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CONFERENCE REPORT

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Introduction

In the wake of the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, the Western powers have lost their appetite for large, long and costly land operations. Strategy papers produced in NATO and in several Western capitals all share a desire to find cheaper and preferably non-military ways to address the security threats emanating from fragile and conflict-affected states. This has rekindled interest in early warning, conflict prevention and local capacity building in the hope of addressing emerging conflicts before they escalate into war.

Whereas the great powers have some tradition and experience with incorporating special operations into such activities, this is not the case in most small and medium-sized states, where limited thought has been given to using special operations as a part of stabilisation activities, except for the traditional training and mentoring role highlighted in NATO doctrine. To give an example, special operations are not mentioned at all in the most recent comprehensive stabilisation strategy published by Denmark in 2013.¹ Although the applicability of special operations for peacetime engagements has been envisioned by, for example, NATO to include various activities within the task of Military Assistance such as training, advising and mentoring,² it still remains to be determined how special operations can contribute to crisis prevention and conflict management efforts.

The Royal Danish Defence College took a first step towards filling this void by hosting a conference focusing on how smaller states can use special operations for stabilisation purposes in the pre-conflict phases. The conference was held at the Defence College in Copenhagen on 29-30 May 2014. It is part of a larger project conducted by the College to investigate how small and medium-sized states can use special operations as part of a whole-of-government strategy to prevent fragile states from destabilising and descending into armed conflicts. The purpose of the conference was not to provide definitive answers but to identify which questions to focus on for future research and collaboration.

Guiding questions

The conference was structured around four core questions. The first was about the nature of special operations and special operations forces in general and the differences that set smaller states apart from the great powers in particular. Since most of the existing thinking and doctrines focus on the great powers and the United States in particular, it was necessary to understand the realities and challenges faced by smaller powers wanting to employ special operations for stabilisation purposes.

(1) Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Ministry of Defence and Ministry of Justice, *Denmark's Integrated Stabilisation Engagement in Fragile and Conflict-Affected Areas of The World* (Copenhagen, 2013).

(2) Ref NATO AJP 3.5

The second question was about the requirements for success. These requirements cover a variety of levels. For example, which organizational requisites are necessary? Which type of political-military mindset does it require? Which types of grand strategies do special operations fit with? These types of questions seek to highlight the required framework for a special operation.

The third question addressed the fit between special operations and the comprehensive and integrated approaches that remain at the heart of Western stabilisation strategies. This involved a discussion of the comprehensive and integrated approaches in general, lessons learned in Afghanistan and how special operations forces (SOF) could plug in to and cooperate with the other civilian and military actors involved in such strategies.

The fourth and final main question focused on the role of special operations in conflict prevention. This involved a discussion of the concept of conflict prevention in general, identification of its strengths and weaknesses and how special operations could add value here.



Lene Espersen (b. 1965) is a former Minister of Foreign Affairs and current member of the Danish Parliament for the Conservative Party as spokeswoman on foreign policy and defence matters.

Highlighted challenges

The conference was opened by Rear Admiral Nils Wang, Chief of the Royal Danish Defence College (RDDC), who welcomed the speakers and the participants and expressed the need for further research on the topic. His statement emphasized the need for giving attention to and developing a better understanding of small-state special operations in view of the establishment of new Danish Special Operations Command (DASOCOM).

A crucial requirement for successful special operations is political understanding of what special operations are capable of and - not least - what tasks they are not suitable for. **Lene Espersen**, former foreign minister of Denmark, viewed this as a challenge in the Danish context. She pointed out that special operations are rarely offered as an option when different military instruments are contemplated in the midst of a crisis. She identified a shift in the principal threats facing the Western states since the end of the Cold War: the shift from conventional to asymmetric threats makes special operations more relevant today than they were during the Cold War.

Ms. Espersen identified a number of specific challenges that the new DASOCOM will face in the near future. First, she pointed out the need for a clear definition of what special operations entail in order to eliminate a wrong perception of special operations and special ops forces. Second, she emphasized the need for a DASO-

COM commander with a sufficiently high rank who can get the necessary recognition among the other generals and admirals in the Danish military. The third recommendation was that the representatives of the SOF community should attend all relevant meetings to avoid isolation in decision-making processes.

When asked whether she could see SOF as an instrument for supporting the Afghanistan stabilisation effort post 2014, she answered that she definitely could see it as possibility. She also expressed a more generic need for special operations when it comes to information gathering and situational awareness in regard to all types of interventions in fragile states. Ms. Espersen said she believes that special operations would be of good use in mapping certain conflict areas where Denmark would want to operate in any context, and elaborated further on the need to understand the civilian and military “jointness” in such operations. With that said, one of her key points was that politicians need to have the courage to use the military, and especially SOF, properly if special operations should ever become a success. There are those who believe special operations are an overlooked and misunderstood yet effective and cheap instrument in achieving strategic important goals abroad, and then there are those who are sceptical about the strategic utility of special operations – especially in the context of conflict prevention. At the conference, there were representatives from both sides. However, it seemed that the ‘cheerleaders’ were the ones who dominated in numbers. **Christopher Ankersen**, a Ph.D. and expert on civil-military relations and the comprehensive approach, chose to represent the sceptics. In doing so, he started by outlining the historical background of the concepts ‘conflict prevention’ and ‘comprehensive approach’ in order to understand the context in which special operations should function. The main argument for entering into conflict prevention is the belief that it is cheaper to deal with than a full-scale war. Dr. Ankersen explained the genealogy of concepts that have existed in parallel in military thinking and political/development thinking and that stem from the same arguments concerning comprehensiveness and cost-effectiveness in dealing with conflict and conflict prevention. He then described the three main concepts ‘conflict prevention’, ‘whole-of-government’ and ‘comprehensive approach’ and questioned whether they were possible in practice.

Questioning the feasibility and viability of these approaches, he warned that involving special operations forces in such operations might be a recipe for failure. He said that special operations forces do not represent a quick fix to conflict prevention and stabilisation and that they should only be employed if they can do something no other actors are capable of. Most important of all, he said it is imperative to approach the challenge of stabilisation and conflict prevention with greater humility than has been the case in the past. Greater realism with respect to what can be



Dr. Christopher Ankersen, Expert on civil-military relations and comprehensive approach. He received a B.A. (Hons) in International Politics and History and an M.Sc. and Ph.D. in International Relations.

achieved in a short time frame was also called for when it comes to intervening militarily in emerging or ongoing conflicts.

Colonel Bernd Horn, a Ph.D. and expert on the utility of special operations, challenged Dr. Ankersen's points about the impossibility of implementing holistic conflict prevention by drawing on examples from Colombia and the Philippines. Colonel Horn argued that special operations had the necessary complexity and, not least, flexibility to implement holistic approaches. He then described special operations as operations conducted in hostile, denied, or politically sensitive environments to achieve military, diplomatic, informational, and/or economic objectives by employing military capabilities for which there is no broad conventional force requirement – operations which often require low-visibility, clandestine or covert capabilities. Special operations are applicable across the range of military operations. They may be conducted independently or in conjunction with operations of conventional forces or other government agencies and may include operations through, with or by indigenous or surrogate forces. Special operations differ from conventional operations in the degree of physical and political risk, operational techniques, mode of employment, independence from friendly support and dependence on detailed operational intelligence and indigenous assets. Bernd Horn was, in general, optimistic about the use of special operations in conflict prevention and whole-of-government strategy. He listed a range of various specifics he sees as peculiar special operations characteristics that could support such strategies, and he viewed special operations as capable of the following:



Colonel Bernd Horn, Colonel (Ret.), Canadian Forces, PhD, Security and Defence Consultant He is currently the Director of the CAN-SOFCOM Professional Development Centre, an appointment he fills as a reservist.

- Providing ground truth in crisis areas
- Developing the necessary networks to allow follow-on activities within a country or region
- Conducting military assistance in conjunction with other services to prevent potential crises in friendly nations or failing states
- Working with joint or other partners to provide assistance to maintain or improve stability in friendly or failing states
- Assisting with combatting transnational organized crime
- Shaping a theatre for influence activities (e.g. countering extremist messaging, promoting legitimacy of partner government)
- Shaping/preparing a theatre for conventional operations

- Providing a forward base/footprint/regional expertise in support of conventional forces
- Working with other services to gain access to hostile, denied or politically sensitive areas to undertake SR or DA tasks
- Working with other services and agencies to prevent, disrupt or mitigate a CBRN event
- Providing kinetic and/or non-kinetic precision effects to disrupt or destroy an opponent's capability of conducting attacks.



Henrik Nielsen is a M.Sc. in social sciences and a Ph.D. He works at NGO Forum as a policy advisor.

At the same time, Colonel Horn stressed that it would all mean nothing if the right political setting were not in place. This means that it is necessary to determine policy objectives, risk threshold and political guidance, and it is important as well to ensure that the special operations options are in line with capability and are fully developed within a holistic framework of other agencies. These prerequisites will provide much-needed, clear, national strategic objectives, which can lead to clear mission directives.

Henrik Nielsen, a Ph.D. and political advisor at NGO Forum Denmark, was sceptical of the utility of military special operations in a stabilisation context and of the idea of comprehensive approach in general. Much like Dr. Ankersen, Mr. Nielsen found it close to impossible to grasp the complexity of the comprehensive approach as well as the practicality of implementing any instruments that would be able to be truly comprehensive. Mr. Nielsen also expressed the general concern and scepticism of NGOs in regard to working with military capacities, including SOF. He said that, because many NGOs came out of a pacifist tradition, working with military institutions would be perceived as a fundamental wrongdoing. One of his main concerns was the need for information sharing between NGO and military units. He did not find it appropriate that the military and the NGOs should share information as it would most likely compromise one another's work. Another point from Mr. Nielsen, which was also in line with one of Dr. Ankersen's points on humility, was that even though you know a lot about a given country, it does not necessarily give you the knowledge to prevent conflict in that country. He said believing that you have sufficient knowledge or even believing that you can achieve such knowledge is a dangerous illusion when articulating the ends, ways and means of conflict prevention.

Hans Illis-Alm, a Colonel from the European Union Military Staff, opined that EU missions have the advantage of being perceived as more neutral in contrast to NATO missions, which can face opposition connected with scepticism mainly about USA-backed interventions in general. He emphasized the challenges that the military branch of the EU faces because it is a significant minority within the EU

apparatus. Colonel Illis-Alm foresaw a specific challenge to using special operations in preventive missions: possible success would not create visible and political credits, simply because a success of conflict prevention could, and most likely would, mean a status quo of the given conflict.

Mogens Christens, a Commander and the Danish Liaison Officer to the US Special Operations Command (USSOCOM), challenged the notion about different national agendas, as he believes that most Western countries want the same thing - peace and stability through efforts to implement different levels of liberal democracy. He then gave examples of policy papers from both the US and Denmark that illustrated common ground in the effort to create stabilisation abroad. In the same context, Commander Christens emphasized the importance of supporting the global SOF network initiative, into which the USSOCOM commander General McRaven and his staff have put much effort.



Colonel Hans Illis-Alm
Chief Concepts Branch,
European Union Military Staff (EUMS) and
holds a Masters degree
in National Security
Strategy.

Michiel de Weger, a Ph.D. and partner at the National Security Advisory Centre in The Netherlands, elaborated on the experiences from Dutch special operations in Iraq and Afghanistan. Mr. de Weger concluded that The Netherlands' SOF needs a repositioning in order to meet future demands successfully. He argued that special operations should be adaptable to different trends with different parts of departure if they should become relevant in future conflict interventions. He emphasized the necessity of looking at the contemporary international scene of security threats, public opinion and the relationship between political and military leaders. These three factors must be examined and included in future special operations decision-making to be relevant for the potential political sponsors. Mr. de Weger highlighted some challenges that have to be addressed in order to reposition The Netherlands military's special operation capacities. With the counterinsurgency (COIN) war in Iraq and especially in Afghanistan, it seemed that many similar operations had been conducted by both conventional and non-conventional forces, meaning that SOF had been assigned to tasks that might as well have been accomplished by conventional forces. Such misuse of SOF risks diluting special operations capabilities and making SOF similar to conventional forces in a COIN intervention. He said a second challenge that should be addressed is that special operations and special ops forces often are misperceived and met with mistrust because of a general unfamiliarity with the entities of special operations. This unfamiliarity concerns not only the relevant political decision-makers, but also the broad population and academia in general. Special operations should be aware of the use of clandestine and discrete methods and only use them when it is of absolute necessity - and perhaps even reevaluate operational security to some extent in order to broaden the insight into the entities of special operations. If special operations do not increase their transparency through genuine, open, external oversight, they will most likely continue to face mistrust and misperception from those actors they are dependent upon in a

holistic stabilisation effort. Mr. de Weger described what he called a ‘conventional forces bias’ as a third challenge to using special operations in an optimal manner, which means that special operations can face internal resistance within the military. The resistance, or just restraint, from the conventional forces often occurs because of the relatively low rank of the chief SOF officers, who cannot match high-ranking branch commanders even though they sit in the same task groups. And, in a time of scarce resources, it is too easy for the more senior officers to pull rank when different tasks and budgets are divided. Envy and other grievances should not be forgotten in this context. SOF units have, throughout history, created ill feelings within the conventional forces as a consequence of their elitist and exclusive positioning. Besides increased transparency, as described above, Mr. de Weger mentioned other measures that could help minimize the ‘conventional forces bias.’ In

Denmark, we are in the middle of the implementation of one of these steps with our new special operations command (SOCOM), which will join all special operations, regardless of the type of environment and unit, under one two-star general. This type of structure will most likely help eliminate some of the rank issues. It would also help to place liaison officers or even the entire SOCOM close to relevant ministerial departments and other military commanders in order to facilitate fruitful and effective cooperation between different relevant decision-makers.

One argument, addressed by most speakers, was that use of military special operations primarily is a national instrument more than a multinational one, meaning that it is a strategic instrument which has its point of departure in a national context. With that said, it could be possible for organizations such as NATO and the EU to have an enabling effect in situations in which mutual interests could benefit from interoperability. However, it seems unlikely that nations would use SOF if there is not a direct national interest. In the same context, it was also stated that small and medium-sized states do not have the special operations capacity to operate entirely on their own. In most cases, they would be dependent on US support, especially when it comes to intelligence, surveillance and reconnaissance (ISR). Another essential point that was emphasized throughout the conference was about the need to understand special operations as a joint capacity together with the conventional operations – meaning that conventional and special operations are believed to create a synergy when correctly applied together. This is an especially important notion in regard to small-state operations, as it is important to use the relatively few military capacities available in the absolutely most effective way.



**Commander Senior
Grade Mogens S. Christens
Commander Danish Special Operation
Liaison Officer (DNK SOLO) to USSOCOM.**

Key takeaways – guiding questions and call for collaboration

The Royal Danish Defence College will continue its research on the strategic utility of small-state special operations. The questions raised at the conference have

helped to further sharpen relevant research questions and areas of research and have provided inspiration for research collaboration across countries.

Dr. Michiel (Johan) de Weger (b. 1970), PhD, Partner at the National Security Advisory Centre in the Netherlands is a specialist in mid-spectrum security threats.

The key takeaways that will guide our future work here at RDDC in investigating whether special operations can contribute to crisis prevention and conflict management efforts by smaller states are the following:

- Special operations as a force multiplier: Can special operations enable other stabilisation agents, locals as well as internationals, to accomplish their missions more effectively? This includes NGOs, diplomats or other officials, other military units, etc. How can the mindset required to enable ‘whole-of-government’ approaches be promoted?
- Economy of force considerations: Are special operations truly a cheaper means of reaching certain ends? When are small and indirect approaches involving special operations forces effective and when are they not?
- Special operations as expansion of choice: Do special operations offer new and/or other solutions to stabilisation efforts in fragile states?
- What can/should special operations NOT do?
- How should special operations and conventional forces be organized and trained in order to make them better suited for undertaking stabilisation tasks jointly?

RDDC will encourage like-minded partners to join research and education efforts focused on the utility of small-state special operations. Besides our continuous research, we continue to facilitate a course called ‘Special Operations as a possible strategic instrument for small states’ as part of the Master in Military Studies programme offered at RDDC.

In addition, RDDC facilitates minor informative courses directed at getting SOF, conventional forces, civilian officials and politicians together in order to enhance the mutual understanding and awareness among the different actors involved in stabilisation efforts.

Relevant publications from the Royal Danish Defence College

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