



CANSOF 2035

Date: November 20, 2025

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KEY EVENTS

On November 19, 2025, Major General Steve Hunter presented *CANSOF 2035* at the 2025 West Coast Security Conference. The presentation examined the evolution of Canadian special operations from their origins in domestic counterterrorism to sustained overseas combat operations and, more recently, to their place in strategic competition. Major General Hunter outlined the expanded mandate of Canadian Special Operations Forces Command (CANSOFCOM), emphasizing precision effects, readiness, partnership building, and operations across physical, digital, and human domains. The session also addressed the role of narrative influence and hybrid threats in the gray zone, alongside emerging capabilities such as artificial intelligence.

NATURE OF DISCUSSION

The discussion framed special operations as a unique instrument in the age of strategic competition. Major General Hunter emphasized that contemporary security challenges unfold across interconnected domains, where competition, influence, and trust are as decisive as kinetic force. Particularly in Canada's context, the emergence of new challenges means CANSOFCOM faces a shifting reality. Within this environment, CANSOFCOM was presented as a tool to detect and disrupt asymmetric threats at distance. These conditions place a premium on partnerships, forward presence, and adaptability, and position special operations as vital to both Canadian national security and defence. Fundamentally, the vision for CANSOFCOM revolves around an integrated and value-based proposition, enabling rapid response, highly trained SOF professionals, and leveraging exquisite capabilities to resolve complex problems.

BACKGROUND

CANSOFCOM's role and capabilities have evolved considerably over the past three decades. Major General Hunter traced the command's origins to the transfer of domestic counterterrorism responsibility from the Royal Canadian Mounted Police to the Department of National Defence in the early 1990s, which led to the establishment of Joint Task Force 2 in 1993. From 1993 to 2001, Canadian special operations focused primarily on domestic counterterrorism. Following the September 11 attacks, Canadian forces were deployed early to Afghanistan, marking the beginning of sustained overseas combat operations as part of the Global War on Terror. In 2006, the formal establishment of CANSOFCOM reflected a shift toward a more flexible and integrated command structure capable of addressing a broader spectrum of security threats.

Today, CANSOFCOM functions as a critical instrument at the intersection of Canadian national security and national defence, deploying high-readiness, low-profile forces to counter contemporary threats to Canada – at home or globally. Its operational philosophy emphasizes forward presence, rapid deployment, and precision effects. Major General Hunter underscored that CANSOFCOM's location at the nexus of national defence and national security, highlights the importance of coordinating with key domestic intelligence and law enforcement partners, while preserving CANSOF's ability to integrate and augment allied and coalition operations.

Personnel were identified as the command's decisive advantage. Beyond operators, CANSOFCOM relies on intelligence professionals, logisticians, and specialized support staff to enable effective operations. As emerging technologies continue to reshape the security environment, traditional capabilities are increasingly complemented by artificial intelligence, unmanned systems, robotics, and innovation hubs. These hubs enable rapid experimentation, allowing the command to adapt more quickly than traditional procurement processes would otherwise permit and to maintain operational relevance.

Major General Hunter emphasized that sustained trust with allies is foundational to CANSOFCOM's effectiveness. With limited resources, the command deliberately focuses its efforts on Canada's most pressing national security and

defence challenges, applying special operations where they can deliver strategic effect.

QUESTION AND ANSWER

To what extent has CANSOFCOM had to adapt to emergent forms of warfare and what has this looked like from a strategic planning perspective?

CANSOFCOM has had to adjust as the security environment shifted from relatively well-defined counterterrorism missions to a more contested landscape characterized by strategic competition. This transition required moving away from linear planning models toward threat-driven approaches capable of rapid adjustment in ambiguous operating environments.

What specific strengths does CSIS bring to Five Eyes and how might intelligence sharing amongst Canada's allies change over the coming years

Through CSIS, Canada brings specialized expertise, deep understanding of its national security landscape, and an ability to work with domestic and international partners. In a relatively small organization, it is valuable to discuss with colleagues in Ottawa and to bring in relevant experts on issue-specific topics to complement capabilities.

With the rise of influence operations and information warfare, special operations forces have to operate in the cognitive domain, how will CANSOF specifically meet these challenges?

Some Western militaries are still grappling with how to operate effectively in information environments while remaining aligned with democratic norms. Canada's emphasis on privacy and commitment to transparency shapes its approach, though balancing these values with operational effectiveness remains an evolving challenge.

In Canada, multiple agencies and departments work on similar threat sets at once. How do we ensure collaborative systems exist for information sharing across departments?

Canada has made progress toward more integrated information-sharing systems. CANSOFCOM's headquarters includes embedded personnel from other government departments, facilitating operational coordination. Collaboration has also been further reinforced through senior-level forums and sustained practitioner-level engagement with partners such as the Royal Canadian Mounted Police, Canadian Security Intelligence Service, and Communications Security Establishment.

KEY POINTS OF DISCUSSION

- CANSOFCOM has evolved from a domestically focused counterterrorism capability into a special operations command addressing a wide spectrum of security challenges both domestically and globally.
- The command prioritizes the detection and mitigation of asymmetric threats across physical, digital, and human domains through high-readiness, low-profile operations.
- Forward presence, readiness, and alliance building are central to countering hybrid threats that seek to exploit vulnerabilities and erode trust.
- To remain operationally relevant, CANSOFCOM complements traditional capabilities with emerging technologies and innovation mechanisms that enable rapid adaptation.

FURTHER READING

Hunter, S. J. (2013). Breaching barriers: A comprehensive approach to special operations forces decision-making in non-traditional security environments (CANSOFCOM Professional Development Centre Monograph Series No. 9). Canadian Defence Academy Press.



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