

AIR WAR COLLEGE

AIR UNIVERSITY

AN ANALYSIS OF THE NATO SPECIAL OPERATIONS  
TRANSFORMATION INITIATIVE AND THE NATO SPECIAL  
OPERATIONS COORDINATION CENTRE

by

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## **Disclaimer**

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## **Biography**

Lieutenant Colonel Peter Goldfein is a 1988 graduate of the University of Michigan where he received his commission as a Distinguished Graduate of the Reserve Officer Training Corps.

His first assignment was to Pope AFB, NC where he participated in Operations Desert Shield and Desert Storm as a C-130 pilot. As a member of the 40<sup>th</sup> and 41<sup>st</sup> Airlift Squadrons, he earned instructor and evaluator qualifications and served as a Flight Commander, and Squadron Chief of Training and Chief of Standardization and Evaluation. He participated in numerous deployments to Europe, Southwest Asia, and Africa including airdrops over Bosnia for Operation Provide Promise, and Operation Support Hope relief operations in Zaire. In 1995 he began a variety of Special Operations assignments, with both operational units and staff elements. In 2002 he earned a Masters of Military Arts and Sciences from the United States Army Command and General Staff College, Fort Leavenworth, KS. From 2002 until 2005 he served in the J-5 of NATO Joint Headquarters North and as the Section Chief of the Distributed Training Section at the NATO Joint Warfare Centre in Stavanger, Norway. As an Observer/Trainer he contributed to numerous exercises with NATO staffs preparing for ISAF and NATO Response Force command. Upon completion of his NATO staff duties, he served as a Special Operations Director of Operations and Squadron Commander including deployments as a Mission Commander to both Afghanistan and Iraq.

Lieutenant Colonel Goldfein's decorations include the Defense Meritorious Service Medal with two oak leaf clusters, the Air Medal with two oak leaf clusters, the Aerial Achievement Medal with six oak leaf clusters, the Joint Service Commendation Medal with two oak leaf clusters, the Air Force Commendation Medal with one oak leaf cluster, the Joint Service Achievement Medal and the Air Force Achievement Medal. He is a Command Pilot with over 4,600 flying hours.

## Introduction

Although the NATO SOTGs [Special Operations Task Groups] in ISAF are highly capable, and the joint commands do have their own small Special Operations planning staffs, the overall structure of NATO SOF needs a standing entity dedicated to addressing the integration of SOF solutions at both the operational and strategic levels. *Gen James L. Jones, USMC, SACEUR*<sup>1</sup>

General Jones' 2006 comments, published in *Joint Forces Quarterly* reflected the consensus of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) heads of state at their November 2006 Summit in Riga, Latvia. At that summit, despite economic realities which limit funding for large conventional capabilities for many of its members, and faced with ongoing complex operations in Afghanistan, NATO agreed to improve its ability to coordinate and conduct special operations. To that end, the heads of state unanimously approved a NATO Special Operations Transformation Initiative with three stated goals: first, to improve the representation of special operations expertise at the Supreme Headquarters Allied Powers Europe (SHAPE); second to create a federation of special operations training centers, and third to create a coordination center for all NATO special operations activities.<sup>2</sup> This agreement resulted in the creation of the NATO Special Operations Coordination Centre (NSCC) as a means to implement the desired transformation and to implement substantive changes to back the political proclamations at Riga.

How effective has NATO been in implementing this transformation and what role has the NSCC played? More than rhetorical promise and a paper only initiative, NATO's Special Operations Coordination Centre has empowered transformation impelled by the

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<sup>1</sup> Jones, *Joint Forces Quarterly*, 2d Quarter 2007, 37. General Jones made these comments towards the end of his tenure as SACEUR. He is currently serving as President Obama's National Security Advisor.

<sup>2</sup> NATO Special Operations Coordination Centre (NSCC), "SO/LIC Symposium" briefing, 10 Feb 09, slide 4.

operational needs of Afghanistan. In just three years the NSCC has proven itself a valuable entity. Central to all three transformation goals, it can take credit for building momentum behind NATO's special operations transformation, and has set the stage for continued consensus based improvements. These should in turn lead to more coherent NATO special operations capabilities.

To support this conclusion, the paper explores how the Alliance has implemented its Special Operations Transformation Initiative. It will evaluate how well NATO has resourced its Special Operations Coordination Centre, examine the effectiveness of that organization, and analyze decisions made by the North Atlantic Council to address the challenges of special operations command and control in multinational combat operations. In order to evaluate these topics, the paper will present relevant background material, address the role of special operations within NATO and the means used by its Special Operations Coordination Centre to build momentum for special operations transformation. With a look towards the future, it will also review implications and challenges associated with a forthcoming NATO Special Operations Headquarters.

## **Background**

NATO's extended commitment to the International Security and Assistance Force (ISAF) in Afghanistan, with up to 71,000 personnel deployed as of October 2009, was a driving factor behind the consensus voiced at Riga.<sup>3</sup> Special operations forces from many nations have played a central role in ISAF; with activities ranging from "direct action" raids targeting insurgent leadership, to support of conventional forces through

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<sup>3</sup> ISAF Placemat, Oct 09, 2.

reconnaissance, and military assistance to Afghan national forces as part of Operational Liaison and Provisional Reconstruction Teams. Special operations require selectively manned, highly trained forces melded into cohesive teams, suitable for tasks beyond the means of other military units. They are well-suited for high-payoff efforts which carry risk-levels unacceptable for any other force.<sup>4</sup> The selection and training criteria make it difficult to produce these forces rapidly, or in quantities on the order of magnitude found in conventional units. Their capabilities however represent a valuable investment for allies with smaller militaries to provide relevant and cost-effective contributions to both national and Alliance operations in today's threat environment.

Despite requiring a high human investment in force development (training and experience), NATO members have agreed that the capabilities special operations units bring to bear enable them to contribute disproportionately to effects on the ground compared to larger formations of conventional forces. That these contributions come with a relatively low cost in personnel, hardware, and logistic support compared to conventional forces makes them appealing to budget constrained NATO members.<sup>5</sup> With few exceptions within NATO, individual nations have the mandate to organize and equip their own forces. What NATO seeks through its Special Operations Transformation Initiative is to provide an Alliance basis to employ those forces more effectively.

A successful attribute of NATO has been the ability of individual members to contribute based on their particular strengths. In the case of special operations, the U.S. is well postured to lead NATO special operations transformation. The size of the United States Special Operations Command (USSOCOM) as compared to other Allied special

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<sup>4</sup> Horn, *Force of Choice*, 6-10, 24.

<sup>5</sup> Horn, "Special Men, Special Missions" 3-24.

operations capabilities, and the reality that over 85% of USSOCOM's deployed forces are in the United States Central Command area of operations which includes Afghanistan, demonstrate the scope of U.S. resources and interest in this effort.<sup>6</sup> Without access to specific budgetary figures for allied special operations, comparison of USSOCOM spending to allied overall defense spending is informative. The U.S. special operations budget alone is comparable to the entire defense budget of all but five of its NATO allies.<sup>7</sup> This empowers the U.S. to lead special operations transformation within NATO. U.S. leadership has support at the highest levels, as evidenced by Secretary Gates' memorandum of agreement with 22 other defense ministers to establish and man the NATO Special Operations Coordination Centre.<sup>8</sup> The U.S. has backed intent with resourcing: during deliberations for the FY10 Defense Appropriations bill, the House Armed Services Committee added \$300 million to the USSOCOM FY10 budget request (from \$8.7B to \$9B) in part to fund the Coordination Centre.<sup>9</sup>

Since its initial standup in June 2007 the U.S. has provided a two-star Commander, a Colonel as Chief of Staff, and 40% of the personnel for the NSCC.<sup>10</sup> This commitment has been vital to meeting the development goals established at its inception, and helped seal Alliance consensus to evolve the Coordination Centre into a more robust NATO Special Operations Headquarters. In October 2009, the North Atlantic Council

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<sup>6</sup> Olson, briefing to Air War College, 23 Sep 09, slide 5.

<sup>7</sup> Simon, *Strategic Forum*, no. 236, 4. As of 2007, only the UK, France, Germany, Italy and the Netherlands spend conspicuously more for their total defense budget than the U.S. allocated to USSOCOM.

<sup>8</sup> Gregory Brinsfield, Lt Col, USAF (NSCC), interview by the author, 28 Sep 09. Lt Col Brinsfield is the Assistant Chief of Staff of the NSCC. In fall of 2006, he was the NSCC Chief of Staff for Implementation, reporting directly to then-RADM McRaven, the NSCC Commander. He led the NSCC implementation team, built the organizational structure, directed the research and development of a collaborative special operations network, and oversaw the movement of the staff from Germany to SHAPE in the Summer of 2007.

<sup>9</sup> Freikert, "U.S. Special Operations Forces (SOF)", 16 Nov 09, 5.

<sup>10</sup> The deputy commander is currently a UK one-star general.

(NATO's highest decision making body) agreed to establish a functional Special Operations headquarters for the first time in the Alliance's history; implications of that decision will be addressed later in this paper.

Special operations capabilities within NATO vary in maturity and size. Some members field large forces with a long tradition of special operations (U.S. UK, Germany, France), some field small units with a long tradition of special operations (Norway), and others provide significant capabilities though their specifically designated special operations organizations are relatively new (Poland, Czech Republic, Romania). Despite this diversity in special operations across its membership, the political resolve demonstrated at Riga has built momentum to improve special operations at the national level and towards a functional NATO component. Robert Berg makes the compelling argument that nations with emerging special operations capabilities have demonstrated willingness to subordinate their limited national resources to the ISAF mission, both for the combat experience they reap and to provide a needed niche capability.<sup>11</sup> These ISAF contributions come without the actual and political expenses associated with larger deployments of conventional combat units.

While national political decisions to employ special operations forces cannot be predicted in advance of a future contingency, U.S. planners can take heart that at least in the current fight in Afghanistan, NATO special operations are enjoying better and more integrated command and control than before, and that nations with capable forces are expanding their support. Using the momentum of positive change developed since 2006, NATO should expect to reap increased utility from its members' Special Operations

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<sup>11</sup> Berg, "Reform of Command and Control Structures in NATO SOF", 46-47.

forces. The words pronounced at Riga have been backed by deeds, and the Alliance has made progress on a broad front to improve special operations effectiveness.

## **Roles of Special Operations Forces in NATO**

Special Operations differ from conventional operations in degree of physical and political risk, operational techniques, mode of employment, independence from friendly support. . . Special Operations are an integral part of Allied campaigns.<sup>12</sup>

For all its efforts to field a compatible and interoperable force, NATO remains an Alliance of diverse militaries. One of the significant achievements of the NSCC has been its role in the coordination and publication of NATO's first Doctrine for Special Operations, Allied Joint Publication 3.5 (January 2009). That the doctrine moved from draft to final in just over two years is indicative of the high level of consensus behind such a document, and testimony to the efforts of a dedicated staff. The principal tasks it defines for Special Operations are as follows: Special Reconnaissance and Surveillance, Direct Action, and Military Assistance. These three broad headings encompass a variety of potential sub-tasks which reflect the vision of Alliance planners for employment of Special Operations across a spectrum including peacetime, peace support, and combat operations.<sup>13</sup>

While the specific language in NATO Special Operations doctrine varies from its counterpart national doctrines of the U.S. and other NATO allies, what is important is that the Alliance agreed on a doctrine for Special Operations. Further, while individual nations' doctrines are not identical to the NATO doctrine, there is sufficient overlap such

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<sup>12</sup> Allied Joint Publication 3.5, Jan 09, 1-1 – 1-2.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid., 2-1 – 2-3, 1-2 – 1-3.

that the relevancy exceeds confusion caused by the differences.<sup>14</sup> This doctrine provides the foundation for interoperable techniques, tactics and procedures as well as accepted NATO standards, a methodology already proven to improve interoperability by NATO's other functional components. The NATO doctrine provides a basis and vision for Alliance members to provide forces to a NATO mission under the proper political circumstances. This sets the stage for improved multilateral training and cohesion during complex operations. The doctrine enables each nation to maintain command of their special operations forces, but mandates a transfer of Operational Control of those forces to a NATO Joint Force Commander for Alliance missions.<sup>15</sup> While nations can introduce "national caveats" on their force employment, by allowing nations to have a final say on how their forces will be used, the doctrine empowers them to volunteer special operations for a NATO operation.

On any given day the Alliance has no special operations units designated as part of a peacetime NATO force structure. The question as to whether to establish such a force has been debated, and advocated by some but until now no consensus has emerged to move in that direction.<sup>16</sup> Even more so than with conventional forces, this lack of consensus is likely due to high operational tempo in Afghanistan: most Alliance members cannot afford to dedicate additional low-density, high-demand specialized troops outside of national channels. Instead, nations continue to resource ISAF and provide rotational special operations staffs for the NATO Response Force.

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<sup>14</sup> Joint Publication 3-5, 17 Dec 03.

<sup>15</sup> Allied Joint Publication 3.5, 3-1.

<sup>16</sup> Gompert and Smith, *Defense Horizons*, no. 52: 5-8 and Berg, "Reform of Command and Control Structures in NATO SOF", 11, 13-14.

As the leadership of the NATO Response Force rotates every six months, it provides limited opportunity to advance NATO special operations and cannot take the place of a permanent Special Operations Component Headquarters. Still, the training and exercise regime established to certify joint staffs to lead the NATO Response Force does provide the Alliance a means to certify special operations staffs as a functional component within the Response Force headquarters. This has given NATO staffs biennial opportunities since 2004 to demonstrate their ability to form the core of a special operations component headquarters, and function effectively in combined-joint operations. The Alliance has capitalized on this training workup and six month window of responsibility to develop special operations command and control expertise in a number of staffs. To codify where this experience resides, NATO designates allies which have been certified for a NATO Response Force Special Operations Component Command, and demonstrated abilities to conduct special operations to the satisfaction of the Alliance as “Special Operations Framework Nations.” As of this writing, the Special Operations Framework nations include the U.S., UK, Italy, France and Spain; with Turkey and Germany on track to receive certification in 2011 and 2012.<sup>17</sup>

While the Special Operations Framework nations are prepared now to lead an NATO Response Force Special Operations Component Command, prior to the Transformation Initiative they had not designated resources towards a permanent Special Operations Coordination Centre, let alone a Component Command to help organize and field functional capabilities alongside existing Air, Land, and Naval components in the NATO command structure.<sup>18</sup> This meant that special operations forces lacked a

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<sup>17</sup> Gregory Brinsfield, Lt Col, USAF (NSCC), electronic mail , 21 Oct 09.

<sup>18</sup> Jones, *Joint Forces Quarterly*, 38.

functional headquarters to advocate and organize NATO-based training and exercises and had no flag officer designated to advocate Special Operations to NATO's four-star Supreme Commander. In comparison to special operations, Allied Command for Operations contains standing Air, Land and Maritime Components led by three or four-star commanders to prepare forces and advise the joint force commanders above them. At Riga, heads of state agreed that the lack of a similar flag level staff for special operations was a hindrance to Alliance operations.

To ensure the Alliance's ability to perform special operations in accordance with its emerging doctrine, the NATO Special Operations Transformation Initiative addressed three goals: improve effectiveness of the Special Operations staff element in Allied Command Operations, create a federation of special operations training centers across the Alliance, and establish the NATO Special Operations Coordination Centre.<sup>19</sup> Prior to 2007 the highest ranking Special Operations billet in the NATO command structure was a Colonel within Allied Command for Operations. The office he directed was limited in size, reported to a subordinate level of leadership in the headquarters, and lacked support for manning from a broad cross section of the Alliance.<sup>20</sup> With agreement to transform, the Commander of United States Special Operations Command, Europe was designated as the senior Special Operations Advisor to the Supreme Allied Commander, Europe. This put a special operations flag officer reporting directly to SACEUR. It established a credible special operations voice at the highest levels of NATO's operational chain, and with the establishment of the NSCC provided him an appropriately supported multinational NATO staff element.

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<sup>19</sup> NATO Special Operations Coordination Centre (NSCC), "SO/LIC Symposium" briefing, slide 4.

<sup>20</sup> Jones, *Defense Horizons*, 38.

## **Impact of the NATO Special Operations Coordination Centre**

Since inception in early 2007 the NSCC has endeavored to improve the effectiveness of multinational special operations forces across the Alliance. In quantity alone, the combined size of special operations forces fielded by non-U.S. NATO members represents roughly half of those assigned to United States Special Operations Command (USSOCOM).<sup>21</sup> When considering potential contributions of NATO Partnership for Peace members, and non-NATO members who have already provided special operations forces for the ISAF mission, the potential pool of highly trained special operations forces is even larger. The nature of special operations makes them particularly demanding of trust and habitual relationships between units. These cross-unit relationships can only come from frequently planning, training, rehearsing and executing operations together, which can be especially challenging in a multi-national environment.<sup>22</sup> The Coordination Centre was established to address observed shortfalls in international collaborative capability and special operations ability to integrate with NATO's conventional forces.<sup>23</sup>

To that end, the Coordination Centre has focused on its role as a focal point for special operations advice and operational planning within NATO.<sup>24</sup> It is conveniently located at SHAPE, with training facilities at nearby Chievres Air Base in Belgium facilitating integration with Allied Command Operations and access to SACEUR. Concurrent with coordinating inputs to help move NATO's Allied Joint doctrine document for special operations from draft to final status; the NSCC embarked on a

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<sup>21</sup> Gompert and Smith, *Defense Horizons*, no. 52, 1.

<sup>22</sup> NSCC, "Special Operations Forces Study", 4 Dec 08, 33-34.

<sup>23</sup> Gompert and Smith, *Defense Horizons*, no. 52, 1.

<sup>24</sup> NATO Special Operations Coordination Centre (NSCC), "SO/LIC Symposium" briefing, slides 5-6.

program of supporting special operations force generation for NATO missions (in particular ISAF), networking national special operations forces into NATO training exercises and education, and improving NATO's ability to command and control special operations.

Beginning with its first commander, Rear Admiral William McRaven (USN) and continuing today under the leadership of Major General Frank Kisner (USAF), the Centre has operated under a vision of increasing the diversity of the contributors to NATO special operations. Representative of the broad enthusiasm for the Transformation Initiative, the NSCC's 149 member staff is generated from 23 different nations making it the most diverse body in the NATO force structure.<sup>25</sup> This diversity reflects contributors' realization both of the utility of special operations to achieve multilateral objectives, and the cost of fielding those forces as compared to other capabilities.

Key to nations with emerging special operations capabilities, the Centre has fostered training to reinforce NATO doctrine. It has established and coordinated formal courses, increased participation in multinational exercises, authored procedural handbooks for mission subsets, and evaluated national capabilities.<sup>26</sup> To date, in a role corresponding to that assumed by component headquarters within NATO for other military functional areas (Air, Land, Maritime), the Centre has conducted five in-depth assessments of special operations doctrine, capabilities and policies at the request of

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<sup>25</sup> As of February 2010, the NSCC had 140 members on station with national commitments to fill 146 of 149 billets. Gregory Brinsfield, Lt Col, USAF (NSCC), electronic mail, 12 Feb 10.

<sup>26</sup> NSCC, "Biennial Review" (Final Draft, October 2009), from Gregory Brinsfield, Lt Col, USAF (NSCC), electronic mail, 3 Oct 09.

allied nations. These assessments provide quantifiable measurements of progress to allies seeking to improve special operations capabilities and align with NATO doctrine.<sup>27</sup>

To further its efforts, the Coordination Centre has connected NATO special operators in national and NATO headquarters through a secure Wide Area Network (WAN), a key enabler for all of its efforts. This allows unclassified communication with U.S. and NATO networks, as well as NATO intelligence and information sharing wherever NATO has secure WAN terminals.<sup>28</sup> This has improved special operations information management, and increased participation in education and training events across the Alliance. The Centre has also fielded C-130 and semi-trailer transportable operations and intelligence support packages designed to integrate small special operations command and control cells into forward operations, and has generated an operations and intelligence fusion cell supporting ISAF Operational commanders.<sup>29</sup>

Another positive outcome of the Coordination Centre has been the growth of special operations forces in ISAF. Many factors can be considered contributory to this growth, from increased access to education and training, improved integration of special operations into pre-deployment ISAF workups, and the Centre's evaluation of allied special operations. Not to be underestimated is the improved collaboration amongst special operations contributing nations fostered by the NSCC. When the Coordination Centre began efforts to improve special operations force generation in early 2007, ISAF

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<sup>27</sup> Gregory Brinsfield, Lt Col, USAF (NSCC), interview with author, 28 Sep 09.

<sup>28</sup> NSCC Biennial Review (Final Draft), 31-35. NSCC built onto an existing U.S. supported WAN used by NATO called Battlefield Information Collection and Exploitation System (BICES) which can exchange information up to the "NATO Secret" level. It now has 66,000 users throughout NATO and its ISAF special operations partners. NSCC Biennial Review (final draft) 31-35, October 2009

<sup>29</sup> Ibid. The package is based on an expandable container to house 16 personnel with self-contained power generation, air handling, communications and computers which connect to the BICES WAN. The NSCC planned to have six such systems operational in Afghanistan by October 2009. The fusion cell is up and running in Kabul manned by a multinational staff of 37.

included only 350 special operators, with a small command and control element in Kabul. By early 2010 that number had grown to 1,650, from twelve nations, spread over ten Special Operations Task Groups, with the Kabul command and control element doubled in size and re-established as “Headquarters ISAF SOF” to coordinate this growth.<sup>30</sup> While not publically linked to European pledges to increase forces following the late 2009 U.S. decision to send thirty thousand additional troops, the NSCC anticipates that NATO special operations in ISAF will continue to grow by another 33% before the end of 2010.<sup>31</sup>

This increase in ISAF special operations forces has enabled contributions across the full spectrum of doctrinal missions: from direct action raids and reconnaissance, to military assistance and liaison to Afghan national forces and humanitarian assistance efforts. According to the Coordination Centre, the combination of increased force levels, expanded use of their Alliance-wide special operations communications network, and integration of special operations into NATO training exercises has significantly improved unity of special operations effort for ISAF.<sup>32</sup>

One area highlighted by General Jones in his roadmap for NATO Special Operations transformation that has not fully come to fruition was his call for the Coordination Centre to “collect and disseminate lessons learned.”<sup>33</sup> While they have been assisting with tactical evaluations of allied units to enhance development of NATO standards, there does not yet seem to be a NATO mechanism responsible to capture

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<sup>30</sup> NSCC, Biennial Review (Final Draft), 9. Gregory Brinsfield, Lt Col USAF (NSCC), electronic mail 12 Feb 10. The re-designation from “Special Operations Command and Control Element (SOCCE)” to “Headquarters ISAF SOF” came in Nov 09, and indicates an elevation of responsibility for that staff and its commander.

<sup>31</sup> Gregory Brinsfield, Lt Col, USAF (NSCC), electronic mail, 9 Jan 10.

<sup>32</sup> NATO Special Operations Coordination Centre (NSCC), “SO/LIC Symposium” briefing, slide 11, 10 Feb 09.

<sup>33</sup> Jones, *Defense Horizons*, no. 52, 39.

operational lessons learned specifically for the integration of special operations. This may be an area which a better resourced NATO Special Operations Headquarters can address.

## **Implications of a Future NATO Special Operations Headquarters**

In the summer of 2009, the North Atlantic Council agreed to re-designate the Coordination Centre into an actual NATO Special Operations Headquarters. In addition to continuing the work done to date by the Coordination Centre, the Headquarters will provide operational command and control for NATO Special Operations; most importantly by providing a staff large enough to deploy as the core of a Combined Joint Special Operations Component Command. This will require an expansion from the current Coordination Centre's 149 person manning document.<sup>34</sup> While specific numbers have not been openly published, the variables would include the size of the deployable core expected to come from the new component headquarters and the amount of time spent deployed forward. NATO has set 2011 as a goal for an initial capability which will most likely emphasize key intelligence billets and an expanded special operations communications network, with full capability to follow by 2012.<sup>35</sup> Detailed design plans are being prepared for 2011 construction of a new facility to house the staff at SHAPE.<sup>36</sup>

The required manning for the new NATO Special Operations Headquarters remains in debate, ranging from taking on new responsibilities with the existing NSCC

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<sup>34</sup> Gregory Brinsfield, Lt Col, USAF (NSCC), interview with author, 28 Sep 09.

<sup>35</sup> Gregory Brinsfield, Lt Col, USAF (NSCC), e-mail to author, 21 Oct 09.

<sup>36</sup> Gregory Brinsfield, Lt Col, USAF (NSCC), e-mail to author, 9 Jan 10.

template, to an expansion of approximately 33% more staff.<sup>37</sup> While the first course of action has a high probability of being resourced (nations are already providing staff for the Coordination Centre), those resources may be insufficient given the expanded terms of reference. Expansion will test enthusiasm for the Transformation Initiative by forcing nations to contribute the right quality and quantity of staff to execute new functions. The U.S. should expect to continue to lead as the strength of its commitment to this expansion and to ISAF will most likely drive proportional Allied contributions.

Since 2007, SACEUR has benefited from having a two-star special operations advisor backed by his NSCC staff, a much more robust capability than his former Colonel led four person special operations office.<sup>38</sup> The success of the current structure led to an Alliance proposal to command the forthcoming Special Operations Headquarters with a three-star officer. While this will obviate the dual-hatted role currently held by the two-star commander of U.S. Special Operations Command, Europe; the new NATO Special Operations Headquarters leadership will almost certainly come from one of NATO's designated Special Operations Framework Nations. Along with the prestige of filling a three-star command billet with direct access to SACEUR, whichever nation fills that role will necessarily provide a majority of staff for the new headquarters. While the command could rotate amongst Framework nations, this would require the ally assuming command to increase its personnel and fiscal contributions to levels comparable to those provided by the U.S. today. Because of this, building on the success

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<sup>37</sup> Gregory Brinsfield, Lt Col, USAF (NSCC), e-mail to author 4 Dec 09. Another course of action requires a 15% expansion to accommodate a 6-month deployment capability. If nations contributed up to 33% more staff, a 12-month deployment would become feasible. Ibid, e-mail to author 12 Feb 10.

<sup>38</sup> Note: under the current structure, the Colonel's staff has been expanded from four to ten and still exists within the Allied Command Operations Special Staff, having been elevated from its previous position under the SHAPE J3. The NSCC and its two-star commander provide direct special operations support to SACEUR.

of the current memorandum of agreement, some anticipate the U.S. to provide the first commander.<sup>39</sup> Given a three-star voice with direct access to SACEUR, NATO will have Special Operations advocacy and advice at a level more commensurate with its functional contributions than ever before.

Even with the collective will to improve collaboration and cohesion, significant challenges remain to implement effective changes. Debates over how to implement improvements center on how to share sensitive intelligence frequently generated by national sources, how to ensure interoperability, command and control, and how to contribute forces to NATO without significant degradations of low-density national capabilities.

Regarding intelligence NATO already has its own classification system, its own communications networks, and a history of intelligence collaboration on issues as sensitive as nuclear response. The NSCC's successful coordination of special operations intelligence fusion cells indicates agreement on a near-term way-ahead. This capability leverages NATO billets in an existing joint-analysis center in the UK, and provides forward deployable cells to support tactical requirements in Afghanistan. Even though participation by non-NATO special operations forces in ISAF inevitably complicates intelligence sharing, the fact that any specific nation has made available highly-trained forces for a sensitive mission makes intelligence sharing an imperative.<sup>40</sup>

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<sup>39</sup> Gregory Brinsfield, Lt Col, USAF (NSCC), e-mail to author, 21 Oct 09. Special Operations Framework nations are identified on page 8 of this paper. For the NSCC the U.S. is the designated framework nation. In that capacity it provides the commander and 40% of the personnel, as well as certain headquarters operating costs. Any nation assuming command would be expected to take on similar responsibilities.

<sup>40</sup> Gompert and Smith, *Defense Horizons*, no. 52, 6. Note: both Partnership for Peace and non-NATO affiliated nations continue to contribute special operations forces in ISAF.

Some continue to propose a standing NATO special operations force as an ultimate goal of this transformation.<sup>41</sup> No matter what variety this force might take, it would require nations to give up some national capability, even on a rotational basis. Even if nations were willing to set aside special operations forces specifically for NATO use, there is currently no means within NATO to generate those forces rapidly enough for crisis response outside of national channels.<sup>42</sup> The current plan to establish a standing Special Operations Component headquarters represents a compromise which can enhance existing venues for multilateral participation without significant degradation of any one nation's low-density special operations capabilities.

In parallel with Alliance transformation, many NATO members have focused on improving national special operations capabilities. This shows recognition of the need not just to field and equip highly trained special operators, but to provide national military leadership with functional frameworks to sustain the organization, training, planning, and execution of special operations. These nations, in turn, are becoming more capable of cohesive NATO special operations. Since NATO agreed on its transformation initiative, Canada, Poland, Spain and Lithuania have all established either a Special Operations (component) Command or at least a Special Operations Directorate within an existing joint structure.<sup>43</sup> Romania has liaised with USSOCOM for advice on fielding a special operations capability for operations outside its borders and has set 2010 as a target for the ability to field a Joint Special Operations Task Force.<sup>44</sup>

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<sup>41</sup> Gompert and Smith, *Defense Horizons*, no. 52, 5-6.

<sup>42</sup> Berg, "Reform of Command and Control Structures in NATO SOF", 19.

<sup>43</sup> NSCC, "Special Operations Forces Study", 2.

<sup>44</sup> Berg, "Reform of Command and Control Structures in NATO SOF", 21.

Whether supporting conventional forces through reconnaissance, disrupting enemy targets through direct action raids, or bolstering host nation forces through military assistance, Special Operations Forces certainly have a role to play in Afghanistan.<sup>45</sup> General Stanley McChrystal does not mention functional military components in his Commander ISAF 2009 counterinsurgency strategy; but his description of what must be done to achieve his desired end state implies that special operations, as defined by NATO doctrine, will be central to counterinsurgency success.<sup>46</sup> Maintaining an effective special operations command and control element within the ISAF Combined Joint Task Force Headquarters, and providing command and control (including intelligence) of ISAF's Special Operations Task Groups are two necessities to ensure the effectiveness of ISAF special operations. The Coordination Centre has supported solutions to these challenges, and upgrading to a three-star NATO Special Operations Headquarters should improve resourcing commensurate with NATO's emphasis on ISAF special operations. Resulting improvements in ISAF's special operations command and control should boost national confidence in NATO members' ability to employ their scarce resources, and in turn boost national willingness to contribute to the effort.

In establishing a new Special Operations Headquarters, NATO could choose to create it via either a multinational memorandum of agreement specifying voluntary contributions, the model used today by the NSCC, or by incorporating the new headquarters officially into NATO's peacetime and combat military structure. The former has worked well in support of the Coordination Centre and avoids the politics and

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<sup>45</sup> Lillerud, *Utenrikspolitisk Institutt (NUPI) Working Paper 752*, 11-12.

<sup>46</sup> McChrystal, "ISAF Commander's Counterinsurgency Guidance", 1-7.

bureaucracy inherent in a North Atlantic Council debate over changing the NATO military structure. The latter is within the authority of the Council, could lend more permanence and demonstrate greater resolve to institutionalize the expanded body, but presents a challenge for timely implementation.<sup>47</sup> As of this writing, NATO will continue to man the organization via voluntary contributions as specified in a yet to be authored multinational memorandum of agreement.<sup>48</sup>

## **Conclusions**

Success of the NATO Special Operations Transformation Initiative to date demonstrates the best aspects of the mutual benefits accrued by NATO membership. This success reflects the efforts of the NSCC; making this a case-study of an alliance successfully identifying a common need, and subsequently resourcing an effective solution when faced with the challenge of complex combat operations.

By establishing a staff outside of the formal NATO command structure, and resourcing the Centre based on a Memorandum of Agreement amongst participating nations, NATO avoided much of the inertia associated with its own bureaucracy. U.S. leadership in manpower and funding has bolstered trans-Atlantic multilateral cooperation. Participating allies, under the general consensus of the entire Alliance, have enabled a viable staff entity, and with just three years of progress have emboldened the North Atlantic Council to create a more robust Special Operations Headquarters. This milestone event for NATO special operations will for the first time bring special

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<sup>47</sup> Berg, "Reform of Command and Control Structures in NATO SOF", 39.

<sup>48</sup> Gregory Brinsfield, Lt Col, USAF (NSCC), e-mail to author, 2 Dec 09.

operations as a function to a comparable level of representation as NATO's existing functional headquarters for land, maritime and air forces.

As long as Alliance members foresee continued challenges from irregular warfare, piracy, and international terror networks, special operations forces will remain in the forefront of military response strategies. They represent a cost-effective means for many nations with otherwise small defense budgets to contribute militarily to Alliance objectives.<sup>49</sup> Investment in the training and interoperability of special operations units provides member nations and the Alliance a capacity to employ force in complex, high risk, high payoff endeavors. In creating a formal structure within NATO, nations also recognize economies of scale with respect to doctrine, training, and evaluation of their forces; in effect pooling resources within the Alliance to improve national capabilities. The transformation energized by the NSCC indicates political will to improve these capabilities which are being tested daily in Afghanistan, in turn boosting confidence in NATO. This confidence by national and NATO leadership is a necessary prerequisite to employ those forces for future special operations and can be seen as another facet of NSCC success. Concurrent with the tangible improvements enacted since 2007 these results have strengthened the Alliance by widening NATO's aperture of response to its modern challenges.

With the decision not only to sustain its Coordination Centre as an interim function, but to establish a full-fledged NATO Special Operations Headquarters, NATO is poised to employ Special Operations at the operational level with the same standards of cohesion expected of all components within a multinational Joint Task Force. While some allies see their highly trained and well-equipped special operations forces as

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<sup>49</sup> Last, *Force of Choice*, 206-208.

national assets, to be provided to multinational forces only under exceptional circumstances, the improvements NATO has made to employ those forces have raised the capabilities of all participants for both national and Alliance objectives.<sup>50</sup> The NSCC's success both demonstrates and sustains national willingness to resource special operations transformation, and the expansion to Headquarters status will only continue to encourage multinational support.

NATO's Special Operations Transformation Initiative goals can be restated as follows: better special operations advice and planning at the highest levels of Allied Command Operations, better integration of special operations into demanding combined operations (ISAF's counterinsurgency campaign), and more cohesion amongst its diverse force providers. Improvements to ISAF special operations highlight the NATO Special Operations Coordination Centre's ability to advance all three and show how it has rapidly turned Riga's political agreement into tangible progress. In setting the stage for a true special operations functional component backed by affordable, combat tested multinational capabilities it has dramatically improved NATO's ability to respond to contingencies, and created special operations options for SACEUR where previously none existed. The future is looking bright for NATO special operations.

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<sup>50</sup> French White Paper on Defense and National Security, 11.

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