

SEALs from Joint Task Force 510 with Armed Forces of the Philippines during counterterrorism training off Basilan Island

## Winning in the Pacific

# The Special Operations Forces Indirect Approach

By DAVID P. FRIDOVICH and FRED T. KRAWCHUK

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Combat operations in Iraq and Afghanistan dominate the headlines, but Southeast Asia has emerged as a quiet yet increasingly crucial front in the Long War. Given the suicide bombings in Bali, the presence of the terrorist groups Jemaah Islamiyah and Abu Sayyaf, and increased anti-Americanism,<sup>1</sup> the need for a continued and comprehensive approach to combating terror in the Pacific is clear. The U.S. Special Operations Command, Pacific (SOCPAC) has been improving ties with regional allies and increasingly applying an *indirect approach* to address the threat posed by militant groups with connections to al Qaeda.

### The Indirect Approach

Addressing threats requires a sophisticated and indirect approach. The Nation

cannot simply enter sovereign countries unilaterally and conduct kill-or-capture missions. It must blend host nation capacity-building and other long-term efforts to address root causes, dissuade future terrorists, and reduce recruiting. The 9/11 Commission Report states that the United States must “help defeat an ideology, not just a group of people.”<sup>2</sup>

To address the underlying conditions that foster terrorism, SOCPAC works with host nation partners to help provide security and stability. This method promotes economic development and shapes conditions for good governance and rule of law. Much of the command’s effort consists of foreign internal defense and unconventional warfare.<sup>3</sup> The primary contribution of Special Operations Forces (SOF) in this interagency activity is to organize, train, and assist local security

forces. The indirect approach relies heavily on the SOF capability to build host nation defense capacity, provide civil affairs forces to give humanitarian and civic assistance, and offer information operations assets to aid the partner.

The indirect approach demands diplomacy and respect for political sensitivities. SOCPAC focuses on working in close coordination with host nation military and political leadership, law enforcement, and U.S. country teams in the region (to include the U.S. Agency for International Development and Department of State Public Diplomacy officials). These stakeholders share the responsibility of capacity-building and leverage each others’ strengths and synchronize efforts. To produce institutional change, host nation partners have to be willing to reform as required. Interagency and multinational will and capacity-building must go hand-in-hand for the indirect approach to succeed.

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Success is measured in terms of accomplishments through, by, and with host nation partners. Over time, these partners are building a long-lasting, self-sustaining capability to provide security, develop good governance, attract foreign direct investment, and counter violent ideology. This process is slow, but it achieves lasting results. Part of our commitment is to remain patient and focus on a long-term indirect method that results in self-sustaining host nation partners.

## Relationships

Besides their long-term benefits, relationships also play a vital role in combating terrorism. SOCPAC members have significant regional experience as well as constructive relationships with other nations' SOF and conventional force leadership. Frequent deployments, exercises, and exchanges allow U.S. personnel to immerse themselves in the region, build a sociocultural knowledge base, and sustain relationships over an extended period.

Through experience, we know we can succeed only through bilateral or multilateral cooperation. Unilateral actions are neither necessary nor welcome. Partner nations willingly accept the lead in their own countries. Additionally, many nations prefer that the United States maintain a low-visibility presence on their soil. SOF can do this with little external support and low overhead from higher headquarters, which supports the Department of Defense concept of small footprints in the region. This method respects local populaces, increases legitimacy, and improves the American image among host populations.

By working with host nation partners and the country team, SOCPAC creates trust and credibility. Serving in the "advise and assist" role, participants have to be open with each other about the training needs of the security forces, as well as which capabilities they bring that can help build capacity. Developing competent forces on both sides requires candid assessments and dedication as well as clear communication. Participants must not ignore feedback or overreact to training setbacks. Instead, they must continue to assess and adapt training programs, and be aware of which capacities are improving.

Such a focused training cycle produces quantifiable and observable results. Typically, the host nation force performs a capabilities demonstration during a closing ceremony.

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Fleet Combat Camera Group, Pacific (Jenniffer A. Villalovos)



55th Signal Company (Eric E. Hughes)

Top:  
**Sailor works with bottle-nose dolphin during mine countermeasure operations, Exercise Rim of the Pacific 2006**

Bottom:  
**U.S. Special Forces and troops from Republic of Korea prepare for fast-rope training aboard Joint Venture high-speed vessel**

Host nation government and senior military officials, as well as the U.S. Ambassador, often attend. The demonstration is visible proof of what the host military gained from U.S. participation. Tangible improvements and demonstrated abilities enhance American credibility with host nation officials and the Ambassador alike.

## Indirect Approach Elements

Three elements constitute SOCPAC's indirect approach in the Pacific region: institution-building, capacity-building, and outside factors. These elements influence whom we partner with and the breadth and depth of those relationships. Integrating the parts provides a comprehensive method of helping host nation partners become self-sufficient in defense capabilities:

- *Institution-building.* The broader populations who support terrorist groups are often economically and educationally deprived. The groups use this deprivation in a quid pro quo way (for example, the terrorist group gives a child an education along with radical indoctrination). Finding out how to get there first to give the people a leg up without creating resentment is an important aspect of institution-building. SOF support these efforts to help countries build healthy institutions of security, governance, rule of law, infrastructure, and economic stability.

- *Capacity-building.* U.S. Special Operations Command, Pacific, works closely with host nation forces to assess training needs and assist in building a more professional and modernized force that respects human rights. The command ensures that it is operating within the political and legal constraints of the United States and the partner nation before committing to a training program. A comprehensive capacity-building program requires assessments of unit capabilities, cultural awareness of political-military sensitivities, appropriate training programs, expert SOF trainers, and validation of efforts.

- *Outside Factors.* Of course, the war on terror extends beyond the Pacific region. Today, the majority of SOF are deployed in support of Operations *Iraqi Freedom* and *Enduring Freedom*. This deployment requires that SOCPAC must do more with less. The command must prioritize where personnel go and what they do and ensure that they can manage expectations. Outside factors also include external support of terrorist

organizations in the form of finance, logistics, equipment, communication networks, and ideology. Close cooperation between host nation forces and U.S. country team officials to help eliminate the lifelines of transnational threats is vital.

For more than 5 years, SOCPAC involvement in the war on terror in the Pacific region has been consistent and ongoing. The command now partners with 10 countries and participates in more than 50 military-to-military events a year. This indirect approach has been a slow and deliberate process that requires commitment to building trust and confidence throughout the region and knowing that the results will not be immediate. This effort is especially well along in key areas.

*The Philippines.* SOCPAC's continued contribution to its counterparts in the Philippines exemplifies a successful interagency, multinational indirect approach to combating terror. In the aftermath of 9/11, SOCPAC deployed to the Muslim south of the Philippines for the first time since World War II to assist the military and civilian population in light of the security challenges in Basilan. The rest of Southeast Asia was watching to see if the U.S. military would honor its words with action.

SOCPAC personnel arrived on Basilan Island in January 2002 with the mission of advising and assisting the Armed Forces of the Philippines (AFP), who would then conduct operations against Abu Sayyaf. At the time, Basilan Island was known to the AFP and local population as a terrorist safe haven. The command operated under strict rules of engagement and stayed in the background to ensure that the AFP was up front.

On hitting the ground, SOCPAC personnel assessed the units they would work with and conducted a series of population surveys

to learn what the people of Basilan needed to sever their ties with Abu Sayyaf. The islanders' greatest concerns were roads, water, security, medical care, and education. Addressing those needs meant digging wells and building roads. SOCPAC also worked with its Philippine counterparts to construct piers and an airstrip for AFP operations. The plan was for this infrastructure to be left for the Philippine military and civilian population.

This collaboration helped the command gain the confidence of our counterparts and the population through a variety of engineering, medical, and community outreach projects. The AFP led in setting security conditions that enabled capacity-building efforts. Within months, SOCPAC received additional forces that extended its humanitarian assistance program. Units, working side by side with the Filipinos, began improving schools, hospitals, and mosques. The local population became supportive of the SOCPAC and national military presence, and the AFP increasingly developed trust in the U.S. advise-and-assist role.

After 2 years, the environment no longer fostered terrorist activities on Basilan Island, and Abu Sayyaf left. The AFP had effectively drained the swamp of the underlying conditions favorable to terrorists with U.S. assistance. With the Basilan people now living in a safer environment, the AFP downsized its presence from 15 infantry battalions to 2. By guaranteeing security, the Philippine military allowed teachers and doctors to return, while business and nongovernmental organizations could operate in areas they once shunned. The AFP won back the support of the population and government, producing a long-lasting effect.

Another indicator of success came from the Basilan people, who chose to support the government rather than Abu Sayyaf. The

populace saw that the AFP was more powerful and legitimate than the terrorists. The indirect approach of the Basilan model enabled the AFP to provide locals with a stable environment that enabled commerce and quality of life improvements.

*Archipelago Region.* Due to the transnational nature of terrorist organizations, the archipelago of the Philippines, Malaysia, and Indonesia is a key focus of SOCPAC indirect efforts. The approach is similar to that taken in Basilan and has been adapted to the socioeconomic and geographic characteristics of the archipelago region. Once stability and good governance are established in the outer islands, nongovernmental and private organizations will more likely operate and commerce will more likely expand.

Initial steps in this region have included slowly and steadily reestablishing ties with the Indonesian military. The command initially engaged with their military through a series of 2-week subject matter expert exchanges (SMEEs) and post-tsunami civic action projects. After conducting 5 SMEEs and several humanitarian assistance initiatives in 8 months, the Indonesian military approached SOCPAC regarding expanding its role to advise and assist their forces. The SMEEs and civil-military operations set the conditions for continuing the partnership. We have now completed six combined events and several construction projects with the Indonesian military, which have increased the trust between the forces. More events are planned.

SOCPAC has also started achieving stronger military-to-military relationships in Malaysia. Success with Malaysian forces focuses largely on partnering during multinational naval exercises. The world-class training events and professionalism of U.S. forces impressed the Malaysian military, and we gained immensely from their

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U.S. Air Force (Sean P. Houlihan)



U.S. Navy (John L. Beeman)



state-of-the-art training facilities, which assisted SOCPAC efforts to execute realistic training scenarios. Strengthening ties with the three archipelago nations builds a solid foundation for a multilateral indirect approach to transnational security.

*Thailand.* In addition to the archipelago nations, SOCPAC counts on Thailand as an important regional partner. The command has enjoyed a rich relationship with the Thai military for many years. It consistently participates in a variety of combined training and exercises, maintaining extended relationships with some units. This military partnership demonstrates the importance of building on the trust already established with host nations.

The Thai military gives SOCPAC solid, quiet support. Its leaders have asked for advice and assistance in areas of concern and provide constructive feedback on the indirect approach. Because the relationship is strong, the Thai officers reveal when a specific approach does not work for them and how we might improve, all with complete candor. They are also open to our comments, a sure indicator of a firm relationship formed over time.

### Effects-based Measurement

In the end, the only meaningful criteria for judging SOF strategy and operations in the war on terror in Southeast Asia are the results and changes that ensue. SOCPAC has established an effects-based assessment system that looks closely at its return on investment regarding activities with host nation partners, measuring the effects quarterly.

This effects-based system assesses how we are doing in building strong relationships and improving capacity—not simply counting the number of activities. The intent is to

measure how *effectively* SOCPAC assists host nation partners in winning over populations and developing institutions of stability. The system has shown that we are making lasting progress even though the results are not instant. The effects-based approach helps the command prioritize efforts, shift resources, and ensure that the indirect approach remains focused and balanced.

Given its success in the southern Philippines, the command plans to partner with other countries to achieve similar effects, with host nation forces in the lead. Every situation is different and requires a program that is appropriate to the local context and needs of the stakeholders. The approach in other Asian nations will be methodical, assessing underlying conditions and host nation units, improving the socioeconomic and security situation at hand, enhancing the legitimacy of local government, and severing ties with terrorists.

In 5 to 10 years, the command will be working with new partner nations while sustaining existing partnerships. We have anchored relationships in the Philippines and Thailand and will continue growing partnerships in Malaysia and Indonesia. SOCPAC will most likely broaden indirect efforts to include working by, through, and with forces in Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, and India. The U.S. approach will continue to develop trusting relationships, with host nation partners in the lead. The command will engage these nations in a purposeful manner to ensure that it can build relationships as successfully as it did in Southeast Asia.

As it creates partnerships, the command looks forward to establishing strong links with U.S. Embassies and Asian multilateral security organizations. Diffusing terrorist organizations requires working together to offer alternative ideologies,

economic opportunity, safety, different channels for political influence to travel, and ways to strengthen family and cultural ties outside of terrorist movements.

A better understanding of the concerns of stakeholders will aid the search for alternatives to political violence. This requires leveraging the knowledge and capabilities of U.S. and host nation diplomatic, informational, military, economic, and law enforcement instruments of power in a coordinated and focused effort.

U.S. Special Operations Forces are uniquely organized and equipped to win the warfare of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Through its actions and tangible results, Special Operations Command, Pacific, has demonstrated that the indirect approach is an effective model for addressing asymmetric threats.

By actively implementing an indirect approach, the command has shaped conditions so that commerce, rule of law, and education can flourish and provide alternatives to violence and despair. Relationships with host nation counterparts have provided a robust exchange of actionable recommendations that promote measurable results. This innovative approach is relevant in an increasingly complex security environment. Working by, through, and with multinational and interagency partners will be critical to continued success in combating terror in the Pacific. **JFQ**

### NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Pew Global Attitudes Project, *America's Image Slips, But Allies Share U.S. Concerns Over Iran, Hamas*, June 13, 2006, available at <<http://pewglobal.org/reports/display.php?ReportID=252>>.

<sup>2</sup> National Commission on Terrorist Attacks, *The 9/11 Commission Report: Final Report of the National Commission on Terrorist Attacks Upon the United States* (New York: W.W. Norton, 2004), 376.

<sup>3</sup> According to Joint Publication 3–07.1, *Joint Tactics, Techniques and Procedures for Foreign Internal Defense, foreign internal defense* “is the participation by civilian and military agencies of a government or other designated organization to free and protect its society from subversion, lawlessness, and insurgency.” *Unconventional warfare* builds on the foundation of working by, through, and with indigenous or surrogate forces. Although the military and law enforcement agencies kill, capture, and detain terrorists, these direct action missions should not be at the expense of the “advise and assist” approach that foreign internal defense and unconventional warfare offer as their centerpiece.

Fleet Combat Camera Group, Pacific (Edward G. Martens)



Left to right:

**Chairman and Secretary field press questions on humanitarian relief in Philippines after mudslide**

**Coastguardsman discusses maritime interdiction with Philippine navy boarding team, Exercise Southeast Asia Cooperation Against Terrorism**

**Army Special Forces conduct security assistance training for Philippine soldiers, Operation Enduring Freedom**