Portolano Transforms Special Forces: Unified Command for 21st Century Conflicts

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The Italian Special Forces are undergoing a profound transformation. As the return of conventional warfare and the massive introduction of new technologies – drones, autonomous systems, cyber – change the face of conflicts, Rome is redesigning the role and architecture of this sector.

Outlining the new framework is the Chief of Defense Staff, General Luciano Portolano, who has initiated – under the direction and supervision of Defense Minister Guido Crosetto – an urgent review process of the Special Forces sector.

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The Special Forces are not absent: if they are not seen, it's because they are working

Despite the high-intensity theaters of today – from Ukraine to the Middle East – where attention is focused on tanks, artillery, and drone swarms, for Portolano, the role of the Special Forces is far from diminished.

The SF are not, he emphasizes, “elite infantry” to be sent to the front line, as disastrously done by Russia in the early stages of the Ukrainian conflict. They are rather a “surgical” tool, designed for actions with a very high strategic impact with a reduced number of operators.

In this context, operations include sabotage against critical nodes, strategic reconnaissance beyond the contact line, opening corridors to counter A2/AD bubbles, designation of high-value targets, clandestine insertion of sensors, and collection/exfiltration of sensitive data.
Their apparent invisibility, therefore, is consistent with their nature: discreet, selective, not mass, but capable of acting as a true force multiplier for the entire military instrument.

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Innovation Lab: drones, MUM-T, cyber, and 3D manufacturing

By their mission and internal culture, the Special Forces are accustomed to living in change. Adaptation, Portolano recalls, is not a challenge, but «part of the DNA» of these units: targeted selection on mental agility, short command chain, accustomed to experimenting before others.

Today this process translates into a multidimensional transformation. Alongside the raiders, new figures are permanently entering: cyber operators, psychological operations specialists (PSYOPS), information management experts, working side by side with operational detachments.

On the technical-tactical level, the SF are systematically integrating:

- **Manned-Unmanned Teaming (MUM-T)**, i.e., the combined work between manned platforms and unmanned systems;
- the use of **drone swarms** for reconnaissance, deception, and sensory saturation of the enemy;
- the use of **smart loitering munitions**;
- **communication networks with a very low probability of interception**, essential for operating in sensor-saturated environments.

Another key front is technological self-sustainability: thanks to **3D printing** and micro-manufacturing capabilities, the units can prototype, adapt, and repair equipment in very short times, reducing dependence on traditional logistics and increasing operational resilience.

In parallel, the training of raiders is increasingly oriented towards strategic-level operations: the ability to act in extreme isolation, close cooperation with intelligence assets, mastery of multi-domain scenarios where the line between war and peace is increasingly blurred.

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From Afghanistan to the expanded Mediterranean: an asset already in action

In the last twenty years, the Italian Special Forces have established themselves as recognized excellence in the main crisis theaters, from the Middle East to Africa. And it is not a closed story.

The evacuation operations from Afghanistan in 2021 and from Sudan in 2023 are just the most visible examples of a daily commitment, often away from the spotlight, in all contexts where Italy maintains a military presence or strategic interest.

Today the focus shifts to two directions:

- the possibility of **high-intensity scenarios in Eastern Europe**;
- the **growing instabilities in the expanded Mediterranean**, from sub-Saharan Africa to the Middle East.

To respond to these challenges, the SF are updating doctrines, experimenting with new multi-domain procedures, and integrating disruptive technologies. It is in this context that the sector reform initiated by Portolano fits.

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The reform of the Special Forces sector: two time horizons

The ongoing review is structured on two temporal levels.

In the short term, “readiness measures” are planned, which include:

- rationalization of Units based on specific missions;
- more streamlined activation procedures;
- a short and dedicated decision-making chain, which will directly connect the new **Special Forces Command** (evolution of the current COFS) with the Chief of Defense Staff and the Political Authority;
- a **dedicated procurement process**, capable of accelerating the introduction of critical technologies for the sector.

In the medium term, the SF sector will be able to rely on operational and logistical enablers assigned more directly:

- **rotary and fixed wing assets** for insertion, support, and exfiltration;
- **remotely piloted systems and drones**;
- fully integrated **PSYOPS units** and **cyber-intel teams** in the operational design.

The individual Armed Forces will still maintain a central role: from the selection and influx of suitable personnel, to logistical support for domain platforms, to the sharing of experiences and lessons learned.

New **selection and training paths** are also being studied: enhancement of training courses, advanced specialization programs, strengthened cooperation with partner and Allied countries, to expand the range of capabilities without sacrificing quality, in compliance with NATO commitments and the direct protection of national interests in “below threshold” crises.

A key element is the **direct command line**: the ability to move from identifying a strategic need to projecting highly specialized forces within a few hours. All accompanied by regulatory adjustments that ensure full legitimacy, transparency, and sustainability of the transformation.

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A more agile, integrated, and technological force

The evolution of the Special Forces sector, which inherits the legacy of the COFS established in 2004, represents for Portolano a further leap in quality.

The expected benefits are numerous:

- **greater speed and decision-making responsiveness**, thanks to a dedicated and agile command chain;
- **complete integration of “enablers”**, from aerial assets to drones, to cyber and PSYOPS components;

- a **unified vision of technological development**, avoiding duplications, concentrating investments, and accelerating the experimentation and adoption of innovative solutions (autonomous systems, cyber capabilities, special insertion platforms);
- **even stricter protection of sensitive information**, with advanced protocols and compartmentalization of skills benefiting not only national security but also relations with partners and allies.

The expected result is a more agile, efficient, and technologically advanced special force, capable of operating effectively both below the conflict threshold and in high-intensity scenarios, strengthening the country's security and its international prestige.

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