

Assistance Beyond Luck: Synchronizing Engagements in the Global SOF Network

U.S. Army Major Andrew Ruszkiewicz

Introduction

“You Can’t Surge Trust. You must build it, slowly and deliberately, before a crisis occurs,” Admiral William McRaven, former commander of USSOCOM.

In December 2012, Mokhtar Belmokhtar, an al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) affiliated terrorist leader in Northern Mali released a statement calling for the mobilization of fighters to converge on Mali and fight the impending Western military interventions in the war-torn country. An estimated 1,200 terrorists would eventually occupy the northern part of the country. Concurrently, West African governments apprehensively pledged to support the fight against jihadist elements, but were drastically under-trained and under-resourced to meet the challenges. Ansar Dine, AQIM, and their associated groups continued to fortify their positions in the Adrar des Ifoghas mountain range in advance of the coming battles.

In February 2013, a fierce firefight broke out as a Chadian special operations forces (SOF) unit operating in Northern Mali made contact with terrorists entrenched in the formidable mountain range. Hours later, Abu Zeid, the deputy commander of AQIM and approximately 30 of his fighters lay dead. Only a week earlier, the same Chadian unit had entered the town of Tessalit, helping French forces liberate it and killing nearly 70 fighters in the process.



Figure 1. Chadian SATG forces near Faya Largeau, the provincial capital city in the Tibesti region of northern Chad. Source: SOFLE team, 2011.

Major Andrew Ruszkiewicz is a U.S. Army Civil Affairs officer. He submitted this paper while attending the Naval Postgraduate School in Monterey, California, where he is currently pursuing a Master's of Science in Defense Analysis with an Irregular Warfare Focus.

*Note: The views expressed in this essay are entirely those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the views, policy or position of the United States Government, Department of Defense, United States Special Operations Command, or the Joint Special Operations University.

Overlooking the battlefield, Brigadier General Abdraman Mery, commander of the Chadian special anti-terrorist group (SATG) surveyed the damage to his force; over 30 killed and numerous more wounded. The losses were substantial, but significantly less than should have been expected after assaulting a force that held a marked advantage in regards to terrain and time to prepare for the battle. Only weeks earlier, General Mery and his 600 special operators had embarked in their Toyota Land Cruiser trucks with little more than crew-served weapons, and traversed the greater part of some of the most inhospitable terrain in the world: the Saharan Desert. In the span of three months, this force had accomplished a feat most would not have believed possible. A year later, in May of 2014, General Mery would arrive in Tampa, Florida, for U.S. Special Operations Command's (USSOCOM) International SOF conference where he would receive an award for his actions during combat operations in Mali. How did this happen?

In order to better achieve synchronization of persistent SOF engagements capable of leveraging partner SOF in an expeditionary manner, USSOCOM must revise the special operations liaison officer (SOLO) program. This essay builds upon previous concepts, such as the Volckmann Program proposed in 2011 by then Colonel Eric P. Wendt, as well as recent recommendations made in "Special Operations Liaison Officer: Looking Back To See The Future."¹ The concept proposed here goes beyond these previous recommendations as it argues for the creation of a regionally aligned, specially trained, SOF liaison program under USSOCOM management. This new concept essentially transforms the SOLO program into a special operations liaison team (SOLT). The SOLT concept would encompass the selection, training, and employment of mid-career special operators from each of the four services to work directly with partner-nation SOF under the Office of Security Cooperation as part of the U.S. country teams. The SOLT would be comprised of mid-grade to senior SOF noncommissioned officers, warrant officers, and officers who have completed key developmental jobs in a particular region. SOLT members would be selected for their advanced regional expertise and would receive specialized training in security assistance and security cooperation programs and military advising, prior to their employment. They could be deployed individually or in small, two- to four-operator elements.

The SOLT concept addresses the gaps in long-range planning and synchronization of persistent engagements, episodic engagements, and train- and equip-funding efforts. It also provides expertise in advising interagency partners and the host nation on special operations at the national level. Equally significant, this program proposes embedding SOF personnel for approximately three years to truly develop and cultivate relationships to leverage regional expertise not currently enjoyed within USSOCOM. Indicative of this need, U.S. Army Brigadier General James B. Linder, the Special Operations Command Africa (SOCAFRICA) commander, regularly comments, "I'm not interested in what language you speak, I want to know which dialects of the language you speak."

This concept would help address the heart of this statement—truly improving regional expertise.

How We Got Lucky

Drawing on the example of the SATG, I define luck as having the right people in the right places at the right time. Significant to the successful engagement with the SATG and their subsequent combat success against an internationally declared terrorist organization were the key relationships formed between the SATG staff, the SOF liaison element (SOFLE) and defense attaché at the U.S. embassy, and the Joint Special Operations Task Force–Trans Sahel. Luckily, key personalities in these specific locations allowed for the refinement of training and equipment requests for the SATG. This was no small task; in 2011 alone, the SOFLE drafted, refined, and submitted no less than four separate train and equip proposals totaling over \$20 million, and supported seven separate episodic engagements with the SATG and one Joint Chiefs of Staff (JCS) exercise. Remarkably, this was accomplished without receiving any training in security assistance, engagement planning, foreign internal defense, or military advising prior to being assigned as a SOFLE.



Figure 2. From left to right: Colonel Jacklyn Pinkham, acting DATT; General Carter Ham, commander USAFRICOM; Chief Master Sergeant Jack Johnson Jr., USAFRICOM SEA; Chadian Lieutenant Colonel Gassim, SATG J2; Chadian Colonel Segour, SATG DCO; Chadian Colonel Mery, SATG commander; Lieutenant Colonel Christopher Schmitt, JSOTF-TS J3; and Captain Andrew Ruszkiewicz, SOFLE, meet during a USAFRICOM visit to discuss SATG operations in 2011. Source: Sergeant First Class Mark Moore.

The activities of building partnership capacity (BPC) included significant use of 1206, 1207, and Title 22 peacekeeping operations funding mechanisms. These train and equip packages were coupled with persistent presence elements such as the SOFLE. Persistent presence with the SATG was further enhanced through episodic engagements, including joint combined exchange training (JCET) and numerous other events. Viewing the multitude of engagements that occurred over time with the SATG, it may be easy to

conclude that a synchronized engagement plan was implemented to best leverage these Department of Defense (DOD) initiatives, but that conclusion is false. The real explanation to the successes of BPC activities in regards to the SATG was luck. I know this to be true, as I experienced the lack of synchronization of engagements first hand while serving as the commander of the SOFLE for nearly a year in 2011. The effects of these engagements still achieved a level of success that is tangible, as General Mery credited much of the success the SATG had in Mali directly to the training and equipping received from U.S. SOF.

The engagements with the SATG may seem well organized, but in reality were suboptimal and lacked coherent synchronization to meet U.S. and Chadian intent for the partnership. The SOLT concept is organized to specifically address these and other issues by synchronizing SOF engagements within a given country. Numerous programs across USSOCOM and the various theater special operations commands (TSOCs) have attempted to address these very issues. At current count, no less than five different named titles exist for managing these types of duties, none of them specifically train and organize personnel for the actual job.² Currently, these duties are performed by rotations of SOF elements or in some cases, an augmentee from one of the SOF service components.

Throughout the various persistent presence efforts, the narrow-focused and repetitive training of JCETs continued to be an issue for the SATG commander. Although grateful for any support, the SATG commander concluded that in order to improve his force, he needed to create the capacity to internally train his formations. The SOFLE lobbied U.S. SOF force providers via SOCAFRICA and explained General Mery's vision to improve his force. The result was the first internal Chadian cadre of trainers for the SATG. That cadre would soon assist the first of multiple JCETs in training company-sized elements at a time. This was something previously infeasible with the personnel packages provided during JCETs. This capability fundamentally changed the capacity of the SATG to train its force in late 2011. Unfortunately, this initiative came too late to truly bear fruit: less than 15 months later the SATG would be deployed to Mali.

Next came the daunting task of security assistance for our Chadian partners. To state that the SATG was poorly equipped and under-resourced is an understatement. The SATG's monthly operating budget was equivalent to approximately \$20,000 for a unit of more than 1,000 soldiers. Almost the entire amount was spent on the basics of food and fuel for operations. This left no room for training, spare parts, or new equipment. Cannibalization of vehicles occurred regularly to keep the SATG operational.³ Over 40 percent of the SATG fleet of Toyota trucks was provided through American security assistance funding. Ironically, many of the orders for these U.S. purchased trucks had to be altered at the last minute because they did not contain the correct fuel type utilized predominantly by the Chadian military. This critical oversight by an American military

planner somewhere in Germany could have had significant negative effects but was luckily caught due to the close relationship between the SOFLE and the SATG staff. Had a SOLT, with established relationships both within the partner force and with higher headquarters been present, this issue would have likely never even manifested.

What makes SOLT different is it formalizes these haphazard attempts to address identified gaps in synchronizing in-country efforts of SOF. SOLT not only addresses the gaps, but mitigates the need for ever changing in-theater SOF augmentation requests from the TSOCs. In lieu of receiving augmentation to fill valid requirements, the SOLT concept calls for a pool of regionally-aligned, specially-qualified personnel retained by USSOCOM for this specific SOF-peculiar mission. In many ways, this concept looks like the SOF version of the foreign area officer program, and as such, for the program to work will require identification of valid candidates who are mid-grade to senior noncommissioned officers, warrant officers, and officers who have also completed key developmental jobs in the same region to address this identified gap. These candidates would opt-in to specialize in this very specific career path.

"Face-to-face fighting with the Islamists is over. The Chadian army does not have the skills to fight a shadowy, guerrilla-style war that is taking place in northern Mali," Idris Itno Déby, president of Chad.

Would the presence of a SOLT in Chad from the beginning have improved the outcome of the SATG's initial combat operation in Mali? Would the SATG have been better trained to operate holistically in an irregular warfare environment? Lastly, would the SATG have been able to sustain its successes following major combat operations had they been better prepared to fight what the Chadian president described as a guerrilla war?⁴ To answer these questions, we need only look eastward across the continent of Africa to the successes in training and employment of the Kenyan Ranger Strike Force (KRSF), under the tutelage of SOF.

Beyond Luck: Institutionalizing Success

Just outside of Nairobi, Kenya, a potential model for success has quietly been ongoing since 2006. From 2006 to 2011, a U.S. investment of approximately \$40 million was spent to establish the Kenyan Ranger School.⁵ The KRSF was soon deployed, operating against al-Shabaab in Somalia. These successes were due to the results of two critical persistent presence elements under USSOCOM. First was the calculated placement of SOF at the KRSF headquarters. This daily interaction with the Kenyan Ranger School, as well as with the KRSF commander and staff, were essential in developing the KRSF capabilities. Second was the assigning of a senior SOF officer as the SOLO in Kenya, tasked to help synchronize resources and engagements, directly furthering the KRSF capabilities in support of U.S. national interests. These two positions are at the very core

of what the global SOF network (GSN) should attempt to emulate as it moves forward in implementation.

Using the KRSF as a template, and further incorporating numerous lessons from the Chadian SATG experiences, the value of persistent presence is clear. Going beyond luck, USSOCOM can leverage the SOLT to address this identified gap. The SOLT program would become a career path managed exclusively by USSOCOM, much like the SOLO program is managed currently. The main divergence between SOLT and the Volckmann Program is that Volckmann participants solely come from Army Special Forces. Under SOLT, any SOF personnel would be eligible to apply to the program.⁶ Critical to the success of the concept is that SOLT members have longevity for assignment to U.S. embassies on three-year, permanent-change-of-station orders. SOLTs would fall under National Security Decision Directive 38 authorities and directly work for the Office of Security Cooperation and ultimately the U.S. ambassador.⁷ Additionally, SOLTs would conduct coordination with the TSOC and ultimately USSOCOM. Figure 3 illustrates one possible command and reporting relationship in which command authorities (solid line) rest with the U.S. country team and coordination and operational synchronization (dotted line) rest with the TSOC.

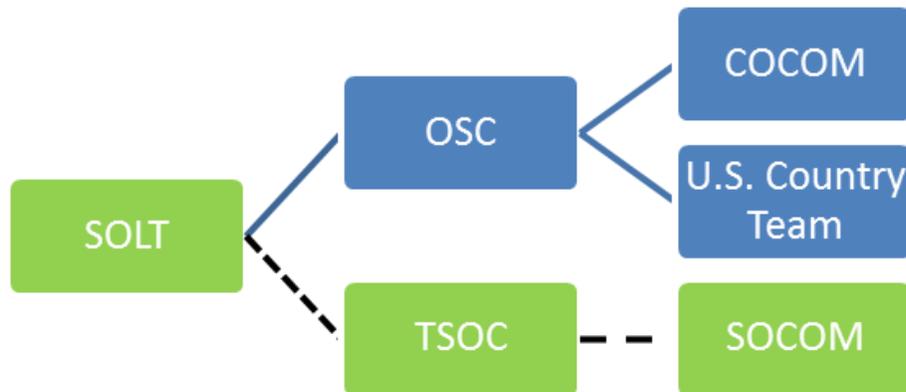


Figure 3. Illustration of possible command and reporting relationships.

By design, the SOLT program directly addresses the majority of the critical capabilities areas outlined in the 2013 USSOCOM Operating Concept and would specifically address concepts such as sustaining the GSN, cultural and regional expertise, SOF information environment, invisible operator, and expanded authorities.⁸ These areas would all be positively impacted through permanent embedding of SOF personnel, at the country team level, who are specifically selected and trained to address these capabilities. Additionally, the SOLT would oversee the preponderance of other in-country SOF operations, synchronizing engagements, and efforts to fully realize their potential and meet U.S. national security objectives. Figure 4 shows just one hypothetical path for this process of becoming a SOLT member.

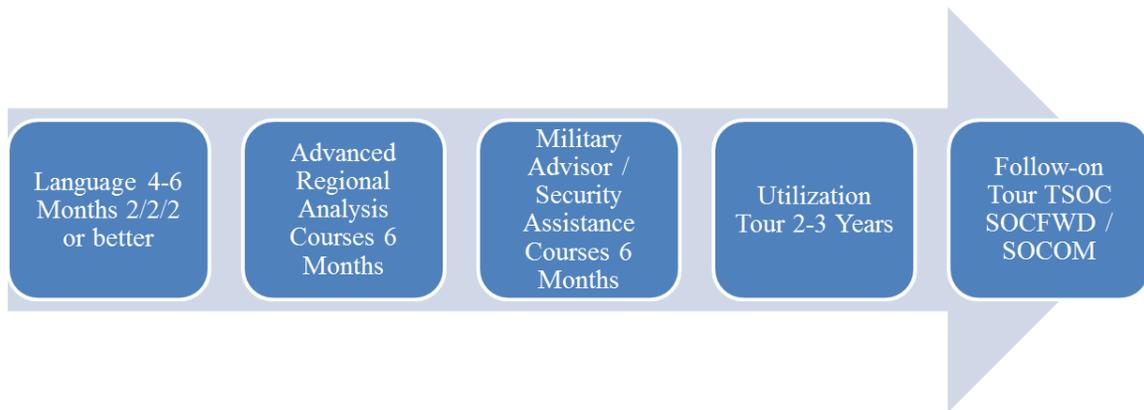


Figure 4. A hypothetical path for the process of becoming a SOLT member.

Shortfalls and Barriers:

Clearly, issues will arise from the implementation of such a type of program. Funding and authorities will have to be negotiated between the services and civilian agencies. Within DOD there will be a need to stress the importance of this type of program and establish its credibility and success as a viable career path for any members to keep themselves competitive. In his Volckmann Program proposal, now Major General Wendt argued these exact points, and provided details on how to avoid making this a career-hampering move.⁹

Moreover, this concept could be perceived as an attempt by SOF to further militarize foreign policy. However, this is not the case at all. A SOLT program would be in the service of the country team, while providing unique SOF expertise that is the exception and not the rule in the paths of security assistance and cooperation staffs. This institutionalization is required to enhance effects through a synchronized and nested program, such as SOLT.

Doing More With Less:

The axiom of doing more with less continues to be vocalized within DOD. Ironically, that is exactly the purpose of SOF and should be capitalized upon as the fiscal constraints of a shrinking DOD budget become evermore apparent in today's environment. The engagement strategy employed in either Chad or Kenya can be adapted across the world with SOF partners. It took only four persistent SOF members in Chad, augmented by quarterly JCETs and train and equip packages, to realize a tangible success: the unilateral employment of a U.S. partner force, without American advisement, against an internationally recognized terrorist organization. Over the nine years of engagement in Chad, the average cost ran between \$500 thousand for episodic engagements and \$10 million for train and equip packages. To put it in perspective, the estimated total expenditure on the SATG since 2010 has been approximately \$10 million, and the KRSF

has recently surpassed \$45 million; amounting to less than a single day's expenditure to support combat operations in Iraq or Afghanistan. The United States has expended more funds in a week supporting combat operations than it has in over six years in the development of two successful African Special Operations Forces.¹⁰ These types of operations directly address global national security objectives in an inexpensive manner and are devised to prevent the need for entrance of U.S. forces into combat. The SOLT program would serve to further enhance the cost-effectiveness of these engagements.

Conclusion:

Previous concepts have not provided a program that creates a capability as proposed in this essay. This concept seeks to select mid-grade SOF personnel and provide them advanced training in their already-assigned regional area, then assign them for a prolonged period in support of U.S. country teams and partner nations with the intent of synchronizing special operations to meet U.S. national objectives. These personnel would be selected from any of the service SOF components and utilized in their areas of regional expertise. Not without obstacles, this concept must address the aspects of career progression, funding, and expanded authorities required for such a program. If implemented, the SOLT concept would ultimately nest with the vision of the 2013 USSOCOM Operating Concept, while accommodating the fiscal constraints of today's operating environment by producing success over years using a fraction of the cost of what is expended per day for major combat operations. All the while, SOLTs would be meeting U.S. national objectives in a more discreet manner. Chad and Kenya are but two region-specific examples of what the SOLT concept could produce. The SOLT concept, if capitalized upon, would institutionalize the success highlighted in just two examples in Africa and negate the need for luck.

Endnotes

¹ Wendt, Eric P., Colonel. “The Green Beret Volckmann Program: Maximizing the prevent strategy.” *Special Warfare*, 24(3), July 2011, 10-16; and Bieganeck, Cory, Leitner, John, and Madsen, Phillip. “Special Operations Liaison Officer: Looking Back To See The Future.” Master’s thesis, Naval Postgraduate School, 2014.

² Some such programs include Special Operations Forces Liaison Elements (SOFLE), Special Operations Liaison Officers (SOLO), Joint Planning and Advisory (or Assistance) Teams (JPAT), Planning and Assistance Teams (PATs), etc.

³ The SATG was not bound by a posse comitatus law and were the premier force employed by the Chadian Ministry of Defense, National Security Agency, and sometimes directly by the president to conduct counterterrorism operations within the country’s own borders.

⁴ Interestingly, upon his return from Mali, Brigadier General Mery conveyed that some of the most important training his force had received was that of Civil Military Operations (CMO). The fact the SATG received CMO training at all was largely an effect of the only persistent SOF presence from 2010 to 2012 of a SOF Civil Affairs team.

⁵ “‘3D’ in Nairobi: An overview of diplomacy, development, and defense at the U.S. Mission, Nairobi, Kenya, April 2011,” slide presentation. Accessed at: <https://www.conferences.state.gov/RM/programmevaluation2011/Related%20Documents/Defense%20Workshops/3Ds%20in%20Nairobi%20-%20An%20overview%20of%20diplomacy,%20development,%20and%20defense%20at%20the%20U.S.%20Mission,%20Nairobi,%20Kenya.pdf>

⁶ Wendt, “The Green Beret Volckmann Program,” 10-16.

⁷ NSDD-38 is often a point of friction between the Department of State (DOS) and Combatant Command commanders within their specific area of responsibility when dealing with DOD personnel working from a U.S. embassy. According to the DOS website: “The National Security Decision Directive (NSDD) 38 dated 2 June 1982, gives the Chief of Mission (COM) control of the size, composition, and mandate of overseas full-time mission staffing for all U.S. Government agencies.” Accessed at: www.state.gov/m/pri/nsdd/ on 30 November 2014.

⁸ United States Special Operations Command Special Operations Forces Operating Concept. May, 2013. Accessed at: <http://fortunascorner.files.wordpress.com/2013/05/final-low-res-sof-operating-concept-may-2013.pdf>

⁹ Wendt, “The Green Beret Volckmann Program,” 10-16.

¹⁰ Current estimates project the ongoing war in Afghanistan cost \$10.17 million an hour, and on average the daily cost of air operations against ISIS are approximately \$7.5 million. National Priorities Project, “Cost of Military Programs,” 14 November 2014. Accessed at: <https://www.nationalpriorities.org/cost-of/category/military/>