



The True Cost of Special Forces?

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This is the third instalment of a series on the costs of remote warfare. To see the introductory post on remote warfare and the Modernising Defence Plan, please click [here](#). To see the second post on the cost of Defence Engagement please click [here](#).

The British government has long cultivated the cloak of secrecy surrounding its special forces units like the Special Air Service (better known by its acronym, the SAS). Originally formed during but disbanded after the Second World War, it was not long before the government once again came to recognise the utility of small, secretive, and highly adaptable units. In 1947, against the backdrop of spiralling violence in Palestine, a reserve SAS unit (the 21st) was created. By 1959, the SAS had added a permanent unit (the 22nd) and another reserve unit (the 23rd) to its ranks.

However, it is the post-9/11 period that has proven to be “the golden age of special operations”. In 2013, a Ministry of Defence (MoD) study discussing how to maintain operations despite a “risk averse” public was leaked. The document suggested, among other things, “investing in greater numbers of SF.” This advice appears to have been followed. In the 2015 National Security Strategy and Strategic Defence and Security Review (SDSR) the government pledged to double investment in Special Forces. This amounted to £2 billion of new investment in the capability of UKSF in the 2015 Spending Review.

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“ “We will more than double our current planned investment in Special Forces equipment to enhance their ability to operate and strike globally in the most hostile environments on their own or with our closest allies, and in particular to enhance their counter-terrorism capabilities.” - National Security Strategy and Strategic Defence and Security Review 2015 ”

It is impossible to put this injection of cash into UKSF into context, however, because we do not have baseline budget figures to compare it to. The size, cost, and geographic spread of UKSF remain classified and their activities are covered by a blanket opacity policy that allows the government to deflect any questions with a “no comment” response. They are also the only part of the UK’s defence and security apparatus *not to fall under the scrutiny of a parliamentary committee* – putting them out of step even with their secretive counterparts in the intelligence services.

In an era where defence is under increasing pressure to demonstrate value for money, the continuing opacity of special forces budgets restricts any meaningful analysis of this assumption. In countries where such budgets are released, it makes it easier to make the case for special forces as cost-effective fighters. For example, *a study of the Danish military* found that the cost of

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conventional force rises approximately 300% when deployed, compared to only a 50-100% rise for DKSF.

In the U.S., where statistics on the numbers and budgets of special forces are also widely available, there is also compelling evidence that special forces represent good value for money. While President Trump's proposed military budget suggests that the administration is hoping to increase SOCOM spending by almost 11%, bringing the budget for Fiscal Year 2019 up to \$13.6 billion, this represents only 1.6% of the US Department of Defence's \$496bn budget. This is not bad considering the global reach of their forces, which SOCOM Commander General Raymond Thomas reckons covers over 80 countries at any one time.

“ “Rather than a mere “break-glass-in-case-of-war” force, we are now proactively engaged across the “battle space” of the Geographic Combatant Commands (GCCs), providing key integrating and enabling capabilities to support their campaigns and operations. We operate and fight in every corner of the world as an integrated joint, combined and interagency force. Today, there are approximately 56,000 active duty, 7,400 reserve, guard, and 6,600 civilian personnel across the SOF enterprise. On a daily basis, we sustain a deployed or forward stationed force of approximately 8,000 across 80- plus countries. They are conducting the entire range of SOF missions in both combat and noncombat situations with a wide variety of Joint, Interagency, International, and Multi-national partners.” – statement from SOCOM Commander General Raymond A. Thomas ”

These headline figures do not, of course, tell the whole story. For reasons unexplained, U.S. special forces budgets do not include the salaries or costs for the 70,000 Special Forces operators, or their major weapons. Once these are added, the SF utilize approximately 3% of the DoD budget. Yet, more complexities are added as different departments cooperate and support each other, and eventually, it becomes very difficult to estimate how much is spent on USSF annually.

In the Danish case, the everyday cost of their special forces is relatively high, and they are constantly kept ready for immediate deployment. This must explain in part the disparity in price hikes for deploying them versus using conventional forces. Nevertheless, the availability of budgetary figures – as well as details of the size and geographic spread of the force – allows for a level of analysis that is completely unattainable in the UK because of the complete opacity over UKSF.

This sort of analysis is vital if governments are to make strategic decisions over defence spending. While internal conversations doubtless happen about UKSF resourcing, this does not appear to be enough in today's resource-constrained defence environment. In 2017, PM Theresa May pledged an additional £300m to bring SF up to full strength. However, this pledge came against the backdrop of proposed staff cuts for the Royal Marines. As it has been repeatedly argued by us and countless others, this seems remarkably short-sighted and counter-productive – especially given the fact that the Marines represent a significant recruitment pool for UKSF.

In addition, we know from public statements from their U.S. counterparts that increasing operational tempo is placing real resource constraints on the force. In 2014, the then-head of SOCOM, Admiral William McRaven, told Congress

that the USSOF “has continued to fray” as a result of endless deployment cycles. Others have been more blunt, including a retired commander of the USSOF in Europe, who exclaimed: “We’re not frayed at the edges—we’re ripped at the damn seams [...] We have burned through this force.”

On the flipside, it is vital that policy makers understand both the true cost and the strategic case for the use of UKSF to make sure that they are not disproportionately resourced. In our research on the [waning risk appetite for the deployment of regular ground troops](#), we highlight the increasing risk that UKSF are used for political expediency above any assessment of whether they are the best tool for the job. This could lead to a boost in special forces funding for tasks that might otherwise be carried out by regular forces, leading to an imbalance in resourcing that could have long-term consequences. The current opacity over their budgets does not allow for any such discussion – hamstringing any chances of a truly informed debate ahead of the release of the Modernising Defence Programme.

Image credit: Defence Images/Flickr

About the author

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