

STRATEGY

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A versatile force

The future of Australia's special operations capability

Andrew Davies, Peter Jennings and Benjamin Schreer

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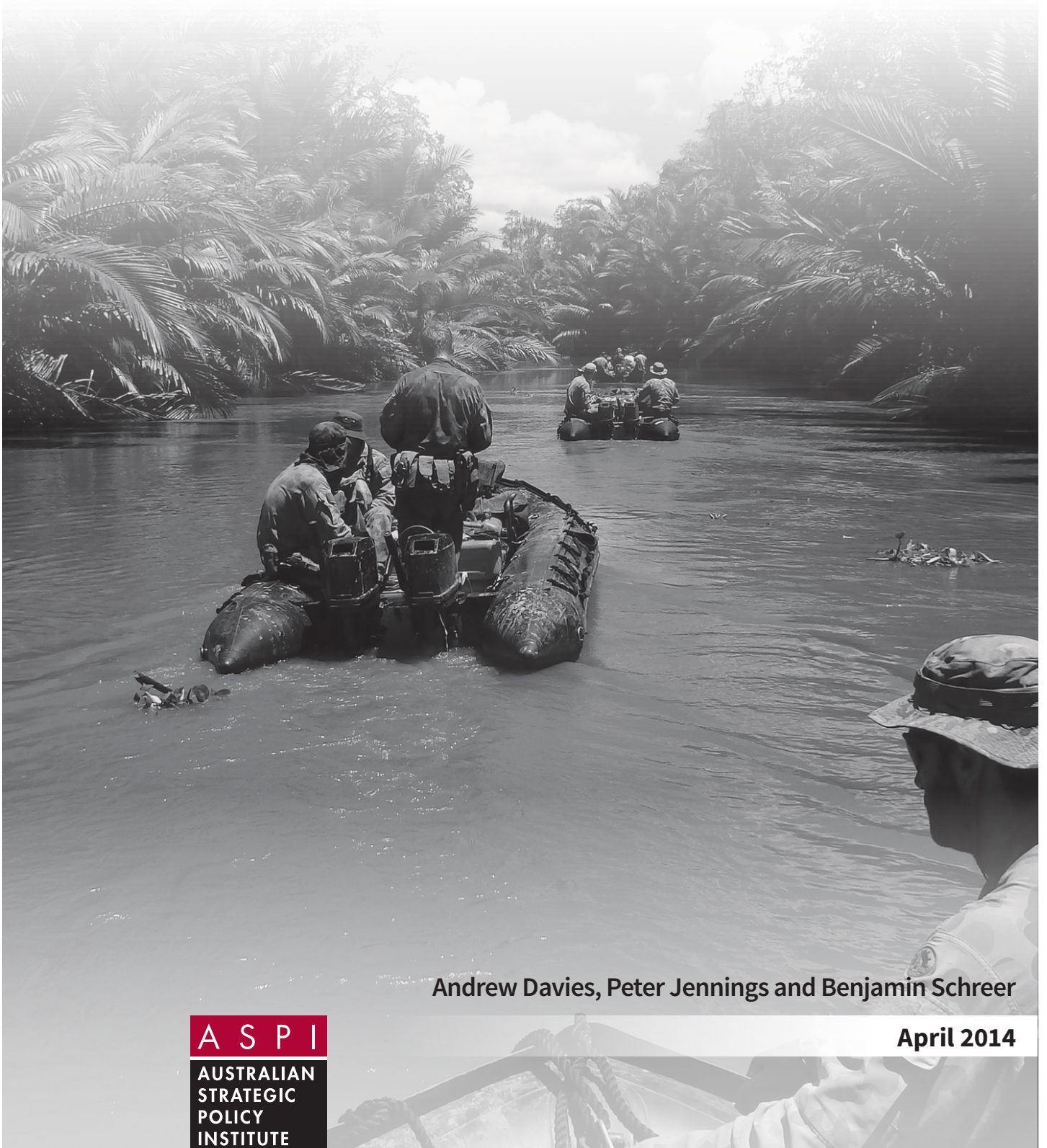
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SOF Free Fall insertion from RAAF aircraft. Photo Courtesy Defence Department.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Over the past decade, the demands of the ADF's global and regional operations saw an unprecedented growth in Australia's special operations capability. Special operations forces (SOF) became the 'capability of choice' for the Australian Government, especially in more threatening environments such as Iraq and Afghanistan. SOF's ability to conduct highly sensitive military missions (including combat and non-combat operations), to operate in complex terrain and to do so at short notice, made them a very attractive military instrument. As a result, Australia's Special Operations Command (SOCOMD) received significant funding, grew in strength, and gained greater prominence in the ADF's institutional structure.

However, as the ADF enters into a period of transition from almost constant high-tempo operations to (potentially) a 'soft power decade', the future of Australia's special operations capability is uncertain. 'Operational fatigue' on the part of government and nation, as well as a lack of immediate external drivers could lead to a diminished interest in special operations and thus less willingness to maintain the capability at its current level. This could be exacerbated by harsh fiscal realities and looming decisions on some prodigiously expensive defence acquisitions, such as future submarines, ships and fifth-generation fighter aircraft.

In one sense, Australia's SOF could become a victim of their own success. The public and the political establishment almost exclusively associate special operations with 'kicking down doors'—despite the fact that this is only one element in a much broader operational continuum. There's a high risk that these specialists are seen only as very good soldiers who can be sent to conduct conventional operations with a lower risk of casualties than the regular forces. As the need for such operations diminishes, the political establishment could lose interest in what is a relatively small but high-value ADF force element.

Alternatively, the government could decide to selectively implement efficiencies in Defence and direct resources away from some force elements and towards others. For example, the special operations capability could be further upgraded relative to the regular Army, which might be cut as part of a 'peace dividend'. With major maritime and air platform purchases to be paid for over the next decade, the land forces are most at risk of resource starvation. Prioritising the special operations capability could seem an attractive option for policymakers, given that SOF can be seen as relatively cost-effective. But that isn't a workable strategy. The capabilities of regular Army are complementary to those of the SOF; these forces work best—indeed, can *only* work—as the top of a 'pyramid' of land forces that provides the personnel base and many of the required enabling force elements.

Against this background, this study aims to inform policy decisions by providing an understanding of the special operations capability and what it offers to government in both peace and wartime. At the same time, it's equally important to consider what SOF can't do—particularly since Australia's SOF are fairly few in number.

In the context of the Afghanistan operation, a widespread belief has developed that SOF are particularly well suited for high-intensity combat operations. However, while they're certainly capable of conducting parts of this mission spectrum, such as tracking down insurgent group leaders, conventional combat operations have been the domain of the regular Army and should remain so. Indeed, SOF offer the best value in unconventional operations and in so-called 'Phase Zero' missions, which focus on building and shaping defence relationships with key partners in a pre-crisis environment. Since regional defence engagement will become more important for the ADF as a whole, SOF can make a significant contribution to this task.

Consequently, any temptation to reduce the special operations capability as a cost-cutting measure should be resisted. Instead, it makes sense to consolidate the capability at current levels while further developing it, including as part of a joint force. This doesn't necessarily mean giving SOCOMD more money, although its American counterparts did get a resource boost in the midst of general cutbacks across the services. However, the command should be provided with an **ongoing funding line for specialised, small-scale capability projects**. Given the specialised nature of the capability, SOCOMD itself is best placed to make small-scale investment decisions, to guide experimental work on developing future capability and to respond quickly to changing operational requirements. The appropriate funding should be in the order of \$20–30 million per year. For larger projects, SOCOMD should compete with other proposals in the well-established defence capability process—although it could use a champion at the committee table to ensure that all of the enabling elements required for special operations, such as airlift, strategic communications and fire support, are in place when needed.

To that end, there's a good case for a revision to Defence's capability manager framework to include a **Capability Manager for Joint Capabilities**. The proposed role has application well beyond SOCOMD, and the new capability manager would have responsibility for ensuring that enabling and support capabilities required by all of the ADF's specialised force elements (including SOCOMD) are appropriately managed and developed. The Vice Chief of the Defence Force (VCDF) would be the appropriate choice. In this model, the VCDF would ensure that ADF projects such as the future submarines and the amphibious capability consider special operations requirements, while the Chief of Army would retain the responsibility to raise, train and sustain the land forces, including SOF.

Apart from questions of how to fund and develop the special operations capability, the government should also seek to **establish a legislative framework for the conduct and oversight of clandestine operations**. Such operations share some similarities with sensitive intelligence operations, and potentially involve military personnel in ways other than uniformed and declared military operations. In an increasingly murky international environment involving well-resourced and dangerous non-state actors, clandestine operations could become a more important task for Australia's SOF. If government decides to use the capability in this way, it's important to develop an unambiguous legislative framework for such operations.

SOCOMD has a lot to offer in Defence's regional engagement strategy. Some augmentation of its capacity to contribute to regional and (limited) global defence engagement would be a valuable investment. There's a case for global engagement, and SOCOMD needs to have knowledge of allied and friendly country practices. That would be assisted through a SOCOMD presence in selected headquarters. Generally, though, **SOF foreign engagement should prioritise Australia's near region**: that's where our security interests are most closely engaged, and proximity would make it easier for other ADF elements to provide support for operations if required.

Defence could consider **establishing SOF liaison elements in selected Australian embassies**, providing a permanent SOCOMD representation in key partner countries. In Southeast Asia, SOCOMD should consider establishing such elements in Indonesia, Malaysia, Singapore and the Philippines, of which Indonesia is the most important. In the South Pacific, fostering SOF cooperation with Papua New Guinea and Fiji should be a priority.

Over time, increased SOF engagement with Southeast Asian nations could lead to the **establishment of a regional SOF training centre**. Defence could initiate this development and offer to host such a school in Australia to facilitate cooperation and coordination among regional SOF. The centre could also link into existing training centres beyond the Asia–Pacific region, such as NATO's Special Operations Headquarters (NSHQ).

Beyond regional engagement, **maintaining and strengthening SOF cooperation with our US ally** is vital for activities in the Asia–Pacific theatre and further abroad. Steps to strengthen the relationship could include intensifying bilateral training activities as well as establishing a small permanent SOF presence at two more US regional combatant commands. While an agreement was recently signed for a SOCOMD liaison post at US Pacific Command (USPACOM), similar arrangements could be considered with US Central Command (USCENTCOM) and US Africa Command (USAFRICOM) to facilitate Australian special operations in the Middle East and Africa.

CHAPTER 1

Introduction

During the past decade, Australia's special operations forces (SOF) became the 'capability of choice' for successive governments. Their ability to conduct highly sensitive military missions (including combat and non-combat operations), to operate in complex terrain and to do so at short notice, made them a very attractive military instrument in the context of ADF missions in the greater Middle East and elsewhere. As a result, they experienced unprecedented financial and institutional growth. However, unless there's an unforeseen major conflict, for the ADF the next decade will most likely be characterised by a greater emphasis on regional defence engagement and a much lower operational tempo. Consequently, the special operations capability is unlikely to be employed to the same degree for kinetic, high-intensity operations. However, that doesn't necessarily make SOF less useful as a tool of Australia's defence policy. In fact, what's often overlooked in debates about SOF is that their utility is often even greater in so-called 'Phase Zero' roles, such as building and shaping defence relationships with key partners in a pre-crisis environment, than during war.¹

The Australian Government and the Defence Department need to think about the future role and shape of the special operations capability. Given the secrecy and myths surrounding their operations, SOF aren't well understood inside and outside Defence. They don't enjoy the broad institutional support of regular forces and are often regarded as competitors rather than critical enablers. Moreover, the political establishment and the public almost exclusively associate special operations with 'finding, fixing and finishing' high-value targets and 'kicking down doors', despite the fact that those tasks are only one element in a much broader operational continuum. Thus, the special operations capability could become a victim of its own success if these specialised operators are seen only as very good soldiers who can be sent to conduct conventional operations with a lower risk of casualties than the regular force. As the appetite for such operations diminishes, there's a risk that the political establishment will lose interest in what is a small but high-value ADF force element. As well, while the Abbott government has pledged to grow the defence budget to 2% of GDP over the next decade, the reality—at least in the short term—is likely to be one of extended cost cutting.² As the special operations capability vanishes from the political radar screen, it also might be subjected to cuts.

The special operations capability is an important military option for the Australian Government, designed for missions that conventional forces can't undertake...

The consequences of such a decision, however, wouldn't be trivial. The special operations capability is an important military option for the Australian Government, designed for missions that conventional forces can't undertake, such as operating in a low-profile manner, behind enemy lines or in theatres where there are no lines at all, and in politically highly sensitive places. Moreover, it's also a relatively cost-effective capability. SOCOMD currently comprises about 2,200 personnel, which is less than 8% of the Army's total strength. Defence doesn't currently provide detailed budget figures for special operations-specific expenditure but a fair estimate is that only a little over 1% of the current Defence Capability Plan (DCP) is devoted to this item. While regular Army, Navy and Air Force elements also contribute to special operations, money spent on the special operations capability remains a small fraction of overall defence spending. This reflects trends in allied countries such as the US, which, despite a much larger special operations posture and a much bigger budget, spent less than 2% of its total defence budget on this capability in fiscal year 2012.³ In times of fiscal austerity, the special operations capability offers the Australian Government a cost-effective tool to support national security objectives. Cuts, on the other hand, could easily disrupt what's a fairly small and highly specialised capability.

In times of fiscal austerity, the special operations capability offers the Australian Government a cost-effective tool to support national security objectives.

Alternatively, the government could decide to strengthen the special operations capability and to downsize the regular Army as part of a 'peace dividend'. With major maritime and air platform purchases to be paid for over the next decade, the land forces are most at risk of resource starvation. Prioritising the special operations capability could seem an attractive option for policymakers, given that the SOF can be seen as relatively cost-effective. But that isn't a workable strategy. The capabilities of regular Army are complementary to those of the SOF; SOF work best—indeed can *only* work—as the top of a 'pyramid' of land forces that provides the personnel base and many of the required enabling force elements.

Against this background, this study looks at some key conceptual, operational and institutional challenges for SOF. It first provides a general framework by discussing the general roles of SOF as well as the evolution and current structure of Australia's special operations capability. It then analyses the changes in the ADF's operating environment and the implications for the capability. This is followed by a discussion of developments in allied SOF, given that Australia's SOF predominantly work alongside allies and partners. The next section deals with ways to improve the development of capability specific to special operations. A section with specific recommendations for Australia's future special operations capability concludes the analysis.

CHAPTER 2

Australia's Special Operations Forces: who are they and what do they do?

The Australian Army's definition of special operations is very generic. Accordingly, special operations are:

... highly specialised and focused operations performed by specially selected, trained and prepared individuals and teams imbued with a creative mindset capable of producing solutions beyond conventional approaches ... These activities are designed to achieve tailored operational, military and national strategic effects beyond those of conventional forces.⁴

While this definition stresses the importance of the human dimension of special operations (for example, the specific skill sets of special operations personnel to enable non-conventional military operations), it doesn't say much else. A more comprehensive definition is provided by the US Joint Special Operations Doctrine, which describes special operations as:

... requiring unique modes of employment, tactical techniques, equipment and training often conducted in hostile, denied, or politically sensitive environment, and characterized by one or more of the following: time sensitive, clandestine, low visibility, conducted with and/or through indigenous forces, requiring regional expertise, and/or high degree of risk.⁵

Special operations thus cover a wide mission spectrum, which is typically divided into two analytical categories: a **direct** and an **indirect approach**. The US Special Operations Command (USSOCOM) defines the direct approach as 'technologically enabled small-unit precision lethality, focused intelligence, and interagency cooperation integrated on a digitally networked battlefield'.⁶ Alternatively, the US Army uses the term 'surgical strike', which is somewhat broader and refers to:

... the execution of activities in a precise manner that employ special operations in hostile, denied or politically sensitive environments to seize, destroy, capture, exploit, recover or damage designated targets, or influence adversaries or threats.⁷

Practical examples include the hunting down of insurgency leaders in Afghanistan by allied SOF (including the Australian Special Operations Task Group, SOTG) or the rescue of Australian hostages overseas. For Australia's SOF, three key missions could be subsumed under the label of the 'direct approach' of special operations:

- **Special reconnaissance (SR)** operations are used for intelligence collection, including reconnaissance, surveillance and other techniques. They're designed to obtain or verify information concerning the capabilities, intention and activities of an actual or potential enemy. They're also used to secure information about meteorological, hydrographic or geographic characteristics of a particular area.

- **Precision strike / direct action (PS/DA)** operations typically include short-duration strikes and other small-scale offensive operations designed to seize, destroy, capture and inflict damage on personnel or materiel. Tactics used include the conduct of raids or ambushes, the placement of mines and other munitions, the use of standoff weapons, the provision of terminal guidance for precision guided munitions, and so on.
- **Special recovery operations (SRO)** are undertaken to rescue personnel or seize equipment from permissive, uncertain or hostile environments. They include domestic and offshore counterterrorism (CT) operations and non-combatant evacuation operations, as well as personnel recovery. For high-risk CT operations that are beyond the capability of civilian authorities, SOCOMD created so-called tactical assault groups (TAGs).

Within that mission set, there's an operating profile that warrants separate discussion: Australia's SOF involvement in **clandestine operations**, such as operations in support of intelligence or in other applications where there's no declared Australian military involvement.

It makes sense for SOF to be employed in this manner—they're highly skilled and proficient in much of the tradecraft required. The Australian Government has few on-the-ground response options when managing crises or dealing with offshore security threats. In an international environment in which non-state actors are increasingly well armed and organised—and thus proportionately more dangerous—those sorts of special operations potentially will play a more important role. Media reporting—admittedly not always the most reliable source of information—suggests that some clandestine operations have already been carried out abroad, with Australian soldiers operating out of uniform.⁸

Such operations are by definition sensitive and frequently dangerous to the personnel involved. As such, they require close oversight. If the government sees continuing value in using SOF for clandestine operations, it would be critical to establish an unambiguous legislative framework. For example, it's worth asking whether those special operations roles should be covered by amendments to the Defence Act or by separate legislation that sets out the prescribed and proscribed roles of any ADF elements involved and provides legal immunities for personnel involved similar to those provided by the *Intelligence Services Act 2001* to staff of the Australian intelligence organisations.

Just as important as a legislative basis is the need for a well-developed appreciation of the sensitivities and potentially high risks of these sorts of operations, both in Defence and in government more widely. The potential costs and benefits need to be carefully weighed in ministerial and Cabinet deliberations, in much the same way they are for sensitive intelligence operations.

The importance of the indirect approach

The political and public preoccupation with kinetic SOF missions shouldn't obscure the fact that such operations are only the prerequisite for the 'indirect approach', which is critical in achieving a long-term effect of modern military operations. USSOCOM describes activities in this mission spectrum as focusing on:

... empowering host nation forces, providing appropriate assistance to humanitarian agencies, and engaging key populations. These long-term efforts increase partner capabilities to generate sufficient security and rule of law, address local need, and advance ideas that discredit and defeat the appeal of violent extremism ... One way [SOF achieve] this goal through the indirect approach is through forward and persistent engagement of key countries.⁹

The US Army uses the term 'special warfare' to point out that an indirect approach can also entail kinetic action and be conducted in permissive *and* hostile environments. Accordingly, special warfare is the:

... execution of activities that involve a combination of lethal and nonlethal actions taken by a specially trained and educated force that has a deep understanding of cultures and foreign language, proficiency in small-unit tactics, and the ability to build and fight alongside indigenous combat formations in a permissive, uncertain, or hostile environment.¹⁰

Arguably, the unifying theme behind both definitions is 'political–military warfare, or shaping and influencing environments and populations'.¹¹

For Australia's SOF, three missions fall into this category:

- **Proxy and guerrilla warfare (PGW)** focuses on training, advising and mentoring indigenous forces.
- **Special shaping operations (SSO)** include activities for 'understanding the environment' (UE), such as international engagement (training assistance, exercises etc.) and contingency planning activities. It also includes advanced force operations (AFO); that is, shaping and preparing the battlespace prior to the advancement of major operations, for example through clandestine and information operations (for instance, operations inside Iraq before the conventional campaign in March 2003).
- **Specialist support (SS)** is provided to other units of the ADF, non-military agencies or coalition forces. This includes operations such as protective security detachments, assistance for humanitarian assistance and disaster relief (HADR), and counterproliferation and counter-narcotics operations.

Concrete examples include working through and with partner forces, such as SOTG training of the Afghan National Security Forces or 'partner capacity building' in Southeast Asia and the South Pacific. It's highly likely that in the post-Afghanistan period those activities will become much more prevalent than direct, kinetic operations.

Truths and myths about special operations forces

Because of their limited size and high demand, SOF are a scarce military resource that takes years to develop and that is perishable. Moreover, contrary to widespread perceptions, their operations usually don't take place outside the general ADF framework; that is, there's a symbiotic relationship with conventional forces. Five essential 'truths' about the SOF capability (sourced from USSOCOM, but applying beyond US forces) are worth keeping in mind:

1. **Humans are more important than hardware.** SOF 'operators' are 'special' in that they not only possess exceptional physical and psychological stamina, but are also 'complex problem solvers' with an ability for critical thinking, flexibility and ingenuity.
2. **Quality is more important than quantity.** Because of the high selection criteria and the focus on small-team operations, 'small is beautiful'. In contrast, lowering entry standards can dilute special operations capability. The US military, for example, has had major problems in filling the ranks of its vastly expanded SOF with appropriate personnel. This is an especially important point if an increase in the ratio of SOF to regular Army is contemplated.
3. **SOF can't be mass produced.** Because of their unique skills, SOF will of necessity constitute only a small portion of the total force. At the moment, the ratio of SOF to total Army size is about 1:14.
4. **SOF capability can't be quickly created after emergencies occur.** While this is true for conventional capabilities as well, it's particularly pertinent for SOF because of the long lead-times required for building up this capability.
5. **SOF are critically dependent on support from conventional forces and other elements.** As discussed in more detail below, all special operations capabilities, regardless of size, are dependent on critical enablers such as aviation and intelligence support, which are usually provided by conventional forces and other elements inside and outside Defence.

We'd add another to the list: **SO are military operations that are bound by law.** Despite the already mentioned need to strengthen the legal framework guiding special operations because they often occur at the 'edge' of existing policy and legal frameworks, Australia's special operations capability is embedded into an institutional framework that provides for oversight and the application of rules of engagement.

The evolution of Australia's special operations capability

Australia's special operations capability has a long history, dating back to World War II when so-called 'Independent Companies' and the 'M' and 'Z' units of Special Operations Australia (SOA) operated as part of joint allied special forces behind Japanese lines in Southeast Asia. Following the end of the war, Australia's 'special action forces' were based around the Special Air Service Regiment (SASR), 1st and 2nd Commando companies and 126th Signals Squadron. They were deployed on a number of operations, including during the Malayan Emergency and the Vietnam War.

In 1979, Army created a small Directorate Special Action Forces—Army (DSAF-A) to improve the planning and coordination of special operations activities. The next step was the establishment of Headquarters Special Forces (HQSF) in 1990, with the role of commanding Australia's SOF and providing advice on special operations capability and employment. The Commander Special Forces (ComdSF) was under the command of the Chief of General Staff (CGS) for the 'raise, train and sustain' functions. However, he answered directly to the Chief of the Defence Force (CDF) for the provision of advice and for the planning and conduct of operations. During the 1990s, further organisational changes were made, such as reassigning the HQ, SASR and 1st Commando Regiment (1 Cdo Regt) to Land Command, as well as renaming the HQ as Headquarters Special Operations (HQSO).

A critical milestone in the recent development of the Australian special operations capability was the Howard government's decision in 1998 to deploy a task force to Operation Pollard in Kuwait. The deployment demonstrated to government the value of the capability.¹² Subsequently, SOF played significant roles in the 1999 East Timor operations and during the 2000 Sydney Olympics. These deployments paved the way for a much greater use of SOF in the wake of the September 2001 terrorist attacks on the US and in Australia's subsequent operations in the greater Middle East. A SOTG formed the core of Australia's initial military contribution to the war in Afghanistan in 2001 and 2002 and, following Canberra's recommitment to Afghanistan in 2005, it conducted a range of counterinsurgency (COIN) operations. As well, a 500-strong SOTG assigned to Combined Joint Special Operations Task Force—West (CJSOTF-W) conducted a range of shaping operations in the opening stages of the 2003 Iraq War. SOF elements also operated in other places around the world alongside Australia's allies and partners to disrupt terrorist networks and other irregular threats.

This strategic environment led to a significant boost in the special operations capability. In 2003, the Howard government directed the establishment of the Special Operations Command (SOCOMD) as a joint command and equal in status to the environmental commands (Land, Air and Maritime commands). Led by a two-star commander (Special Operations Commander Australia, SOCAUST), its headquarters was renamed Special Operations Headquarters (SOHQ). In the context of the operations in Afghanistan and Iraq, SOCOMD and its assigned units were allocated significantly more resources, bringing the number of its total personnel to about 2,200.

The CDF, through the Chief of Joint Operations (CJOPS), commands special operations through the capabilities provided by SOHQ (Figure 1). During operations, special operations force elements can be assigned to a commander of a joint task force. During peacetime, they're assigned to SOCAUST, whose responsibilities include:

- developing special operations capabilities, including joint support capabilities
- undertaking contingency planning for special operations as directed
- planning and conducting special operations
- providing advice on the employment of SOF to strategic and operational level headquarters.

Importantly, however, the Special Operations Commander Australia is responsible to the Chief of Army (CA) for the 'raise, train and sustain' functions.

Figure 2 shows the current special operations units assigned to SOHQ.

In summary, Australia's special operations capability has experienced a significant growth and institutional upgrade over the past couple of decades, owing to the changing strategic environment. However, it's important to keep in mind that SOCOMD hasn't been elevated to the level of a fully independent command with its own funding line and the like.

Figure 1: Australian special operations command and control arrangements

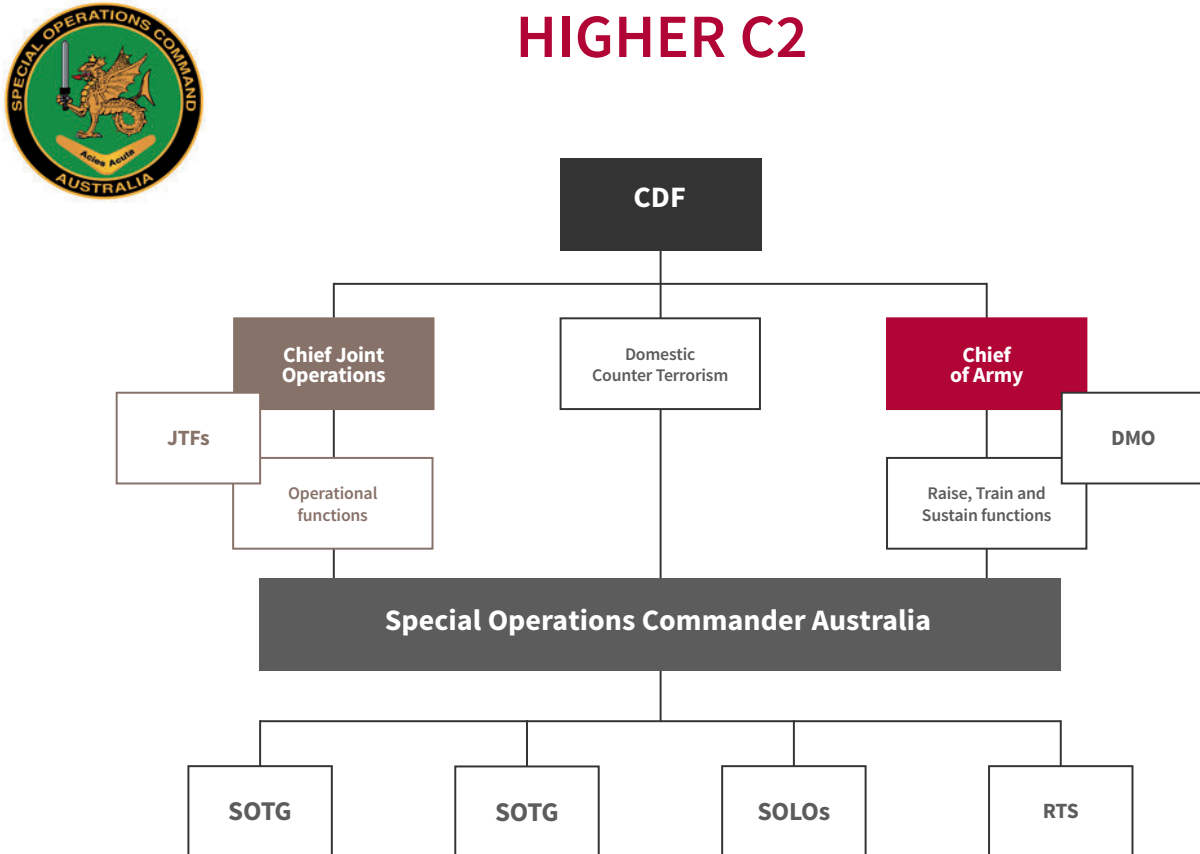
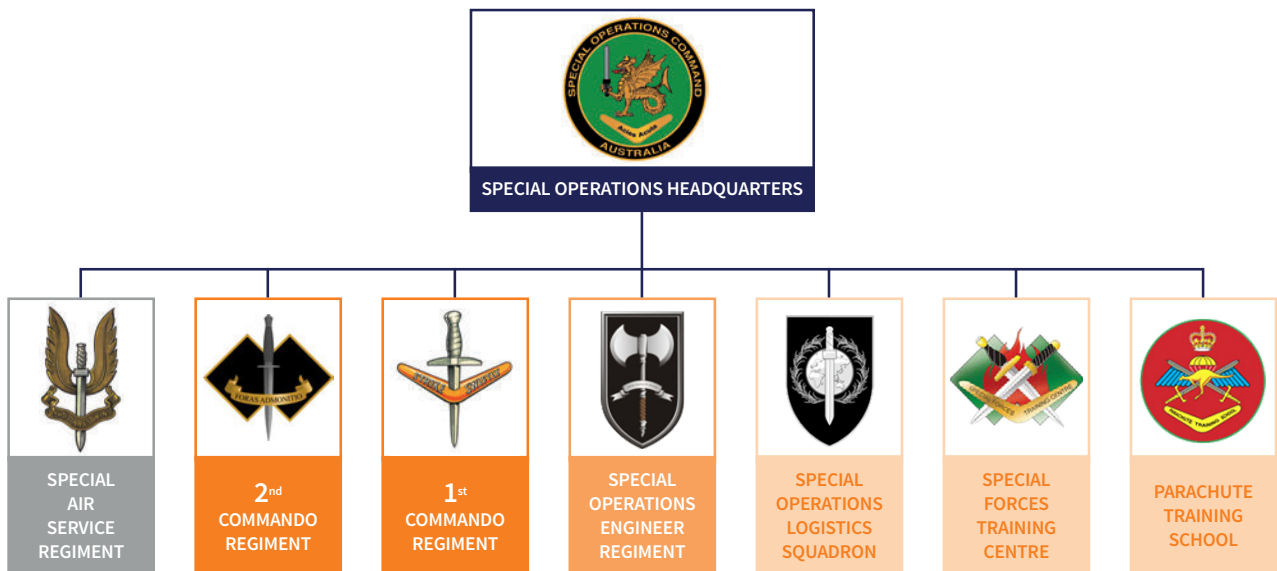


Figure 2: Australia's Special Operations elements (approximately 2,200 personnel)



CHAPTER 3

The future tasks for Australia's special operations capability

Despite the winding down of operations and uncertainty about the future security environment, the special operations capability will remain relevant for Australian governments in a number of areas, although most likely in different ways and with new priorities. The trend observed over the past two decades of military operations shifting towards low to medium intensity operations in a diverse range of environments means that SOF will continue to be of great utility to Western governments, including Australia's. They can also play a significant role in an emerging Australian strategy that places greater emphasis on regional defence engagement.

Wars are now frequently conducted 'among the people', meaning that an exclusive focus on classical military campaigns against other militaries is an increasingly obsolete concept.¹³ This isn't to argue that military operations against conventional forces are a thing of the past or that regular land forces have lost their utility, but land forces need to be able to operate in scenarios that fall short of classical state-on-state conflicts. They're likely to continue to face conventional and unconventional forces, irregular militias, paramilitaries, terrorist organisations and criminal networks, as well as hybrids. And, in any case, Australia's land forces are simply not of a size to be able to contemplate a future based predominantly on large-scale conventional operations.

SOF are well suited to operate in this space. Yet, as the major operation in Afghanistan comes to an end (and with no immediate major follow-on operation in sight), SOF will need to place greater emphasis on being in a 'supporting' rather than 'supported' role. For example, they'll increasingly support intelligence-led operations and assist security forces of partner countries. This has implications for the way they conduct operations and how they're structured.

Violent extremist networks and domestic counterterrorism

The fight against 'violent extremist networks' (VENs) was the driving force behind the significant upgrade of Australia's special operations capability after 2001. In the wake of terrorist attacks around the Western world in the first part of the 2000s, the Howard government decided to enhance the capability of Australian SOF to conduct domestic CT operations. As part of this emphasis, in July 2002 a new tactical assault group (TAG) was established, based around the 2nd Commando Regiment in Sydney (TAG East) to conduct offensive CT operations, complementing TAG West based on the SASR in Perth. Special operations became an integral part of Australia's CT architecture. In the process, SOCOMD enhanced its interactions with non-military CT stakeholders such as the Australian Federal Police (AFP), state police authorities and the intelligence services. SOCOMD also filled a CT role in the context of Australia's engagement in the Middle East and Afghanistan through the offensive disruption of VENs and capacity building of host nations' security forces.

With the Afghanistan operation winding down, it's time to reassess the role of SOF in combating VENs and in domestic CT. The end of major operations in the Middle East and Afghanistan doesn't mean that the threat posed by extremist terrorism and other irregular threats have disappeared. Rather, transnational VENs have shifted the bulk

of their activities from places such as Afghanistan to other, often more remote areas, particularly in Africa. However, it doesn't necessarily follow that SOCOMD should invest in a specific capability to operate on the African continent, even as Australia's business interests there grow. In the event of a hostage rescue operation, SOF elements could be deployed from domestic bases on short notice. Moreover, it appears more cost-effective to 'burden-share' with US and NATO SOF, both of which are already increasing their activities in Africa. A SOF contribution placed in USCENTCOM and USAFRICOM might be sufficient to utilise allied SOF nodes in the Middle East and Africa in a contingency.

Instead, Australia's primary contribution to an evolving allied SOF network to combat VENs should focus on increasing ties in Southeast and South Asia. In Southeast Asia, strengthening SOF ties with Indonesia, Malaysia and the Philippines is particularly important. In South Asia, Bangladesh and Sri Lanka are obvious candidates for closer cooperation; the latter is also important for Australia in disrupting people smuggling.

For operations against extremists overseas, the area of operation won't necessarily be a recognised area of conflict (as was the case in Afghanistan), and so won't usually include a large presence of international conventional forces. That means that special operations activities will need to be conducted in small self-contained teams to allow for discreet and, if necessary, publicly deniable missions (for example, in the case of surgical strike). However, what it also means is that in most cases SOF elements won't be able to rely on critical enablers provided by conventional forces. Therefore, unless a decision is made to develop such capabilities, Defence would need to secure allied or partner support; otherwise, the risk involved in such operations could be too high.

When it comes to domestic CT, the special operations capability continues to be important as a response to a high-end terrorist attack on Australian soil. SOCOMD has developed a tight network with civilian authorities involved in domestic CT. Unless a decision is taken to improve the capabilities of the AFP and the states' police services to upgrade their CT capability to deal with the highest spectrum of terrorist threats, this arrangement will be enduring.

Post-Afghanistan, the preferred strategy of Western powers, Australia included, will be one of building capacity in other nations to reduce the need for security assistance and military employments.

Strengthening regional engagement

The ADF's current transition period provides an opportunity to refocus investment in regional and global SOF engagement activities. Post-Afghanistan, the preferred strategy of Western powers, Australia included, will be one of building capacity in other nations to reduce the need for security assistance and military employments. SOF will increasingly have to focus their activities on enabling partner countries to better address security problems within their own borders. As pointed out earlier, SOF are well suited for such 'Phase Zero' activities, which in the special operations space range from simple tactical-level training (marksmanship, radio operations and communications, medical training, small-unit tactics) to more sophisticated issues, such as increasing the professionalism of foreign militaries, security philosophies and institution building.¹⁴ As many countries in Southeast Asia and the South Pacific seek to enhance their military capabilities, SOF provides government with an option in a strategy to

selectively enhance regional defence diplomacy. The question is not if, but where and how, Australia's SOF should intensify their international engagement.

Despite debates about a global SOF network, it would make sense for Australia to focus on our near region—that's where our security interests are most closely engaged and proximity would make it easier for other ADF elements to provide support for operations if required. That's not to say that international efforts to increase global SOF networks are irrelevant for Australia's special operations capability. As already mentioned, small SOCOMD contingents at USCENTCOM and USAFRICOM, as well as selective cooperation with NSHQ, are prudent investments to prepare for possible contingencies beyond the Asia–Pacific region. However, SOCOMD's international engagement needs to be prioritised, given limited resources and because of Australia's strategic priorities, which remain aimed at stability in our immediate neighbourhood, that is, the South Pacific and Southeast Asia.

To strengthen SOCOMD's international engagement, adequate resourcing is essential. That won't be easy, since these activities often fail to receive the same degree of prioritisation from political and military leaders as direct, kinetic operations. Their immediate dividends are often less clear to policymakers, as they are 'counter-intuitively characterized by slow and deliberate employment—long duration actions and activities, relationship establishment, development, and sustainment'.¹⁵ Particularly in Defence's current fiscal environment, programs related to the indirect approach could be vulnerable to cuts despite their long-term benefits. Defence needs to ensure that SOCOMD remains adequately resourced to conduct more, not less, partner engagement.

Another consideration is the future rationale behind SOF's cooperation with Asia–Pacific nations. So far, regional defence engagement has focused mainly on counterterrorism, which in terms of allaying any concerns in the polity of both Australia and the partner country constitutes 'low-hanging fruit'. Engagement on more traditional military roles is more sensitive, and engagement on the development of SOF capabilities even more so. Yet, as many of those countries aim to strengthen their capabilities in those areas, deeper engagement has the potential to provide high rewards, and SOCOMD's engagement activities might need to be readjusted.

One area for engagement is contributing to partner nations' general force generation through SOF activities.

One area for engagement is contributing to partner nations' general force generation through SOF activities. The US Joint Special Operations Task Force—Philippines (JSOTF-P) experience demonstrated this potential by improving the host nation's airlift capability; between 2001 and 2007, US SOF training and advice helped to increase the readiness of the Armed Forces of the Philippines' helicopters from about 15% to 80%.¹⁶ Other areas for SOF cooperation with Southeast Asian countries include HADR—another low-hanging fruit area—as well as unconventional warfare and amphibious operations. However, if the Australian Government and Defence consider extending SOCOMD's activities in these areas, they need to recognise that this kind of defence engagement could potentially be much more consequential, as many Southeast Asian countries remain wary of each other, seek to hedge against China's maritime assertiveness, or both.

Consequently, new engagements with some Southeast Asian countries should be considered very carefully. For example, despite the recent re-establishment of an Australian defence attaché in Myanmar, that country's future path is still uncertain and SOF engagement could be detrimental to Australia's interests. Likewise, building SOF ties with Vietnam could be difficult because of its domestic situation, despite the country's growing regional importance.

SOCOMD should seek to intensify collaboration with counterparts from Indonesia, Malaysia, Singapore and the Philippines. Strong ties with elements of Indonesia's SOF, such as KOPASSUS, are of singular importance. The relationship between SOCOMD and KOPASSUS has experienced ups and downs and has sometimes been contested domestically in both countries, but strengthening the relationship is in Australia's strategic interest.¹⁷ Increased cooperation with the other three countries, along with Indonesia, would not only be bilaterally beneficial but could also form the nucleus of possible multinational SOF cooperation in Southeast Asia. As is discussed in the next section, USSOCOM is aiming at the establishment of regional SOF coordination centres (RSCCs), including in the Asia–Pacific region. While it's unclear whether this initiative will have financial and/or diplomatic support, a regional SOF training school—partly based on the NATO model—could be established in Australia or Southeast Asia as a testbed for greater cooperation. Defence could informally explore the potential with regional countries and offer SOCOMD expertise and participation. For example, Singapore could be a good location, given its geostrategic position in Southeast Asia. Alternatively, Australia could offer to host such a centre.

Close to home, apart from Indonesia, key emphasis should be on strengthening or developing SOCOMD's presence in Papua New Guinea (PNG) and Fiji. It's quite conceivable that the PNG Government would be open to closer SOF engagement. And, provided this year's Fijian election delivers a politically acceptable result, Defence should explore opportunities for SOF engagement—a move most likely to be welcomed by a government in Suva.

Strengthening SOCOMD's regional connectivity might require adjustments in its posture. One could be to establish regional command elements in Australian embassies to allow for a permanent country and/or regional SOF footprint. They would consist of longer term (two years plus) permanent SOCOMD representatives in key partner countries to provide in-country expertise and linkages to local authorities. Indonesia, PNG, Malaysia, Singapore and the Philippines are obvious candidates. Such 'single operators' would be able to acquire much deeper cultural familiarity and linguistic proficiency with SOCOMD's regional and global partners. Furthermore, SOCOMD could build up its cohort of small teams, specialised in proxy and guerrilla warfare, and assign them with responsibility for key partner nations.

Finally, SOCOMD should look for ways to increase its nascent engagement with Chinese SOF. This would provide some substance to the agreement between Australia and China on strengthening military-to-military relations. And our US ally would certainly welcome such interaction, given that ties between USSOCOM and its PLA equivalents are almost non-existent. SOCOMD's interaction with Chinese SOF could therefore be an indirect alliance contribution. It should be noted that in 2011, Indonesian and Chinese SOF held their first training exercise, based on CT and special recovery operations¹⁸, indicating Beijing's interest in greater international cooperation.

Contribution to conventional and hybrid military operations

Despite their focus on unconventional threats and risks, Australia's SOF also have a role to play in addressing hybrid conflict (for example, a collapse of North Korea) and conventional state-on-state conflicts, which can't be discounted in the future. The future Asia–Pacific strategic environment requires a new degree of interaction between SOF and conventional forces. Many Asian countries (China foremost) are investing in anti-access/area-denial (A2/AD) capabilities in order to pose high risks to potential adversaries. If the Australian Government wants to retain the option to project military power in the face of such capabilities, either as part of allied operations or independently, it will rely on the ability of the ADF to operate in such non-permissive, denied operational environments.

SOF would play a key role in this context, either as 'first entry' forces as a precursor to follow-on forces or in a covert reconnaissance or strike role. To be effective in these roles, SOF will need well-developed capabilities to cooperate with conventional forces. The ADF's current development of an amphibious capability, based on two Canberra-class amphibious assault ships (landing helicopter docks, LHDs), provides an excellent opportunity for such cooperation. The amphibious force will depend on an initial-entry force (in the case of a high-intensity operation) that can seize and hold an entry point long enough for the main forces to enter, or conduct a shaping operation before the landing

of the conventional force. One way to achieve that end is for the special operations element to be an integral part of the amphibious capability in terms of doctrine, training and equipment. Alternatively, SOF might be inserted by other means, especially if the initial environment isn't suitable for the operation of large amphibious vessels. One such mechanism might be insertion via submarine, which will be in the cost-benefit mix for the Future Submarine (FSM) project. The specific capability requirements are discussed below under 'Capability development'.

Contributions to US coalition operations

Over the past decade, Australia's special operations capability has been the Australian Government's preferred instrument for contributing to the US alliance in the form of a small but highly valued force element. The US and its NATO allies speak highly of Australian SOF, particularly their professionalism and capability across most of the special operations spectrum, although they also note a lack of depth and shortfalls in some critical enablers. In turn, SOCOMD profited significantly from close cooperation with American SOF, particularly through access to critical enablers such as intelligence, in-theatre mobility and fire support in Afghanistan and elsewhere.

From a SOCOMD perspective, the key question is how to maintain the close linkage and the level of interoperability with its American counterparts as the operations in Afghanistan and the Middle East end.

For the foreseeable future, Australia's strategic policy will be centred on our close relationship with the US and, as suggested here, increasingly with regional counterparts. From a SOCOMD perspective, the key question is how to maintain the close linkage and the level of interoperability with its American counterparts as the operations in Afghanistan and the Middle East end. The recent decision in the US to increase the size of its SOF at a time when all other services are being cut shows the enduring value of a relationship between SOCOMD and its American counterpart. The US shift towards the Asia-Pacific provides opportunities to maintain and strengthen the relationship. USSOCOM already has a Special Operations Liaison Officer (SOLO) embedded in the US Embassy in Canberra.¹⁹ Furthermore, the agreement reached at the end of last year to establish a SOCOMD liaison position at US Pacific Command (USPACOM) in Hawaii demonstrates that steps are being taken to better coordinate the two allies' SOF activities in the Asia-Pacific theatre. Finally, there's value in maintaining linkages with USSOCOM through exchanges, training activities and the like.

However, in the post-Afghanistan era defence planners also face the question of what the implications are for Australia's capacity to employ SOF without the critical enablers provided by allies. This particularly concerns contingencies in our immediate neighbourhood in which the US decides not to engage. In other words, Defence needs to prepare for the likelihood that the 'luxury' of SOF access to American enablers is not available and to plan to make up for resulting capability gaps.

CHAPTER 4

Allied special operations forces

Australia's increase in special operations capability over the past decade reflected a similar trend in allied SOF. The US, in particular, significantly expanded its special operations capabilities. Further, the UK and Canada also improved their SOF capabilities. SOCOMD has a strong tradition of working with UK SOF, and Canada stood up an SOF command, providing some potential lessons for us to learn. Finally, closer ties with NATO's new Special Operations Headquarters (NSHQ) were established in the context of Afghanistan. It's noteworthy that many allied SOF face challenges very similar to those faced by Australia's special operations capability. After rapid increases in personnel and financial resources, they're also now subject to fiscal austerity measures and questions about their future utility and structure. While each country will have to make some decisions about the scale and role of their own sovereign capabilities, for coalition operations there's scope for a cooperative approach to providing SOF. That might take the form of enhanced and expanded regional and global SOF networks, with shared connectivity and interoperability, allowing a collective reaction to a changing security environment.

United States

US SOF play in a different league compared with other countries, including Australia. They're probably the only SOF capable of operating across the whole spectrum of special operations because of their depth in manpower and other capabilities, which give them global reach.

In 1987, the US consolidated separate service special operations capabilities into a single US Special Operations Command (USSOCOM)—a functional combatant command with a global area of responsibility. This four-star lead command now consists of four service SOF 'components', the Joint Special Operations Command and, since 2013, the seven Theater Special Operations Commands (TSOCs) previously assigned to each of the seven US geographic commands. The TSOCs, while assigned 'combatant command' to the USSOCOM commander, remain under 'operational command' of the relevant geographic combatant command.

Moreover, a civilian Assistant Secretary of Defense for Special Operations/Low Intensity Conflict in the Pentagon is responsible for overseeing policy and resources related to special operations and for advising the Secretary of Defense on special operations. Since 2001, USSOCOM has experienced a massive increase in both personnel and money. It's difficult to determine the exact number of personnel but, according to the US Congressional Research Service, USSOCOM end-strength increased from 36,000 in 2001 to 'about 67,000 active duty, National Guard, and reserve personnel from all four services and DOD [Department of Defense] civilians' in 2013.²⁰

The Pentagon's stated goal is to raise that number to 70,000 during FY 2015, but it's unclear whether enough financial resources will be made available. In line with the higher operational tempo and manpower increase, the USSOCOM budget increased from US\$2.3 billion in 2001 to US\$10.4 billion for FY 2013. There had been recent signs that pressure on the US defence budget was likely to affect USSOCOM funding: USSOCOM's funding request for FY 2014 is US\$9.9 billion (a 4% decrease)²¹, and the US Congress is demanding greater insight into the

USSOCOM budget.²² But the recent announcement of US defence spending adjustments provided something of an endorsement of the SOF with the announcement of a 5% increase in the size of US SOF by 3,700 troops, to a total of 69,700.

As in Australia, US SOF became an instrument of choice for successive US administrations, as has been evident in USSOCOM's increased end-strength and financial resources and its expanded responsibilities and authority. Moreover, to combat a complex nexus of transnational terrorism, insurgency and criminal networks, a premium had to be placed on a fusion between operations and intelligence, exemplified by the so-called 'find, fix, finish, exploit, analyse and disseminate' (F3EAD) approach.²³ Indeed, one of the key lessons of Australia's SOTG in Afghanistan has been the prevalence of intelligence-focused special operations missions to enable 'evidence-based' operations.

However, US experts also point to an imbalance between 'direct' and 'indirect' activities in US SOF operations. The lion's share of political attention and SOF resources went into kinetic, man-hunting missions, while critical and potentially more decisive non-kinetic activities were relegated to a status that some have described as little more than a 'bumper sticker or a random engagement'.²⁴ That might have been an appropriate weighting of activities for the specific circumstances in Afghanistan, but might not provide governments with the appropriate range of military options in a shifting operational environment that places a much greater emphasis on activities such as partner capacity-building and small-team operations in remote locations.

To look at one example, the threat from VENS has mostly migrated from places such as Afghanistan to remote areas in Africa and the Middle East. In October 2013, for example, US SOF conducted simultaneous raids in Somalia and Libya.²⁵ To combat VENS, these small-scale raids are often the tool of choice, as they can be mounted quickly and deployed without the large-scale (and slow) movement of forces required for conventional operations. Furthermore, in December 2013 the US also secretly sent a three-man advisory detachment to Somalia to assist a force of the African Union in operations against militants.²⁶ In the future, SOF will operate more in a 'grey area' between war and peace, and will do so without a large presence of conventional forces from which to draw critical enablers such as logistics. They'll also require timely intelligence support and might rely more on partner forces and their ability to conduct similar operations. Building partner capacity to enable them to provide for their own security will add depth to US and allied capabilities in environments where access is limited and where their comparative technological advantage is being eroded.

From a US perspective, the growing focus on more non-kinetic SOF missions also applies to the Asia-Pacific region. In this context, the US JSOTF-P is widely regarded as a model for future SOF partner engagement. Starting in 2002, a US SOF contingent successfully trained, advised and assisted the Armed Forces of the Philippines and the Philippine National Police to grow their CT and COIN capability. JSOTF-P also worked closely with non-military agencies to conduct wide-ranging humanitarian and development assistance missions in rural areas of the country. A full-time SOF officer assigned to the US Embassy in Manila allowed for close cooperation and interagency interaction.²⁷

While it remains to be seen whether the JSOTF-P model can be replicated in other countries²⁸, the increased emphasis on partner engagement is likely to lead to adjustments in US SOF structure. This includes the development of additional 'single operators' and small-unit teams with specialised knowledge and networks in pivotal partner countries. While language skills and cultural awareness are important parts of special operations in general, the aim would be to deploy operators for much longer periods (two years plus) in designated countries to allow more substantial networks and expertise to evolve.

Finally, USSOCOM has pushed for the expansion of the 'Global SOF Network' (GSN). To achieve this objective, it wants to improve partnerships with regional SOF, including those of Australia. Apart from enhancing its Theater Special Operations Commands, USSOCOM proposes the establishment of regional SOF coordination centres (RSCCs), including in the Asia-Pacific region. However, at this point it's unclear whether the RSCC concept stands much chance of being implemented. There's been a lot of push-back in the US Congress, not least because of the additional funding required. Congress has already proposed to reduce funding for some GSN activities, and USSOCOM has been directed to develop a 'resource neutral' plan to develop the GSN.²⁹

Regardless, as discussed in the previous section, Australia has a vital interest in maintaining and improving the ties between SOCOMD and US SOF.

United Kingdom

The formation of the UK's special operations capability dates back to World War II and the commando operations of the British Army's Special Air Service (SAS) against the German Afrika Korps in North Africa. During the Cold War, the SAS was (among other units) deployed on operations in Southeast Asia, Africa and Northern Ireland. In 1987, the SAS and the Special Boat Service (SBS) were drawn together into a unified command (known as UKSF), based around the Director Special Forces. During the 1990s, they were deployed on all major British operations, including in Iraq, the Balkans and East Timor.

Just as in Australia and elsewhere, UK SOF received a major boost after 2001 and the operations in Afghanistan and Iraq. They became an independent, operational-level component command, alongside Air, Maritime and Land elements in the Permanent Joint Headquarters (PJHQ) and in the deployable Joint Task Force Headquarters. The Director Special Forces was upgraded from one-star to two-star level. The UK SOF has tripled in size since 2004 to approximately 3,500 personnel (including support staff) and has been prioritised for funding and equipment. Further steps to upgrade the capability included:

- the expansion of the SAS Signals Squadron to battalion size
- the formation of a special reconnaissance regiment (18 Signal Regiment) in 2004 to provide the SAS with dedicated intelligence
- the establishment of a Joint Special Forces Support Group (a Ranger-style battalion based on the First Battalion, Parachute Regiment)
- more unified and larger special operations capability through closer cooperation between the SAS and the Special Boat Service
- the creation of an organic Joint Special Forces Air Wing, including the 8 Flight Army Air Corps, 657 Squadron of the Royal Air Force (RAF), 7 Squadron (RAF) and 47 Squadron (RAF), which provide rotary- and fixed-wing strategic and tactical mobility.³⁰

However, UK SOF now face a much tighter fiscal environment, and in early 2013 media reports indicated the possibility of deep cuts in the capability.³¹ However, apparently those plans haven't been implemented. This reflects a trend in many Western armed forces, particularly in Western Europe: the steady reduction of armies since the end of the Cold War has led to a concentration of resources when it comes to land forces. While the regular army in the UK and elsewhere has been reduced, high-value assets like SOF have increased in size, resource allocation and strategic importance.³²

Canada

Canada's SOF also have a long tradition, dating back to World War II. Canada's involvement in Afghanistan, like Australia's, led to an increase in its special operations capability. In 2006, a new Canadian Special Operations Command (CANSOFCOM) was established. It comprises five key units: a Joint Task Force 2 (JTF 2), which is a CT and special operations unit predominantly for overseas deployments; the Canadian Special Operations Regiment (CSOR), which provides tactical support to the JTF 2; the 427 Special Operations Aviation Squadron (SOAS); the Canadian Joint Incident Response Unit; and the Canadian Special Operations Training Centre (CSOTC).³³

From an Australian perspective, two issues are particularly noteworthy. First, Canada is also a member of the 'Five Eyes' community (along with the US, the UK, Australia and New Zealand), and the Canadian and Australian SOF organisations have worked well together in the past. Indeed, as Canada seeks to increase its strategic role in the Asia-Pacific, there could be scope for deeper cooperation in this space.³⁴ Second, apparently the Canadian

Government established a capability manager (CM) to manage organic SOF capability. While we can't make a judgement on whether that works in the Canadian context, a similar model could be considered in Australia.

New Zealand

The New Zealand special operations capability is the smallest among the Five Eyes, commensurate with the modest size of the New Zealand Defence Force. The capability is based on a regiment (five squadrons) of the New Zealand Special Air Service Regiment (NZSAS). In 2005, a dedicated CT squadron (D Squadron—Commando) was established. It's been deployed regionally and globally, including in East Timor, Bougainville and Afghanistan. In some of those deployments, the NZSAS has been repeatedly incorporated in missions alongside Australian SOF. There's also an established exchange between the two organisations. In the future, this relationship could grow in importance as the ADF develops its amphibious capability to better deal with contingencies in the South Pacific. This area is the primary operating environment for the New Zealand Defence Force, and SOF elements from both countries could be called upon to work together in an amphibious operation to evacuate Australian and New Zealand nationals during a crisis. NZSAS personnel should therefore be tightly integrated in the ADF's amphibious capability development through joint planning, exercises and the like.

NATO

Largely in the context of the Afghanistan operation, Australia has intensified its relationship with the NATO alliance.³⁵ This included cooperation between the SOCOMD/SOTG and NATO's new Special Operations Headquarters (NSHQ), which was established in June 2007 and redesignated with that name in March 2010. In line with the trend outlined above, one factor behind the new organisation was the need to come to terms with declining allied defence budgets and the appreciation that SOF offer an effective and relatively cost-effective capability.³⁶

Currently led by a US commander, NSHQ reports directly to the Supreme Commander Allied Forces Europe (SACEUR) for tasking and prioritisation. While it currently consists of approximately 220 personnel from the 26 member countries, there are plans for an increase in strength. NSHQ's mission is to be the 'primary point of development, coordination and direction for all NATO Special Operations-related activities'.³⁷ It works with allies and partners to coordinate deployment and increase interoperability through standardisation and NATO's Battlefield Information Collection and Exploitation Systems (BICES). NATO has also established a Special Forces School at Chievres Air Base in Belgium.

It's NATO's goal to further enhance its SOF network and to establish a 'federation of SOF training centres'. Australia is seen as a key partner in this regard...

It's NATO's goal to further enhance its SOF network and to establish a 'federation of SOF training centres'.³⁸ Australia is seen as a key partner in this regard, as outlined by NATO Secretary General Anders Fogh Rasmussen during his 2012 visit to Australia.³⁹ As a result, there could be new opportunities for SOCOMD and NSHQ to collaborate beyond Afghanistan as part of an increasingly strong Global SOF Network, particularly since NSHQ is very much driven by the US. Given geostrategic proximity, it's plausible that one key operational focus of NATO SOF will be Africa, which is also an area of increasing interest for Australia, as recognised in Australia's *Defence White Paper 2013*.⁴⁰ It's also noteworthy that USSOCOM has identified NSHQ as a role model of SOF cooperation⁴¹; some of its structures might be useful in efforts to set up similar institutions in the Asia-Pacific region.

CHAPTER 5

Capability development

While SOF are capable of acting independently in some circumstances, there are many situations in which they depend on other force elements for transport, intelligence fusion, communications connectivity (including for command and control), fire support and logistics. Operations in the Afghanistan theatre saw Australia's SOF rely heavily on allied assets, particularly tactical aviation. This worked well enough, primarily because the US was in the lead in the operation and had a large number of assets in theatre. But that's not guaranteed to be the case in all circumstances, especially in Australia's near region, where our national interests are likely to be more highly engaged than American ones.

As well, the hybrid operations described above may require SOF to operate seamlessly with other ADF and, potentially, allied force elements. For example, SOF operating in support or advance of amphibious operations will need lift into theatre in the first instance, and will subsequently be required to at least communicate with other land and naval elements to coordinate follow-on landings. They might also need to coordinate indirect fire support or air strikes.

Together, these requirements raise a number of policy questions:

- Which capabilities should be organic to the SOF, and which should reside elsewhere?
- How are the capabilities required by the SOF to be raised, trained and sustained?
- How will Australia's SOF maintain the high levels of interoperability with allied (especially American) forces that have developed over the past decade?

There are no hard and fast answers to these questions. Like all other questions in capability development and force preparedness, they depend critically upon judgements made by government about the roles envisaged for the ADF in general and the SOF in particular, and on the resources made available. Generally, a greater allocation of resources results in a higher level of capability that can be raised and sustained. Similarly, allocating greater resources to SOF to enable them to maintain a wide range of organic capabilities would reduce uncertainty in planning and make for seamless operations. But it would also come at an opportunity cost elsewhere in the Defence Capability Plan.

Therefore, a degree of judgement is needed to determine 'how much is enough' where resources are concerned and about how self-sufficient the SOF should be. However, a few general principles can be used to guide decision-making, and some organisational changes would help to identify mission-critical gaps that would benefit from higher priority in the capability development process.

First, it makes sense for assets that are frequently used in mission-critical ways to be held organically by the SOF. It would simply be inefficient to have to constantly coordinate the availability of those assets, which wouldn't usually be available for other tasking in any event. However, that list probably doesn't extend much beyond personal

equipment and weaponry, specialised equipment such as chemical, biological, radiological and nuclear (CBRN) gear, and basic mobility vehicles. Perhaps counterintuitively, the versatility of SOF tends to work against their holding large quantities of materiel. Holding all of the equipment required to perform all of the assigned tasks would be prohibitively costly in both money and the personnel who would be involved in sustaining it.

Second, there's an economy of scale if equipment is maintained as part of the wider ADF fleet. For example, maintaining even a small number of helicopters within SOCOMD would incur substantial fixed costs and bring with it difficulties in ensuring availability with a small fleet. Again, this tends to argue against organically embedding enabling capability within SOCOMD. That said, given that the SOF are among the ADF elements most likely to be committed to a high-risk operation at short notice, the preparedness and capability of the necessary support elements have to be managed carefully to avoid unnecessary operational risks.

A Special Operations Capability Manager?

One way to manage the capabilities that have to come together in special operations would be to have a capability manager responsible for ensuring that all of the elements are fit for purpose and available with reasonable notice. That naturally raises the question of whether SOCOMD needs its own capability manager. Of course, any such organisational solution needs to work well within the wider Defence capability management framework.

Defence's solution for the development and delivery of capability is the capability manager (CM) framework. CMs have the responsibility to raise, train and sustain forces. In short, they're tasked with providing the government of the day with the military options that have been identified in government policy guidance, consistent with the resources available.

CMs have a role in both the development of future capability and the management of existing resources. In the development of future capability (either new capabilities or the enhancement of existing ones), they're responsible for both defining the user need and developing a proposal for consideration by government that takes into account the coordination of the fundamental inputs to capability (FICs), which include logistics, training, doctrine, personnel and so on.

Currently, there are only four CMs:

- Chief of Navy (CN), for maritime capability
- Chief of Army (CA), for land capability
- Chief of Air Force (CAF), for aerospace capability
- Deputy Secretary Intelligence and Security (DEPSEC I&S), for Defence intelligence agencies capability.

The 'easiest' solution for SOCOMD's requirement for the coordination of enabling and support force elements would be to stand up a CM for special operations. However, there are arguments against that. For a start, it's sensible to limit the number of CMs. Defence's committee processes already have a large number of stakeholders and the result is time-consuming process and a lack of clear responsibility. As well, SOCOMD isn't the only ADF force element to have critical dependencies on others—there are many others in a similar position. Having a large number of CMs would result in a messy set of overlapping responsibilities, and the likely outcome would be a framework in which accountability is diffused to the point of being meaningless. That's why, for example, there aren't separate managers for submarines and surface combatants; those maritime elements are managed as part of an overall naval capability, and the Chief of Navy has the ability to move resources between the force elements depending on the guidance he receives from government and from the Chief of the Defence Force's preparedness directive.

Most of the SOF roles are fundamentally in land operations (although they can also influence and enhance operations in other domains), and almost all of the personnel in SOCOMD are drawn from the wider Army. The current capability management arrangement in which the Chief of Army is responsible for land operations more broadly doesn't seem, *a priori*, to be the wrong solution. The Chief of Army is responsible for managing the Army's

materiel and personnel, including many of the enablers for special operations, such as vehicles, rotary-wing transport and fire support. He's also responsible for ensuring that the interfaces between the Army and the other services required for joint operations are fit for purpose.

It might be argued that the specialised nature of SOF requirements makes it prohibitively difficult for the Chief of Army to manage special operations capability in addition to the rest of his portfolio, but that argument would apply to other force elements as well. Submarine operations are highly specialised and often sensitive, dangerous, or both, and the interfaces between submarines and other ADF and national elements need to be managed carefully. Similarly, air combat operations are highly specialised and sometimes need to be tightly coordinated with land and surface forces. In other words, the capability management requirements of SOF are an example of a wider issue within Defence: the management of those capabilities required to 'join up' the predominantly single-service elements.

So perhaps the best solution, not just for SOCOMD but for other ADF force elements as well, is for the ADF to stand up an additional CM for Joint Capabilities, responsible for ensuring that the capabilities required for the ADF to operate jointly are in place and managed across the force elements that have to work together. The new CM would be responsible for ensuring that C4ISR (command, control, communications, computers, intelligence, surveillance and reconnaissance) capabilities were coordinated across the services, and that the enabling and support capability required by specialised force elements are appropriately managed and developed. In this model, SOCOMD's requirements would be considered and prioritised along with those of other ADF elements. Such a move would be consistent with trends elsewhere; the UK and Canada both have appointments responsible for joint capability development. It would also provide a natural home for the development of plans such as the C4ISR and antisubmarine warfare roadmaps.

The counter-argument is likely to be that the existing capability development process is already joint, with Capability Development Group (CDG) already staffed by tri-service and civilian personnel. That's true: the ADF's jointness has noticeably improved over the past few years, and the roadmaps mentioned above were developed without a CM for Joint Capabilities. But there are also signs that there'd be value in formalising a champion of joint capabilities within the process.

The current Defence Capability Plan (DCP) is showing signs of strain, and the 'big four' projects—Joint Strike Fighter, Future Submarine, LAND 400 (protected mobility vehicles for land forces) and future frigates—have been described by the Head of CDG as being of a size that has 'the potential to distort the force structure'. In such an environment, having a voice at the table for the joint capabilities that have to be developed and funded in what's bound to be a restrained DCP for at least the next few years (and probably well beyond) would give the best chance of realising synergies between predominantly single-service items. It would be a way of making sure that the sort of coordination required by SOCOMD and other force elements that have non-organic critical enablers is given appropriate consideration in the capability development process.

This is a particularly important time for the development of joint capabilities. The ADF's future amphibious capability will arguably require more jointness than any predecessor, and SOCOMD will necessarily have an important role to play in that as well. The two prime candidates for the role of CM Joint Capabilities are the Vice Chief of the Defence Force (VCDF) and the Chief of Joint Operations (CJOPS). There are pros and cons for each: CJOPS has the most immediate awareness of current strengths and weaknesses in joint operations, but the demands of current operations might limit their ability to look towards future possibilities. VCDF is well placed to do the latter, but isn't as intimately involved in making the ADF work in a joined-up way from day to day. Nonetheless, the central organisational position of VCDF in the senior defence committee structure makes that position the natural actor for such a role. CJOPS would then become a source of expert advice to VCDF in identifying current shortfalls and developing trends in joint operations.

To be clear, we're not proposing that the responsibility to raise, train and sustain the land forces—of which the SOF are a component—should move away from Chief of Army, any more than the other Chiefs relinquish the capabilities

they are now responsible for. In our model the new CM Joint Capabilities should be responsible for those elements of materiel and FICs required to realise synergies between force elements under the responsibility of the extant CMs.

Funding special operations capabilities

It's fair to say that the SOF provide very good 'bang for the buck' at the moment and are still far from being in the realm of diminishing returns—meaning that some judicious additional funding could give a proportionally high return on investment. And, if the expanded role that SOCOMD has played recently continues to be the default (or is expanded even further), some extra capitalisation is likely to be required.

Given the specialised nature of the capability, SOCOMD itself is best placed to make small-scale investment decisions and to guide experimental work on developing future capability. In the same way that other specialist organisations, such as the Australian Signals Directorate, have a capability development budget that's managed in house, an ongoing funding line for SOCOMD that allows it to use resources in a discretionary way would be likely to give a better (and more efficient) return than requiring it to go through more elaborate processes within the Army or beyond. The appropriate quantum of funding is hard to identify from outside, but it should probably be at least the size of several minor projects—perhaps \$20–30 million per year.

But for larger projects, the benefit to SOCOMD has to be balanced against the opportunity cost elsewhere in the Defence portfolio, and there's no compelling reason to prioritise SOCOMD over the rest of the ADF. Provided that the requirements of SOCOMD are appropriately factored into the capability development process along with the estimated costs and benefits, the process should be able to prioritise appropriately—especially if there's a CM Joint Capabilities to make the case, as recommended here. In any event, it's likely that the value-add of SOCOMD will often make the gaining of priority relatively easy.

The human dimension

Finally, it's important to consider the human dimension of Australia's special operations capability. The first aspect is the size of the SOF. Unless the Australian Government wants to significantly increase the scope of special operations activities (and we don't see a compelling reason for this in the near to medium term), the current end-strength of SOCOMD seems about right. Given the current fiscal realities and the lower tempo of operations, it's difficult to argue for an increase in SOF personnel. Moreover, the inherent challenges in recruiting highly specialised 'operators' puts a limit on the pool of suitable candidates. However, we'd also argue against cutting the special operations capability. It takes years to build specific capabilities, and Australia's relatively small SOF could easily be disrupted as a result of personnel reductions.

A possible challenge for future special operations recruitment could emerge if a decision is made to downsize the regular Army, which is the key pool for recruiting SOF candidates. Should it be subjected to manpower cuts, it's reasonable to expect that the Army would be reluctant to 'lose' more of its most capable people to SOCOMD. Consequently, the Army leadership and SOCOMD need to think about the best ways to manage SOF recruitment and sustainment under personnel and budgetary pressures.

SOCOMD could also experience what the former Commander USSOCOM, Admiral Eric Olson, has called the problem of a 'fraying' force. That is, a consistently high tempo of special operations has placed significant stress on those SOF who served in Iraq and Afghanistan and their families, creating challenges for retaining US SOF beyond Afghanistan.⁴² For SOCOMD, the 'fraying' challenge could be somewhat different. With a decrease in high-intensity operations and a greater shift towards the non-kinetic special operations mission spectrum, experienced operators might decide to leave the force. While some retirement of personnel is inevitable, SOCOMD needs to think creatively about opportunities to expose seasoned operators to highly demanding activities outside real operations. One possibility is for SOF operators to participate regularly in high-level exercises with allied SOF, particularly USSOCOM.

CHAPTER 6

Recommendations

Over the past decade, the Australian special operations capability has proven to be a major asset for the Australian Government. Looking to the future, we make the following recommendations.

Consolidate the SOF capability at existing levels. Because SOCOMD received significant resource investments over the past decade, particularly in proportion to the regular Army, there could be a temptation to cut back the special operations capability on the grounds that the post-Afghanistan period won't require such a strong focus on unconventional military operations. However, SOCOMD is a very small organisational element within Defence and would be disrupted by even minor changes. Moreover, its specific skill set, developed over the years, is likely to become more, not less, important in the new strategic environment. Finally, particularly in a resource-constrained environment, SOCOMD offers government a relatively cost-effective option. The government and the Defence leadership should resist attempts to cut the special operations capability.

Provide SOCOMD with an ongoing funding line for specialised, small-scale capability projects. Given the specialised nature of the capability, SOCOMD itself is best placed to make small-scale investment decisions and to guide experimental work on developing future capability. In the same way that other specialist organisations, such as the Australian Signals Directorate, have a capability development budget that's managed in house, an ongoing funding line for SOCOMD that allows it to use resources in a discretionary way would be likely to give a better (and more efficient) return than requiring it to go through more elaborate processes within the Army or beyond. The appropriate quantum of funding should probably be at least the size of several minor projects—perhaps \$20–30 million per year. For larger projects, no SOF-specific funding line seems required.

Establish an ADF Capability Manager for Joint Capabilities. The ADF should consider standing up a Capability Manager for Joint Capabilities who is responsible for ensuring that C4ISR capabilities are coordinated across the services, and that the enabling and support capabilities required by specialised force elements are appropriately managed and developed. In the SOCOMD case, Chief of Army would retain the responsibility to raise, train and sustain the land forces, while the new Capability Manager would be responsible for ensuring that the materiel and enablers required to realise synergies between SOCOMD and other ADF elements were in place.

This would enable SOCOMD's special capability requirements to be considered and prioritised along with those of other ADF elements. The Vice Chief of the Defence Force is best suited for this new position.

Establish an unambiguous legislative framework for clandestine operations. In the future strategic environment, clandestine operations, which involve military personnel in ways other than uniformed and declared military operations, could become more important for Australia's SOF. If the government decides to use SOCOMD in this way, we need an unambiguous legislative framework and robust oversight mechanisms.

Enhance SOF regional engagement through regional liaison elements. While conducting high-value kinetic operations will continue to be a core SOF mission, the next decade is likely to see a greater shift towards the

'indirect' approach of special operations. Engagement with partner nations in our region and beyond will become more important. This development should be reflected in the SOF posture. One step could be to establish regional special operations liaison elements in selected Australian embassies to enable a permanent country and/or regional SOF footprint. These would be longer term (two years plus) permanent SOCOMD placements in key partner countries to provide in-country expertise and linkages to local authorities.

Prioritise and intensify SOF cooperation in Southeast Asia and the South Pacific. Australia's SOF engagement should prioritise our near region. That's where our security interests are most closely engaged, and proximity would make it easier for other ADF elements to provide support for operations if required. In Southeast Asia, Defence could establish SOF regional liaison elements in Indonesia, Malaysia, Singapore and the Philippines. The SOF relationship with Indonesia is the most important and should be prioritised.

Initiate the establishment of a regional SOF training centre. Greater SOF cooperation with Southeast Asian countries could lay the groundwork for the establishment of a regional SOF training centre in a Southeast Asian country or Australia. Modelled on NATO's Special Forces School, the centre could facilitate cooperation and coordination among regional SOF as a contribution to cooperative security in the region. It could also link into existing training centres beyond the Asia-Pacific region. Defence could initiate a dialogue with regional partner countries on the feasibility of such an undertaking.

Maintain and strengthen cooperation and linkages with US SOF. Cooperation between SOCOMD and USSOCOM is critical for Australia's security interests and is highly likely to continue, whether in the Asia-Pacific region or further abroad. Moreover, Australia's SOF have benefited significantly from access to US SOF activities and capabilities. The task is to maintain a similar degree of cooperation. The US 'pivot' to our region provides a good vehicle to do so, as US SOF will very likely intensify their activities in the Asia-Pacific region. It will be important to ensure that Australian and US SOF activities in the Asia-Pacific theatre are well coordinated. SOCOMD should establish a permanent presence at USAFRICOM and USCENTCOM to facilitate possible operations in Africa and the Middle East.

Intensify cooperation with Chinese SOF. Defence should promote cooperation between SOCOMD and its Chinese counterpart. This would be a confidence-building measure in Australia-China military-to-military relations as well as a burden-sharing contribution to the US alliance. Exercises related to counterterrorism and humanitarian assistance and disaster relief would be well suited for this purpose.

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ACRONYMS AND ABBREVIATIONS

ADF	Australian Defence Force
AFP	Australian Federal Police
C4ISR	command, control, communications, computers, intelligence, surveillance and reconnaissance
CDG	Capability Development Group
CJOPS	Chief of Joint Operations
CM	capability manager
COIN	counterinsurgency
CT	counterterrorism
DCP	Defence Capability Plan
GDP	gross domestic product
JSOTF-P	Joint Special Operations Task Force—Philippines (US)
NATO	North Atlantic Treaty Organization
NSHQ	Special Operations Headquarters (NATO)
NZ	New Zealand
NZSAS	New Zealand Special Air Service Regiment
PLA	People's Liberation Army
SAS	Special Air Service
SASR	Special Air Service Regiment
SOF	special operations forces
SOCAUST	Special Operations Commander Australia
SOCOMD	Special Operations Command
SOHQ	Special Operations Headquarters
SOTG	Special Operations Task Group
TSOC	Theater Special Operations Command (US)
UK	United Kingdom
UN	United Nations
US SOF	US Special Operations Forces
USAFRICOM	US Africa Command
USCENTCOM	US Central Command
USPACOM	US Pacific Command
USSOCOM	US Special Operations Command
VCDF	Vice Chief of the Defence Force
VEN	violent extremist network

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Over the past decade, the demands of the ADF's global and regional operations saw an unprecedented growth in Australia's special operations capability. Special operations forces (SOF) became the 'capability of choice' for the Australian Government, especially in more threatening environments such as Iraq and Afghanistan. SOF's ability to conduct highly sensitive military missions (including combat and non-combat operations), to operate in complex terrain and to do so at short notice, made them a very attractive military instrument. As a result, Australia's Special Operations Command (SOCOMD) received significant funding, grew in strength, and gained greater prominence in the ADF's institutional structure.

However, as the ADF enters into a period of transition from almost constant high-tempo operations to (potentially) a 'soft power decade', the future of Australia's special operations capability is uncertain. 'Operational fatigue' on the part of government and nation, as well as a lack of immediate external drivers could lead to a diminished interest in special operations and thus less willingness to maintain the capability at its current level. This could be exacerbated by harsh fiscal realities and looming decisions on some prodigiously expensive defence acquisitions, such as future submarines, ships and fifth-generation fighter aircraft.

Against this background, this study aims to inform policy decisions by providing an understanding of the special operations capability and what it offers to government in both peace and wartime. At the same time, it's equally important to consider what SOF can't do—particularly since Australia's SOF are fairly few in number.

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