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The Strategic Implications of Sensitive Site Exploitation

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The Strategic Implications of Sensitive Site Exploitation

As part of the War on Terrorism (WOT), the United States has implemented a National Strategy for Combating Terrorism that includes operations not only against terrorist organizations, but also against States that sponsor them. In support of the WOT, the Department of Defense has begun to conduct Sensitive Site Exploitation (SSE) operations against strategically important sites of significant intelligence value in such places as Pakistan, Afghanistan, and Iraq. These operations, although planned and executed at the tactical level of operations, have strategic implications for both the U.S. and the international community. Consequently, because of the increased frequency with which the United States Government (USG) can expect to conduct SSE operations to support the WOT, and because of the strategic impact that those operations can have, the U.S. should consider developing a long standing Joint Interagency Task Force (JIATF) with an appropriate mix of expertise drawn from the DOD, government agencies (i.e. CIA, DOE, and Justice Department), and select Non-Governmental Organizations (i.e. UN weapons inspectors and ICRC). This paper will assess the strategic implications that SSE operations have for the U.S. in the WOT, provide an overview of SSE doctrine, organization, and a review of recent operations. Based on the critical importance these operations have for the U.S., a proposal for a JIATF will be presented that argues for a long-standing organization composed of interagency members with the requisite expertise to conduct these operations in the future.

STRATEGIC IMPERATIVE: Since September 11, 2001 the Bush Administration has focused the USG on the War on Terrorism. According to President Bush in the National Security Strategy, the “gravest danger our nation faces lies at the crossroads of radicalism and technology”, because many terrorist organizations and rogue states are actively seeking weapons

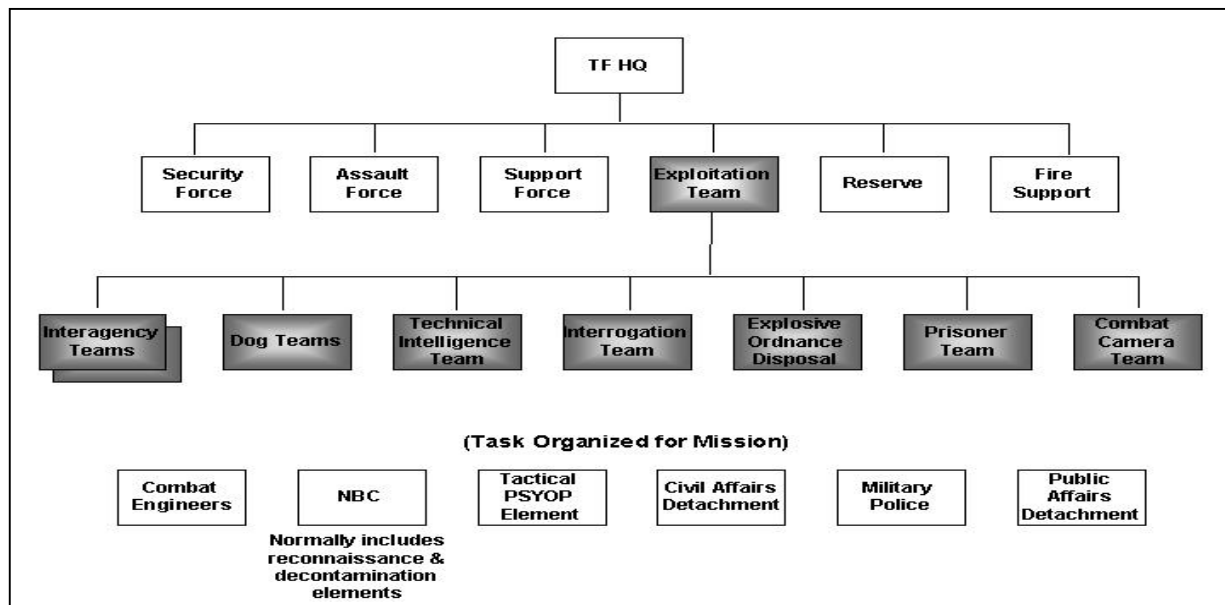
of mass destruction (WMD).¹ These enemies are determined to acquire WMD, along with other advanced technology, to be used as threats or offensively to achieve their aggressive goals. Consequently, the Bush Administration has developed a comprehensive strategy to combat WMD that includes proactive counter-proliferation efforts to deter and defend against the threat before it is unleashed.² According to the NSS, this strategy must be integrated into the doctrine, training, and equipping of our forces to ensure that the U.S. prevails in any conflict with WMD armed adversaries. Similarly, the National Strategy for Combating Terrorism advocates a “strategy of direct and continuous action against terrorist groups”.³ Because the threat of terrorists or rogue states acquiring or using WMD is a “clear and present danger” to the security of the United States, a central goal of our strategy must be to prevent terrorists from acquiring, storing, or manufacturing the WMD that would enable them to act upon their worst ambitions.⁴ One of the United States’ objectives in support of this goal is to interdict and disrupt material support for terrorists through timely, effective interdiction efforts against WMD-related materials, technologies, and expertise.⁵ Clearly, developing teams that are trained and prepared to interdict the transfer, use, and storage of any WMD materials and other sensitive information and technology is a critical function within both the NSS and the National Strategy for Combating Terrorism. A further review of the recent doctrinal development and use of SSE teams will reveal that they clearly support the U.S. strategic objectives in the War on Terrorism and are an integral part of our efforts to ensure WMD does not get into the hands of terrorists or rogue states.

DOCTRINE: A sensitive site is a geographically limited area with special diplomatic, informational, military, or economic sensitivity to the United States. Recent examples of sensitive sites include the following: war crimes sites, critical hostile government facilities,

areas suspected of containing persons of high rank or those sought after by the USG, document storage areas containing enemy or terrorist classified files, research and production facilities involving breakthrough technologies, and any place containing or suspected to have enemy research, production, storage, employment or use of chemical, biological, radiological, and nuclear weapons. Sensitive site exploitation refers to a related series of activities taken by USG forces inside a captured sensitive site. These activities exploit personnel, documents, electronic files, and material captured at the site, while neutralizing the threat posed by the site or any of its contents.⁶ The primary purpose of the exploitation is to secure, destroy, or capture sensitive materials or evidence that can be used for its strategic political value or to ensure potential adversaries do not have access to the WMD. A SSE team is a tailored organization responsible for capturing and entering a sensitive site to exploit its contents while eliminating the threat posed by material found inside. The team is normally organized around joint and interagency experts who include specially trained, equipped, and qualified individuals organized to meet the particular requirements of the specific sensitive site.

Ideally, the DOD will form a Task Force (TF) consisting of tactical military elements and the sensitive site exploitation team tailored for the specific site to be exploited.⁷ The military components of the Task Force will normally isolate, seize, and secure the sensitive site with assault, security, and support forces. The military also provides command and control, as well as airlift support, explosives experts, and nuclear, biological, and chemical (NBC) reconnaissance support. The SSE teams provide the requisite expertise for intelligence, chemical, biological, radiological, and nuclear (CBRN) expertise beyond the tactical military level, and forensics/evidentiary experts.

Example of Task Force Organized for Sensitive Site Operations⁸



The teams can be organized to conduct both deliberate and unplanned exploitation operations depending on the amount of time available prior to executing the operation. A deliberate organization is formed before operations begin or the nature of a campaign may be such that the JFLCC Commander may form one or more special purpose forces for a variety of sensitive sites. In an unplanned operation, the tactical units may be required to conduct the initial site security, followed by an SSE team that is rapidly deployed to augment the tactical units. In either case, the organization is specifically tailored to meet the requirements of the sensitive site, but will almost always consist of a combination of both military and interagency experts working together to exploit the site.

RECENT EXAMPLES OF SSE OPERATIONS: Since the end of the Cold War, the United States has conducted both overt and covert SSE operations in numerous conflicts. During the Gulf War, U.S. forces conducted SSE operations at the An Nasiriyah Southwest Ammunition storage points to secure and destroy suspected Iraqi chemical weapons.⁹ During Operations in Bosnia-Herzegovina as part of allied participation in the IFOR/SFOR mission, the USG

conducted limited SSE operations in support of the International War Crimes Tribunal at suspected war crimes sites.¹⁰ More recently, the USG has been involved in numerous SSE operations across Afghanistan in operation Enduring Freedom. Many of these SSE operations were conducted to clear sensitive areas of suspected high-ranking al-Qaida members and/or critical contraband items ranging from suspected WMD materials to weapons caches. Based upon feedback from tactical units involved in the SSE (TF Rakkasans of the 101st Air Assault Division and TF Panthers of the 82nd Airborne Division), their operations were similar to a doctrinal cordon and search mission, but required the augmentation of SOF, interagency personnel, and NGOs.¹¹

During Operation Iraqi Freedom, U.S. Central Command established a separate Task Force to conduct SSE operations, Exploitation Task Force-75 (XTF-75). XTF-75 is a “task-organized” unit that was pulled together from a U.S. Army field artillery Brigade, retrained to secure and examine sites suspected of holding banned weapons, and augmented with personnel possessing a variety of military and scientific expertise.¹² Their primary task is to document suspected WMD sites that coalition forces encounter, secure them, take samples, and prove to the international community that Saddam Hussein’s regime possessed WMD materials. As the campaign has progressed, their focus has expanded to include suspected sites of possible Iraqi war crimes. XTF-75 includes members of all branches of the U.S. armed forces, British military, and a host of civilian agencies.¹³ It also includes some of the nation’s top military and civilian weapons scientists from the Defense Intelligence Agency (DIA), the Central Intelligence Agency, and the Defense Threat Reduction Agency (DTRA), Arabic linguists, combat camera crewmen, and computer specialists organized into 8-10 mobile teams. The two DOD agencies augmenting the teams have distinct roles: the DIA organizes the civilian scientists and oversees their

investigations, while DTRA is responsible for destroying any unconventional munitions found. From the civilian sector, the teams are augmented by the Iraq Survey Group, a group of 30-40 former United Nations inspectors in Iraq including those that worked for International Atomic Energy Agency, the UN Special Commission, and the UN Monitoring, Verification, and Inspection Commission (UNMOVIC).¹⁴ These mobile teams carry a complete laboratory in trailer sized shipping containers to identify chemicals at the atomic level and rapid DNA testing for biological toxins.¹⁵ The procedures that CENTCOM uses to locate and identify the WMD in Iraq consists of three steps: front line units identify suspected sites, secure them, and conduct tactical detection to identify suspected biological, chemical, or radioactive materials; XTF-75 conducts a more thorough investigation of suspected sites using the exploitation teams and mobile laboratories; and as required, the civilian scientists and weapons inspectors are brought in to conduct the detailed investigation, documentation, and disposal of the materials. The civilian inspectors, made up of the best scientists and experts that the USG can find, provide the high quality expertise required to distinguish between suspected chemical and biological agents.¹⁶

With the demise of the Hussein Regime from power, and as Iraq has come under coalition control, the Bush Administration has faced greater domestic and international pressure to find the “smoking gun” to prove its claims that Hussein’s Regime was stockpiling illegal weapons of mass destruction. The pressure on the Task Force is also intensifying as they continue to search for and inspect facilities at more than 100 sites identified in intelligence reports, with that number growing as new leads are identified as Iraqis become more forthcoming with additional information.¹⁷ As XTF-75 has conducted operations, however, civilian weapons experts have criticized the DOD effort as being naïve, wrought with bureaucratic confusion over expeditiously hiring the appropriate civilian scientists, and resulting in the military “overreacting or under

reacting to discoveries in the field”.¹⁸ Ultimately, the success of XTF-75 in Operation Iraqi Freedom will have strategic implications for the United States in the War on Terrorism by confirming to the International Community that Hussein’s Regime retained prohibited WMD facilities and equipment in violation of UNSC resolutions, and by confirming that Iraq has been completely disarmed of all WMD. Confirmation of Iraq’s possession of prohibited items will help the U.S. convince the world, particularly those skeptics in Europe and the Middle East, that Operation Iraqi Freedom was an integral part of the Global War on Terrorism.

JIATF PROPOSAL: The increase in the number of SSE operations conducted in support of the War on Terrorism, combined with the U.S. strategy to continue to conduct counter-proliferation operations until terrorism is defeated, leads to the conclusion that the types of exploitation missions being conducted by U.S. forces in the WOT will surely continue into the future. Given the strategic implications of the operations on the overall effort for the war on terrorism and the organizational challenges of developing an “ad hoc” organization from scratch, it seems obvious that the USG should consider standing up a JIATF with the appropriate organization, expertise, and equipment to conduct future operations. Although each SSE operation may require a slightly different task organization depending on the type of mission and material at the site, an organization established with the requisite expertise and equipment would ensure more effective operations. Specifically, the interagency elements that would constitute the SSE team would include designated Intelligence, SOF, expert weapon’s inspectors, and CBRN experts from agencies such as Defense Information Security Agency, the Department of Energy, DTRA, and investigative experts from the Justice Department. This core group would form the basis for the exploitation teams and could readily be “plugged in” to a military unit that was conducting tactical operations in a designated AOR. By establishing a JIATF, the Task Force would seek to

establish operational connections between civilian and military Departments and agencies that will improve the planning and execution of SSE within the government. The JIATF could be subordinate to the regional combatant commander during a specific campaign, or could be assigned to the Counter-Terrorism Task Force when not executing a specific mission. Rather than developing a SSE Task Force in an adhoc fashion as we have seen in Afghanistan and Iraq, the JIATF would be readily available to support the GWOT for a variety of operations.

CONCLUSION: Since 9/11, the United States has embarked on a War on Terrorism that has established as an objective the interdiction and disruption of material support for terrorists. With the increase in the probability of a terrorist organization or rogue state using chemical, biological, radiological, or nuclear weapons against the U.S. or our allies, the USG must develop the capability to identify, secure, search, and exploit suspected WMD sites.¹⁹ Certainly, these operations not only have a direct impact on the national security of the U.S., they have strategic implications within the international community. However, as we have seen during recent operations in Iraq and Afghanistan, the requirements for sensitive site exploitation operations far exceed the capabilities of any one USG organization alone. The requisite equipment and expertise must be pulled from a variety of departments and agencies to include DOD, DIA, CIA, DTRA, as well as the civilian sector. Because of the urgency in which SSE operations will be conducted, developing an organization with the capabilities, equipment and training is an imperative for effective WMD counter-proliferation. By establishing a JIATF with the capabilities to conduct SSE operations, the United States will be better prepared to prevent the proliferation and use of WMD in the future.

¹ The White House, The National Security Strategy of the United States of America, Sept 2002, (Washington, D.C.), ii.

² The National Security Strategy of the United States of America, 14.

³ The White House, National Strategy for Combating Terrorism, Feb 2003, (Washington, D.C.), 2.

⁴ National Strategy for Combating Terrorism, 10.

⁵ National Strategy for Combating Terrorism, 21.

⁶ U.S. Army, ST 3-90.15: Tactics, Techniques and Procedures for Tactical Operations involving Sensitive Sites, Dec 2002 (Fort Leavenworth, KS), v.

⁷ ST 3-90.15: Tactics, Techniques and Procedures for Tactical Operations involving Sensitive Sites, iv-v.

⁸ ST 3-90.15: Tactics, Techniques and Procedures for Tactical Operations involving Sensitive Sites, 25.

⁹ ST 3-90.15: Tactics, Techniques and Procedures for Tactical Operations involving Sensitive Sites, Appx D.

¹⁰ <http://www.fas.org/man/crs/93-056.htm> , pg1-2.

¹¹ Arthur A. Durant, Deputy Chief of Doctrine at U.S Army Infantry School, Fort Benning, Georgia, "Sensitive Site Exploitation," personal e-mail (1 April 2003).

¹² Peter Eisler and Cesar G. Soriano, "Iraq Scoured for Signs of Banned Weapons", Washington Post, April 16, 2003, 29.

¹³ Mary Beth Sheridan, "Unusual Task Force sets out to 'Prove What Saddam Actually Has'", Washington Post, March 12 2003, A-10.

¹⁴ William Broad, "U.S. Civilian Experts Say Bureaucracy and Infighting Jeopardize Search for Weapons", Wall Street Journal, April 16, 2003.

¹⁵ William Gellman, Washington Post, April 8 2003, A-15, 23.

¹⁶ Broad

¹⁷ Eisler and Soriano

¹⁸ Broad

¹⁹ National Strategy for Combating Terrorism, 9.

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