



We Need To Talk About the UK's New Special Operations Concept

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30 September 2019

Recent reports in the British media suggest UK special forces are pushing for a new role in the changing global security environment. This represents an opportunity for a much-needed debate about the future resourcing and priorities of the UK's special forces.

For over three years the Oxford Research Group has been researching the growth of Britain's special forces deployed to tackle non-state groups like Boko Haram, ISIS, Al-Shabaab and al-Qaeda in many places across the world. In particular, our work has looked at how – as Western nations have drawn down from large-scale combat operations in Iraq and Afghanistan – risk-averse decision makers have increasingly come to regard special forces as an alternative to deploying conventional combat troops. This appears to have led to a situation where – irrespective of the threat – Britain's special forces soldiers have become the preferred tool of choice.

The changing political landscape, which has seen a resurgence of China and Russia, has turned national attention away from these activities. However, as the rest of Britain's armed forces increase their strategic focus on the threat posed by near-peer competitors and hybrid warfare, special forces are being tipped to lead on what the British Director Special Forces is reportedly calling the 'Special Operations Concept'. This concept is British special forces' response to the challenge posed by military operations fought in the 'grey zone'.

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It is unclear which department within government is (or has) been assessing how the new Special Operations Concept can contribute to the fight against these new threats. It is likely the UK's National Security Council (the executive decision-making body for the UK's National Security Strategy) would have discussed this policy, especially as the Director Special Forces often attends NSC meetings. But as they often take place in secret, we can't be certain.

Despite the extra £2.2bn that was pledged for UK defence in the Chancellor's recent Spending Round, the declassified December 2018 report of the Modernising Defence Programme (MDP) – a mini-security review of sorts – made no reference to Britain's special forces capability. This stands in stark contrast to the ongoing policy debate taking place in Washington, D.C. about the future role for U.S. Special Operations Forces (SOF).

While the UK appears to have marched on without any public policy debate, the U.S. Congress instructed the Department of Defense (DOD) to assess the state of U.S. SOF as part of the 2019 National Defense Authorisation Act. This is a step the Congressional Research Service has suggested “policymakers will likely make good use of” as a means to “find the right balance between continuing to challenge terrorist organizations while simultaneously addressing growing irregular warfare threats posed by nation-states”. This process will play a crucial role in determining future budget priorities for U.S. SOF.

It is problematic that as part of UK efforts to respond to current concerns over great power competition – the threat of which was demonstrated most starkly in March 2018, when Russian nationals carried out a nerve agent attack on British soil – there hasn't been a similar opportunity to debate the role of Britain's special forces. Indeed, the Special Operations Concept could see

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Britain's special forces spearheading these efforts. Special forces are a finite resource and the absence of debate should be reconsidered.

Discussions are necessary not only because it will need to be ensured that special forces have the right resources for the job, but also because this new role for Britain's special forces should be based on sound, evidence-based strategic calculations. The [recent congressionally mandated reviews](#) into U.S. SOF have already begun to examine such issues. Without a similar UK Government review, there are risks Britain's special forces will soon succumb to overstretch. With [evidence](#) emerging that the SAS and Special Boat Service (SBS) have already been under-resourced over the past two years, the Government cannot disregard the issue.

As the fight against the Islamic State has demonstrated, the predominant use of light footprint operations only [increases the probability that special forces will be a significant part of the UK's military presence on the ground](#). The UK's adversaries continue to have a strong strategic interest in confronting Britain's armed forces off the open battlefield; operating in the grey zone and under the threshold of full, state-on-state conflict. Based on these trends, it's not unreasonable to suggest UK troops are more likely to find confrontation with Russia in somewhere like Syria, rather than in a conventional war in Eastern Europe.

As American Congressman, Rep. Adam Smith, Chairman of the House Armed Services Committee, [stated](#) at a New America Foundation SOF Policy Forum based in Washington in September 2019: "Special operators build partnerships, train local forces and are sometimes the first on the ground to see changes in a country's stability" none of which, he said, is going to change even with a growing strategic focus on great power competition.

This will force the UK Government – with fewer resources than U.S. SOF – to find the right balance between operations it assigns special forces to respond to state-based threats and the stabilisation efforts they're likely to be tasked with as the UK continues to increase its operational tempo in countries across the [Sahel-Sahara](#) and the [Horn of Africa](#).

The Government's recent commitment to increase spending on defence will require further debate about shifting strategic priorities for Britain's special forces. But without democratic accountability of Government policy decisions surrounding Britain's most revered military capability, the UK Government risks stretching these forces to possible breaking point.

Image credit: [U.S. Army photo by Master Sgt. Michel Sauret](#).

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