

The Special Air Service and the concentration of military power

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Key concept

- Analyses the rise of the British SAS as an example of organisational transformation in the armed forces today, arguing that the new prominence of the SAS illustrates the contemporary dynamics of military change more widely.

Main points

- **The importance of politics, as well as logic, in capability development.** With the rise of asymmetric threats, and as budgets decline and military threats globalise, skilled and mobile Special Forces have become increasingly relevant. In hindsight, the growing importance of the SAS simply seems logical, but in actuality it is but one of a number of Special Forces capability options that the British Army might have chosen for priority development; and it is probably clearly the most expensive such option. Indeed, the SAS's position was tenuous for most of the post-war period, with the regiment being disbanded after the war and reformed in an ad hoc manner only during the Malayan crisis in the 1950s. The central strategic role that the SAS has now appropriated for itself is the outcome of intense political lobbying. A crucial element was the relationship between the Director SAS in the late 1970s and Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher, which was instrumental in the employment of the regiment in the Falklands campaign and Gulf War 1 (and that officer's subsequent promotion to the highest level). Given the opportunity to demonstrate its versatility and capability, the SAS has justified the confidence placed in it. Its consequent reputation and its first-priority for continued resourcing simply reinforced its impressive capacity. Its institutional political power has been further cemented by strong inter-service ties in terms of Royal Marine, Army and RAF units that have been specially designed to support special operations.
- **The capability economics of Special Forces.** Like the ADF, the British Army is smaller now than it has been for decades, but the concept of 'downsizing' fails to recognize the true dynamic of current developments. While it is true that force numbers are smaller, the distribution of resources has become more targeted. The SAS is a case in point: it has grown in size relative to the rest of the British Army, and has also been substantially augmented by the addition of attached supporting organisations and priority-call equipment. In this respect, the SAS represents the concentration of military resourcing, and arguably is at the vanguard of a different way of thinking about capability development.
- **The SAS's source of capability.** Special Forces soldiers have markedly higher levels of expertise, versatility, and resilience. This is as a result of rigorous selection and training (apparently members of the SAS have informally changed their motto from 'who dares wins' to 'who trains wins'). Such training is important not only in terms of the development of individual and team skills, and familiarity with other members of the team, but also contributes to an extraordinarily high degree of cohesion. Such cohesion is a crucial element in unit capability. 'Warriors... are social products whose membership of a highly resourced organisation has facilitated their élite individual performance. Outside of that institutional environment, they could not develop or sustain the capabilities [required by their role]'. (Apparently this principle has also been embraced by successful élite sports groups.)
- **The role of the SAS in the network military organisation.** In the contemporary battle-space, forces coordinate themselves over large geographical areas to create 'effects' at designated points. The old industrial-military hierarchies are being replaced by networks. This has important implications for the SAS and its employment. It now might be understood not so much as a conventional tactical military unit in the vertical hierarchy, but as a node in the network structure. On operations, the SAS forms flexible alliances with a diversity of other in-theatre forces to prosecute missions in line with the intentions of the superior command, but often not explicitly directed by the commander. As such, it can not only carry out its own missions, but can also serve as a coordination facility for strategic commanders.