

UNDERSTANDING CANADA'S SPECIAL OPERATIONS FORCES

by Erin Yantzi

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Canadian Special Operations Forces Command members conduct a freefall jump out of a U.S. Air Force C-17 Globemaster at Hurlburt Field, Florida, in 2013. Credit: Matthew Bruch/USAF

In July 2020, Canadian Special Operations Forces Command (CANSOFCOM) released its latest strategic plan, [Beyond the Horizon](#). The plan recognizes shifts in warfare, including an increasing number of grey-zone activities by state and non-state actors—activities that fall just below the “[threshold of traditional armed conflict](#).” It also clarifies CANSOFCOM’s role within Canada’s defence and security structure and activities. The analysis of this plan raises important questions about transparency and the need for oversight and accountability of Canada’s special operations forces.

DEVELOPMENT OF CANADA'S SPECIAL OPERATIONS FORCES

CANSOFCOM was created in 2006, but Canada had special operations forces (SOF) before then. Joint Task Force 2 (JTF-2) was created in 1993, taking over functions related to domestic hostage rescue and counter-terrorism from the Special Emergency Response Team of the Royal Canadian Mounted Police (RCMP). Today CANSOFCOM oversees 2,550 staff members and a budget of \$218-million in an organization that includes JTF-2, Canadian Special Operations Regiment, Canadian Joint Incident Response Unit, the 427 Special Operations Aviation Squadron, and the Canadian Special Operations Training Centre.

CANSOFCOM's mandate is to provide the government with "agile, high-readiness" special operations forces "capable of conducting special operations in defence of Canada both at home and abroad." CANSOFCOM's missions are often politically sensitive or strategic, and depend on its high-readiness, flat organizational structure, direct access to defence and political decision-makers, and high-calibre professional members.

POSITIONING CANSOFCOM

Consolidating the Objective, CANSOFCOM's previous strategic plan that was released in 2015, reads like a business plan for measured and healthy institutional growth—a roadmap for the transition from a "small to medium-sized military enterprise." It described a command that was working to become a "strategic institution" within Canada's defence environment, able to deliver results that aligned with the government's strategic goals.

The 2020 plan reveals a command confident of its place within not only the Canadian Armed Forces, but Canada's defence and security environment and current geopolitical realities. CANSOFCOM now advertises "fully integrated, connected and empowered" professionals who are able to "excel as a military force at the National Defence/National Security nexus within the grey spaces of conflict."

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GREY SPACE

Deputy Minister for National Defence Jody Thomas situates the new plan in today's world, where "Canada is increasingly faced with a geopolitical reality that lacks defined boundaries of war and peace, safety and danger." This "reality" is referred to as the grey zone or grey space.

In the grey zone, the lines between domestic and international, military and non-military, war and peace, and competition and conflict and crisis are all blurred. Both threats and warfare take on hybrid and asymmetric forms. In addition, states increasingly blend together all forms of national power at their disposal—economic, political, technological, information, and military—to counter threats.



A member of Canadian Special Operations Forces Command observes members of the Niger Armed Forces during marksmanship training in Diffa, Niger, in 2017. Credit: Zayid Ballesteros/US Army

For example, the U.S. Special Operations Command’s [white paper](#) described grey zone “challenges” as “characterized by the ambiguity about the nature of the conflict, opacity of the parties involved, or uncertainty about the relevant policy and legal frameworks.”

While CANSOFCOM’s 2015 strategic plan did identify hybrid warfare and an asymmetric threat environment, *Beyond the Horizon* frames these developments within the “grey spaces of conflict.”

WHERE NATIONAL DEFENCE MEETS NATIONAL SECURITY

A focus on the defence and security nexus reflects an increase in interdepartmental and agency cooperation and activities. CANSOFCOM regularly interacts with Global Affairs Canada, Public Safety Canada, the Canadian Security Intelligence Service, the Communications Security Establishment, and the RCMP.

CANSOFCOM sees itself as a “‘gaps and seams’ force in the spaces between the national defence and security architectures.” It operates in spaces occupied by both national defence and security interests to defeat asymmetric threats. It supports conventional military operations while countering terrorism and proliferation, undertaking special operations and other activities as both enabler and leader.

This view of CANSOFCOM is supported in the newest defence policy [Strong, Secure, Engaged](#), in which CANSOFCOM “at its core... [is] focused on a cooperative joint, inter-agency, and multinational approach to operations.”

PEOPLE, RELATIONSHIPS, TRUST

CANSOFCOM's strategic plan focuses on people, relationships, and trust, even as the command must maintain a high level of secrecy. The plan seems to reveal a conscious attempt to maintain a balance between secrecy and accountability when it notes, "Mandates and Authorities constitute a sacred trust between CANSOF and the CAF [Canadian Armed Forces], the Government of Canada and the nation. CANSOFCOM must continually earn them by demonstrating integrity and credibility in all organizational and operational contexts."

While CANSOFCOM appears to be attuned to potential criticisms levied at the perceived secret, "special" nature of their organization and operations, there is still room for continued discussion and debate on the decision to deploy CANSOF, and on appropriate accountability measures.

ACCOUNTABILITY AND TRANSPARENCY

Interagency cooperation and a Whole-of-Defence approach increase the government's ability to protect Canada from threats in a complex, frequently grey-zone environment. However, they can also obscure multiagency activities that relate to national defence and security with a plethora of different mandates, authorities, and oversight and review mechanisms. Monitoring of such operations by civil society and other organizations becomes much more difficult.

The recent creation of Canadian review bodies [National Security and Intelligence Committee of Parliamentarians](#) (NSICoP) and [National Security and Intelligence Review Agency](#) seems to indicate the government's commitment to greater accountability, transparency, and trustworthiness. However, there appears to be no discussion of CANSOFCOM in the redacted NSICoP [special report](#) on the intelligence activities of the Department of National Defence and the Canadian Armed Forces, despite CANSOFCOM's intelligence capabilities. It is possible that CANSOFCOM was grouped in with the CAF, or that details of CANSOFCOM intelligence activities were redacted.

Meanwhile, the current government—like most previous Canadian governments—continues to avoid directing attention to most Canadian military engagements. In addition, the lack of parliamentary debate or scrutiny of CAF activities seems to reflect a lack of interest in defence matters by the Canadian public.

But global civil society IS interested and continues to raise questions about the transparency and accountability of Canada's special operations forces. The Oxford Research Group's Remote Warfare Program produced a 2016 report, [Assessing SOF transparency and accountability](#), which includes assessments of British, American, Australian, and Canadian special operations forces. The report notes: "The activities of SOF have always been clouded. The US, with its more open political system and investigative media has reported most widely on the activities of US SOF. Even so, many of their activities take place away from political and public scrutiny. In the UK, Australia and Canada the situation is even more limited." It notes that Canadian special forces are not accountable to Parliament, which seems to be quite ignorant of any operations.

A PIECE IN A COMPLEX PUZZLE

As stated in *Beyond the Horizon*, "multilateral organizations, non-governmental and civil society organizations, industry actors, strategic influencers, educational institutions and even non-defence-specific corporations all play important roles within the international security environment. Each offers unique perspectives, complementary capabilities and access to people, regions, tools

and insights that CANSOFCOM would not otherwise have on its own.”

CANSOFCOM must balance increasing government demand for special operations capabilities with other demands from parliamentarians and civil society to be transparent and accountable. The government must acknowledge that, while SOF can be quickly deployed and seems to be designed for today’s threat environment, they should not be seen as a ‘silver bullet’. According to researcher Kobi Michael, decision-makers have a “strategic preference” to use SOF because it offers immediate and impressive success. The use of SOF by governments should not be shielded from scrutiny, nor should the use of such forces replace good policies, diplomatic processes, and transparent international engagement.

Erin Yantzi was a Project Ploughshares Peace Research Intern. She is currently pursuing her MA in Political Science at the University of Waterloo.

PROJECT PLOUGHSHARES

140 Westmount Road North
Waterloo ON N2L 3G6
Canada

www.ploughshares.ca

519-888-6541

plough@ploughshares.ca

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