A Dutch SOCOM

The way ahead to addressing national and international SOF shortfalls

Anne Tjepkema

Special Operations Forces (SOF) can provide an adequate military answer to the demands of modern combat operations. With the establishment of a Special Operations Command (SOCOM) by Belgium, Denmark, and the Netherlands, a critical NATO shortfall will be addressed. This article provides a detailed overview of the latest developments in this area.

The history of the Dutch special forces dates back to World War Two when Nr. 2 Dutch Troop was founded in the UK for inter-allied operations. Later, the commandos were employed in their homeland and against Japanese forces. Throughout the Cold War period the Korps Commandotroepen fulfilled roles mainly in the gathering of intelligence within the Royal Netherlands Army. The Korps Mariniers dates back to the 17th century and became the amphibious infantry component of the Royal Netherlands Navy. Within that Korps commando units were formed, not totally unlike those of the Army. Thoroughly trained light forces have always been seen as a cornerstone in the armed forces, although their staff capacities were developed marginally. Synergy between the two elite entities was always limited due to inter-service rivalries: both the Army and the Navy saw their special forces as crown jewels in their overall force posture. After the end of the Cold War, cooperation became even more difficult: where most other domains in each service suffered from reductions or even dissolution, special forces enjoyed expansion and deployment in almost every national mission abroad. Despite successful integrated operations in Afghanistan and Iraq, the lack of an effective approach in the standing forces remained. Indeed, this operational prominence paved the way for the establishment of a staff element at the Defence Department. This Joint Special Operations Division (JSO), however, had limited responsibilities and was not allowed sufficient authority. As yet, the sizable number of special forces combat units is not supported by a sufficient capability in the field of enablers and command and control.

Alongside national developments, NATO has encouraged its member states to engage in structural reforms regarding the development of special operations forces (SOF) since 2013. The overall aim of these reforms was to make serious contributions to eliminating the critical shortfall in this domain, with special attention to SOF Command and Control (C2) and SOF Air. The Netherlands, wishing to remain aligned with SOF developments within NATO, will generate part of a Special Operations Component Command (SOCC) capability in 2021. As announced in the Defence White Paper of March 2018, the Dutch armed forces will be able — together with Denmark and Belgium — to offer this multinational headquarters (called Composite SOCC) for a short SOF mission.

With the establishment of a Special Operations Command (SOCOM), a critical NATO shortfall will be addressed. From 2020 on, the Netherlands, together with Denmark and
Belgium, will be able — through NLD SOCOM — to provide the core of a multinational CSOCC. Additionally, this Defence Staff level operational headquarters (HQ), positioned directly under the Chief of Defence, will plan, direct, execute and evaluate all national SOF operations. In short, NLD SOCOM will integrate and synchronize and employ the SOF capabilities. Further roles include:

- the development of plans and policy;
- assuring the quality of training and exercises;
- the development of knowledge and the stimulation of innovation;
- developing and facilitating (fast) SOF procurement strategies.

The Services (Army, Navy and Air Force) will retain command of their SOF units. When these units prepare for operations and deployment, they will be placed under operational command of SOCOM and made available for a long-term multinational mission. For unforeseeable missions on a short notice, additional SOF capabilities are being provided. Characteristic of NLD SOF is maintaining inherent unilateral crisis response capabilities on high alert states in order to conduct unforeseeable national special operations. Mission profiles include Hostage Release Operations (HRO) and Non Combatant Evacuation Operations (NEO). These capabilities provide national decision makers with agile, tailorable and rapidly deployable formations to respond to emergencies. This article describes the way ahead in the ongoing organizational restructuring of this high-quality capability.¹

Terminology

It may be instructive to explain the terminology regarding special operations. The term “special forces” is used in the USA exclusively for the U.S. Army “Green Berets”. Hence, NATO uses the term “special operations forces”. Special operations are military activities conducted by specially designated, organized, trained and equipped forces, manned with selected personnel, using unconventional tactics, techniques and modes of employment.² NATO doctrine defines three principal tasks for SOF: Military Assistance (MA), Special Reconnaissance (SR) and Direct Action (DA). A SOCC is an advanced party of 70-150 personnel who provide an organic, rapidly deployable headquarters (HQ) capability for NATO.

SOCC-contributing nations are committed to provide at least the core of such a staff, together with at least one Special Operations Task Group (SOTG), a task group consisting of 50-100 personnel and a SOF Air unit. During employment, SOF need dedicated and non-SOF enabling capacities to allow them to fulfill their mission, e.g., fire support, intelligence, cyber, air assets and logistics. These enabling capabilities can be divided into combat support (CS) and combat service support (CSS).

The strategic context

According to a study by The Hague Centre for Strategic Studies, four trends determine the operational environment in which SOF can provide an adequate military answer to the demands of modern combat operations.³ Firstly, military operations require more and more precision in their execution. Harmless victims and collateral damage are less and less acceptable. SOF can meet those standards more easily than large conventional forces. Secondly, in irregular warfare and counter-insurgency large units are usually less effective than SOF in terms of inherent flexibility, precision and sense of purpose while maintaining a small footprint and low visibility. Thirdly, states have entered into the field of hybrid warfare, their methods deriving from those employed by non-state actors. The employment of unconventional means together with traditional ones is a combination for which SOF have shown to possess a unique suitability. Recent operations of Russian SOF in the Crimea and the Ukraine indicate the viability of this type of warfare. Lastly, SOF can play an important role in long-term efforts to contribute to regional stability and conflict prevention, the so-called Military Assistance (MA). SOF engage easily in partnerships with very diverse groups by organizing training courses and providing military advice.
Benchmark

As part of the preliminary process leading to the establishment of NLD SOCOM, planners carried out an international benchmark study among eight countries that have established different types of SOCOM headquarters in the past: Australia, Canada, Denmark, Germany, France, Norway, the UK and Sweden. After consultations with NATO-experts, the current model and roles of SOCOM were deemed the most appropriate option in the Dutch situation. Incorporation of the current Joint Special Operations (JSO) branch of the Operations Directorate and receiving operational command of the relevant SOF units will provide the basis for the foundation of NLD SOCOM, albeit after an implementation period ending in 2020, when full operational capability (FOC) will be reached.

NLD SOCOM, being part of the Defence Staff, will be located in the building of the Ministry of Defence. It will be manned by approximately 60 personnel from all services, with a two-star general commanding. Potentially, it will be allocated its own budget. This projected capability is a major step in the maturation of SOF, the development of SOF C2 (such as the CSOCC) and the strategic positioning of Dutch SOF in the international SOF network. At this time, a CSOCC can, however, only be fully established in cooperation with like-minded countries, for which cooperation with Denmark and Belgium has been sought. In this trilateral set-up, Denmark has taken the initial lead, as its SOCOM has already been established.

The constituting national elements

For the establishment of CSOCC, Letters of Intent were exchanged between The Netherlands, Denmark and Belgium in February 2017, followed by a Memorandum of Understanding in June 2018. The tri-national CSOCC will be offered to the NATO Response Force (NRF) in 2021. Pending a Force Generation process at SHAPE level, the Dutch share in this CSOCC may include:

• contribution to the CSOCC staff (approximately one-third of the staff positions);
• contribution to the Special Operations Air Task Group (SOATG, a SOF C2 element);
• a Special Operations Land Task Group (SOLTG); or
• a Special Operations Maritime Task Group (SOMTG);
• a Special Operations Air Task Unit (a limited SOF rotary-wing element).

The air domain

Lessons learned from the failed American operation *Eagle Claw*, the intended liberation of U.S. Embassy personnel in Teheran (1980), have demonstrated that a prerequisite for SOF Air capability is the mindset and the specific training of the aircrews. They have to be able to operate under difficult circumstances, in adverse weather, in darkness at low level, over mountainous terrain and in a so-called non-permissive environment. Frequent training with SOF units is essential to the development of mutual understanding and trust. In the ‘benchmark countries’ this has often led to the creation of SOF-only helicopter units. Selection of aircrew for this type of operations should guarantee the quality of the unit.

The RNLAF operates three types of helicopters suitable for SOF: Chinook, Cougar and NH-90. The latter is in the Dutch configuration fit for a number of maritime operations, but not for land operations. The Chinook offers the best total trade-off of operational characteristics, but is the mainstay of the 11th Air Manoeuvre Brigade. The Cougar is able to perform the majority of the spectrum of special operations, albeit in a more limited way than the Chinook, though crews have ample experience in shipborne operations. Therefore, the Cougar is the selected airframe for further development of SOF Air. As it stands now, this transport helicopter will be maintained in service until 2030. A potential successor will be specially designed for SOF. Further, the air arrangement implies an analogous status for the Dutch fixed-wing squadron of four C-130 aircraft, of which two will be designated with four specially trained crews. Obviously, the complexity of a mission determines the requirements for planning, intelligence and communications. Dependent on the type of mission, additional personnel and equipment from other units in the armed forces will provide these. During operations, liaison will be established in advance with these units in order to facilitate smooth planning. Regular training in the SOCOM framework adds to the robustness of this planning and the essential mutual trust among the SOF units.

Supporting capabilities

Currently, the Dutch SOF units lack (sufficient) supporting and enabling capabilities, such as medical teams, intelligence, communications and engineers. This implies that SOF units have to rely on regular forces for their required support. SOCOM can play a role in developing plans for addressing this national shortfall. A specific topic being studied is the inclusion of women in the conduct of special operations. They are considered to enhance the effectiveness of military assistance and special reconnaissance operations in particular. There are no important arguments against the incorporation of female personnel in SOF units. However, arriving at a balanced organization will require extra recruitment effort and time. The impression that operational standards will be
adjusted to make this happen should be avoided at all costs. Finally, a critical partner for SOCOM is the DISS (Defence Intelligence and Security Service or MIVD), which is currently adapting to its support of SOF operations. SOF expertise is being added to analysis teams and liaison is established. Close cooperation with DISS will have a positive effect on the preparation and execution of SOF operations. Similarly, SOCOM aims to forge a strong connection with the Defence Cyber Command (DCC).

Conclusion

The Netherlands SOF are in the midst of significant organizational changes. With the establishment of NLD SOCOM, the planning and execution of SOF operations will be considerably improved. NLD SOCOM will ameliorate the development of SOF policies, plans and procurement, the quality of training and the development of innovation. Together with Belgium and Denmark, the Netherlands will be able to provide NATO with operational SOF C2 capabilities by means of the CSOCC, a critical shortfall. On the tactical level, progress is being made on topics like the development of SOF Air and SOF-supporting capabilities. Together with the SOF units, and in close cooperation with its partners, NLD SOCOM aims for a major enhancement of the SOF contribution to national security.

Anne C. Tjepkema MA is a former RNLAF officer and military historian.

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