

The Evolution of Strike and Intelligence Functions in Special Operations Forces

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Abstract : The expansion of special operations forces (SOF) in the twenty-first century is often discussed in terms of the size and disposition of SOF units. Research regarding the number SOF personnel, the equipment SOF units procure, and the variety of roles and mission that SOF fulfill in contemporary conflicts paints a fascinating picture of changing expectations for the use of force. A strong indicator of the changing nature of SOF in contemporary conflicts is the fusion of strike and intelligence functions in the SOF in many countries. What were once more distinct roles on the kind of battlefield generally associated with the concept of conventional warfare have become intermingled in the era of persistent conflict which SOF face. This study presents a historical analysis of the co-evolution of the intelligence and direct action functions carried out by SOF in counterterrorism, counterinsurgency, and training and mentoring missions between 2004 and 2016. The study focuses primarily on innovation in the US military and the diffusion of key concepts to US allies first, and then more broadly afterward. The findings show that there were three key phases of evolution throughout the period of study, each coinciding with a process of innovation and doctrinal adaptation. The first phase was characterized by the fusion of intelligence at the tactical and operational levels. The second phase was characterized by the industrial counterterrorism campaigns used by US SOF against irregular enemies in Iraq and Afghanistan. The third phase was characterized by increasing forward collection of actionable intelligence by SOF force elements in the course of direct action raids. The evolution of strike and intelligence functions in SOF operations between 2004 and 2016 was significantly influenced by reciprocity. Intelligence fusion led to more effective targeting, which then increased intelligence collection. Strike and intelligence functions were then enhanced by greater emphasis on intelligence exploitation during operations, which further increased the effectiveness of both strike and intelligence operations.

Keywords : counterinsurgency, counterterrorism, intelligence, irregular warfare, military operations, special operations forces

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