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From Afghanistan to Somalia, Special Ops Achieves Less with More

At around 11 o'clock that night, four Lockheed MC-130 Combat Talons, turboprop Special Operations aircraft, were flying through a moonless sky from Pakistani into Afghan airspace. On board were 199 Army Rangers with orders to seize an airstrip. One hundred miles to the northeast, Chinook and Black Hawk helicopters cruised through the darkness toward Kandahar, carrying Army Delta Force operators and yet more Rangers, heading for a second site. It was October 19, 2001. The war in Afghanistan had just begun and U.S. Special Operations forces (SOF) were the tip of the American spear.

Those Rangers parachuted into and then swarmed the airfield, engaging the enemy -- a single armed fighter, as it turned out -- and killing him. At that second site, the residence of Taliban leader Mullah Mohammed Omar, the special operators apparently encountered no resistance at all, even though several Americans were wounded due to friendly fire and a helicopter crash.

In 2001, U.S. special operators were targeting just two enemy forces: al-Qaeda and the Taliban. In 2010, his first full year in office, President Barack Obama informed Congress that U.S. forces were still "actively pursuing and engaging remaining al-Qaeda and Taliban fighters in Afghanistan." According to a recent Pentagon report to Congress, American troops are battling more than 10 times that number of militant groups, including the still-undefeated Taliban, the Haqqani network, an Islamic State affiliate known as ISIS-Khorasan, and various "other insurgent networks."

After more than 16 years of combat, U.S. Special Operations forces remain the tip of the spear in Afghanistan, where they continue to carry out counterterrorism missions. In fact, from June 1st to November 24th last year, according to that Pentagon report, members of Special Operations Joint Task Force-Afghanistan conducted 2,175 ground operations "in which they enabled or advised" Afghan commandos.

"During the Obama administration the use of Special Operations forces increased dramatically, as if their use was a sort of magical, all-purpose solution for fighting terrorism," William Hartung, the director of the Arms and Security Project at the Center for International Policy, pointed out. "The ensuing years have proven this assumption to be false. There are many impressive,

highly skilled personnel involved in special operations on behalf of the United States, but the problems they are being asked to solve often do not have military solutions. Despite this fact, the Trump administration is doubling down on this approach in Afghanistan, even though the strategy has not prevented the spread of terrorist organizations and may in fact be counterproductive.”

Global Commandos

Since U.S. commandos went to war in 2001, the size of Special Operations Command has doubled from about 33,000 personnel to 70,000 today. As their numbers have grown, so has their global reach. As TomDispatch revealed last month, they were deployed to 149 nations in 2017, or about 75% of the countries on the planet, a record-setting year. It topped 2016’s 138 nations under the Obama administration and dwarfed the numbers from the final years of the Bush administration. As the scope of deployments has expanded, special operators also came to be spread ever more equally across the planet.

In October 2001, Afghanistan was the sole focus of commando combat missions. On March 19, 2003, special operators fired the first shots in the invasion of Iraq as their helicopter teams attacked Iraqi border posts near Jordan and Saudi Arabia. By 2006, as the war in Afghanistan ground on and the conflict in Iraq continued to morph into a raging set of insurgencies, 85% of U.S. commandos were being deployed to the Greater Middle East.

As this decade dawned in 2010, the numbers hadn’t changed appreciably: 81% of all special operators abroad were still in that region.

Eight years later, however, the situation is markedly different, according to figures provided to TomDispatch by U.S. Special Operations Command. Despite claims that the Islamic State has been defeated, the U.S. remains embroiled in wars in Iraq and Syria, as well as in Afghanistan and Yemen, yet only 54% of special operators deployed overseas were sent to the Greater Middle East in 2017. In fact, since 2006, deployments have been on the rise across the rest of the world. In Latin America, the figure crept up from 3% to 4.39%. In the Pacific region, from 7% to 7.99%. But the striking increases have been in Europe and Africa.

In 2006, just 3% of all commandos deployed overseas were operating in Europe. Last year, that number was just north of 16%. “Outside of Russia and Belarus we train with virtually every country in Europe either bilaterally or through various multinational events,” Major Michael Weisman, a spokesman for U.S. Special Operations Command Europe, told TomDispatch.

However, that campaign, which took back almost all the territory ISIS held in Syria, was exceptional. U.S. proxies elsewhere have fared far worse in recent years. That 50,000-strong Syrian surrogate army had to be raised, in fact, after the U.S.-trained Iraqi army, built during the 2003-2011 American occupation of that country, collapsed in the face of relatively small numbers of Islamic State militants in 2014. In Mali, Burkina Faso, Egypt, Honduras, and elsewhere, U.S.-trained officers have carried out coups, overthrowing their respective governments. Meanwhile, in Afghanistan, where special ops forces have been working with local allies for more than 15 years, even elite security forces are still largely incapable of operating on their own. According to the Pentagon's 2017 semi-annual report to Congress, Afghan commandos needed U.S. support for an overwhelming number of their missions, independently carrying out only 17% of their 2,628 operations between June 1, 2017, and November 24, 2017.

Indeed, with Special Operations forces acting, in the words of SOCOM's Thomas, as "the main effort, or major supporting effort for U.S. [violent extremist organization]-focused operations in Afghanistan, Syria, Iraq, Yemen, Somalia, Libya, across the Sahel of Africa, the Philippines, and Central/South America," it's unlikely that foreign proxies or conventional American forces will shoulder enough of the load to relieve the strain on the commandos.

Bulking up Special Operations Command is not, however, a solution, according to the Center for International Policy's Hartung. "There is no persuasive security rationale for having U.S. Special Operations forces involved in an astonishing 149 countries, given that the results of these missions are just as likely to provoke greater conflict as they are to reduce it, in large part because a U.S. military presence is too often used as a recruiting tool by local terrorist organizations," he told TomDispatch. "The solution to the problem of the high operational tempo of U.S. Special Operations forces is not to recruit and train more Special Operations forces. It is to rethink why they are being used so intensively in the first place."