

Joint, Interagency, and Multi-National Integration of SOF for Defense, Diplomacy, and Development.

(or - how to translate policy into the right balance and mix of defense, diplomacy, development, and ultimately requirements)

Opening remarks...

In addressing the question on the screen I offer one perspective on how we, NATO, are trying to evolve the multi-national aspect of SOF to deal with the security challenges we face today. In doing so my particular aim is twofold:

Firstly to tell you that we exist, and why;
and secondly to explain why we should be supported, and how

As for any military officer in search of inspiration, I find it both diplomatic and instructive to start with a look at the higher commander's intent. In this case I shall rather blandly label higher command simply as NATO given that we have many fathers. Whilst I am sure it needs little explanation, there are a few observations worth making as a start-point.

First, the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation is the world's most successful military alliance, bringing together 28 nations from Europe and North America. It has also forged substantive partnerships and engagements of various kinds with that number of countries again.

Despite this somewhat comfortable assertion, my second observation is that NATO is having to confront some significant existential challenges following the certainties of the Cold War. It has been perceived not to be doing enough to counter new threats; that it lacks a civil-military approach; that it has lost political confidence; that it has a narrow policy focus which ignores crisis prevention; and that it has lost a clear role in the public mind.

The response has been the New Strategic Concept launched at the Lisbon Summit in November last year. This reaffirmed the three core tasks of Collective Defence, Crisis Management and Cooperative Security. It interpreted these to embrace the Comprehensive Approach to a greater degree, to further develop expeditionary capabilities and to employ military and political forces before and after conflicts, as well as during them. Specifically, from the SOF perspective, NATO will develop and maintain robust, mobile and deployable forces, and will enhance its capacity to detect and defend against international terrorism. This will include the development of appropriate military capabilities, including those required to help train local forces to fight terrorism overseas and improve their security situation. This is significant new language for NATO, particularly the stronger references to terrorism, conflict prevention and capacity building.

Whilst NATO has few permanently assigned forces and a limited budget of its own, it has access to the collective capabilities and resources of our nations. These nations cooperate to a remarkable degree in the field of security and defence, and are committed to the Alliance remaining relevant in the face of modern day threats and challenges, including international terrorism. NATO therefore provides – or at least seeks to provide – a very mature, uniquely structured and relevant tool for military collaboration. My third point about NATO, therefore, is that despite its challenges, its history and institutional strengths make it an exceptional start-point if you want to work with

Allies in the military domain. Thereafter it is what we make of it.

So what of SOF in NATO? Firstly, I ought to offer a personal definition of the term NATO SOF. It is not just 'everyone else' or 'European SOF', or even necessarily the sum of separate SOF capabilities in NATO. It is instead the sum of those bits of SOF resident in the nations – all the nations – that are placed in the NATO domain. For operations, this may be limited by time and mission set. I shall come back to this point later.

For those with no direct or current experience beyond US SOF, whilst individual nation's SOF cannot compete with the sheer scale of SOCOM and its attendant capabilities, you would recognise the raw material – men and women who are carefully selected by their nations, are well trained, highly motivated, innovative, trusted and empowered to varying degrees. In turn, they very much recognise the US SOCOM Strategy, the 3-D Warrior, or the Guidance for 2011. Therefore, behind language and cultural differences you are dealing with what you would expect and hope for. NATO's non-US SOF are different through circumstance, not DNA.

However, they have lacked an identity and presence in NATO and in some cases in the individual nations as well. In 2006 SOF in NATO was represented by little more than isolated individuals in NATO posts across parts of the command structure whilst the SOF capabilities resided in the nations and was connected by *ad hoc* bi-laterals. Clear gaps were exposed in Bosnia, Kosovo and the early years in Afghanistan where SOF found they lacked the structures and habits to work together effectively under NATO, or under OEF for that matter. This therefore led in 2006 to the NATO SOF Transformation Initiative, intended to enhance the ability of SOF to train and operate together, improve equipment capability, remedy specific shortfalls and – in the future – provide the core of a deployable component level headquarters if required. These efforts are intended to enable the timely deployment and direction of NATO SOF, fully integrated from the start into the operational commander's plan.

The result initially was the NATO SOF Coordination Centre in 2007, with the US as the Framework Nation and driving force. The NSCC set about transforming the landscape with a speed, energy and resourcefulness that impressed many in NATO where transformation is often a rather slower process. In 2010, recognising the early success of the NSCC, this matured naturally into the NATO Special Operations Headquarters, or NSHQ (explain SO, not SOF).

The mission is on the slide. I think it speaks for itself. The key tasks that fall out of this, and which we are actively pursuing, are – to provide SOF advice to the NATO chain of command; to drive cohesion into the SOF component; to engage partners and nations in support of SOF development; to develop a secure network for collaboration and operations; to define the necessary policy, doctrine, standards and other essential parts of the conceptual framework; to improve the development of capability and force generation for operations; and to develop the Core of a deployable SOF component command. It is a big list, and we are not yet on top of all of it, but we will be.

Some facts. We are based in Belgium at the NATO military headquarters, otherwise known as SHAPE. Commanded by a US 3-Star General we number about 150 people from 24 NATO nations, with 2 non-NATO partners also represented. A further 6 nations are in varying stages of signing up. We will grow over the next 18 months to about 215 people, and also move into the best new HQ building in NATO. We already have a substantial, modern and expanding training campus in the

locality. We have also developed our own enclave on BICES as a secure collaborative SOF CIS network that is also highly deployable. The vision is for a collaborative foundation for NATO SOF, recognised by NATO nations and empowered by their capable personnel, acting as a dynamic catalyst for evolutionary transformation of the required SOF capabilities, and acknowledged as the operational core for NATO SOF. In short, SOF has arrived in NATO, rather than just in its nations. For this we owe you the US a huge amount as the nation that has shown the necessary vision and leadership, matched these with resources, and gripped the problem by the scruff of the neck.

Has this achieved anything? The short and emphatic answer is yes – very much so. SOF now exist in NATO policy, doctrine and force standards. We most assuredly have a voice – a very senior one at that – and are increasingly capable of expressing it coherently in the Alliance chain of command and national capitals.

The most significant expression of NATO SOF is in ISAF. Over the period SOF in ISAF have trebled in size, and includes some US SOF. ISAF SOF are linked coherently into the campaign plan, and to the other SOF entities. They have expanded their mission, and are now an independent command answering directly to General Petraeus. You will be well aware of the significance he attaches to the effect that SOF are having. Whilst we must recognise that the lion's share of the SOF effort and effect is from the US, a notable amount of the significant effect frequently cited by Gen Petraeus is created by ISAF SOF. Some nations are at similar scales of effort to the US when expressed as a proportion of their available capabilities.

ISAF SOF is not just an attempt at imitation either – you get something extra and not just more of the same. Perhaps this is best illustrated in the partnerships that have been developed with Afghan institutions. Whilst US SOF have focused very much on raising and partnering their Afghan counterparts, ISAF SOF have – sometimes haphazardly – built a series of relationships with parts of the Ministry of Interior. Both are necessary – indeed it may be that an analysis of campaigns in both Iraq and Afghanistan might conclude that COIN requires us to prioritise capability and capacity building of the police and interior ministry ahead of that of the army – but I sense that we are each most effective in our current lanes. That said, the current Afghan Local Police initiative, which is MOI focused, could not have been initiated by ISAF SOF. There are too many what one might term 'edges' to it, and operational urgency, to allow for the NATO consensus approach to work. ISAF SOF and the US SOF not under ISAF have therefore become complementary and not competing, and are maybe even stronger as a whole than the sum of the parts?

It is not axiomatic that any improvements in ISAF SOF are the result of NSHQ, but I contend that it is NSHQ that has made much of the difference. It is the enduring mechanism for the new concepts and capabilities in ISAF SOF. It has also improved SOF force generation, with NSHQ providing an opening for the willing but less-experienced nations to contribute effectively and with confidence. With significant US support, NSHQ has directly enabled ISAF SOF through the creation of a multi-national and inter-agency bespoke intelligence fusion capability, and rolled out a biometric capability that leads the way in ISAF. ISAF SOF is conducting the full spectrum of SOF tasks, including an increasing amount of Military Assistance – (or 'MA', but what you would describe as Foreign Internal Defence) – which is breaking new ground for many NATO nations. The development of MA concepts and the requisite capabilities is being led by NSHQ at the behest of ISAF SOF.

To achieve all this, back home NSHQ has rapidly developed and provided courses and training

optimised to enhance ISAF SOF capability and interoperability. It is establishing an increasingly effective network for routine SOF dialogue and collaboration. It advises nascent SOF nations. It conducts senior engagement activity, up to and including Defence Ministers, to promote the SOF component. It is the gearing for accelerated and focused SOF development, and – I venture – it is making a difference.

I would not want, nor expect you to believe that it is all plain sailing. There are constraints upon what we do, and on what can be achieved. A small number of NATO nations are more ambivalent about SOF capability than we would like. Others are not very far down the road of growing what we would recognise as SOF. Many hold significant domestic Counter Terrorist response commitments, or other national responsibilities, limiting their expeditionary capability and experience – although very often size means that they are pretty good at being Joint. (And I should point out that NSHQ is very firmly a Joint headquarters). All this must be respected, and it places some limits on capacity, collaboration and ambition.

There is also a complex mix of inputs. There are different approaches on engagement in law-enforcement activity, including counter-narcotics, and collaboration with the corresponding agencies. As we are finding now there are also very different perspectives on the SOF task of Military Assistance (FID), and whether it is a task for some NATO SOF. On the other side, NATO recognises the sensitivities of hostage rescue operations and therefore leaves this thorny issue largely to the national domain. The effect of all this – as I alluded to in defining NATO SOF at the start – is to limit the area of SOF activity open to NATO-driven collaboration to what one might oddly call ‘collective conventional SOF activity’ – although much still goes on bi-laterally between nations. This aperture will widen over time, aided by the network being put in place by NSHQ. It means, however, that we must be very careful with applying templates and are best served by looking for ways to develop or unlock existing potential rather than attempting to order things too neatly.

There are, of course, more traditional constraints. We have a common language but sometimes forget to use it in a way that accommodates those who do not speak it every day. (Even those who do have it as their first language can struggle to understand each other – comment). We compensate with common and detailed NATO terms of reference, which mean that interoperability is actually much less of a constraint than it might be supposed.

Most significantly, perhaps, we are constrained by our ability to share information of all sorts – lessons, intelligence or just our experiences. The reasons are many – secrecy, security, systems, habit and plain capacity among them. It is difficult, often requiring busy people to do even more. Whenever this comes up it is often assumed to be a veiled criticism of the US, but on this occasion I really don’t mean it that way. Whilst there are issues, such as the often used example of NOFORN to label information that was provided by Allies in the first place, it is remarkable how far the US has come, how bold some commanders have been, and how many sacred cows have been slaughtered to enable a good degree of sharing. Instead, I am referring to all of us. We all need to see sharing as the start-point rather than the by-product, and limit only that which truly needs to be limited. We also need simply to make the effort to share rather than stick to the established and easy means of distribution just because that is the way we have always done it. (Wikileaks). Of course, were we to achieve this enhanced information exchange we would also need the means to manage it better, and to protect us from the volume.

And, in the background, there is always money – or a lack of it. NATO itself has little of it, employs byzantine processes, and as latecomers to the party there is almost nothing available in NATO for SOF capability. NATO nations' resourcing of their SOF varies, but you can be sure that none matches SOCOM, even per capita. Generally, reflecting our times, SOF is attracting more of what is available, but of course that is itself reducing in the current financial climate. Smaller SOF nations lack the economies of scale too. The result is severe pressure on budgets, which is usually expressed by a lack of the critical enabling capabilities. These are often very expensive to develop and maintain. There is no doubt that NATO SOF potential is under-exploited because of a lack of enablers.

All of these constraints – differing approaches, a limited range of SOF activity in NATO, language, the lack of a sharing culture, and money – are to varying degrees the job of NSHQ to overcome, but it also means there is a limit on the collaborative model and we would be deluding ourselves if we did not recognise that. However, I have absolutely no doubt that NSHQ will create an ever-deepening network of increasingly capable and collaborative national SOF within NATO and beyond, and will continue to test the limit of what is achievable.

I hope I have succeeded in informing you that we exist, and why. I hope also that I have said enough to persuade you that this US-led SOF experiment in the heart of NATO is worth continued support and investment, at least for now. (Churchill - 'you can always count on Americans to do the right thing, after they have tried everything else'. In this context NSHQ is 'the right thing'.) But what might it all mean in a forum such as this?

I interpret the question as how do we get the most effective capability, willing and able to face the challenges of the 3D environment, from the collaborative efforts of SOF across NATO?

Firstly, we need to realise that part of the New Strategic Concept that talks about crisis prevention, and about generating the policy, capacity and skills to train local forces to fight terrorism themselves. SOF needs to institutionalise the conduct of Military Assistance – and possibly even re-define the term – recognising that MA it is not just about training but about building genuine capacity and, if necessary institutions and concepts up to the national level to make that training effective. Such activity can also be used as a significant door-opener, by SOF or by others, to achieve an influence and effect that goes beyond its mere mechanics. It is at the heart of defence, diplomacy and development for SOF, being the vehicle it uses for interaction with a target audience as part of the Comprehensive Approach. You can challenge us to live up to the rhetoric, consider the optimisation of equipment and procurement with MA in mind, and force the greater professionalisation of this skill-set.

Secondly, whilst NATO SOF are a long way down the road of Joint and Multi-National we need to challenge how we do Inter-agency, and widen the discussion to include more of that which is currently regarded as national business. Counter terrorism demands it, as does support to Development. Whilst recognising that this starts to tread on some very sensitive issues, including constitutional ones in some countries, we should not be afraid of debate and discovery even if we know that the potential deductions are unpalatable or currently unenforceable. We should be clear on the potential benefits to be had, the efficiencies to be made and the attendant risks of both action and inaction. You can help expose these deductions and opportunities as well as promote the greater standardisation of interagency systems, although I can see that it may not always be in commercial interests to do so

Switching to requirements, NATO SOF unsurprisingly has the same aspirations for 'kit' as anyone else – sensors of every kind, lighter equipment, more flexible and capable mobility options, better information and communications systems and so on. As with any SOF, the list can be demanding, endless and very expensive. You will understand much of this better than I – but will also recognise that nations and not NATO (and certainly not NSHQ) hold the significant purse-strings – so I will express NSHQ requirements more generally and from the perspective of what may be additional or different.

The over-riding requirement for us is to promote and enable sharing of information, and its exploitation routinely and in real-time. Interoperable (or ideally common) CIS; the wider use of commercial encryption; more flexible gateways; better data-mining tools; and more accurate translation tools – and all of this supporting and enabling processes and an approach that guides an originator towards production aimed at sharing in the first place. Industry can force us to be more coherent, as well as benefit from us being the opposite.

The second requirement is the improvement of enabling capabilities for expeditionary SOF operations. This is partly addressed by improved sharing and dissemination of information, but it is mostly about SOF capable ISR and rotary wing. We need to understand the minimum levels of capability required, build-in modularity and find novel and affordable ways of resourcing this or making it available to SOF that would otherwise not be able to reach what might be regarded as a theatre-entry standard. This must push us to distinguish the essential from the desirable, to make maximum use of commercial-off-the-shelf products, to seek economies of scale across borders and to find new models for sharing and for service provision.

The third requirement is simply interoperability in all its forms - whether it is the formal aspect of this, such as radios and IT systems that can talk to each other; the more informal aspect such as reversing the proliferation of batteries and other simple commodities; or harmonising the more sophisticated proprietary systems that challenge the effectiveness of an application programming interface. Standardisation and innovation may be enemies in some circumstances, but we must always ask ourselves if something optimises its actual employment or simply its notional capability. Good fielded capability can be better than awesome potential. Simplicity, modularity and standardisation are good for multi-national operations as well as capacity building abroad.

It is time to conclude. I hope I have managed to convey that there is a very active line of development for Joint Multi-National SOF, in NATO, led by the US and strongly supported by the other NATO nations. It is generating the collaborative SOF capability and network required for Defense, Diplomacy and Development operations. It is showing that in ISAF today. It doesn't lack much in the way of policy freedoms, but there are bespoke requirements to get right – conceptual, cultural and technical. It has considerable potential and I hope you will be able to find new ways to support us.

Closing remarks....