 (November – December 2006): 40.

¹⁶² Robinson, "SOF Experience in the Philippines," 153.

1. Training, advising, and assisting PSF, including the provision of direct support and intelligence.
2. Conducting civil-military operations.
3. Conducting IO.¹⁶³

The U.S. and Philippine governments were now focused on the destruction of the ASG.¹⁶⁴

1. Severely Restricted

The maximum number of U.S. troops deployed to the Philippines at any one time occurred in February 2002 with the initial deployment of JTF-510 and 1,300 personnel.¹⁶⁵ After 2002, the average number ranged from 500 – 600 personnel.¹⁶⁶ This personnel constraint was largely due to political sensitivities, formed by a nationalist sentiment among the Filipino people. Even with the small footprint, the U.S. advisors were often met with displeasure from the people and government that they were sent to assist. After the redeployment of JTF-510 in 2002, the two countries renegotiated the terms of assistance. During this period, Pacific Command (PACOM) recommended a larger package be sent to the Philippines, but that was promptly rejected by the Philippine government, which had closed all U.S. bases back in the 1990s.¹⁶⁷ This rejection may have been a blessing in disguise. As Colonel Gregory Wilson notes, “As we now know, large U.S. occupation forces in Islamic regions can create problems for us.”¹⁶⁸

Along with limits on the deployment of personnel came restrictions on rules of engagement. The U.S. personnel on the ground were primarily advisors, but were severely limited on how and where they could advise. The U.S. advisors were initially only partnered at the battalion level, but were ultimately allowed to advise down to the

¹⁶³ Ibid., 154.

¹⁶⁴ Rothstein, “Less is More,” 283.

¹⁶⁵ Wilson, “Anatomy of a Successful COIN Operation,” 42.

¹⁶⁶ Robinson, “SOF Experience in the Philippines,” 152.

¹⁶⁷ Ibid., 154.

¹⁶⁸ Wilson, “Anatomy of a Successful COIN Operation,” 39.

company level.¹⁶⁹ During their advisory role, U.S. troops were not allowed to engage in combat. They maintained the right to self-defense, but had to stay in the rear and conduct their assessments after each mission had been completed. The United States also provided intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance platforms to gather actionable intelligence in support of PSF operations.¹⁷⁰

During OEF-P, the PSF often requested more direct support and advising from the United States. These requests were denied, but the PSF still became more effective and confident due to the presence of the U.S. advisors. The PSF began to patrol more heavily in insurgent strongholds and build relationships with locals through Civil Military Operations, IO, and through their physical presence on the ground.

2. Fighting the Insurgents Indirectly

Without having the authorities that U.S. troops had in Iraq and Afghanistan, the JSOTF was truly forced to build and maintain a close relationship with their partner force. OEF-P was also a secondary theater of action, and as Rothstein stated, “Logic, and a clear absence of any reasonable alternative, dictated an indirect approach.”¹⁷¹

Following the lines of operation, the United States immediately went to work training the PSF in basic combat and medical skills.¹⁷² The PSF also began to build rapport with the local villagers by increased patrolling and civic action projects. The PSF were always in the lead in these operations and they engaged with local leaders to describe the rationale behind the military operations.¹⁷³ The PSF, through their direct engagement and focus on securing the population, were able to overcome their information disadvantage and degrade the insurgent and terrorist organizations to a manageable level.

¹⁶⁹ David S. Maxwell, “Operation Enduring Freedom-Philippines: What Would Sun Tzu Say?” *Military Review* 84, no. 3 (May – June 2004): 21.

¹⁷⁰ Wilson, “Anatomy of a Successful COIN Operation,” 44.

¹⁷¹ Rothstein, “Less is More,” 284.

¹⁷² *Ibid.*, 285.

¹⁷³ *Ibid.*, 284.

The PSF were very successful in providing security for the population through direct engagement and were able to minimize combat operations. This allowed them to separate the insurgents and terrorists from the population. Civilians and government forces now have greater freedom of movement in areas of Mindanao that were once highly contested.

3. Analysis

The George W. Bush administration described the GWOT as a global struggle against terrorist organizations and the regimes that support them. The Barack Obama administration forewent the term GWOT. Instead Obama stated, “We must define our effort not as a boundless ‘Global War on Terror,’ but rather as a series of persistent, targeted efforts to dismantle specific networks of violent extremists that threaten America.”¹⁷⁴ The Philippines may well serve as an example of how independent, supported SO can have strategic effects. In the most extensive case study to date on OEF-P, Linda Robinson, Patrick B. Johnston, and Gillian S. Oak at the RAND Corporation conclude that OEF-P “contributed to (1) a reduced transnational terrorist threat and support for threat groups and (2) increased PSF capabilities at the tactical, operational, and institutional levels.”¹⁷⁵ The strength of ASG has fallen from an estimated 1,200 in 2002 to less than 500 in 2009, while JI has less than 100 members left.¹⁷⁶ This is a success story that seems to shine compared to SOF’s efforts in Iraq and Afghanistan.

Out of the public eye, OEF-P has garnered little attention while tens of thousands of U.S. troops were deployed to both Iraq and Afghanistan. Unlike the largely direct action mission in Iraq and Afghanistan, the JSOTF in the Philippines was constrained by the Philippine government. By having no option of executing unilateral U.S. operations, U.S. troops were forced to assist the PSF in fighting their war by providing support,

¹⁷⁴ Paul D. Shinkman, “Obama: Global War on Terrorism is Over,” *U.S. News*, May 23, 2013, <http://www.usnews.com/news/articles/2013/05/23/obama-global-war-on-terror-is-over>.

¹⁷⁵ Linda Robison, Patrick B. Johnston, and Gillian S. Oak, “U.S. Special Operation Forces in the Philippines 2001 – 2014,” (RAND Corporation, 2016), xvii, http://www.rand.org/content/dam/rand/pubs/research_reports/RR1200/RR1236/RAND_RR1236.pdf.

¹⁷⁶ Max Boot and Richard Bennet, “Treading Softly in the Philippines,” *The Weekly Standard*, January 5, 2009, <http://www.weeklystandard.com/print/treading-softly-in-the-philippines/article/17038>.

advice, and training. By supporting the PSF, the PSF avoided relying on the United States to conduct combat, unlike what was seen in Afghanistan and Iraq.¹⁷⁷ U.S. forces and the PSF were able to achieve operational success, while avoiding dependency and enhancing the bi-lateral partnership between the two countries.

a. Hypothesis 1-Interdependent CF/SOF Operations Conventionalizes SOF and Results in Increased Tactical Utility over Strategic Utility.

The OEF-P case study is the only case in this study that does not involve CFs. This was done to show how SOF can achieve U.S. strategic objectives independent of CFs. After 9/11, the United States sought retribution for the attacks and focused on the hunt for Osama bin Laden and al-Qaeda leadership in the mountains of Afghanistan. The United States, with the Philippine government's approval, deployed a small SOF contingent to bolster the Philippine security apparatus in their fight against Islamic radicals.

Due to the force restrictions, the JSOTF in the Philippines was able to successfully conduct Special Warfare missions. Although there were attempts by PACOM to introduce a larger footprint into the Philippines, this was denied by the Philippine government and SOF were required to operate with and through the PSF. This approach allowed SOF to operate indirectly through a partnered force. Without a CF headquarters in charge, SOF was able to remain flexible and adaptive.

b. Hypothesis 2-Independent Special Operations Against Irregular Threats have the Greatest Likelihood of Success Resulting in High Strategic Utility for SOF.

Once again, this case demonstrates a very successful approach when faced with an irregular warfare situation. In order to stop an insurgency the host nation typically has to take the lead and succeed in operations. During OEF-P, SOF was forced to work with and through the PSF because of force constraints placed on the U.S. from the Philippine government. These constraints also limited SOF's ability to conduct operations, which meant that the PSF had to always be in the lead. Although, at the time, this may have been viewed as a hindrance, it set up the Philippines for enduring success.

¹⁷⁷ Robinson, "SOF Experience in the Philippines," 125.

A large U.S. footprint, a characteristic of CFs, would have undermined the legitimacy of the host-nation forces, who would have been seen as weak or as a puppet of the United States.¹⁷⁸ Also, the presence of CFs may have undermined SOF's strategic utility and ability to work through and with the PSF. The United States should internalize the lessons of the Philippine case as a guide for future strategic interaction.

c. Hypothesis 3-Irregular Threats are Usually Best Countered by Irregular Strategies and Capabilities.

Popular support will often determine who wins an irregular conflict. Support, funding, and safe havens will either allow the insurgency to thrive, or, if taken away, will cause an insurgency to wither. It is a struggle, by both the insurgent and the counterinsurgent, to garner popular support. The United States, fighting on foreign soil, will always have difficulty gaining support when they execute independent operations. If the United States wants to achieve their strategic goals, then, as Robinson states, "Foreign internal defense must be conducted in support of an internal defense and development plan that is crafted and embraced by the host nation government."¹⁷⁹ This asserts that the HN government should be in the lead. This does not mean that the United States should relinquish all responsibility, but rather allow the locals, who know the language, cultures, and nuances of the country, to conduct the majority of the interaction with the population. As countries across Africa, the Middle East, the Central Asian States, and Southeast Asia see an increase in terrorism and insurgencies, it will become increasingly important to develop indigenous capacity to address these threats.¹⁸⁰

OEF-P is a case where the U.S. military had no choice but to work closely with the HN security forces. This not only enabled the PSF to conduct successful COIN operations, but likely also contributed to a stronger bilateral military relationship between the United States and the Philippines.¹⁸¹ SOF's acceptance of an indirect approach, working through the PSF to counter the insurgents in the southern Philippines, will stand out as a success.

¹⁷⁸ Wilson, "Anatomy of a Successful COIN Operation," 39.

¹⁷⁹ Robinson, "SOF Experience in the Philippines," 163.

¹⁸⁰ Wilson, "Anatomy of a Successful COIN Operation," 39.

¹⁸¹ Robinson, "SOF Experience in the Philippines," xxii.

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V. CONCLUSION

If the United States has learned anything over the last decade and a half, it is that combatting terrorism and insurgency while conducting reconstruction is difficult.¹⁸² Although the United States has had some successes combatting irregular threats in the past few decades (e.g., El Salvador and the Philippines), its track record in more visible conflicts such as Iraq, Afghanistan, and Vietnam has been less positive. This would follow Hy Rothstein's hypothesis that oftentimes "Less is More."¹⁸³ In simple terms, the greater the emphasis senior U.S. officials place on an irregular warfare situation, the worse the results will often become.¹⁸⁴ While the deployment of a large number of CFs can show resolve, their use in irregular warfare may have an adverse effect on the results of the campaign. When CFs and SOF operate together, this can also have an unwanted consequence on the effectiveness of SOF attempting to combat irregular threats.

Tactical dependence between CFs and SOF often results in the misuse of SOF on the battlefield. While strategic utility is often achieved by independent operation aimed toward strategic objectives (e.g., OSS Jedburghs in France and the invasion of Iraq), SOF begins to have diminishing returns when they are tied to CFs at the tactical level. SOF are distinguished from CFs by the capabilities they possess to operate in unique environments.¹⁸⁵ These environments, due to the threats posed and political conditions, are often not conducive for the deployment of CFs. In the thesis "Flattening the Learning Curve: SOF as the Supported Command in the Irregular Warfare Environment," David J. O'Hearn, Damon S. Robins, and Aaron C. Sessoms argue that SOF should be in command during irregular warfare. CFs could be in supporting roles to SOF as required.¹⁸⁶ Their thesis states that, "The past 10 years have demonstrated the importance

¹⁸² Department of the Army, *Operations*, 2–2.

¹⁸³ Rothstein, "Less is More."

¹⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, 275.

¹⁸⁵ Tucker and Lamb, *United States Special Operations Forces*, 148.

¹⁸⁶ David J. O'Hearn, Damon S. Robins, and Aaron C. Sessoms, "Flattening the Learning Curve: SOF as the Supported Command in the Irregular Warfare Environment," (master's thesis, Naval Postgraduate School, 2012).

of integration and interoperability as SOF and GPF [General Purpose Force] have been sharing the same battlefield and even conducting some of the same missions.”¹⁸⁷ Our thesis concludes that utilizing two different forces to conduct the same mission in the same battlespace is not productive, and a failure to adopt the correct strategy using the proper force structure. There are some threats, largely irregular in nature, where SOF should take the lead.¹⁸⁸

Our thesis offers three hypotheses for examining the post-9/11 cases to determine the effect that CF/SOF interdependence has on the United States achieving strategic objectives. We will examine the validity of the hypotheses.

First, *interdependent CF/SOF operations conventionalizes SOF and results in tactical utility over strategic utility*. Both SOF and CFs are attempting to regain their core competencies that have been degraded since 9/11. CFs are now focused on rebuilding their ability to conduct combined arms maneuver, while SOF is changing its focus back to special warfare and the indirect approach.

In Iraq and Afghanistan, SOF demonstrated both high and low strategic utility. The initial invasions of both countries was successful with both independent (Afghanistan) or complementary operations (in Iraq, CFs in the south and SOF in the north) at the strategic level. During this initial period, SOF achieved high strategic utility. Afterwards, as both countries began to devolve into insurgencies, SOF’s strategic utility was minimized as a result of supporting CFs and conducting largely direct action missions against the insurgents. Although the United States saw success during the “surge,” many would contend that the successes in Iraq were not due to U.S. strategy, but rather the willingness of the Iraqi population to stand up and fight against the Sunni extremists in their villages. Oftentimes, as Tucker and Lamb claim, “trying to solve the problem directly with larger U.S. forces can engender disproportionate resentment and resistance from foreign populations that is counterproductive for overall objectives.”¹⁸⁹

¹⁸⁷ Ibid., 9 – 10.

¹⁸⁸ Tucker and Lamb, *United States Special Operations Forces*, 157.

¹⁸⁹ Ibid., 156.

OEF-P used a proper strategy (not by design, but due to constraints) that forced the United States to use a very indirect method using primarily SOF without a large CF footprint. These constraints allowed SOF to have a strategic impact, independent from CFs and indirectly.¹⁹⁰ SOF's strategic utility was high during the entirety of OEF-P.

Second, *independent special operations against irregular threats have the greatest likelihood of success resulting in high strategic utility for SOF*. Lamb and Tucker note, "when SOF perform in an independent role they provide greater strategic value since they provide the primary effort."¹⁹¹ Operating independent of CFs allows SOF to concentrate their efforts on partnership with indigenous forces. It also removes unneeded bureaucracy and restrictions that come with subordination or dependence on CFs.

One of SOF's greatest achievements was their initial success in the invasion of Afghanistan as the supported force. This SOF-led effort achieved results beyond anyone's expectations. USSF was successful in ousting the Taliban, but a larger CF footprint was introduced due to pressure from for a large military intervention after 9/11 and because "conventional generals desperately wanted into the war."¹⁹² SOF operations in the Philippines allowed the HN government to take the lead in quelling the insurgency and terrorist activity taking place in the south. The Philippine government and PSF maintained their legitimacy, as they were not viewed as a puppet of the United States. SOF had varied effects during the invasion of Iraq. SOF had high strategic utility in the north during the invasion, but lower utility in the south when conducting operations in conjunction with CFs.

The cases show that SOF has their highest strategic utility when operating independent of CFs. SOF, as the lead effort, is able to provide strategic effects at a low cost and high level of efficiency.

¹⁹⁰ Ibid.

¹⁹¹ Ibid., 158.

¹⁹² Moore, *The Hunt for Bin Laden*, 273.

Third, *irregular threats are usually best countered by irregular strategies and capabilities*. According to Tucker and Lamb, “working through indigenous forces may be the only means of solving a problem such as insurgency or terrorism.”¹⁹³ SOF, specifically USSF, were designed to operate with and through indigenous or HN forces. Their small footprint and expertise in small unit tactics and staff functions (e.g., personnel, logistics, operations, intelligence, communications, and command and control) make them well suited to train and advise indigenous forces. This indirect approach can “produce strategic effects at low political cost, which is always useful and sometimes imperative.”¹⁹⁴ The indirect approach differs from “the American way of war” and is more effective in irregular warfare situations.

Once again, the invasion of Afghanistan serves as a model of high strategic utility. The partnership between USSF and indigenous forces proved to be very effective in removing the Taliban from power.¹⁹⁵ This irregular strategy, the result of an “absence of alternatives,” turned out to be the best strategy for removing the Taliban and destroying al-Qaeda’s safe haven. USSF were also successful in northern Iraq during the initial invasion. Their partnership with the Kurdish Peshmerga forces proved instrumental in defeating Iraqi forces in the north. After the insurgency began, CFs took the lead and SOF lost its strategic effectiveness. This approach proved unsuccessful as Iraq fell deeper into insurgency until the Sunni Awakening. The failure of the United States to place emphasis on building HN capacity and legitimacy led to an extended insurgency and the creation of ISIS.

Irregular wars are often won by irregular strategies with HN forces in the lead. The United States tries to fight irregular threats using CFs, but when they have limited options and are forced to employ SOF as the main effort, they tend to be more successful.

A common theme throughout this research is the achievement of U.S. strategic objectives when SOF were used independent of CFs and the conventionalization of SOF

¹⁹³ Tucker and Lamb, *United States Special Operations Forces*, 152.

¹⁹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁹⁵ Ibid., 161 – 162.

when working alongside CFs. If the United States' primary goal is to combat terrorism and defeat insurgencies, then conducting independent SOF operations using an indirect approach may be the proper strategy. The indirect approach provides the best option for enduring solutions.

The United States possesses the greatest conventional military in the world and because of this it is not often threatened by conventional warfare.¹⁹⁶ Nation-states and non-state actors have adapted and primarily pose an irregular or hybrid threat to the United States. The United States must, in turn, adapt and create strategies to combat these threats. SOF and CFs were created for different purposes. The two forces can provide complementary effects for each other at the strategic level, but interdependence at the tactical level, under some conditions, severely limits SOF's ability to deliver strategic effects in support of national objectives. If the United States is going to succeed in defeating irregular threats in the future, it must develop the best strategy to address the threat. Often, this strategy should involve an independent SOF option operating with and through HN or indigenous forces.

¹⁹⁶ O'Hearn et al., "Flattening the Learning Curve," 2.

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