



Center for Strategic and Budgetary Assessments

STUDIES

Special Operation Forces: Future Challenges and Opportunities

November 17, 2008 | **Robert Martinage**

Resources: Forces & Capabilities

Special Operations Forces (SOF) are elite, highly trained military units that conduct operations that typically exceed the capabilities of conventional forces. They have figured prominently in US military operations since 2001 and have become central to the implementation of US national defense strategy with respect to the war against violent Islamic radicalism. During the unconventional war against the Taliban and al Qaeda in Afghanistan in Operation Enduring Freedom, SOF played a pivotal role by integrating US precision air power with the operations of irregular Afghan opposition forces to achieve rapid regime change and eliminate al Qaeda's primary sanctuary.

Since the fall of the Taliban, SOF have played a critical role in training and advising elements of the Afghan National Army, providing personal security for senior Afghan officials, and capturing or killing scores of senior Taliban and al Qaeda leaders and lower-level operatives. They are also currently conducting operations along the Afghanistan-Pakistan border and training elements of Pakistan's Special Service Group. In the early phases of the war with Iraq, SOF again played a central role in a special-operations-intensive campaign, providing the primary ground force element on two of three fronts, and performing a number of special reconnaissance, direct action, and unconventional warfare missions in support of the conventional campaign.

Over the past five years, they have been instrumental in training and advising Iraqi security forces, as well as in hunting down high-value al-Qaeda targets in Iraq. In the broader war against violent Islamic radicalism, to the extent their constrained capacity allows, SOF are building partner capacity, collecting intelligence, hunting high-value targets, and conducting other counterterrorism operations in multiple countries across several continents. The operations tempo currently being sustained by SOF is the highest in its history.