

# **Special Forces and the Future of Warfare: Will SOF Predominate in 2020?**

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24 May 2004

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## **Special Forces and the Future of Warfare: Will SOF Predominate in 2020?**

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American Special Operations Forces (SOF) have scored some extraordinary achievements in recent warfare. In Operation Iraqi Freedom (OIF) they were assigned primary responsibility for a vast stretch of Iraq's western desert, where they denied the Iraqis launch areas for missiles, led the search for Iraqi weapons of mass destruction (WMD), and became the supported, rather than the supporting, command in joint action with conventional ground forces. In operations along the Green Line in northern Iraq they were again the lead American element, working with Kurdish pesh merga militia to tie down Iraqi conventional divisions in a critical economy of force action, eventually marching into the cities of Kirkuk and Mosul and securing Iraq's northern oil fields. On Iraq's decisive southern front they worked closely with conventional forces, providing important targeting and intelligence for air strikes and ground maneuver. In Operation Enduring Freedom (OEF) in Afghanistan, a handful of commandos transformed a six-year stalemate into a rapid victory by America's Afghan allies over the Taliban regime. In both Iraq and Afghanistan – and elsewhere in the world – SOF are even now playing a critical role in combating insurgents and hunting down terrorists.

SOF have thus become an increasingly central element of American military power. Their growing utility is in turn attracting an increase in the personnel and resources devoted to special operations.

But how far should this trend be taken, and how prominent should SOF's role become? Are there natural limits on the roles and missions suitable for special operations, and if so, what are they? Is a modest expansion of special operations at the margins of an essentially conventional military the best approach? Or should the conventional military eventually be

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transformed around SOF – should special operations come to provide the predominant ground element in a radically restructured American military?

This paper approaches these questions by stipulating that some near term expansion is warranted, and asking instead, what are the limits in how far this can be taken in the longer term? In principle, this question could be approached from the supply side, by considering our ability to produce a greatly expanded SOF without diluting its quality: can sufficient numbers of qualified individuals be found, and if so, can the nation afford the time and training expenditures needed to prepare them properly? Alternatively, one could consider the demand side: how much of the nation’s military needs can be met with special operations, assuming for the moment that we can supply the forces if we otherwise wanted them? The ultimate limiter here is SOF’s ability to take over missions now primarily assigned to conventional forces – and especially, its ability to shoulder the mission that now drives much of the conventional ground forces’ structure: major combat operations (MCO). SOF’s role could certainly expand within the framework of traditionally SOF-specific missions such as unconventional warfare or counter-terrorist direct action, but such tasks are unlikely to become the central drivers of American force structure any time soon; expansion within the framework of such missions is thus likely to be incremental rather than radical. The limiting constraint on SOF’s predominance in the American military is its ability to supplant conventional forces in one or more of their traditional roles.<sup>1</sup>

Below I take the demand-side approach, and focus on the potential for long-term realignment of missions from conventional ground forces toward SOF. In particular, I consider one of the most widely discussed of these possibilities: the argument that a “New Model” or

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<sup>1</sup> Of course, MCO is not the only mission of conventional ground forces, and it may no longer be the most demanding on conventional force structure: stability and support operations (SASO) have emerged as a central driver of force adequacy in the aftermath of Saddam’s ouster in Iraq. Most proposals for realigning major missions of the conventional military to SOF, however, have focused on MCO, and it is far from clear that SOF could ever field enough troops to shoulder the demands of SASO in a theater the size of Iraq while performing their other necessary duties elsewhere. It is also theoretically possible that SOF could become predominant via a radical diminishing of MCO or SASO’s importance relative to such traditionally SOF-centered missions as unconventional warfare or counter-terrorist direct action. This seems unlikely by 2020, however: as long as there are either rogue states or potential great power challengers, MCO seems unlikely to recede completely; and as long as there are failed states that could potentially require large-scale American intervention, SASO seems unlikely to disappear as a mission with a significant claim on conventional force structure. By contrast, a realignment of the MCO mission to SOF could produce a significant change in the size of conventional heavy ground forces in the U.S. military, and potentially a major change in the nature (if not the size) of conventional U.S. ground forces overall. Either would constitute a radical change in the structure of the American military. I thus focus below on MCO, though this is certainly not the only conventional mission in which SOF’s future role could increase to some degree.

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“Afghan Model” of war based on the combination of SOF and standoff precision will enable America to wage major combat operations without mass conventional ground forces of our own. If so, this would imply a dramatic shift in the relative importance of SOF and the conventional military in American force structure, and would certainly constitute revolutionary, rather than merely evolutionary, change.

I argue, however, that such a realignment would be ill-advised. Although such proposals have been regularly advanced (and especially so in the months following the Taliban’s fall), evidence from Afghanistan and Iraq suggests important limitations to the Afghan Model that would make it risky to redesign the military around its requirements. While it can sometimes be highly effective, its preconditions cannot always be met, and thus a more balanced military will remain advisable for the foreseeable future.<sup>2</sup> None of this is to suggest that a moderate near-term expansion in SOF capability is unjustified; a detailed cost-benefit analysis of such incremental programmatics is beyond my scope here. But the scale of advisable change is probably limited to evolutionary expansion – certainly the case for the radical option considered below is too weak to be sustained.

I present this argument in four steps. First I describe the Afghan Model and its implications for American force structure in somewhat greater detail. I then assess its performance in Afghanistan and the implications of this for restructuring. Next I turn to Iraq, and evaluate evidence from OIF for the prospective performance of an Afghan Model elsewhere. I then address the prospects for future technological change in light of this combat experience. I conclude with some summary observations and implications for long term defense planning.

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<sup>2</sup> These findings are based on an analysis of data collected through a combination of interviews with 222 American, British, and Iraqi participants in the two conflicts; direct, physical inspection of the ground at key battlefields in Iraq and Afghanistan; and review of primary source written documentation from both campaigns. These interviews are documented in a series of audiotapes deposited in the U.S. Army Military History Institute’s archive at Carlisle Barracks, Pennsylvania, together with other primary source documentation obtained for this project. Collectively, they comprise, respectively, the Operation Enduring Freedom Strategic Studies Institute Research Collection, U.S. Army Military History Institute, cited hereafter as MHI/OEF, and the Operation Iraqi Freedom Strategic Studies Institute Research Collection, U.S. Army Military History Institute, cited hereafter as MHI/OIF. For reasons of security, SOF personnel are identified below by rank and first initial only. Full identification of interviewees is available in the cited archival material at appropriate levels of classification.

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## **The Afghan Model**

Perhaps the most-discussed concept for a SOF-predominant military turns on what some have called the “New Model” or “Afghan Model” of major combat operations. In this Afghan Model, small teams of elite commandos on the ground provide the targeting information needed for precision weapons to reach dispersed, concealed opponents. This SOF-directed standoff precision is so lethal, it is argued, that hostile militaries can be defeated without mass conventional land forces of our own. In this view, SOF is thus the catalyst that enables standoff precision strike to realize its full potential and substitute for large-scale close combat on the ground. Until the commandos arrived in Afghanistan, for example, high-altitude bombing could do little against a country with few large, fixed targets, this school argues. But once Coalition bombing was guided by friendly eyes on the ground, they claim, it became possible for airpower to annihilate the Taliban infantry and armor that had stymied the Northern Alliance for the preceding six years of civil warfare, enabling even an unsophisticated, outnumbered ally to liberate the entire country in a matter of weeks.<sup>3</sup> On the Green Line in Iraq in 2003, it is argued, SOF similarly enabled Kurdish militia previously cowed by the Republican Guard to turn the tables on Saddam’s forces and conquer major cities and key economic assets by advancing in the wake of SOF-directed precision bombing. Elsewhere in Iraq, it is argued, SOF’s ability to target precision strikes contributed greatly to enabling a Coalition ground force thought undersized by

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<sup>3</sup> See, e.g., Michael Gordon, “‘New’ U.S. War: Commandos, Airstrikes and Allies on the Ground,” *New York Times*, December 29, 2001, p. 1; Paul Watson and Richard Cooper, “Blended Tactics Paved Way for Sudden Collapse,” *Los Angeles Times*, November 15, 2001; Thom Shanker, “Conduct of War is Redefined by Success of Special Forces,” *New York Times*, January 21, 2002, p. 1; Vernon Loeb, “An Unlikely Super-Warrior Emerges in Afghan War,” *Washington Post*, May 19, 2002, p. 16; John Hendren, “Afghanistan Yields Lessons for Pentagon’s Next Targets,” *Los Angeles Times*, January 21, 2002, p. 1; Rajiv Chandrasekaran and John Pomfret, “Aided by U.S., Pashtun Militias Move Closer to Kandahar,” *Washington Post*, November 27, 2001, p. 6; Ann Scott Tyson, “U.S. is Prevailing With Its Most Finely Tuned War,” *Christian Science Monitor*, November 21, 2001, p. 1; Joseph Fitchett, “Swift Success for High-Tech Arms,” *International Herald Tribune*, December 7, 2001, p. 1; “Afghanistan: First Lessons,” *Jane’s Defence Weekly*, December 19, 2001.

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many to triumph nonetheless.<sup>4</sup> More broadly, some Afghan Model advocates see SOF-enabled precision strike as a substitute for large-scale conventional ground combat.<sup>5</sup>

If so, this might enable a radical restructuring of the U.S. military. If SOF-directed precision fires can provide the bulk of the real combat power needed to prevail in major combat, then much of the heavy conventional ground forces now held for this purpose could be eliminated or converted to other purposes. This would produce a possibly smaller, considerably lighter conventional Army and Marine Corps, combined with expanded precision strike air and missile assets and a significant increase in the SOF strength needed for their direction.<sup>6</sup> The result would be a very different U.S. military: lighter, faster, more strategically mobile, less reliant on theater logistical infrastructure and secure ports, with an even greater ability to project firepower over greater distances than today's – but also a military much more reliant than today's on standoff precision for effectiveness.

## **The Afghan Model in OEF**

SOF-directed precision strike was indeed extremely valuable in both OIF and OEF. But do these cases suggest that we can safely *rely* on standoff precision in the way a SOF-predominant Afghan Model restructuring would require? The answer is no. In neither case does the evidence suggest that SOF-directed precision was sufficient for success. In OEF, at least, it was *necessary*

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<sup>4</sup> See, e.g., Thom Shanker, "After the War: Elite Fighters; Chief Details Huge Scope of Special Operations," *New York Times*, July 28, 2003, p. A10; James Dao, "Aftereffects: Special Operations Forces; War Plan Drew U.S. Commandos From Shadows," *New York Times*, April 28, 2003, p. A1; Thomas Ricks, "Rumsfeld Stands Tall after Iraq Victory," *Washington Post*, April 20, 2003, p. A1; Jack Kelley, "Covert Troops Fight Shadow War Off Camera," *USA Today*, April 7, 2003, p. A2.

<sup>5</sup> Rowan Scarborough, "Decisive Force Now Measured by Speed," *Washington Times*, May 7, 2003; Usha Lee McFarling, "The Eyes and Ears of War," *Los Angeles Times*, 24 April 2003; Terry McCarthy, "What ever Happened to the Republican Guard?" *Time*, 12 May 2003; also Max Boot, "The New American Way of War," *Foreign Affairs*, Vol. 82, No. 4 (July/August 2003), pp. 41-58; Andrew Krepinevich, *Operation Iraqi Freedom: A First-Blush Assessment* (Washington, D.C.: Center for Strategic and Budgetary Assessments, 2003), pp. 13-24, 28, 30-31.

<sup>6</sup> See, e.g., Krepinevich, *Operation Iraqi Freedom*, pp. 13-24, 28, 30-31; Hunter Keeter, "Anti-Terror Campaign Could Speed Military Transformation," *Defense Daily*, November 21, 2001, p. 4; Michael Vickers, *The 2001 Quadrennial Defense Review, the FY 2003 Defense Budget Request and the Way Ahead for Transformation: Meeting the "Rumsfeld Test"* (Washington, D.C.: Center for Strategic and Budgetary Analysis, 19 June 2002); Moniz, "Afghanistan's Lessons Shaping New Military;" Scarborough, "Army Officials Fear More Cuts;" "Misdirected Defense Dollars," *New York Times*, January 16, 2002; Joseph Fitchett, "Campaign Proves the Length of U.S. Military Arm," *International Herald Tribune*, November 19, 2001, p. 1.

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– but it was not in itself sufficient. And for an Afghan Model based restructuring to make sense, something very close to sufficiency is required.

In Afghanistan, for example, the war entailed extensive close combat between two sizeable – Afghan – land armies. In fact, the war as a whole was much more orthodox, and much less revolutionary, than many now believe. OEF was not waged exclusively at long standoff, and success in the campaign’s close combat actions proved crucial to its outcome. The results of this close combat rested in turn on friendly land forces’ ability to integrate ground maneuver with the effects of precision fires. Where those ground forces enjoyed sufficient skills to exploit the effects of American firepower (or where their opponents were sufficiently inept, or both), that firepower proved decisive. But where unskilled allies were forced to confront enemies with the skills to reduce their exposure to standoff fires, the results were much less successful. And this in turn means that for the Afghan Model to work requires an important precondition: the ground forces involved, whether ours or someone else’s, need a combination of skills and motivation that is at least in the ballpark of the army they are fighting against. If this precondition is met, SOF-directed precision could indeed provide OEF-like results in other places and times. But if the precondition is not met, the OEF experience suggests that SOF-directed precision alone may not be sufficient for success.

In OEF, the war initially involved a very poorly skilled opponent, and the early fighting went mostly the way Afghan Model proponents assume. The new Model apparently took the Taliban by surprise, and their initial dispositions were poorly chosen for this kind of warfare.<sup>7</sup> They typically deployed on exposed ridgelines with little effort at camouflage or concealment. Entrenchments were haphazard, lacking overhead cover for infantry positions or proper emplacements for combat vehicles. As a result, their positions could be identified from often

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<sup>7</sup> America’s opponents in this campaign were not a unitary or monolithic military. Their three main components – the indigenous Afghan Taliban, foreign allies who fought for the Taliban regime, and the subset of these trained in al Qaeda’s infamous camps – had very different military properties and combat performance. Below, “Taliban” refers collectively to any hostile forces in Afghanistan. “Afghan Taliban” refers to the indigenous Afghan component. “Foreign Taliban” refers to all non-Afghan components, both al Qaeda and non-al Qaeda. “Al Qaeda” refers exclusively to the forces trained in bin Laden’s camps and associated with his organization. Of these, al Qaeda were the most capable; the Afghan Taliban the least. For a more detailed discussion, see Stephen Biddle, *Afghanistan and the Future of Warfare: Implications for Army and Defense Policy* (Carlisle, PA: U.S. Army War College Strategic Studies Institute, 2002), pp. 13-21.

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extraordinary distances. And once located, their poor entrenchment and exposed movement made them easy prey for precision weapons.

The result was slaughter. At Bishqab on October 21, 2001, for example, U.S. SOF pinpointed Taliban targets at ranges of over eight kilometers.<sup>8</sup> Skeptical Northern Alliance commanders peered through their binoculars at Taliban positions that had stymied them for years and were astounded to see the defenses suddenly vaporized by direct hits from 2,000 pound bombs. At Cobaki on October 22, Taliban observation posts were easily spotted at 1500-2000 meters and annihilated by precision bombing.<sup>9</sup> At Zard Kammar on October 28, Taliban defenses were wiped out from a mile away.<sup>10</sup> At Ac'capruk on November 4, exposed Taliban combat vehicles and crew-served weapons on hillsides west of the Balkh river were spotted from SOF observation posts on the Koh-i-Almortak ridge line some 4-5 kilometers distant and obliterated by American air strikes.<sup>11</sup> At Polanyi Canyon near Bamiyan on November 7, Taliban positions were plainly visible from more than four kilometers away.<sup>12</sup> Taliban counterattacks, as at Tarin Kowt on November 18, were conducted in the open with no evident attempt at concealment, dispersal, or covering fire to keep US or allied observers' heads down or to complicate target acquisition.<sup>13</sup>

Within days of the first SOF-directed air strikes, however, American commandos were already reporting that Taliban vehicles in their sectors had been smeared with mud to camouflage

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<sup>8</sup> MHI/OEF: Tape 032602p, CPT M. int.

<sup>9</sup> MHI/OEF: Tape 032602p, CPT M. int.

<sup>10</sup> Kirk Spitzer, "Green Berets Outfought, Outthought the Taliban," *USA Today*, January 7, 2002, pp. 1ff.

<sup>11</sup> MHI/OEF: Tape 032802p, CPT D. int.

<sup>12</sup> MHI/OEF: Tape 032702a, CPT T. et al. int. Some targets in this region were visible at ranges of up to 10 kilometers: *ibid.*

<sup>13</sup> MHI/OEF: Tape 032802a, MAJ D. int.; Tape 041902p, COL Clarke int.; see also Karl Vick, "In a Desert Outpost, Afghan War Was Won," *Washington Post*, December 31, 2001, pp. 1ff.; Peter Finn, "Wounded Army Captain Details Teamwork Against Taliban," *Washington Post*, December 11, 2001, pp. 1ff; Jonathan Weisman, "A Soldier's Story: U.S. Backbone Wins Battle," *USA Today*, December 26, 2001, p. 5. Note that the Taliban military's compartmentation and poor communications meant that learning often proceeded at different rates in different parts of the front. In the north, for example, Taliban defenders who had seen the effects of Allied bombing at Bishqab, Cobaki, and Oimetan had already begun to adopt careful camouflage and overhead cover by November 5 at Bai Beche, whereas Taliban defenders around Ac'capruk, which had not been extensively bombed before November 4, did not (MHI/OEF: Tape 032602p, CPT M. int.; Tape 032802p, CPT D. int.). Similarly, the Taliban experience in the north filtered down to units in the south more slowly than it did among units within the northern fighting – hence the early southern counterattack at Tarin Kowt was massed and exposed in the open, rather than covered and concealed as were their later efforts at Sayed Slim Kalay or along Highway 4. In each case, however, the affected units learned quickly from their own experience, and adaptation followed rapidly after the initial air strikes.

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them.<sup>14</sup> By November 5, the Taliban were already making aggressive use of overhead cover and concealment.<sup>15</sup> In the fighting north of Kandahar and along Highway 4 in December, al Qaeda defenses were well-camouflaged, dispersed, and making use of natural terrain for expedient cover.<sup>16</sup> This pattern continued through Operation ANACONDA in March, by which time al Qaeda forces were practicing systematic communications security, dispersal, camouflage discipline, use of cover and concealment, and exploitation of dummy fighting positions to draw fire and attention from their real dispositions.<sup>17</sup> The Taliban did not just passively suffer under American attack – they adapted their methods to try to reduce their vulnerability. And as they did, the war changed character.

Among the more important changes was increasing difficulty in finding targets for precision attack. At Bai Beche on November 2-5, for example, a mostly-al Qaeda defensive force occupied an old, formerly-Soviet system of deliberate entrenchments. With proper cover and concealment, the defenders were able to prevent American commandos from locating the entirety of their individual fighting positions, many of which could not be singled out for precision attack. American SOF thus called for area bombing across the entirety of the position. After more than two days of heavy bombing, enough surviving, actively resisting al Qaeda defenders remained in the position to drive back the initial attempt by American-allied Northern Alliance cavalry to take the position. The attached American SOF observed this reverse and began calling renewed airstrikes in anticipation of a second assault. In the process, however, a SOF warning order to the cavalry to prepare for another push was mistaken by the cavalry as a command to launch the assault, with the result that the cavalry began its attack much sooner than intended. The surprised Americans watched the Afghan cavalry break cover and begin their advance just as a series of laser-guided bombs had been released from American aircraft in response to the SOF calls for air support. The SOF commander reported that he was convinced they had just caused a friendly fire incident: the bomb release and the cavalry advance were way

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<sup>14</sup> MHI/OEF: Tape 032602p, CPT M. int. This became widespread throughout the theater: see, e.g., Tape 032802a, MAJ D. int.; Tape 032602a, CPT H. et al. int.; Tape 032602p, MAJ M., MAJ K.

<sup>15</sup> MHI/OEF: Tape 032602p, CPT M. int. On al Qaeda's use of cover and concealment in southern Afghanistan, see Tape 032602a, CPT H. et al. int.; Tape 032802a, MAJ D. int.

<sup>16</sup> MHI/OEF: Tape 032602a, CPT H. et al. int.; Tape 032802a, MAJ D. int.

<sup>17</sup> See, e.g., MHI/OEF: AFZS-LF-B, Memo, FOB 3/3 SSE Support Intelligence Summary, 25-29 March 2002; Tape 041902p, LTC Briley int.; Tape 041902p, COL Clarke int.; Tape 041802a, COL Smith int.; Tape 100702p, LTC Townsend int.

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too close together for official doctrinal limits, and the air strike would never have been ordered if the SOF had known that the cavalry was then jumping off for the second assault. As it happened, the bombs landed just seconds before the cavalry arrived. In fact, the cavalry galloped through the enormous cloud of smoke and dust that was still hanging in the air after the explosions, emerging behind the enemy defenses before their garrison knew what was happening. The defenders, seeing Northern Alliance cavalry to their rear, abandoned their positions in an attempt to avoid encirclement.<sup>18</sup>

The result was an important victory — in fact, the victory that turned the tide in the north and led directly to the fall of Mazar-e-Sharif on November 10. But the battle involved serious close combat (cavalry overrunning prepared, actively resisting defenses), and the outcome was a very close call. The assault profited from an extremely tight integration of movement with suppressive fire — far tighter, in fact, than either the cavalry or their supporting SOF would ever have dared arrange deliberately. Luck thus played an important role in the outcome. The Northern Alliance might well have carried the position eventually even without the good fortune of an extraordinary integration of fire and movement; this was clearly a crucial battle, and they would presumably have redoubled their efforts if the second attempt had failed. But as fought, the outcome involved an important element of serendipity.

Nor was Bai Beche unique in demanding hard fighting at close quarters. In the December fighting along Highway 4 south of Kandahar, concealed al Qaeda defenses among a series of culverts and in burned-out vehicle hulks along the roadside remained wholly undetected until their fire drove back an allied advance at point blank range.<sup>19</sup> An al Qaeda counterattack in the same sector using a system of wadis for cover approached undetected to within 100-200 meters of allied and American SOF positions along the highway before opening fire on friendly forces.<sup>20</sup> At the village of Sayed Slim Kalay north of Kandahar between December 2-4, concealed al Qaeda defenders likewise remained undetected until they fired upon unsuspecting U.S. and allied attackers. An al Qaeda counterattack using local terrain for cover maneuvered into small arms

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<sup>18</sup> MHI/OEF: Tape 032602p, CPT M. int.; Tape 032602p, MAJ M., MAJ K. int.

<sup>19</sup> MHI/OEF: Tape 032602a, CPT H. et al. int.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid.

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range of friendly defenders before being driven back.<sup>21</sup> At Konduz in late November, al Qaeda counterattackers penetrated allied positions deeply enough to compel supporting American SOF teams to withdraw at least three times to avoid being overrun.<sup>22</sup> At Tora Bora, massive American bombing proved insufficient to compensate for allied Afghan unwillingness to close with dug-in al Qaeda defenders in the cave complexes of the White Mountains; this ground force hesitancy probably allowed Osama bin Laden and his lieutenants to escape into neighboring Pakistan.<sup>23</sup>

At Operation ANACONDA in March 2002, an intensive pre-battle reconnaissance effort focused every available surveillance and target acquisition system on a tiny, ten-by-ten kilometer battlefield. Yet fewer than 50 percent of all the al Qaeda positions ultimately identified on this battlefield were discovered prior to ground contact. The result was extensive close combat. In the opening action of the battle, for example, American-allied Afghans under General Mohammed Zia and supported by American SOF were assigned to drive al Qaeda defenders from the “Tri-cities” area (the villages of Shirkankeyl, Babakuhl and Marzak); they were instead pinned down under hostile fire from prepared defenses in the surrounding mountainsides that had survived preliminary air strikes. Zia’s troops eventually withdrew after they proved unable to advance. Only after the al Qaeda defenders pulled back under joint, multinational attack by allied airpower, western infantry, and multinational SOF, were Zia’s troops able to enter the Tri-cities and adjoining ridgelines. In fact, most of Operation ANACONDA took the form of a series of close assaults to destroy surviving, actively resisting defenses whose locations were mostly unknown prior to their firing upon friendly forces, often at very close quarters.<sup>24</sup>

Among these examples, the fighting along Highway 4 in December is particularly instructive. The American-allied Afghans here were divided among two factions. The first, commanded by Haji Gul Alai, were very capable troops by Afghan standards. They used terrain for cover and concealment, maintained good intervals between elements in the advance, moved

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<sup>21</sup> MHI/OEF: Tape 032802a, MAJ D. int.

<sup>22</sup> MHI/OEF: Memorandum for the Record, COL J. int., 2 July 2002.

<sup>23</sup> See, e.g., Barton Gellman and Thomas Ricks, “U.S. Concludes Bin Laden Escaped at Tora Bora Fight; Failure to Send Troops in Pursuit Termed Major Error,” *Washington Post*, April 17, 2002, p. 1; William Arkin, “Dropping 15,000 Pounds of Frustration,” *Los Angeles Times*, December 15, 2001.

<sup>24</sup> MHI/OEF: Tape 042002p, LTC Gray int.; Memorandum for the Record, COL J. int., 2 July 2002; Tape 041902p, LTC Briley int.; Tape 041802p, LTC Lundy int.; Tape 041802a, COL Smith int.; Tape 041802p, LTC Preysler int.; Tape 041902a, MAJ Busko int.; Tape 041902a, CPT Murphy int.; Tape 041902a, CPT Lecklenburg int.; Tape 100702p, LTC Townsend int.

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by alternate bounds, exploited suppressive fire to cover moving elements' exposure, and were able to exploit the effects of American air strikes by coordinating their movement with the bombing (which many Afghan factions could not). The second faction, by contrast, was much less skilled: the attached SOF commander characterized them as "an armed mob — just villagers given weapons." Their tactics consisted of exposed, bunched-up movement in the open, with no attempt to use terrain to reduce their exposure, and little ability to employ supporting or suppressive fires. At the Arghestan Bridge on December 5, this second faction launched an assault on a dug-in al Qaeda position south of the Kandahar airport. Driven back repeatedly, they proved unable to take the position, in spite of U. S. air support. Only after these troops were withdrawn and Haji Gul Alai's forces took over the assault the following day could the al Qaeda positions be taken.<sup>25</sup>

Of course, the alliance ultimately prevailed.<sup>26</sup> And SOF-directed precision airpower was a necessary precondition for this – it was what turned a stalemated civil war into a dramatic battlefield victory for America and its allies. But while precision bombing was *necessary*, it was not *sufficient*. It could annihilate poorly prepared fighting positions, and it could inflict heavy losses on even well-disposed defenses. But it could not destroy the entirety of properly prepared positions by itself. And unless such positions are all but annihilated, even a handful of surviving, actively-resisting defenders with modern automatic weapons can make great slaughter of unsophisticated indigenous allies whose idea of tactics is to walk forward bunched up in the open. To overcome skilled, resolute defenders who have adopted the standard countermeasures to high-firepower airstrikes still requires close combat by friendly ground forces whose own skills are sufficient to enable them to use local cover and their own suppressive fire to advance against hostile survivors with modern weapons.

By and large, America's main Afghan allies in this war either enjoyed such fundamental skills or profited from accidentally tight coordination of their movement and American fires (as at Bai Beche) or both. The Northern, and later the Southern, Alliances were not uniformly the motley assortment of militiamen they are sometimes said to have been. Enough of them were

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<sup>25</sup> MHI/OEF: Tape 032602a, CPT H. et al. int.; Memorandum for the Record, CPT H. int., 2 July 2002.

<sup>26</sup> At least in the sense of driving the Taliban from power. Whether larger American war aims have been secured in Afghanistan is still to be determined.

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capable of modern military tactics to allow them to exploit the tremendous potential that precision air power can bring to armies capable of integrating their movement with its firepower.

But not all of America's allies in this war were up to this job. Though the typical combat units on each side were about equally matched (as the stalled pre-intervention battle lines imply), both sides in Afghanistan were actually diverse mixtures of better- and worse-trained, more- and less-motivated troops — and this diversity offers a couple of valuable opportunities to observe instances of unequally-skilled forces in combat. In such unequal fights as the first day at Arghistan Bridge and the assault on the Tri-cities in ANACONDA, the results suggest that where the indigenous allies are overmatched tactically, American air power and SOF support alone may not be enough to turn the tide. In Afghanistan, the Northern and Southern Alliances, eventually combined with the American and Canadian infantry that fought at ANACONDA, together provided significant ground forces that ultimately shouldered an essential load of old-fashioned close combat against surviving, actively resisting opponents. Even with 21<sup>st</sup> century firepower, without this essential close combat capability the outcome in Afghanistan could easily have been very different.

## **The Afghan Model in OIF**

What about Iraq? Did SOF-directed precision strike enable an out-matched or unskilled Kurdish ally to defeat greatly superior Iraqi forces on the Green Line in 2003? Kurdish skills, though mixed, were certainly no match for the Republican Guard on their own. A decade of actual combat experience gives ample evidence of this: the Guard repeatedly crushed pesh merga resistance whenever Kurdish uprisings without American military protection gave Saddam cause and opportunity.<sup>27</sup> If SOF support had enabled the pesh merga to turn the tables on the Guard in

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<sup>27</sup> On Kurdish skills and tactics in 2003, see, e.g., MHI/OIF Tape 062503p1sb MAJ P int. Note that this is not to suggest that even the Iraqi Republican Guard was especially skilled in military fundamentals: on their manifest limitations, see Stephen Biddle, "Victory Misunderstood: What the Gulf War Tells Us About the Future of Conflict," *International Security*, Vol. 21, No. 2 (Fall 1996), pp. 139-179 at 158-61; idem., "Iraq and the Future of Warfare," Testimony Before the House Armed Services Committee in *Operation Iraqi Freedom: An Outside Perspective, Hearings Before the Committee on Armed Services, U.S. House of Representatives, One Hundred Eighth Congress, First Session*, 21 October, 2003, pp. 4-7. But limited though the Guard's skills were, they were nevertheless manifestly superior to the pesh merga's. If SOF-directed precision strike were sufficient to drive the Guard from the field in support of a pesh merga advance, this would thus provide at least some significant support

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2003, this would therefore be evidence of precision strike prevailing without support from capable conventional ground forces, and would thus strengthen the case for an Afghan Model restructuring of the American military.

Yet this is not what actually happened on the Green Line. In fact there was no contact between Kurdish militia and the Republican Guard in OIF. The Iraqi defenses on the Green Line were disposed with regular conscript infantry in the forward positions opposite the Kurds. A handful of Republican Guard divisions were withheld in reserve behind these forward defenses, with the dual mission of encouraging the regulars in front of them to fight, and of constituting a mobile reaction force for response to local breakthroughs or for repositioning elsewhere in the theater as information developed on the location of the American main effort. At least one of these reserve Guard divisions was in fact sent south to Baghdad after the war began, but none of them was committed to combat on the northern front, and there is no evidence of any fighting between any Guard elements and either Kurdish militia or their attached American SOF in OIF.<sup>28</sup>

There *was* significant combat against Iraqi conscript infantry in the north. These Iraqi conscripts, however, were poorly motivated and very poorly skilled. The results bore a strong resemblance to the early stages of the Afghan campaign, in which inept indigenous Taliban defenders were swept away by SOF-directed precision air power alone. The Iraqi 8<sup>th</sup> Infantry Division's positions before Kirkuk, for example, consisted of an interconnected system of 20-foot high dirt bunkers that were plainly visible to the naked eye from any direction, and easily detected by observers with binoculars at distances of as much as 15 kilometers away. The Iraqis made no apparent attempt at concealment or camouflage, made no attempt to use natural cover to thwart target acquisition, frequently silhouetted bunkers on the geographic crests of ridge lines, and provided no overhead protection for open slit trenches between bunkers.<sup>29</sup> American SOF had little difficulty targeting such positions, which offered little meaningful protection against precision air strikes. The garrisons of these positions, moreover, rarely attempted to hold their ground under attack. Though few deserted outright (Ba'athist paramilitaries and Republican

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to a claim that Afghan Model capabilities can overturn otherwise very unfavorable local military balances without significant U.S. ground strength.

<sup>28</sup> MHI/OIF: Tape 062503a1sb LTC B int (J2, CJSOTF-N)

<sup>29</sup> MHI/OIF: Tape 062503p1sb MAJ P int.; Tape 062503a1sb LTC B int. Iraqi defenses at Mosul were similar: Tape 062403p1sb LTC K int.

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Guards to their rear saw to that),<sup>30</sup> many remained in position only until engaged by Coalition air power, at which point they would withdraw without risking close combat. Friendly forces thus adopted a pattern of advancing into visual range of Iraqi defenses, targeting them for precision air strikes, then walking forward to occupy the abandoned positions after the Iraqi conscript garrison fell back. Iraqi casualties were consequently light, but Coalition casualties were all but nonexistent and Iraqi territory could be taken at will as long as the advance was pushed no faster than the rate at which air power was available to destroy static, easily detected Iraqi defenses.<sup>31</sup>

## **The Future**

Taken together, Afghanistan and Iraq thus suggest that a SOF-predominant Afghan Model *can* sometimes substitute for large-scale U.S. ground forces – but only if an important precondition is met. If indigenous allies are capable of providing troops whose skills and motivation are somewhere in the ballpark of their opponents', then SOF-directed precision firepower can be decisive, turning stalemates or looming defeats into one-sided battlefield victories for America and its allies. If the enemy is unskilled or ill-motivated, then even unskilled or ill-motivated allies will be sufficient – as both the early stages of the Afghan campaign and the fighting on the Green Line in OIF show. But if the enemy is better trained or more willing to stand and fight, then inept or uncommitted allies may not be able to take advantage of the tremendous potential that SOF-directed standoff precision brings to the battlefield – as we have seen at Tora Bora, Arghestan Bridge, and the Tri-cities in ANACONDA.

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<sup>30</sup> Some SOF observers report hearing regular Iraqi-on-Iraqi gunfire issuing from behind the Iraqi front, which they attribute to enforcement action by paramilitaries and Republican Guards assigned to prevent conscripts from deserting: see, e.g., MHI/OIF Tape 062503p1sb MAJ P int.

<sup>31</sup> MHI/OIF: Tape 062503p1sb MAJ P int.; Tape 062503a1sb LTC B int.; Tape 062403p1sb LTC K int.

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Figure 1: Al Qaeda Fighting Position Sanger, Objective Ginger, Shah-I-kot Valley  
Afghanistan

But what about the longer term future? Will this finding change with newer technology by 2020? Probably not. The cover and concealment that enabled al Qaeda defenders to thwart SOF target acquisition and precision engagement in 2001-2 were provided by features of the earth's physical and human geography that are likely to remain problematic for even 2020's sensors and weapons. Figure 1 provides a concrete illustration of this problem in the form of a photograph of an al Qaeda fighting position from Takhur Ghar mountain near Objective Ginger on the ANACONDA battlefield.<sup>32</sup> The arrow indicates the al Qaeda defenders' location; without the arrow, there would be no visible sign of a combat position even from the nearly point blank range at which this photograph was taken. Overhanging rock in turn provides cover and concealment from overhead surveillance systems. In principle one might hope to observe

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<sup>32</sup> Photo taken from MHI/OEF: AFZS-LF-B, Memo, FOB 3/3 SSE Support Intelligence Summary, 25-29 March 2002.

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resupply movement or al Qaeda patrols into or out of such positions, or to overhear radio communications from its occupants. Al Qaeda soldiers wearing the flowing robes of local herdsmen and traveling in small parties among the mountains, however, are nearly impossible to distinguish at a distance from the noncombatants who tend goats or travel through such areas as a matter of routine.<sup>33</sup> And defenders able to operate under radio listening silence while communicating using runners, landlines or other non-broadcast means can reduce signals intercepts to a level that makes identification of specific fighting positions very problematic. Against such targets, it is far from clear that any surveillance technology coming any time soon will ensure reliable target acquisition from standoff distances.

Nor are positions such as this one rare anomalies or atypical of Afghan terrain more generally. Figures 2 and 3 show broader samples of the Shah-i-kot battlefield on which Anaconda was fought, including the features known as “The Whale” (after a similar rock formation at the US National Training Center at Ft. Irwin California) and Objective Ginger, respectively.<sup>34</sup> Almost any of the dozens of shadows, crevices, or folds in the earth scattered across these landscapes could house positions like the one shown in Figure 1. And this is just a tiny subset of even the Anaconda battlefield, which is itself a tiny subset of Afghanistan as a whole. The natural complexity of such surfaces offers any adaptive opponent with the necessary training and skills a multitude of opportunities to thwart even developmental remote surveillance systems. Against such opponents, remote surveillance will still detect some targets, and remote sensors remain crucial assets, but the only sure means of target acquisition is direct ground contact: a ground force whose advance threatens objectives that the enemy cannot sacrifice and thus must defend compels them to give away their locations by firing on their attackers. Skilled attackers can eventually locate any defensive position by observing the source of the fire directed at them – and this, in fact, is how the majority of the al Qaeda positions at ANACONDA were found.

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<sup>33</sup> The author observed many such individuals and small parties among the high ridge lines and mountain valleys of Paktia Province during helicopter travel between Bagram AFB and the Shah-i-kot valley in April 2002.

<sup>34</sup> Photographs taken by the author, April 20, 2002.

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Figure 2: The Whale, Shah-i-kot Valley, Afghanistan

Nor is this problem unique to Afghanistan or its mountainous terrain. Militarily exploitable cover is commonplace in almost all likely future theaters of war. For targets who observe radio listening silence, as al Qaeda now does, foliage, for example, degrades all current remote sensor technologies; urban areas provide overhead cover, create background clutter, and pose difficult problems of distinguishing military targets from innocent civilians.<sup>35</sup> Each is widely available. More than 26 percent of Somalia's land area is wooded or urban, as is more than 20 percent of the Sudan's, 34 percent of Georgia's, or 46 percent of the Philippines'.<sup>36</sup> This cover, moreover, is

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<sup>35</sup> See, e.g., Alan Vick, et al., *Enhancing Air Power's Contribution Against Light Infantry Targets* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND, 1996), pp. 13-30; Peter Brooks and Edward Smith, "Evaluation of Airborne Surveillance Systems," *IDA Research Summaries*, Vol. 3, No. 1, (Winter/Spring 1996), pp. 4-5; Dominick Giglio, "Overview of Foliage/Ground Penetration and Interferometric SAR Experiments," *SPIE Proceedings*, Vol. 2230, 1994, pp. 209-17; Tony Capaccio, "An Army Bosnia Review Rates JSTARS a 'White Elephant,'" *Defense Week*, November 25, 1996, pp. 1ff; idem, "NATO Strikes Must Pierce the Fog of War," *Defense Week*, Vol. 15, No. 7 (Feb. 14, 1994), pp. 1ff; Captain Kristin M. Baker, untitled, *Military Intelligence*, October-December 1996, pp. 27-29; Lt. Col. Collin A. Agee, untitled, *Military Intelligence*, October-December 1996, pp. 6-12. For a more detailed discussion, see Stephen Biddle, "The Past as Prologue: Assessing Theories of Future Warfare," *Security Studies* Vol. 8, No. 1 (Autumn 1998), pp. 1-74 at 24-6.

<sup>36</sup> Central Intelligence Agency, *The World Factbook, 2001*, available at <http://www.cia.gov/cia/publications/factbook/>

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often distributed in small, widespread patches. On the GOODWOOD battlefield of 1944 in Normandy, for example, over 80 percent of all one-kilometer grid squares now contain at least some forest or urban cover (though only 26 percent of the total land area is covered).<sup>37</sup> In most countries, the central geostrategic objectives are urban areas; even where the bulk of the national land area is open desert (as in Iraq), the cities are both the key terrain and an ample source of cover from overhead sensors (Baghdad alone covers more than 300 square kilometers).<sup>38</sup> Among the most important themes in the history of modern tactics is the growth of methods for exploiting such cover to reduce vulnerability to modern firepower – the “empty battlefield” that has characterized the modern era is a product of skilled armies’ ability to find cover sufficient to thwart standoff target acquisition and to exploit this cover to perform meaningful military missions without excessive exposure.<sup>39</sup>

And this in turn suggests that the preconditions for Afghan Model success observed in 2001-3 are likely to remain binding for the foreseeable future: against an opponent skilled and determined enough to exploit the complexity of the earth’s surface for cover and concealment, some ground force capable of taking advantage of such cover itself will remain necessary for standoff precision to be decisive. Fire *and* maneuver remain essential against skilled, resolute enemies; a model built on fire alone – even very precise fires – will thus remain a risky proposition for a long time to come.<sup>40</sup>

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<sup>37</sup> *Institut Geographique National Carte Serie M761, Feuilles XVI-12 (Caen) and XVI-13 (Mezidon).*

<sup>38</sup> <http://media.maps.com/magellan/Images/BAGHDA-W1.gif>

<sup>39</sup> Modern fire-and-movement, combined arms tactics turn on exploitation of natural cover: Stephen Biddle, *Military Power: Explaining Victory and Defeat in Modern Battle* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2004); also Shelford Bidwell and Dominick Graham, *Firepower: British Army Weapons and Theories of War, 1904-1945* (London: Allen and Unwin, 1985); Jonathan House, *Combined Arms Warfare in the Twentieth Century* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2001); John English, *On Infantry* (New York: Praeger, 1984); Stephen Biddle, “Land Warfare: Theory and Practice,” in John Baylis, James Wirtz, Eliot Cohen and Colin Gray, eds., *Strategy in the Contemporary World* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002), pp. 91-112.

<sup>40</sup> This is not to suggest that current or developmental sensors are useless or that anyone anywhere can fight effectively from cover opaque to standoff observation. To find and exploit cover while taking or holding ground requires a very demanding set of tactical skills. Historically, armies have varied widely in their ability to do this, and in fact the Afghan campaign itself displays substantial variation in the Taliban’s ability to do so: the Afghan Taliban early in the fighting were systematically unable to do so; only the foreign Taliban and al Qaeda encountered later in the campaign proved able to contest territory from covered, concealed positions. The less skilled the opponent, the more exposed they will be to remote target acquisition. And no army can disappear utterly: diligent reconnaissance will always uncover part of an enemy’s dispositions; the better the sensors, the more they will find, and today’s sensors can find enough to be a crucial contributor to success in theaters like Afghanistan. But this is not to say that they can find enough – on their own – to break a skilled, resolute opponent

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Figure 3: Takhur Ghar Mountain and Objective Ginger, Shah-i-kot Valley, Afghanistan

## **Conclusions and Implications**

The primary implication of this analysis is that the Afghan Model has important limitations as a template around which to restructure the American military. Sometimes a SOF-centered Afghan Model military would in fact be the ideal force: where America enjoys either an inept opponent or the right allies, a restructured force could well be superior to today's – with both extreme lethality and increased agility. But if our enemies' skills are closer to al Qaeda's than to Iraqi conscripts', then the Afghan Model cannot succeed without allies on the ground with at least broadly comparable skills and motivation. And in a world where we cannot know just where, with whom, or against whom we may be fighting in 2020, to assume we will always enjoy such allies could be a dangerous gamble. If, instead, we retain a balanced military in which

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by standoff fires alone. Even today's best sensors are still far from an ability to acquire most or all of a hostile force that has learned to exploit the natural complexity of the earth's surface for cover and concealment – as our experience against al Qaeda in 2001-2 demonstrates.

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America is itself capable of fielding a conventional ground force with the skills and motivation needed to close with the enemy and exploit properly the potential of standoff fires, we thus reduce uncertainty and gain important leverage.

Of course, this analysis is limited to the major combat operations around which the Afghan Model turns. Major combat is not the only mission required of future forces, and will probably not be the most often used. Many now see stealthy action against terrorists hiding in the shadows, for example, as the future of warfare, and argue that such wars call for a greatly enhanced role for SOF. If the key targets for the future are small groups of furtive individuals deep in the interior of potentially hostile countries, then SOF's combination of strategic reach, independent direct-action capability, human intelligence collection, and small footprint are ideally suited, whereas heavy conventional capability is often inappropriate. And if so, some argue, then in a future of counter-terrorist warfare, special operations should become the main effort in U.S. military action, with greatly expanded size and resources, and with much of the remaining military tasked to support their efforts. Many in this school thus believe the Special Operations Command (SOCOM) should be transformed from a force provider into a combatant command with a major operational role – some say the lead role – in prosecuting the Global War on Terror.<sup>41</sup>

A proper analysis of SOCOM's role in the War on Terror is beyond the scope of this paper. But it is important to note that even if one posits a much larger role for SOF in future counter-terror warfare, this is still a long way from a sound case for a SOF-predominant military in 2020. However important direct action against terrorists may become, it will remain one among several important missions – and several of these will continue to require large conventional ground forces for their accomplishment. One of these missions – major combat – is addressed in detail above, and will surely remain an important element of U.S. strategy for the foreseeable future. In fact, the Bush Doctrine for waging the War on Terror rests heavily on major combat capability as a means of holding states accountable for the actions of terrorists within their borders and denying terrorists possible state havens for their activities. But major

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<sup>41</sup> See, e.g., Susan Schmidt and Thomas Ricks, "Pentagon Plans Shift in War on Terror; Special Operations Command's Role to Grow with Covert Approach," *Washington Post*, September 18, 2002, p. A1; Ricks, "Rumsfeld Stands Tall After Iraq Victory;" Gregory Vistica, "Military Split on How to Use Special Forces in Terror War," *Washington Post*, January 5, 2004, p. A1.

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combat is hardly the only such mission. A major element of current U.S. strategy is the political reconstruction of Iraq, a long-term mission with heavy demands for conventional ground forces in a stabilization and support operations (SASO) role. More broadly, SASO capabilities have been in heavy demand ever since the Cold War ended, and will surely continue to be required, whether in Iraq or elsewhere, for the foreseeable future. If major combat could be reliably waged with a military consisting chiefly of SOF and standoff precision weapons, then one might reasonably prescribe a radically transformed military in which today's heavy forces were restructured to provide the needed SASO capability at lower cost and greater effectiveness. But the analysis above suggests that an Afghan Model restructuring may be ill-advised for major combat. And either way, an emphasis on counter-terror war per se would not free America from the need to retain large-scale conventional ground forces of some sort – whatever the best organizational framework for commanding them in the Global War on Terror.

Though it may well make sense to expand incrementally the role and size of special operations forces, it thus does not appear that the Afghan Model, at least, offers a viable opportunity for radical restructuring by 2020. Change is surely needed, but so is continuity. And the actual experience of Afghanistan and Iraq suggests that the need for continuity may be greater than some now expect, the scale of the changes needed may be more evolutionary, and the prospects for revolutionary change may be more limited.