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# Special Operations Forces: Key Role in Preventive Defense

By

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[The following commentary by General Shelton has been extracted from *Defense Issues*, Vol., 12, No. 12, 1997, published by the American Forces Information Service, a field activity of the Office of the Assistant Secretary of Defense (Public Affairs), Washington, D.C. *Defense Issues* is available on the Internet via the World Wide Web at [http://www.dtic.mil/defense/links/pubs/di\\_index.html](http://www.dtic.mil/defense/links/pubs/di_index.html)]

The U.S. program of preventive defense rests on the premise that fewer weapons of mass destruction in fewer hands makes America and the world safer; that more democracy and more free-market economies in more nations means less chance of conflict; and that defense establishments have an important role to play in building democracy, trust, and understanding in and among nations.

William Perry  
Former Secretary of Defense

Based on special operations forces' (SOF) traditional core missions and capabilities, forward global presence and employments, regional orientation, unique language skills, and cultural awareness, SOF have and will continue to be the premier implementing force for the United States' Preventive Defense—peacetime engagements designed to detect and resolve pending crises or conflict and create the conditions that support enduring peace. These peacetime engagements, otherwise referred to as noncombat contingencies and/or military operations other than war, have resulted in the majority of SOF deployments since Operation Desert Storm and will likely continue to dominate our strategic security environment for the next decade.

Special operations forces offer a unique, versatile, and global joint service force which continuously operates worldwide. In 1996, SOF elements deployed to over 140 countries. Many of these deployments occurred in parts of the world plagued by disease, starvation, poverty, and civil strife—fertile ground for insurgencies, humanitarian crises, and ethnic conflict. These perennial problems in the developing world are expected to be exacerbated in the future by exploding populations and expansive urbanization. These trends can overwhelm local governments, and exceed indigenous military capabilities and readiness.

SOF are in the best position to adapt to the changing security environment in the developing world where U.S. interests reside by providing security and other forms of assistance to foreign governments, their militaries, and their populace through traditional foreign internal defense missions, humanitarian relief and medical support, and other international activities.

The success of the Preventive Defense program depends heavily on cooperation and enduring relationships with our foreign friends and allies—a primary benefit and objective of SOF employments in support of taskings from the National Command Authorities, the geographical CinCs [commanders in chief], and our American ambassadors.

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U.S. special operations forces have become extremely skillful in practicing the art of peace, while still remaining prepared for and preserving the option of force. Although often without much fanfare or pronouncements, Navy SEALs, Army Special Forces, civil affairs and psyop [psychological operations] units, and Air Force Special Operations elements have proven their worth in fostering calm, stability, and democratic values, as most recently in the case of Operations Uphold and Maintain Democracy in Haiti; understanding and diffusing tensions, in Peru and Ecuador as part of Operation Safe Border, for example; strengthening coalitions, most notably in the Middle East through joint combined exercises and training; and performing in politically sensitive environments, perhaps, even pre-empting the use of force and enforcing the tenuous peace through effective coalition liaisons, psychological operations, and civil affairs as in Operation Joint Endeavor in the Balkans.

The permanent overseas presence of various SOF elements, their regional orientation, established military-to-military relationships, interoperability, cross cultural skills, and political sensitivity will continue to be critical for strengthening ties with traditional allies, coalition partners, and other nations. SOF operate and train frequently with coalition forces and other foreign militaries to enhance their proficiency and professional development, and at the same time improve interoperability between them and U.S. forces. They interact with the senior political and military leadership of the various countries they deploy to and establish special enduring relationships with their host nation military counterparts. In many parts of the world, the military is often the most cohesive institution and wields significant power, and thus can influence the outcome of events during a crisis and affairs of the government. By working and training with foreign militaries, SOF can reduce tensions, enforce democratic values, and build trust among nations.

Recent productive SOF military-to-military training missions overseas included six highly successful training events conducted in FY 1996 with the Indonesian armed forces.

Additionally, SOF is participating in the ongoing multinational observer mission Operation Safe Border in Ecuador and Peru, which originated in January 1995. The Ecuadorian and Peruvian conflict involved a long-standing border dispute, which had evolved into armed conflict three times since 1984. The successful observer mission conceived and implemented by U.S. Southern Command included personnel from the U.S., Argentina, Brazil, and Chile.

Operation Safe Border has allowed 5,000 troops to withdraw from the zone of conflict, and 140,000 troops have demobilized since the mission began—significantly diminishing tensions in the region. It was the first use of special operations forces in multinational observer and observer support roles in South America. SOF's unique experiences and deployments in Latin America, crosscultural skills, language proficiency, and professionalism contributed to the success of the overall mission and framework for the continuing international peacekeeping operation.

The other key component of Preventive Defense is counterproliferation of weapons of mass destruction [WMD], essentially preventing the proliferation of WMD by denying access to related technologies and materials, and deterring and defeating proliferators on the future battlefield. Secretary Perry stressed that "Nowhere is preventive defense more important than in countering the spread of nuclear, chemical, and biological weapons."

Weapons of mass destruction, particularly in the hands of rogue states, regional aggressors, or terrorists with the will and means to use them, pose a significant growing and unpredictable threat to our national security and vital interests at home and abroad. Proliferation of WMD also threatens regional stability and increases the lethality of conflict.

Complicating this threat further is the growing elusiveness of potential enemies, the low signature of the threat, technology transfer and smuggling, and the impenetrable nature of

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underground, hardened, and covert WMD production and/or storage facilities. WMD also expose civilian personnel to greater hazards such as deliberate or accidental contamination. Unlike our value system, which seeks to minimize collateral damage and casualties, many potential adversaries lack the same concerns.

Given the focus of U.S. counterproliferation policy and strategy, SOF's evolving counterproliferation mission, and the inherent high risk involved, special operations forces are expected to play a significant role in countering the threat from WMD in the future. As the debate continues over just how to prevent the spread of WMD using conventional means, SOF offer the most acceptable counterforce capability. Again, SOF's inherent capabilities and international activities places them in an ideal position to foster international cooperation needed to stem or prevent NBC smuggling and terrorism, while still pursuing the means to detect, deter, neutralize, or effectively destroy WMD and related infrastructure, if necessary. This mission continues to grow in its significance for SOF and our nation.

Although the era of the Cold War is over, our nation continues to be challenged by new dangers and more diverse and sophisticated threats. Now, more than ever, special operations forces must maintain vigilance for signs of turmoil or pending crisis and conflict as they remain actively engaged throughout the world, whether in support of the National Command Authorities, the geographical CinCs, or our American ambassadors.

The unpredictable and dynamic strategic security environment demands a military force that can avert or prevent armed conflict, establish trust among nations, work to alleviate problems that plague developing nations and threaten their survival, and help lay the foundation for lasting peace and stability. Equally important will be special operations forces' unconventional capabilities to respond to challenges from pariah states and nonstate actors such as terrorists, undeterred by the threat of conventional forces or U.S. nuclear retaliation.

Special operations forces—key players in Preventive Defense—can restore calm, foster stability and if necessary, resolve situations quickly, quietly, and effectively to avert potential dangers from becoming full-blown crises. The capabilities that SOF provide and their impact and contributions to Preventive Defense, are even more impressive considering SOF cost less than two percent of DoD's budget and consist of less than two percent of DoD's personnel. Clearly, SOF are a cost-effective, yet potent investment in our nation's future.