

SPECIAL OPERATIONS FUTURES SUMMIT

28-30 APRIL 2015

Introduction

SOCAUST convened a Special Operations (SO) Futures Summit with SOCOMD COs and their RSMs, SOHQ principal staff, and commanders/principal staff of key SOCOMD support elements. The Summit provided SOCAUST with the opportunity to outline in detail his concerns about the 'health' of SOCOMD and state his intent for the Command. The Summit also provided the chance for attendees to put forward their thoughts about the health and future direction of SOCOMD either in general discussion or through presentation of ideas after group consideration.

Purpose

The purpose of this document is to capture the key elements of the Summit and where appropriate provide independent observations regarding these.

Readers of this document should note that it is authored by an independent observer in a way that brings the key issues discussed at the Summit to the surface in a purposefully blunt and unambiguous manner. It should be further noted that the author has applied his judgement on these issues based on presentations and side discussions at the Summit and his previous work with SOCOMD since 2004.

The Current Situation – The Problem and Contributing Causes

SOCOMD's 'strategic health' is in poor shape to the point of dysfunction. SOCOMD has over recent years developed a history of unacceptable behaviour that has become endemic; it is fixated on current operations at the expense of investing focus and effort on modernisation to meet future requirements; and the operations it undertakes are largely conventional in nature that shifts the focus away from the maintenance and enhancement of its core capabilities to undertake SO.

At its heart there appear to be two key causes of the problem. The first is that SOCOMD does not operate as a unified command but rather, a federation of units. This situation is made worse by the fact that collaboration between units within this federated arrangement is undermined by a 'class' stratification based on unit affiliation and selection (i.e. some units are 'more special' than others), and historically

active competition between SASR and 2 CDO REGT in terms of role expansion / turf protection (i.e. bickering over role/mission).

The second is that SOCOMD has developed an unhealthy fixation on current operations at the expense of all else. SOCOMD has now been significantly committed to military operations for over a decade. In a number of cases, Special Operations Forces (SOF) have been used to undertake what are essentially conventional force operations that could have been conducted by Army's infantry forces. This has led to a situation where SOCOMD is often viewed as the default 'force of choice' for operations that are likely to involve 'warfighting' (i.e. direct action).

The unintended consequences of both of the above causes are felt by the Command in a range of ways:

- + The development of a culture of arrogance and entitlement in certain areas of SOCOMD.
- + Failure of leadership and lack of accountability.
- + A focus on excellence in the conduct of conventional operations at the expense of SO.
- + A lack of effort in modernising SOCOMD's capability to undertake SO.
- + A level of 'ostrichisation' of SOCOMD with Army and Defence.

A CULTURE OF ARROGANCE AND ENTITLEMENT

Due to the cycle of continuous operations, a generation of officers and soldiers fundamentally believe excellence on operations is the sole focus of SOCOMD. This has manifested to the point where there is a view that excellence on operations will in some way mitigate unacceptable behaviour and excuse the abrogation of 'in barracks' responsibilities. Attitudes have developed over time that excellence on operations confers upon individuals a status where they no longer need to accord to accepted codes of conduct nor undertake tasks they view to be below this status. The consequences of this attitude over time, have been a range of serious incidents that are no longer isolated, but have become endemic. This is particularly the case for SASR.

FAILURE OF LEADERSHIP AND LACK OF ACCOUNTABILITY

Effective leadership and accountability has not been evident across all areas of assigned responsibility within units. Hard decisions have not been taken to deal with unacceptable behaviour at their source and unit management and administration appears to be a secondary concern. Leadership and accountability at all levels are variable across the Command and are heavily influenced by personality, operational experience, personal relationships and unit affiliation. As such the default has been to turn a 'blind eye' and forgive, rather than take affirmative action.

EXCELLENCE IN CONVENTIONAL OPERATIONS AT THE EXPENSE OF SO

To a large extent the nature of operations being undertaken by SOCOMD are conventional in nature. That said, SOF prosecute these operations extremely effectively. As a result, these type of operations have become viewed as the norm for SOCOMD to undertake, and thus are the focus of attention at the expense of developing/maintaining proficiency in SO. These type of operations have also diminished the role and status of SOCAUST within Army, Defence and across government at an inter-agency level, as he is not

required to explain the employment of SOF in the conduct of conventional operations. This means that when advice on SO matters is required SOCAUST is no longer the first point of contact.

LACK OF MODERNISATION EFFORT

Due to the focus on current operations the majority of SOHQ's effort has been in support of these. While no one would argue the necessity to support operations, this has come at the expense of modernisation. As a consequence, there has been a lack of 'intellectual' investment in the future of SOCOMD which has meant that modernisation has been 'ad hoc' and not well thought through. Additionally, there has been a reticence to report deficiencies in capability and to make do with what is in place. SOCOMD has also developed an isolationist approach to modernisation by not effectively integrating its approach and personnel with Army through HMSP-A. This has resulted in missed opportunities to leverage Army's modernisation efforts with the needs of SOCOMD. As such, the capability to undertake SO has slowly diminished over time.

'OSTRACISATION' OF SOCOMD

While not overt, there is an undertone of feeling that SOCOMD is undertaking roles on operations that fall within the capability of Army. SOCOMD has perpetuated this situation by continually volunteering its forces to undertake operations even if such operations are within the capability of conventional forces. Additionally, unacceptable behaviour and failure of leadership have negatively impacted the reputation of SOCOMD where it is seen to be out of step with Army and Defence.

SOCAUST's Vision and Intent for the Future

SOCAUST noted the importance of a vision for SOCOMD that is both meaningful and enduring. As such, this vision must provide the appropriate focus for the Command and not be at risk of change by future SOCAUSTs. SOCAUST's vision for the Command is that:

SOCOMD has the capability to successfully deliver the full suite of special operations missions—those missions that no other Australian organisation can undertake—anywhere and in partnership with anybody, both now and into the future.

The vision requires that the Command continually modernise across all of the fundamental inputs to capability, and that there is a comprehensive understanding of SOCOMD's capability and how to best employ this, across the appropriate key decision makers in Defence, other relevant government departments and agencies, and at the executive political level.

SOCAUST outlined that the two key areas of focus for the Command in moving towards this vision are to:

- + Remediate the current serious endemic problems that are plaguing SOCOMD.
- + Build the future capability that SOCOMD needs to successfully undertake SO missions.

Both areas must be addressed in parallel and SOCAUST highlighted that commanders (including SOCAUST himself) will be held accountable for their responsibilities in regard to executing these.

Given the current situation, SOCAUST's intent is to 'recalibrate' SOCOMD to modernise in accordance with the above vision. As such, SOCAUST has put SOCOMD on 'pause' from undertaking further

operations short of any national emergency requirements. This will allow the Command to 'reset' by addressing the above areas of focus.

The recalibration will address four thematic areas—governance, capability, force generation and culture. In essence SOCOMD will modernise by addressing both internal issues and realising opportunities to address gaps in high readiness capabilities.

SOCAUST's Immediate Priorities

SOCAUST's immediate priorities against the four thematic areas are summarised below.

GOVERNANCE

'Re-zero' all SOCOMD directives and guidance. Currently there are too many such documents some of which are contradictory thus causing confusion. SOCAUST's aim is to ensure clear and unambiguous guidance is provided to the Command. This is essential to empower SOCOMD's chain of command in understanding their responsibilities for which they will be held to account.

CAPABILITY

Identify current deficiencies in the Command's capabilities to undertake SO. SOCOMD's 'can do' attitude and focus on current operations has led to a situation where the Command has not adequately highlighted gaps in its high readiness capabilities. This exposes Defence to a risk of not being able to undertake the range of SO missions required to support Australia's national interests.

FORCE GENERATION

Reorganise the SOCOMD to ensure the right balance between FORGEN, operations and modernisation. As such, SOCOMD will critically examine its organisation and focus on working the issues that matter most. A first step will be to ensure SOHQ is addressing the big problems that relate to the strategic health of SOCOMD.

CULTURE

Address the increasing narrowness of SOCOMD's people. SOCAUST is particularly concerned that elements within SOCOMD have become so specialised and subject to 'group think' that the Command is losing the innovation, versatility and adaptability that were once a hallmark of SOCOMD. SOCAUST will initiate a range of development programs and activities that prepare, challenge and test SOCOMD's commanders at all levels. Collectively as a Command, SOCOMD will re-imagine the way it does business and critically examine progress in this regard.

Implementation – Avenues of Action

Implementation of the four thematic areas identified above will be executed through the following avenues of action:

- + Command and leadership.
- + Design.

- + Communications.

COMMAND AND LEADERSHIP

Fundamental to SOCOMD addressing its internal issues is effective command and leadership. SOCAUST emphasised the centrality of the chain of command where commanders at all levels are empowered and entrusted to execute their responsibilities in command. With this comes accountability, and commanders should be aware of SOCAUST's expectation that they will execute their responsibilities both on operations and 'in barracks' without fear or favour. Dealing with issues as they occur at the 'coal face', no matter how trivial, prevents these becoming bigger issues, and wide spread accepted behaviours, over time.

Strong leadership at unit level down to the lowest levels is clearly required to redress the cultural issues plaguing the Command. This may require calling out individuals who are 'comrades in arms' and even replacing commanders that are incapable or unwilling to execute their command responsibilities to which they have been entrusted.

Leadership at a Command level is also required to ensure SOCOMD works as an effective entity. SOCAUST identified the clear need to say 'no' to missions that are not SO in their nature and when there is not enough capacity or capability within SOCOMD to carry out the operation. SOCAUST also identified the need to declare high readiness capability gaps as they occur.

DESIGN

Modernising SOCOMD will be underpinned by a design approach where 'form will consciously follow function'. Design will be informed through addressing the following fundamental questions:

- + **Where does SOCOMD best sit within Defence to provide a national SO capability?** SOCOMD currently sits as an Army Command by virtue of its history. It is overwhelmingly Army in its makeup, yet it works in very close collaboration with other government agencies and like allied/regional SO partner organisations almost independently of Army. Additionally, SOCOMD works with, and relies heavily on joint capabilities. Its personnel can be drawn from all three services and it can access personnel from external sources (government and non-government). While its relationship and reliance on Army is unquestioned, consideration need to be given as to where it best sits within Defence's structure.
- + **Who should SOCAUST answer to?** SOCAUST is by virtue of his appointment the specialist adviser on SO to Army, Defence and government. Advice on SO, more often than not, needs to be provided immediately, knowledgeably and authoritatively. The highly specialised nature of SO, the close working relationships with other government agencies and like allied/regional SO partner organisations, and the high risk profile and often extreme time constraints involved, necessitates direct engagement with SOCAUST rather than working through the chain of command. Consequently, where SOCAUST (as opposed to SOCOMD) sits within Defence needs close consideration.
- + **What tasks should SOCOMD not do that can/should be undertaken by other organisations?** There are a range of missions that SOCOMD undertakes or is prepared to undertake that are a legacy of history and past decisions. These need to be critically evaluated against the vision for SOCOMD in that they are *those missions that no other Australian organisation can undertake*. An example is whether there is still a requirement to maintain a domestic counter terrorism capability as a core task.

- + **How should SOCOMD better integrate with Defence and Army to deliver SO?** SOCOMD is in many ways isolated (principally by its own doing) from the rest of Army and Defence and undertakes functions that replicate what is already in place. This plays out in SOCOMD not have a collaborative working relationship with Army, where the Command is left to fend for itself. Consideration needs to be given to where structures and capabilities already exist that SOCOMD should utilise (e.g. using the current OPGEN mechanism in place for Certification, leveraging HMSP-A in modernising the Command, etc.). Additionally, consideration is required as to where SOCOMD staff should be embedded across Army and Defence to provide an informed SO perspective 'at the source' of policy; concept development and experimentation; force options testing; and capability development, acquisition and sustainment.
- + **How does SOCOMD balance its FORGEN (i.e. raise, train, sustain) responsibilities and the conduct of operations?** SOCOMD units see their role primarily as a capability to undertake operations rather than FORGEN. It may be more useful for SOCOMD units to be viewed more akin to Army brigades as a primary mechanism for raise, train and sustain, than for undertaking operations. This would necessitate a cultural shift where unit COs have responsibility only for FORGEN rather than leading on operations. C2 for operations would need to be put in place with the appropriate experience, structures, systems and communications that allow for seamless conduct of operations with those forces assigned from units.
- + **How should SOHQ best command and support SOCOMD?** SOHQ is attempting to be a Functional Command, a standing component of JOC for operations and a substantial contributor in the strategic domain. In attempting to undertake all these tasks it has had to prioritise the immediate and urgent often at the expense of the important and longer term. A fundamental rethink is required to identify its role and responsibilities so as to inform design in the execution of these.

COMMUNICATIONS

SOCOMD must be able to explain what it does and the value it brings to many audiences. These range from within SOCOMD itself, to Army, the other Services, Defence more broadly, other government departments/agencies, politicians, regional partners and allies, and the public. In essence there are two strategic outcomes sought from communicating across these audiences:

- + **Allow the effective employment of SOCOMD.** This will be achieved by developing the appropriate level of understanding (and confidence) by the particular audience, of SOCOMD and its capabilities, what it can do, what value it provides and how best to use it.
- + **Enable SOCOMD to continuously modernise.** This will be achieved through articulating a vision for SOCOMD together with a meaningful concept of how it wants to fight, the capability enhancements it needs to fight, and the value that these bring. SOCOMD will continually communicate gaps in high readiness capabilities and the impact of these.

Conclusion

The key outcome of the SO Futures Summit was for SOCAUST to outline his vision and intent for SOCOMD. This document outlines the key elements of these and provides the basis for progressing

SOCAUST's intent. It should therefore be used as a high level reference by commanders for action and reporting progress.