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**NATIONAL SOF C2: NCA-DIRECT OR VIA THE CINC?**

by

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A paper submitted to the faculty of the Naval War College in partial satisfaction of the requirements of the Department of Joint Military Operations.

The contents of this paper reflect my own personal views and are not necessarily endorsed by the Naval War College or the Department of the Navy.

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Abstract of

NATIONAL SOF C2: NCA-DIRECT OR VIA THE CINC?

The command and control of national-level special operations missions has been a topic of debate for almost 20 years. National command authorities stay abreast of strategic special operations capabilities and can make a case for controlling them on strategic missions, based upon operations security, political expediency, or additional considerations. On the other hand, geographic unified commanders have come to expect responsibility for all military activities in their respective regions, as a matter of law and doctrine.

Foremost, a chain of command should facilitate the success of a mission. Secondly, special operations tend to be singularly unique, and, as such, should not be tied to doctrine thoughtlessly. National command authorities who determine whether a national special operation is led from Washington, D.C., or from a geographic unified commander's headquarters, should allow the elements of the specific situation to influence which command line is more appropriate to accomplishing the mission. I propose that an "estimate calculus" based upon operations security considerations, intelligence requirements, staff competence and leadership expertise, be conducted per situation to determine or validate a particular chain of command. The elements of the "calculus" have been shown historically to influence the successes and failures of national special operations.

I have no doubt that my calculus will validate a doctrinal chain of command in almost every case. But we should assess every situation where national special operations forces may be applied, and tailor every aspect of that potential mission for success, to include determining an exceptional command and control scheme when supportable.

## **NATIONAL SOF C2: NCA-DIRECT OR VIA THE CINC?**

When applying national-level special operations forces (SOF), United States national command authorities (NCA) should determine a chain of command that offers the best potential for success. Current doctrine espouses only one command chain, that being through the respective geographic commander in chief (CINC), whether an operation is special or otherwise. I intend to examine several key factors historically shown to influence the success or failure of national special operations, and propose that command and control (C2) arrangements in each instance should be decided by whether a particular arrangement would enhance, in net fashion, the positive contribution of these key factors, thus increasing the chances of mission success. Every national SOF mission, typically unique and high-risk with strategic consequences, deserves a C2 line based upon a rational calculus other than automatic default to doctrine.

## **CONTEXT**

National SOF is that SOF specifically applied towards operations overseas that have direct and immediate strategic implications for the U.S., such as high-profile hostage crises, citizen evacuations in hostile environments, or situations involving rogue weapons of mass destruction (WMD). Command and control lines as directed by the NCA for such operations have been controversial ever since these SOF were first employed in the failed Iran hostage rescue mission of 1980, with debate centered around whether C2 should be retained by the NCA, or delegated to the geographic CINC who "owns" the area encompassing the special operation. National SOF operations have been conducted under both forms of C2, but since the Goldwater-Nichols legislation of 1986 and its

empowerment of geographic unified commanders, almost all recent operations have been commanded by the respective CINC. Formal provisions do exist, however, for the NCA to exercise direct control, or control via the commander in chief of U.S. Special Operations Command (USSOCOM), of "selected special operations missions," when circumstances warrant such an arrangement.<sup>1</sup>

## **KEYS TO SUCCESS**

Based upon a review of national SOF operations into Iran (Rice Bowl/Eagle Claw), Grenada (Urgent Fury), Italy and the Mediterranean (the M/V Achille Lauro incident), and Panama (Just Cause), several key factors recur that had direct effects upon mission success. These are: (1) access to, and the quality of, operational intelligence; (2) ability to balance operations security (OPSEC) with requirements to coordinate planning and actions; (3) the collective competence of C2 staff; (4) effectiveness of interagency and international coordination; and (5) leadership's understanding of national SOF capabilities and limitations.

Any commander and staff assigned to C2 a special operations mission will accept responsibility for the aforementioned factors, but the ability to manage these factors between different organizations may vary widely. Given a situation that requires the application of national SOF, whether the NCA or a geographic CINC has C2 responsibility can make a significant difference in the outcome, depending on the nature of the situation and the strengths and weaknesses of that organization relative to the circumstances. A time-compressed crisis environment, in particular (and in which

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<sup>1</sup> Joint Chiefs of Staff, Unified Action Armed Forces (UNAAF) (Joint Pub 0-2) (Washington, D.C.: February 24, 1995), II-15.

national SOF usually works), tends to bring out the best and worst of C2 leadership and staff!

## **INTELLIGENCE**

### **Who has the best access? Who can best exploit it?**

The scope and quality of operational intelligence is critically valuable to SOF units. If these small and typically unsupported units are penetrating deep into the enemy's area, or are tasked to singularly accomplish a mission of urgent strategic value, their leadership needs access to, and extremely good confidence in, the intelligence that justifies the risks. USSOCOM has invested heavily in intelligence "pipes" running from national government and military organizations (CIA, DIA, among others) to continental U.S.-based (CONUS) SOF staffs in appreciation of this vital functional area. But even with sophisticated intelligence systems in the rear, there are inevitable gaps in coverage or drop-offs in intelligence "push" to deployed units. **The expectation among SOF planners is that NCA-level, CINC, or joint task force (JTF) staffs will augment forward units with relevant, reliable and timely intelligence.** But the relative records of these different organizations to provide sound intelligence is mixed.

Intelligence shortfalls in theater JTF Operation Urgent Fury into Grenada, 1983, have been well documented.<sup>2</sup> National SOF elements were employed in advance force and direct action operations without maps, enemy order of battle information, and accurate weather/sea state data, almost certainly contributing to some of the casualties sustained by these men. Although the theater or JTF commander in this case could be faulted for not acquiring and disseminating this intelligence to their forces, the exigency of the

situation and national SOF's reluctance to share plans and information with the JTF staff mitigated their culpability. On the NCA-directed Operation Rice Bowl/Eagle Claw into Iran, 1980, to rescue American hostages, the RH-53 helicopter force encountered severe sand storms whose presence or potential had not been adequately briefed by intelligence personnel to the pilots. The storm-induced attrition to the force directly contributed to the abort of the mission based upon minimum force criteria. Intelligence responsibilities in this case resided with General Vaught, the JCS-nominated commander who depended heavily upon selected, intra-Pentagon staff support, not theater expertise.<sup>3</sup> If the U.S. Readiness Command (now U.S. Central Command) had responsibility for supporting the operation, it is likely they would have been more familiar with, and consequently briefed, the likelihood of local weather phenomena such as "haboob" dust storms. **The type of intelligence national SOF needs should be considered within the C2 decision.**

The ability to quickly act on intelligence may differ between the national and theater levels. Intelligence, operations and C2 were effectively fused under crisis conditions when the NCA successfully directed the activities of a forward-deployed national SOF task force, elements of U.S. European Command forces, and other government agencies, in order to apprehend the perpetrators of the M/V Achille Lauro hijacking of 1985. The operation took excellent advantage of perishable, high-level intelligence provided via Israel to the National Security Council (NSC) as to the whereabouts and intentions of the hijackers, leading to an "in-air" intercept of their aircraft by U.S. Navy F-14's and a force-down into Sigonella, Italy, for a ground reception by U.S. SOF.<sup>4</sup> The type and

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<sup>2</sup> Joint Chiefs of Staff, Operation Urgent Fury, Grenada (Washington, D.C.: 1997), 64.

<sup>3</sup> Paul Ryan, The Iranian Rescue Mission (Annapolis, MD: Naval Institute Press, 1985), 31.

<sup>4</sup> Vlad Jenkins, "The Achille Lauro Hijacking," (Cambridge, MA: Kennedy School of Government, 1988), 18.

sensitivity of the Israeli intelligence limited its dissemination to the NSC, who, by virtue of their C2 authority, quickly exploited it. Theater CINC's may not routinely receive such high-level intelligence as it "breaks", and therefore may miss similar opportunities to exploit fast-moving situations. But if local intelligence will be more valuable to the national force, the CINC and his staff would be best positioned to both provide and exploit the intelligence.

## **OPERATIONS SECURITY**

### **Who can best balance OPSEC with planning and execution?**

The identity, activities and capabilities of U.S. national SOF remain extremely sensitive and closely guarded. The challenge continues to be one of limiting the distribution of sensitive information, but ensuring that those people and organizations who can assist your efforts have the opportunity to do so without risk of compromise. The nature of sensitive information, though, has changed. For example, current WMD-related issues tend to be tightly controlled, given their huge potential psychological or physical impacts. Arabian Gulf activities with regard to Iraq and Iran are also closely held as post-Desert Storm hostilities continue to simmer. Specific sensitivities will elevate the level at which OPSEC guidelines are determined in particular situations, and may even dictate who or what staff is given command of an operation.

Both the Rice Bowl and Urgent Fury operations suffered from OPSEC-induced weaknesses. The high level of secrecy surrounding the missions caused severe restrictions on the number and affiliation of people who were granted access to the planning and execution phases. In the case of the NCA-directed Rice Bowl, neither the

standing JCS intelligence staff nor the institutionalized JCS crisis action system were ever utilized for support.<sup>5</sup> Instead, due to the “sensitive nature” of the operation, ad hoc arrangements were settled on that ultimately proved unsatisfactory.<sup>6</sup> For theater-led Urgent Fury, the national SOF staff did not see fit to provide Commander Second Fleet or his JTF with robust planning and liaison teams to coordinate operations, largely due to their standing OPSEC guidance (and, to a lesser degree, limited manpower and communications capability). But six years later, theater-led Operation Just Cause in Panama effectively managed OPSEC and successfully coordinated the activities of numerous SOF elements with conventional forces. A lengthy planning phase, improved staff education and procedures, as well as the experience base and expertise of Just Cause leadership (both in CONUS and U.S. Southern Command) all contributed to ensure that OPSEC would not be allowed to handicap execution of the plan.

**OPSEC guidelines for any particular situation will probably be inherited, and may not be negotiable. The C2 staff, either national or theater, that has the leadership and expertise to put together the better planning effort which still meets OPSEC requirements will be the right answer.**

## **STAFF COMPETENCE**

**What staff is best suited to C2 this particular SOF operation?**

Due to its high resourcing priority, an excellent ability to incorporate previous lessons learned, and a general maturing of the organization over 16 years, today’s standing national SOF staff is extremely competent functioning at the operational and tactical

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<sup>5</sup> Ryan, 115.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid., 145.

levels.<sup>7</sup> The ability of staffs at the JTF, CINC, or NCA level, however, to work with national SOF for contingencies will vary, based on that staff's nature (ad hoc or standing), training, experience and the particular requirements of the situation.

At the NCA/JCS level, the Joint Staff has contingency support systems that are regularly exercised, and they also enjoy the benefit of having some of the finest men and women in uniform, but their contribution to a crisis at the local level will be questionable. The geographic CINC staffs will necessarily be more ad hoc in response to contingencies, because of their competing manpower and mission requirements, but the CINC's have much improved the way they quickly organize and field a crisis staff. **The time available for crisis resolution, and the requirements of the fighting force, will largely determine how well a particular staff performs.**

Operation Just Cause reaped the benefits of a lengthy deliberate planning phase, allowing CINC and JTF staffs to "gel" (they became de facto standing staffs), and effectively address much-refined operational requirements. Urgent Fury stands in stark contrast; requiring a predominately maritime staff hastily augmented to orchestrate a joint land operation in a very compressed time frame did not produce a well-executed effort. The Achille Lauro operation was a true contingency, lasting only three days, but the competence of the forward-deployed SOF staff, in combination with the force's relatively limited and straight-forward support requirements, allowed the NCA to effectively C2 the mission, relegating the geographic CINC to a supporting role.<sup>8</sup> **Generally speaking, then, the more time available for planning and the more**

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<sup>7</sup> We have a standing national SOF staff today because the ad hoc nature of the organization supporting Operation Rice Bowl was determined to have directly contributed to mission failure.

<sup>8</sup> Jenkins, 3.

**support required on behalf of the force are conditions best addressed and led at the theater level.**

## **INTERAGENCY AND INTERNATIONAL COORDINATION**

### **What are the expected requirements?**

The expectation and degree of interagency and international coordination required to conduct the SOF operation will influence both the level and the number of participating persons and organizations. **The nature of the situation and the anticipated level of approval authority will indicate whether the national or regional staff will be more appropriate to lead in this area.**

The business of government and military bureaucracies in Washington, D.C., is to conduct coordination. But the military has gone to significant lengths to provide geographic CINC's with the ability to do the same thing with regard to matters affecting their areas of responsibility (AOR's). Political advisors, agency liaison officers, and contact mechanisms have better empowered the CINC's in this regard. The substantive difference in capabilities between the NCA and a geographic CINC to coordinate interagency and international affairs is the level at which coordination is conducted, and the time which is required. The NCA has both the authority and the means to access Cabinet members, agency directors, and even heads of state. Certainly a CINC can work through the NCA to access the same levels, but we must assume that he will require relatively more time to do so, an important factor if time is in short supply for a particular operation.

During the fast-moving Achille Lauro episode, a member of the NSC hastily located and contacted Italian Prime Minister Bettino Craxi in order to secure Italy's permission to use Sigonella, Sicily, as a reception site for the EgyptAir plane suspected of carrying the hijackers.<sup>9</sup> Likewise, the NSC was constantly in touch with the Secretary of State and the Secretary of Defense to propose actions, provide updates and receive guidance. The collocation of information, control means and command authority enabled the NCA to effectively C2 this counter-terrorism action, although we must recognize that the preciousness of time in this case lent itself to a centralized, national-level C2 solution. There will be occasions when CINC's have better relationships with countries or agencies within its AOR than Washington does, and CINC C2 will then provide the best means for successful coordination.

## **KNOWLEDGE OF NATIONAL SOF**

### **What's the scope and detail of the commander's SOF expertise? Comfort level?**

Leadership's familiarity with national SOF capabilities and limitations is critical to employing them successfully. National SOF mission areas and tactics, techniques and procedures differ by degree and type from the more visible, regionally-oriented SOF. Although most senior military leaders have some experience or education in SOF operations, relatively few are knowledgeable of national SOF capabilities, due to their more restrictive OPSEC status. Members of the JCS and other senior Pentagon officials, however, have likely received briefings or demonstrations about national SOF as part of their specific job responsibilities, since national SOF is considered to be a strategic force with capabilities tailored to current threats.

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<sup>9</sup> Ibid., 21.

In years past, both national and regional leadership have misemployed SOF. Operation Urgent Fury suffered national SOF casualties when timelines were modified without an appreciation of the impact this might have on SOF actions. A SEAL water parachute operation programmed to occur in twilight instead took place during darkness; four SEALs lost their lives in the unexpectedly heavy seas, and the mission was scrubbed. (Aircraft equipment failures and the inadequate planning and decision-making input provided by SOF to the JTF staff were also major factors in this episode.) The Holloway Commission performing a post-mortem on Operation Rice Bowl/Eagle Claw concluded that there were inadequate in-process reviews of the plan by SOF experts, and leadership at the NCA/JCS level was probably too optimistic of the capabilities of SOF men and equipment.<sup>10</sup> But General John Pustay, in justifying NCA direction of Rice Bowl/Eagle Claw, said at the time that neither of the CINC's in Europe or the Pacific were prepared to mount an unconventional operation on the scale of Rice Bowl, because of their deficiencies in counter-terrorism expertise.<sup>11</sup> Those deficiencies have long been corrected, but current rogue WMD challenges seem to mirror our situation with regard to terrorism in the early 1980's – we're inexperienced and possess only limited, predominately CONUS-based, capabilities.

**In and of itself, a CINC's degree of familiarity with national SOF is unlikely to determine C2 arrangements. However, in cases where a CINC's familiarity or bias is in the extreme, either positive or negative, it may become a deciding factor.**

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<sup>10</sup> Ryan, 124.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid., 145.

## **TIME**

Time is a thread that runs through each of the foregoing factors, greatly influencing the contribution or detraction of each factor towards the mission. If you have it, time can remedy many shortfalls, and C2 arrangements in line with doctrine are probably the right answer. Time was available and effectively used for successful theater-led operations Just Cause in Panama and Uphold Democracy in Haiti. But time was also available for the unsuccessful, NCA-led Operation Rice Bowl/Eagle Claw, leading one to believe that time was not spent wisely, or the operation was fatally flawed in one or several aspects, including C2. If, on the other hand, you have very little time available to act, the “come as you are” capability, including those aspects presented herein, of the NCA/JCS staffs versus the theater CINC and his staff, becomes a predominant factor in a C2 decision.

## **AN ESTIMATE OF THE SITUATION**

The soundness of an NCA C2 decision based on this proposed calculus of intelligence and coordination requirements, OPSEC considerations, and leadership and staff competence, is obviously only as good as the NCA’s ability to assess the particular situation, forecast its direction, and evaluate “own” (i.e., friendly) status. In some cases, the NCA may feel very good about its estimates, such as when they have been closely following developments in a situation over a long period of time, and therefore confidently arrive at a C2 decision. Many times, though, a situation develops as a complete surprise and defies confident assessment, at least of the “enemy” side of the

equation.<sup>12</sup> In most of these cases, the NCA will revert to the doctrinal C2 solution, and pass command responsibilities to the respective theater CINC. But even then, certain circumstances can make the doctrinal answer appear less sound, as, for example, when a crisis threatens to cross unified command borders.

Obviously, good estimates will use objective criteria as much as possible in lieu of opinion. Also, the professional recommendation of CINCSOC should be solicited, if for no other reason than to ensure that all aspects of the situation are being considered.

## CONCLUSION

I believe that a geographic CINC ought to know about every military or military-supported operation in his AOR. I also acknowledge that in an overwhelming majority of cases, C2 via the CINC for national SOF operations is the right answer, and will be supported both by doctrine and my proposed calculus. **But today's highly diverse threat environment will present some challenges that call for exceptional command relationships, and high-level leaders must have the wisdom to recognize these circumstances and be willing to support departures from doctrine. Special operations tend to be exceptional by definition, and every aspect of these operations should be appropriately tailored to contribute to mission success, including C2.**

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<sup>12</sup> In these instances, specific factors are often weighted too heavily, given the absence or scarcity of other information. For example, OPSEC may come to dominate all other considerations, such as happened in Iran or Grenada.

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