JSOU Report 22-2

Special Operations Forces Transformation in the Future Operating Environment

JSOU

In this edited volume, the authors pose solutions to Special Operations Forces' (SOF) future challenges. Looking to the national defense strategy, this volume describes the role of competition in the future and the three ways SOF can compete, deter, and win. SOF must maintain their edge, and their transformation needs to be addressed at the individual, organizational, and institutional levels. This volume takes risk into consideration while addressing SOF transformation in three key areas: SOF roles and missions, culture, and great power competition. Both U.S. and Canadian SOF perspectives are outlined in this volume, and each chapter urges readers to consider how SOF might better compete short of armed conflict.

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Special Operations Forces Transformation in the Future Operating Environment

Edited by Dr. Peter McCabe

JSOU Report 22-2

Joint Special Operations University

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Sharpening the Edge of SOF's Advantage: The All-Domain SOF Leader-Professional

Special Operations Forces Transformation in the Future Operating Environment

Edited by Dr. Peter McCabe

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On the cover. Artist rendering of analytical humans maximizing their use of artificial intelligence, machine learning, and industry 4.0 technology. Such tools should, in part, inform a transformation of Special Operations Forces. Photo by sutadimages/ Shutterstock.

Back cover. U.S. Army Cultural Support Team, trained to support U.S. Army Special Operations Forces, interacts with Afghan children in a village in the Kunar District. Photo by U.S. Army Spc. Patricia Caputo.

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Foreword

The title of this edited volume, *Special Operations Forces Transformation in the Future Operating Environment*, contains two terms that standout: "transformation" and "future." Both concepts elicit images of change, and that is what this volume attempts to address—how do Special Operations Forces (SOF) change to meet the challenges ahead? We must look to our guiding documents, specifically the 2018 national defense strategy (NDS), which addresses the changing nature of warfare and the role that competition will play in the future.[1] Since the NDS release, the term "competition" has been hotly debated within the military and academia. What does it mean to compete within this security environment and with other great powers? In answer, the NDS lays out a strategy to compete, deter, and win. There are three ways SOF can compete, deter, and win:

Lethality:[2] SOF must maintain their edge in numerous ways (modernizing the Force, thinking ahead, flexibility, and education/training). Lethality is more than just the ability to kill.

Partnerships:[3] This is an approach to operations led by partners, state or nonstate, with enabling support from the U.S. or U.S.-led coalitions.

Reforming the enterprise:[4] The January 2020 comprehensive review acknowledges that, in some instances, SOF employment and mission accomplishment are to the detriment of leadership, discipline, and accountability. This volume addresses each of these ways for SOF to compete, deter, and win.

SOF transformation needs to be addressed at the individual, organizational, and institutional levels. Like any organization in transition, risk needs to be mitigated as much as possible. This volume takes risk into consideration while at the same time addressing SOF transformation in three key areas: SOF roles and missions, culture, and great power competition. The chapters address various aspects of these three areas and provide the reader with unique perspectives on transforming SOF. Both U.S. and Canadian SOF perspectives are outlined in this volume and provide the reader with thought experiments on competition in the future operating environment. I recommend the content of this important publication to

the reader and urge consideration of how special operations might be able to find better ways to compete short of armed conflict.

Peter McCabe, PhD, Colonel, U.S. Air Force, Ret.
Joint Special Operations University

Endnotes

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Mr. Charles N. Black is the co-founder and managing partner at Xundis Global, LLC, which specializes in navigating complexity through creative and reflective application of design, strategy, and planning to realize favorable futures. Mr. Black is a retired Marine Corps officer with over 26 years of diverse leadership, planning, and operational experiences with conventional, special operations, and coalition forces. He is a founding member of the JSOU Design Thinking Program and a subject matter expert facilitating design inquiries for the SOF enterprise.

Lieutenant Colonel Andrew Brown, PhD, is a Canadian Army intelligence officer and military historian. He has served in Canadian Special Operations Forces Command at the unit and headquarters levels, in the Royal Canadian Regiment, and in the Canadian Airborne Regiment. He currently teaches history at the Royal Military College of Canada.

Dr. Bernd Horn is a retired infantry colonel who has held key command and staff appointments in the Canadian Armed Forces, including deputy commander of the Canadian Special Operations Forces Command, commanding officer of the 1st Battalion, the Royal Canadian Regiment and Officer Commanding 3 Commando, and the Canadian Airborne Regiment. Dr. Horn is also an adjunct professor of history at the Royal Military College of Canada. He is currently the command historian at the Canadian Special Operations Forces Command Education and Research Centre.

Lieutenant Colonel Jay Lachine joined the Canadian Forces as an infantryman and, after deployments to Croatia and Bosnia, was selected

for the Special Commissioning Plan. He has deployed numerous times to Afghanistan as part of the Special Operations Task Force. He was recently posted to Canadian Special Operations Forces Command Headquarters as the J5 (Directorate of Plans, Policy, and Programs) and then chief effects. He is currently the commanding officer of the Canadian Special Operations Training Centre.

Ms. Simone Ledeen is the former acting deputy assistant secretary of defense, special operations and combatting terrorism at the Department of Defense (DOD). In this capacity, she assisted in providing policy guidance for oversight of all DOD policies, strategies, and plans related to special operations and irregular warfare, with special emphasis on counterterrorism, sensitive special operations, and other activities. Prior to her appointment, Ms. Ledeen served as an executive director at Standard Chartered Bank where she led the successful launch of the bank's multi-national financial crime compliance program in Africa, the Middle East, and Pakistan. Ms. Ledeen has a Master of Business Administration from the Bocconi University School of Management in Milan, Italy, and a bachelor's degree with high honors from Brandeis University.

Lieutenant Colonel Michael P. Manning is a distinguished military graduate of the Providence College ROTC class of 1997. Throughout his career, he has served in infantry and Special Operations Forces assignments. Lieutenant Colonel Manning is currently a U.S. Army War College fellow at The Fletcher School, Tufts University.

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Mr. Ruari Nicholson joined the Canadian Security Intelligence Service (CSIS) in 1996. Prior to CSIS, he served as a Naval officer in the Royal Canadian Navy. Mr. Nicholson spent the majority of his career in counterterrorism operations, most recently as the deputy director general in the counterterrorism division in Ottawa. Mr. Nicholson has a bachelor's

in political science from McGill University and a master's in public administration from the Royal Military College of Canada. Mr. Nicholson is a 2016 graduate of the National Security Program from the Canadian Forces College (recipient of the Holman medallion). He attended the 2019-2020 Leadership in Counter Terrorism International Conference.

Chief Warrant Officer Jason Yeremiy has been a member of the Canadian Armed Forces for over 25 years. He has served in numerous positions and at various ranks within Canadian Special Operations Forces Command. He is currently the regimental sergeant major for the Canadian Special Operations Training Center.

Introduction

Dr. Peter McCabe, Colonel, U.S. Air Force, Ret.

In January 2020, the Joint Special Operations University (JSOU), MacDill Air Force Base, Tampa, Florida, hosted a symposium on Special Operations Forces (SOF) transformation in the future operating environment. This ninth symposium in the series (since 2010) built on previous symposia hosted by Canadian Special Operations Forces Command (CANSOFCOM) and Special Operations Command North held in Ottawa, Ontario, and Colorado Springs, Colorado, respectively. Over the last 10 years, this series of symposia focusing on special operations has yielded numerous edited volumes on a variety of topics including *The Role of SOF in Training Others to Build Partner Capacity throughout the World* (2011), *The Role of the Global SOF Network in a Resource Constrained Environment* (2013), *The SOF Role in Countering Transnational Organized Crime* (2015), *Countering Transregional Terrorism* (2017), and *Risk and Decision-Making in a Complex Environment* (2018). This volume is the last in the series with the CANSOFCOM Education and Research Centre. Moving forward, JSOU and CANSOFCOM have agreed to conduct small group collaborative research. In 2021, both organizations partnered with academic and operational subject matter experts and conducted research on the role of SOF in the Arctic and its implications for great power competition. This volume finishes the series looking to the future. The question is not if SOF should transform to meet the future operating environment but how.

This volume looks to the future focusing on SOF roles and missions, culture, and great power competition. It will address the future operating environment, what near-peer competition means for SOF, how SOF can maintain their advantage, and the risk of failing to evolve. The reader will gain an appreciation of the SOF challenges ahead and be able to imagine possible desired futures. This volume provides analysis of SOF transformation from a broad range of perspectives. The chapters are written by practitioners who are active in operations, policy, and research. Hence, the chapters will vary on the degree of academic rigor. The reader will benefit from synthesizing these divergent viewpoints. The hope is that the reader will gain a

better appreciation for the challenges facing SOF that are driving the need for transformation—even better if the reader can identify and advocate for certain possible solutions for implementation. As General Richard D. Clarke, United States Special Operations Command (USSOCOM) Commander, notes, SOF "are re-shaping our current forces and capabilities even as we develop new technological and tactical approaches for our diverse missions."[1]

Section A consists of three chapters on SOF roles and missions. There is a long list of SOF core activities.[2] These include such missions as direct action, special reconnaissance, unconventional warfare, and foreign internal defense among many others. The question is, Does SOF need to still accomplish all of these missions, or can some be handed off to conventional forces? In addition, are there new missions that need to be picked up by SOF to meet future operating challenges? Each chapter stands by itself in advocating a need to modify SOF missions to meet future challenges.

Section B consists of three chapters that focus on SOF culture and ethics. Unfortunately, SOF have been in the news for all the wrong reasons. Recently publicized high-profile cases[3] within SOF have focused on SOF culture and ethics. On 9 August 2019, the USSOCOM commander directed a comprehensive review of SOF culture and ethics. The review, completed and distributed on 23 January 2020, concluded that USSOCOM does not have a systemic ethics problem but did conclude that "SOF employment and mission accomplishment is to the detriment of leadership, discipline, and accountability."[4] The three chapter authors each bring different perspectives on SOF culture in general and recommendations for improving SOF culture and ethics.

Section C addresses great power competition. The term "great power competition," like other overused terms such as "global war on terror," has many meanings for many different people. Understanding what it is and what it is not is an important first step in deciding how to address it. One of the first scholars to use the term is Robert Kagan in his 2008 book, *The Return of History and the End of Dreams*. In it, he argues that major powers were staging a comeback and that a pitched ideological struggle was taking shape between Western democracies and the autocracies of China and Russia.[5] Evidence of this has been seen with China's buildup of disputed islands in the South China Sea and Russia's invasion of Ukraine and the annexation of Crimea. This led to the Trump administration's national security strategy (NSS) and national defense strategy (NDS)—both outlining a version of great power competition focusing on Russia and China. An article from *The*

Atlantic in August of 2020 noted that the term "great power competition" appeared in 141 news articles in the Nexis database during the eight years of the George W. Bush administration and 1,021 times during the eight years of the Obama administration, largely during Obama's second term. In the Trump administration's first two and a half years alone, it has surfaced in more than 6,500 articles, soaring after the rollout of the NSS and NDS.[6] So, here it is being addressed once again but this time from a SOF perspective. Readers are privileged to have two great chapters that will enlighten with their special operations perspective of great power competition.

Section D concludes with the symposium transcript remarks by the former acting deputy assistant secretary of defense for special operations and combatting terrorism at the Department of Defense, Simone Ledeen. She presents future challenges and risks to special operations in the future operating environment.

The following can be considered an executive summary of each chapter to highlight the arguments and propositions of each author.

The Future of Special Operations

The initial chapter of this volume by Charles Black looks to the future. This edited volume focuses on SOF transformation and this chapter appropriately focuses on the future of SOF. Black examines the forces of change, their impact on organizations, and the alternative interpretations of conflict. Concepts such as "antifragile" (strength in the face of a volatile future) are introduced, and Black explores how SOF can reframe their role, missions, and responsibilities. The ultimate goal is for SOF to find a future where their strategy, structure, and resources achieve strategic resilience and antifragility. This volume could not have started on a better, more positive note.

A Place for SOF in the Changing Security Environment

Rauri Nicholson describes a middle strategy—one in which states face the challenge of defining strategy in scenarios where intelligence/SOF communities are asked to deliver precise effects without the benefit of clear political end-state objectives. As SOF move away from focusing solely on violent extremist organizations and instead focus on threats from great powers (states), the need to review current roles and missions is ever more pressing. Anti-West adversaries attempt to influence electoral outcomes by

manipulating populations using social media as well as undermine state institutions. In addition, these states attempt to gain economic and political access and advantage. How can SOF respond? How much do SOF need to evolve to address these challenges? Mr. Nicholson argues that Western SOF compete in an uneven playing field where they are held to account to international and national norms and regulations while adversaries are not. Hence, new approaches need to be devised.

Mission over Tasks: SOF Transformation

In this chapter, Dr. Bernd Horn argues that the dynamic and ambiguous security environment demands that SOF take a disciplined and careful analysis of how they must evolve and transform to meet future challenges. He illustrates this by looking to the past in how the British Special Air Service had to adapt to ensure relevance and effectiveness. Today's SOF must recognize the competitive landscape that blends conventional, irregular, asymmetric, criminal, and terrorist means and methods. This new reality requires SOF to transform. They must shed their focus on direct action and allow for continual competition under the threshold of war through SOF non-kinetic activities and the targeting of key actors and audiences. Dr. Horn provides a list of potential issues and solutions that will assist in the evolution of SOF.

Breaking Philoctetes: United States Special Operations Command's Contribution to Moral Injury

This is the first chapter of Section B on SOF culture. Lieutenant Colonel Michael Manning uses the story of the elite Greek warrior, Philoctetes, as the backdrop to address the subject of moral injury. So what is moral injury? According to Manning, it is the "moral and ethical wounds that occur in individuals due to repeated exposure to high-end combat." Philoctetes, while critical to the success of the Trojan War, was ultimately broken by the experience. Manning describes a parallel with how USSOCOM employs SOF in the current counterterrorism fight. The chapter describes how the latest USSOCOM review of the Force, the comprehensive review, is not enough. Manning advocates for a re-look at how SOF are employed. Only then will the organization take the necessary steps to address the effects on SOF culture.

SOF Culture in Education/Training

As a Lieutenant Colonel in the Canadian Forces, Jay Lachine brings a unique perspective to the subject of CANSOFCOM culture and specifically how training assists in embedding that culture. Lachine argues that "leadership and education reinforce the core values and provide guidance and way ahead when faced with adversity and/or ambiguity." Lieutenant Colonel Lachine describes CANSOFCOM culture, the challenges to achieving it, and how education and training can reinforce that culture. Of course, this concept is not just applicable to CANSOFCOM but to the special operations community worldwide.

Evolving SOF Culture

This chapter presents another Canadian perspective on SOF culture, this time by Chief Warrant Officer Jason Yeremiy, who presents a look at how SOF culture can and should evolve. The chapter explores the nature of culture and the importance of understanding oneself as well as others. Chief Warrant Officer Yeremiy introduces the term "anchoring" (cognitive bias), which influences decision making (often to the negative) and discusses how anchoring can lead to hubris. Chief Warrant Officer Yeremiy recommends going back to first principles. In the case of SOF, that is the five SOF truths, which provide SOF an anchor for their values and ensure SOF culture remains aligned with those values.

Great Power Competition and Operating Challenges for SOF

This is the first of two chapters in Section C: Great Power Competition. The U.S. national defense strategy (2018) highlights China and Russia as potential competitors to displace Western norms.[7] They are doing and will continue to do this through various means (politically, economically, and through influence operations). In this chapter, Lieutenant Colonel Andrew Brown focuses on Russia as a competitor and the operational challenges it will pose for SOF. Specifically, Lieutenant Colonel Brown addresses four areas of contention: compromised electromagnetic spectrum, adversary SOF, survivability, and organizational considerations. Of course, there are other areas of contention, but these provide SOF a starting point to address potential challenges for SOF in great power competition.

Role of SOF in Great Power Competition

Charles Barnham focuses on the competition short of armed conflict where SOF and civil affairs (CA) can contribute the most. The first step is identifying countries that are important to U.S. national security. Second, the stabilization needs of these countries (focusing on the human domain) need to be determined. Third, strategies and plans need to be developed to address the stabilization needs. Finally, implementing stabilization activities is required to improve security, governance, and service delivery. Barnham provides examples to demonstrate the value and capabilities of CA units to the role that SOF can play in great power competition.

Keynote Address: Future Challenges and Risks to Special Operations

Simone Ledeen's transcribed remarks are presented here as the final chapter in Section D: Concluding Thoughts. As the former acting assistant secretary of defense, special operations and combatting terrorism, the remarks are salient to the wider special operations community. The remarks focus on evolving the countering violent extremist fight, the rise of great power competition, and providing a way ahead for SOF. Ledeen argues for integration with non-military partners—not just de-confliction but operating jointly. She also argues the SOF community must build resilience and capacity in allies and partners. Finally, SOF must be more proactive and less reactive in irregular warfare capabilities.

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Section A: SOF Roles and Missions

Chapter 1. The Future of Special Operations

Charles N. Black

> It is not the strongest of the species that survive, nor the most intelligent, but the one most responsive to change. - Charles Darwin

The world is changing at a rapid pace, requiring the defense ecosystem to design and develop new approaches to compete and win in a dynamic operating environment against multiple near peers. The U.S. special operations perception of success, combined with a preference for kinetic effects in the counter-violent extremist organization (VEO) fight, is now culturally misaligned with the range of emergent futures. It, like others that fail to remain aware and keep pace, will face irrelevance or future collapse. Perhaps for this precise reason, organizational change is a common topic among those confronting the dynamic, volatile, and potent forces of change, including those within the national security ecosystem. In response, many organizations invest significant effort in attempts to align their respective strategies, structures, and resources, intending to steer the ship toward a desired goal.[1] A change in strategy demands a change in structure. Change to strategy or structure without the other contributes to misalignment and an organization's failure to achieve desired outcomes.

U.S. special operations—a multi-identity institution with public battlefield successes from the bin Laden and al-Baghdadi raids to less visible operations—are not immune to the same systemic forces affecting other industries. The research and observations of the late Harvard business professor, Clayton Christensen, find that unrecognized disruptive technology and market forces are common reasons that companies fail. In particular, successful companies reinforce behaviors they perceive contribute to their success, thus constraining their awareness of other variables that create unanticipated change. Christensen refers to this as the innovator's dilemma.[2] More specifically, he found that top-performing and well-managed organizations were more susceptible to this bias, suggesting that change will not come easy to United States Special Operations Command (USSOCOM).[3] The globally

networked enterprise of USSOCOM can find, fix, and kinetically finish any "bad guy" anywhere. Unfortunately, the very success of USSOCOM and its enterprise is the same reason it is at risk of failing in future missions. To that end, this essay explores the future of U.S. Special Operations Forces (SOF) and ways they might achieve a more successful tomorrow.

First, the chapter examines the forces of change, their impact on organizations, and the alternative interpretations of conflict. This is followed by a discussion of the national defense strategy (NDS) and consequences for U.S. SOF. Third, the chapter explores how U.S. SOF might reframe their role, missions, and responsibilities to become "antifragile," thriving and gaining strength in the face of diverse, volatile, and random futures.[4] Fourth, the chapter concludes with a multi-disciplinary look at organizational approaches such as strategy, structure, and resourcing that achieve strategic resilience and antifragility.

Emergent and Future Conflict Is Divergent Plural

Many people, especially in the military culture, adhere to a traditional belief in a single, predetermined future, one that is predictable and attainable with enough insight and effort. It follows that such an approach would bring unity of effort within an organization by providing a clear aiming point for strategy development and resource planning. Contrarily, quantum physicists and complexity theorists agree that people have always had multiple possible futures, some knowable and others unknowable, and that humans alone do not control the future. Even the renowned strategist, Colin Gray, asserts that there are "almost certainly an unknowable number of possible futures," the future in contrast to the past being absurdly plural.[5] For U.S. SOF, the notion of "plural futures" must inform and shape their future operating concepts, dependent force development, and design activities if they are to retain a competitive advantage.

The forecasts about the emergent and future world are infinite and wide ranging. As Jennifer Gridley writes, the future is absent of facts thus full of divergent possibilities.[6] However, there is consensus about major shifts in human civilizations, the most important among them including the brittleness of traditional political structures in the face of rapid change, the increasing influence of substate actors, and technology-driven disruption combined with unprecedented human access to information and influence.

Today's international system is "entering a state of protracted and intensifying security competition"[7] and perhaps moving away from a binary state of war or peace. Phil Williams suggests that the world has entered a global crisis in governance wherein global politics have moved beyond traditional state-centric geopolitics or, at the very least, are challenging the tenants of the state-based system.[8] Given the current trajectory and turbulence of the global system, the consequence to U.S. national security and the role of U.S. SOF is significant.

Department of Defense Perspective

The NDS offers a good appreciation of the emerging world and charts a reasonable course for how the Department of Defense (DOD) will compete across a continuum of conflict.[9] It envisions multiple militarily capable actors operating across numerous domain environments while employing a combination of traditional and irregular capabilities as each seeks to secure interests and gain advantage over others. There are many who argue for a strategy that returns to the past to fight the conventional war they prefer. The Cold War geopolitical landscape was bipolar and relatively static along the main fronts—nothing like the multipolar, dynamic, global, multi-domain system of today. As such, those interpreting the return to great power competition as reason to return to old ways will contribute to more misalignment, misperception, and errant expectations.[10]

The DOD strategy outlines a major departure from past approaches. One could argue that much of the core thinking of this document, underpinned by former Secretary of Defense James Mattis and many other experienced leaders, is exactly what is required. The strategy does not offer an either-or choice of war or peace. Rather, it breaks from the past notion of deterrence and advocates leveraging the full range of military capabilities to be successful in a wide-ranging character of conflict—most notably hybrid or other named approaches that seek advantages below the level of armed conflict. Many have adopted the term "gray zone" to describe the character of conflict that does not fit the traditional, binary framing of either peace or war. It has been useful to expand the discourse about the changing character of war, yet it falls short.

The future of competition and conflict is neither the gray zone nor the unfortunately common black-and-white interpretation of war or peace.

Research centered on the use of U.S. Armed Forces as a political instrument show that its short-term (and generally long-term) outcomes are often less positive and enduring as the level of military force increases.[11] The future as many prefer it is not the political warfare conducted during the decades of the Cold War. As originally designed, it is unlikely SOF will be parachuted into ungoverned space to linkup, train an indigenous guerilla force, and fight a proxy adversary and its ideology. The future of conflict is something new and distinct from the interstate, insurgent, and proxy wars of the past century. As noted before, the confluence of rapidly advancing technologies and growth of cyberspace and space, combined with the erosion of political frameworks, collide to create new conditions that are ripe to create both opportunity and risk for those seeking to secure perennial interests or leverage over others. The state remains a key actor on the global stage while substate groups and other-than-state entities increasingly wield power and influence in this accelerating world.

As actors seek to secure their goals employing old and new means, the character of conflict will certainly continue to evolve and change in unpredictable ways. This by itself is not new. However, the rate and convergence of change is new and unprecedented. It is now necessary to think beyond state borders and population groups to see the world differently, see it as it is and not through doctrinal or component lenses, to more effectively sense make, anticipate, and exploit opportunities to achieve positive outcomes in a competitive, multidimensional space wherein U.S. goals are subject to constant change.

Given the juxtaposition between the recent past and the emergent future, how might U.S. SOF contribute to national security in new ways? Five years ago, this question was posited and not much has changed.[12] Today, there are innumerable discussions about the role of SOF in what is often framed as great power competition. During the past two decades of fighting violent extremists, SOF have mastered the art and science of manhunting, found their niche, and metaphorically grown into adulthood. The unintended consequences are that policy makers and senior military leaders too often depend upon the perceived outsized results from SOF to achieve effects without the visibility or large footprint. This now includes the ill-framed notion of great power competition. For many inside and outside the organization, SOF have become a panacea for any tough security challenge confronting

the Nation. It is a common belief within the ranks and among policy makers that SOF can do it faster and better and be whatever the Nation needs.

The potential drawback to the binary choice between SOF and conventional forces is that SOF have become less connected/integrated with their conventional partners. Following major withdrawal of forces from the Middle East, SOF have been operating in a silo. In a speech at the activation of USSOCOM over forty years ago, Admiral Crowe, then Chairman of the Joint Chiefs, recognized the divergent views about SOF and noted they will require "leadership that provides the vision and energy to oversee and direct integrated coordinated activities and to make the whole truly Joint and larger than its parts."[13] Unfortunately, today there is a generation of operators and leaders that has limited experience supporting or integrating with the broader Joint Force. Given the truth that SOF cannot be mass-produced or created after crisis, how does the enterprise maintain its current position of advantage in spite of a strongly rooted kinetic mindset? What is the U.S. SOF role in the emergent security arena? Some desire to follow a path analogous to hyper-conventional or elite forces that emerged from the counter-VEO effort while others remain anchored to the irregular roots and the indirect approach. The reality is that the SOF truths remain valid and can help inform a way forward, yet the enterprise must rekindle its unconventional thinking to divest of its current concepts that are no longer useful and create new ways.[14]

Policy makers and analysts alike must remain cognizant of the limits of SOF while developing military strategy lest too much be asked of them with detrimental consequences. Last spring, General Clark directed a comprehensive review of the Force in response to congressional inquiry arising from accusations of the Force violating special trust and falling short of standards.[15] The reported insights are valuable if one chooses to pursue a path for change. Many now argue, in fact, that the recent public ethical challenges and cumulative psychological wounds of constant war are a direct consequence of that shortfall. That, however, is a critically important topic and will be addressed in a later chapter. This is particularly important as the security environment changes—a SOF-centric strategy might be appropriate for some challenges but inappropriate for others.[16]

What Is the Future for Special Operations, United States Special Operations Command, and SOF?

It is important to take a step back to revisit and explore the definition of special operations before looking at USSOCOM and SOF. There are many variations, although there are common threads. In an important development in special operations theory, Dr. Tom Searle, former Green Beret turned scholar, concludes that special operations are everything "outside the box" that frames conventional operations. Over time, leaders can expand or contract core conventional capabilities, which in turn renders all other military requirements "special." The precise nature of special operations is based not just on what SOF train to conduct but also on the operational needs that defy the conventional application of military force.[17] The author's alternative definition is that a special operation is the unconventional employment of military and other means by, through, and with partners to achieve the right strategic effect, at the right time, and at the right place to secure interests and to gain temporal advantage. Special operations require unique operational employment, tactics, and capabilities to support the Joint Force commander.[18]

USSOCOM remains unique in that it is a combatant command but with unique service-like responsibilities.[19] Its basic mandate is to train, organize, and equip SOF to be employed by geographic combatant commanders. However, the Department has evolved, USSOCOM has matured, and, as described in the first section, the operating environment has and continues to change. Consequently, some of the traditional geographic-centric organizing constructs for military command and control have become unintended constraints. The line between force generation and employment has blurred due to the overwhelming emphasis on direct action counterterrorism operations, which detracts from the operational and strategic agility necessary for the future environment. Though the legislated responsibilities will likely not change, how they manifest will likely change to maximize SOF's value to the Joint Force and national security.

Today, USSOCOM has four major roles in terms of mission space. The first is crisis response derived from the failures of Operation EAGLE CLAW forty years ago. Today, this remains a no-fail mission. The second role is to perform more traditional preparation activities, usually in support of a contingency or war plan. Within this area, SOF perform a range of core activities. The third role followed the terror attacks on the Homeland. The

previously narrow counterterror mission evolved into leading the global, enterprise-wide, counter-VEO campaign. The requirements associated with sustaining this mission for the past two decades directly led to significant growth in global operational activity, budget, and force structure. Today, most of the leaders—and the Force in general—are inculcated with a counter-VEO mindset, which has led to innumerable tactical successes but little sustainable strategic effect. Unfortunately, the trajectory of the status quo will not lead SOF to success when confronting emergent challenges in the twenty-first century. The Department and Services have changed course and speed—USSOCOM must, too.

Relatedly, a new and fourth role is emerging from the new defense strategy for USSOCOM and SOF—competition below armed conflict. This is a subset of broader great power competition, which includes contingency preparations and deterrence operations. Competition below armed conflict is intended to employ integrated campaigning to advance national security objectives and achieve desired aims without war.[20] Rather than another "counter" strategy for a particular adversary, integrated campaigning is a way to focus on and secure U.S. interests while gaining advantage and influence over competitors. It is characterized by activities outside conflict zones, better integrated with old and new partners, and oriented across domains. New thinking and approaches communicated in strategic guidance and concepts orient SOF toward the new demands of the twenty-first century.

As Dr. Searle notes, SOF are created because the success of special operations requires different and unique capabilities and skills normally not found in conventional forces. It follows that the form and function of SOF are interdependently linked to their conventional partner. If the conventional force changes, as it is today, so, too, must SOF. SOF are purpose-built forces for a specific, narrow range of missions and are thus not fungible. The fungibility of SOF is a common debate and is at the core of each groups' identity. A Green Beret is not assessed, selected, and trained for the same missions as a SEAL. They are both SOF yet are different. They have different purposes and should not be viewed as interchangeable. Unfortunately, due to high demands for SOF in the counter-VEO fight, USSOCOM has tended to treat some of its forces as fungible, which contributes to a hyper-conventional, kinetically oriented, and elite mindset. Looking forward, the special operator of tomorrow will be very different from today and will be informed by new requirements for new types of special operations. The distinction between

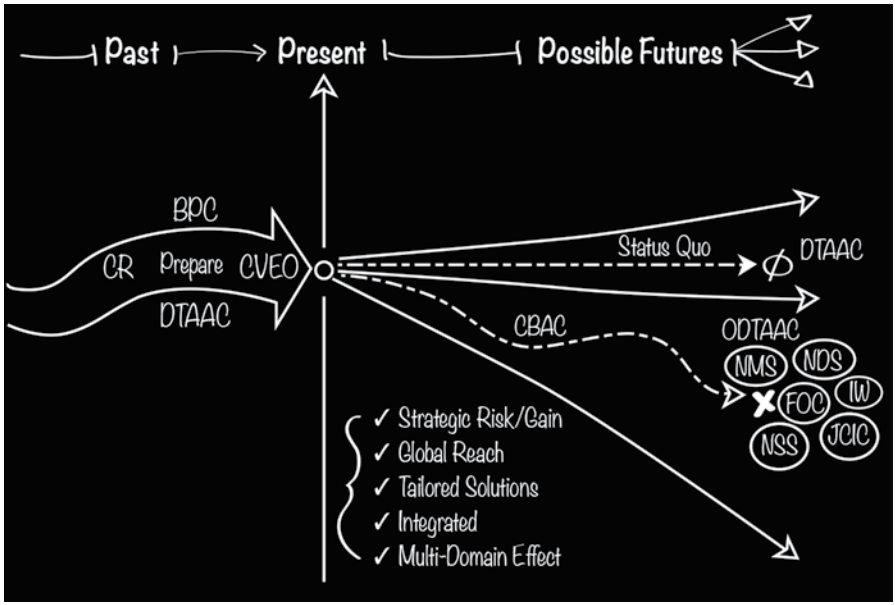

Figure 1. Visualization showing the current trajectory of the enterprise not leading to a desired future as framed in the various governing documents. Source: Author and Jordan Alexander

who is considered an operator or an enabler will diminish and perhaps will become contextual. Everything done is happening in the operating environment, whether in the continental U.S. or not, and is discoverable by adversaries. The mental notion that Americans enjoy sanctuary at home to train and get ready before deploying, at which point they then incur risk and achieve operational effects, is no longer valid. Everything they do is potentially an operational act.

Strategies of Diversification

So how might USSOCOM transform itself and its forces to meet the challenges of the twenty-first century? It is beneficial to the strategy development of USSOCOM to explore business management approaches to confront the same forces of change. Nearly 63 years ago, H. Igor Ansoff introduced a strategy framework for companies to remain relevant and maintain positions of advantage. He argued then, and it remains valid today, that a company must continually grow and change just to maintain its position relative to

its competitors and the marketplace. He titled his approach a "strategy of diversification," whereby the company pursues multiple paths and continually assesses the benefits of the various approaches and shifts the weight of effort among the various strategies for growth and change informed by organizational sense making.[21]

Another way to explain strategies of diversification is the adoption and execution of more than one strategy while concurrently weighing success within the context of external forces and the ever-changing future aim. This is no easy task considering the strength and power of path dependencies to keep the ship on its current course and speed. History matters and shapes organizational habits and beliefs, especially as they create incentives and penalties to reinforce the behaviors associated with "who we are" and "how we do things."[22] The inherent adaptability of organizations to break from historical precedence and embrace new ideas about the future is not in the DNA of most organizations.[23] It is worthwhile to use Ansoff's framework to discuss the roles and strategies of USSOCOM now to reimagine what might be an approach to transformation that achieves a positive future from among many possibilities.

The first of Ansoff's four strategies is market penetration. The organization's efforts focus on increasing the volume of activity in the instance of operations, activities, and investments without departing from its current approach and products. This has a drawback in that, in looking for new customers, the organization might see itself as a hammer and every opportunity a nail. This is the status quo for the SOF enterprise. Given the character of the global system as described earlier, this approach has quickly diminishing returns and will not lead to long-term relevance. The second strategy is product development. This is when the organization pursues innovation in ways and means within a given mission space—in other words, it plays the same game but with new toys. Consider the evolution of the National Mission Force into a near-permanent, global, man-hunting enterprise. The third strategy is market development, which is an expansion of an organizational approach to a new mission space. In terms of USSOCOM, this would be analogous to reorienting the global counter-VEO network for something outside its original purpose such as great power competition. Existing structures, ways, and means developed for one mission area are applied to another. At times, this might align, but in the long term, misalignment of capabilities and concepts is highly likely.

The last strategy among the four is much different. Unlike the others, diversification calls for a departure from the current product and marketplace. For this reason, diversification requires new approaches and capabilities that necessitate changes in structure and a break from the past. This, of course, translates into new missions and forces.[24] Each strategy frames a specific orientation and path. From an enterprise perspective, USSOCOM can unlock its full potential by pursing strategies of diversification. In preparation for an unpredictable and emergent twenty-first century, the enterprise could once again organize around specific missions—be they crisis response, counter-VEO, traditional contingency preparation, or even competition below armed conflict—and amplify when and where necessary from a diversified base. As a comprehensive approach, this would enable U.S. SOF to successfully confront possible futures.

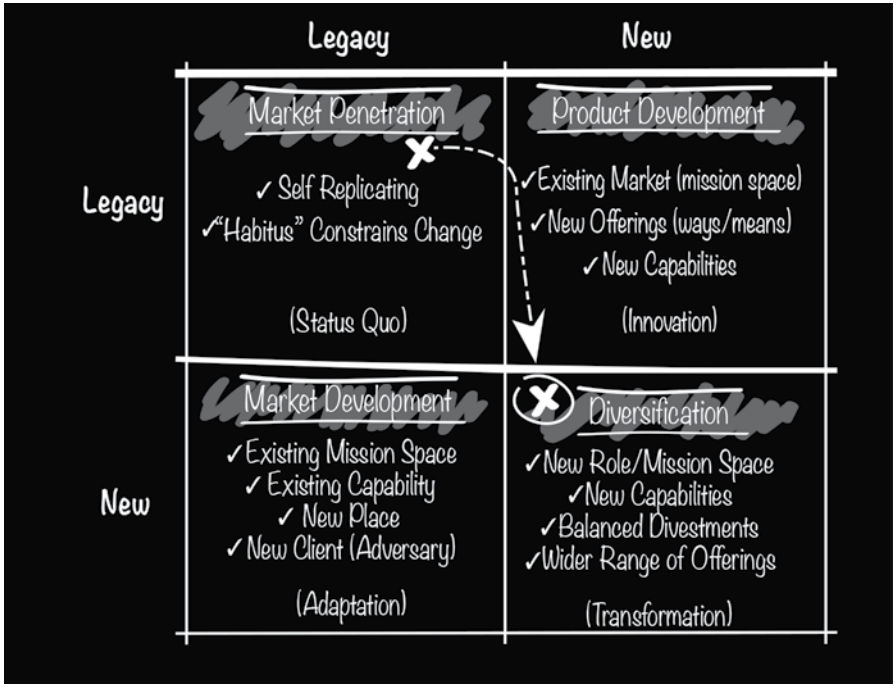

Figure 2. Table showing the strategies of diversification. Source: Igor Ansoff

One can look to research of Nassim Taleb, who offers a more present and different perspective, yet it further substantiates the core ideas that underpin

diversification. He describes fragility as that which does not like volatility, disorder, and randomness. Most people are more comfortable with organizations that are predictable, orderly, and stable within a given environment—analogous to a machine as compared to a living organization. Fragile things break, collapse, or diminish when things change.[25] In the prologue to his book, he writes that those organizations that accept disorder, randomness, and uncertainty as well as absorb shocks, surprises, and volatility actually get better.[26] It follows that, when confronting a wide range of uncertain futures, strategies of diversification and less rigidly structured approaches can move toward antifragility.

This framework can be used to view the portfolio of responsibilities of USSOCOM derived from 10 USC§ 164 and 167 and dependent strategies.[27] Arguably, USSOCOM has had episodic success achieving coherence across the enterprise as it confronted an expansion in scale of mission. Following the 9/11 attacks, USSOCOM enjoyed significant and rapid growth in resources that grew into the globally connected counter-VEO oriented enterprise. Although it does not necessarily require a growth in structure, it does need to change its relevance and contribution to the broader Joint Force and security system beyond one mission area.

Returning to the business sector, many successful companies have an options-oriented mindset—a holistic approach to evaluating future opportunities. They specifically create sensing systems that prompt strategic attention and action, no matter when the specific events occur. There is no singular strategy other than one designed for learning from which options are contextually derived. Imagining the future security environment, the multitude of actors, and the redefinition of U.S. special operations within it is, frankly, opaque at best. However, no organization begins with a completely empty chalkboard. With knowledge of the past and with honest reflection, it is possible to navigate a path from the present state to a more favorable near future. In this regard, SOF know their own history—an organization born from the Nation's failure to respond to crisis. There is also consensus that the past 20 years of war have been a key driver for rapid organizational growth and adaptation oriented on a broader counter-VEO mission following the 9/11 attacks. Today, the enterprise is optimized for sustained counter-VEO operations globally. This optimization for counter-VEO makes it fragile compared to new mission areas.

Following a shift in strategy in response to new assessments of the security environment, the U.S. Government and DOD more specifically began to change direction and speed, reorienting on competition with and winning against great powers. Although U.S. SOF retain their existing role for crisis response, traditional war preparation, and priority counter-VEO operations, there are now new demands related to great powers in this space of neither peace nor war. Unfortunately, the new operating space is not in declared theaters of armed conflict. It is complicated by the body of international and U.S. law, precedent, policies, and old paradigms about war and peace.

The Joint Concept for Integrated Campaigning, created in parallel to the NDS and Chairman's national military strategy, suggests how military power can and should integrate with other elements of national power, particularly in the conflict continuum.[28] SOF are well suited to contribute to this envisioned approach. Given this proposition, SOF must transform and become something new.

Missions and SOF of Tomorrow

Missions of tomorrow will demand the ability to aggregate precisely the right capabilities to achieve the right strategic effect at the right time and right place—by, through, and with joint, interagency, intergovernmental, and multinational (JIIM) partners. This means reimagining the definition of an operator. The enterprise must be willing to divest of the expensive and old while investing in new ways—structures, capabilities, and operating concepts. In the end, it must design, resource, and ultimately employ future force capabilities that can achieve strategic effects across the physical, virtual, and, ultimately, the cognitive domain using tactical actions at times, places, and targets of their choice.

SOF of tomorrow may look nothing like today's elite, mainly kinetic-oriented force. Moving beyond SOF's proud history and tradition will be difficult. One can reasonably argue that much of the fundamental force structure created in the Cold War and increased capacity during the war on terror are legacy and misaligned with future requirements. The Special Forces Operational Detachment Alpha was masterfully created and framed for a bipolar world where the U.S. participated in political warfare on the global periphery in the quest to contain and defeat the spread of Soviet communism. The Green Beret is used as one example, but one could easily

choose any of the SOF clans—even the newest Marine Raiders. How many SEAL teams are needed if the niche contribution is competition below armed conflict? Why is psychological and civil affairs capability undervalued as a decisive tool? Does the emerging role and function within the Department require operators to perform the same mission-essential tasks or achieve the same effects in 1970, 1990, and 2000 as it will in 2030? Is the enterprise improving on the margins with what Ansoff framed as market penetration or development? Are they looking to do what they have been but doing better or do something new altogether? The author has many warriors that prefer kinetics, so he orients on those opportunities. Today's U.S. SOF are the best SOF ever fielded—but is it the right force for tomorrow?

Habitus and Obstacle to Change

USSOCOM is a social system comprised of individuals, and social science offers useful theory to explore the replication of collective behavior and its reticence to change. Pierre Bourdieu's concept of habitus underpins a set of principles that he argues are operating unconsciously to guide social action.[29] Bourdieu asserts that because past behaviors over time have met expectations, organizations create constraints that serve to reproduce the same behaviors with the expectation for repeated and predictable outcomes.[30] Comparatively, because of SOF's bias for action, rapid problem solving, and the pursuit of counter-VEO initiatives, the Force was incentivized to replicate that behavior. In fact, new structures in the form of processes, priorities, and thinking were created. As an unintended consequence, cognitive blinders are created that further retard the ability to see the need for change and adopt necessary measures.

The Force must recognize and move past the normative expectation that decisive, short-term, and easily measured results born from two decades of manhunting is universal to all special operations. As identified earlier, SOF must be employed within their capability by, with, and through others. As General Downing stated in his congressional testimony in June 2006 before the Armed Services Committee, most special operations support bigger political, economic, and social struggles. He stated, "The military has a role to play, but it is just a role."[31] SOF are not a panacea, nor are they an alternative to statecraft and certainly not to conventional forces.

Conclusion

In the end, specially assessed, selected, and trained personnel will be required to produce different capabilities and missions than the conventional force. They will continually be asked to perform extremely high-risk, high-payoff missions in the most extreme conditions in support of U.S. national security. They will increasingly do so as part of a more integrated approach by, with, and through JIIM partners as well as yet-to-be-established and new, unorthodox partnerships such as global corporations. They will leverage the untapped potential of a global "SOF for life" network. They will operate against state and non-state threats, both new and old. They will divest of some former partners and cultivate new ones. They will reemerge as a strategically oriented, agile, and antifragile organization. They will not look like the Force of today. How the enterprise imagines or limits the view of those futures will shape how and what SOF do and what SOF become. Force development and design strategies must look beyond the constraints of today.

SOF are ultimately about their people—the foundation being the extraordinary people. It is crucial to remember that "special" has a specific meaning. Special operations have a different—neither better nor elite—purpose outside the box of conventional forces.[32] The box itself stretches and continues to reframe by exceedingly capable and diverse joint forces. The Services and other functional combatant commands are full steam ahead oriented in a new direction. To keep pace and change course, SOF must also stretch their own thinking about who they are and what they do for what promises to be a future very different from the present. The one certainty is that the status quo is high organizational risk leading to fragility and undesired futures.

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Chapter 2. A Place for SOF in the Changing Security Environment?

Rauri Nicholson

> Every age has its own kind of war, its own limiting conditions, and its own peculiar preconceptions. - General Carl Von Clausewitz

The author's subsequent reflection on the Tampa Special Operations Forces (SOF) symposium and collective future operating environments includes astonishment of how dramatically the reality has changed by the rapid spread of a pandemic, one that has so fundamentally impacted organizations and society. A consequence of globalization, the pandemic has surfaced vulnerabilities associated with the mass movement of people and goods.

Over the course of the 7–8 January 2020 symposium, the group deliberated on the nature of coming conflict, the role of SOF organizations in a near-peer environment, SOF culture/ethos, and the necessity for interagency cooperation. Reflecting on the rapidly evolving geopolitical context and the relative decline of multilateral organizations, it is evident that trusted international rules and norms are being tested. If the last decade has been described as the golden age of SOF, during which the reliance on SOF organizations reached unparalleled heights, the future decade may be more contentious.[1]

In the author's presentation to the symposium, he depicted the challenge of defining strategy in scenarios where intelligence/SOF communities are asked to deliver precise effects without the benefit of clear, political, end-state objectives. This shortcoming, defined as a middle strategy, is particularly acute considering that state adversaries have well-articulated plans as it relates to achieving their strategic interests. When one considers that Western funding envelopes are tied to the short-run political calculus, it illustrates the difficulty of being competitive in an arena with increasingly influential state powers with long-term plans. That these adversaries observe few of the established international rules or norms illustrates how acute this challenge has become.

Canadian Special Operations

Within this demanding competitive environment, governments have seemingly come to rely on SOF to address many of these challenges in the security operating environment. Canada is no different. One of the most significant transformative moments in recent Canada defense history occurred in 2005 when the Chief of the Defence Staff announced the creation of what would become a fourth service, the Canadian Special Operations Forces Command (CANSOFCOM). With a distinct ethos, CANSOFCOM offered a flatter structure than traditional military counterparts, one which would allow it to take a highly dynamic and innovative approach to achieving mission objectives.

As with any SOF organization, questions surfaced as to whether the Canadian Special Forces might be used as a politically expedient military force. In the "Golden Age of Special Operations Forces," Abigail Watson examines the value of SOF operations to policy makers. She found they were attracted to a limited investment in military forces that offered the prospect of substantial political dividends.[2] This value proposition has consistently been the attraction of SOF, particularly where the maintenance of large, deployed forces has proven to be prohibitively costly. In a post-COVID-19 reality of fiscal restraint, this trend could undoubtedly continue. If, however, the political dividend related to contributions to multinational military deployments alters, these appetites might change.

From a Canadian perspective, the Canadian Armed Forces (and Canadian Special Operations Forces) "asserts the country's geostrategic interests by bolstering allies and promoting stability abroad."[3] This calculus has informed the Canadian view of extraterritorial operations for several generations. From a political perspective, Canada's image as a reliable partner has proven essential in the servicing of bilateral and multilateral partnerships. This has made sense within the context of the globalization of transnational threats but has also meant the nation's global reputation was well served.

Canada's traditional approach, however, may be in danger. What is clear is that rifts in the Western political consensus and the fraying of multilateralism suggest that the political rules of the road are shifting. This is particularly true as the U.S. moves through a "murky and non-doctrinal phase in its international relations."[4] Where Canada might have achieved political advantage through participation in multinational military enterprise, there

may be less consideration in a context where capitalist democracies share a less common world view. If deploying these precious resources derives no political consideration or return, why bother?

As such, the challenge for the Canadian Special Operations Forces is that the political dividend derived from having a tier-one special operations capability able to contribute to extra-territorial operations might be fading. If this foundation is diminished, the attendant political appetite to deploy SOF may be reduced. This is particularly true as SOF stand the prospect of increasing encounters with state actors versus violent extremist organizations (VEOs).

Plans without Strategy

Modifying and influencing state behavior has become increasingly challenged by strategic incoherence in the establishment of collective strategies. As Western Special Forces and intelligence organizations emerge from 20 years of counterterrorism operations, they are being asked to reimagine operations in a dramatically different environment, one where states will deploy all facets of national power to achieve objectives or influence outcomes. This approach has been evident in the efforts of adversaries to influence electoral outcomes via manipulation of social media and undermine rival state institutions and stability, as well as gain economic and political access and advantage.

The challenge is immense. To suggest that this evolution of statecraft and decline of Western influence can be countered with skill sets developed during the Cold War underplays the extent to which the West is in a new dimension of conflict and competition. The pandemic provides a possible inflection point as it points to a future where global supply chains might be less pervasive. How this will manifest in terms of state competition is currently the subject of great deliberation. Without foresight against this evolution, the West's well-considered military and intelligence structures can rapidly trend toward obsolescence.

The challenge in defining national strategy is the lack of strategic consensus within old alliances as to what it is that connects national interests. Further, if "winning" is defined by leveraging partnerships and influencing state behavior, the Western alliance appears to be at a distinct disadvantage in terms of defining its brand, be it liberal democracy, capitalism, or apple pie.

Without this consensus view, the connective tissue which unites democracies in pursuing a rules-based approach to international affairs will slowly fray.

Notably, the capacity building offered through SOF partner forces engagement has the potential to influence the establishment of proficient military skills. Bespoke capacity building can offer the strategic effect of influencing the behavior of a partner nation or steadying the allegiance of a partner state. This is in part related to the strong brand that SOF organizations continue to represent. Challenges in this realm include managing the human rights practices of partner forces and the attendant legal obligations related to information sharing. National legal obligations in the realm of sharing with nontraditional partners have offered distinct stresses in the conduct of contemporary operations.

In essence, nations require a well-considered strategy with regards to alliances and the deployment of military force. What is the national interest? What is the end state desired? And what resources, military and other, can best achieve the desired outcome? Without a clear strategy framework that lays out ends, ways, and means, *ad hoc*/one-off plans will flounder. As has been historically shown, SOF can play an influential role in achieving strategic advantage. After all, the renowned strategist Colin Gray explained, "Special operations forces are a national grand-strategic asset: they are a tool of statecraft that can be employed quite surgically in support of diplomacy, of foreign assistance (of several kinds), as a vital adjunct to regular military forces, or as an independent weapon."[5]

Culture Wars

Despite SOF's utility, from a cultural perspective, it is possible that SOF may be under pressure to adhere to a progressive-centrist view of military and intelligence organizations. Societal, political, and legal developments in democracy continue to demand rigid adherence to defined behavior and representation. The paradox is that the fraying world order means that these rules and behaviors are not applied to adversaries. If these demands of the center are such that Western governments are no longer competitive, the defense of democracy may be greatly challenged.

The current American pivot to great power competition carries potential inflection points for SOF. One can see that the large SOF organizations that contributed to the elimination of threats from VEOs will necessarily have

to alter their operations to the coming state-related threat. This will mean they will be entering into a realm where they don't necessarily have primacy in terms of mandate or ability, particularly as they are working in a space inundated with cyber capability. While this new venture offers significant potential for interagency cooperation, this area of operations is not unique to Special Forces. From a cultural perspective, this alters the view of organizations that are defined as having a singular and remarkable military skill. Transitioning from direct action raids to support of conventional operations in a peer-on-peer conflict is a major change in focus.

Just as intelligence organizations have struggled with the transition from human intelligence to data exploitation and online operations, the redefinition of SOF operations and operators could result in organizational friction as new mission sets alter the image of the traditional SOF warrior. Further, as civilian and military organizations compete for similar skill sets in the realm of cyber warriors and data scientists, this will mean that Special Forces will strive to either attract or train against an entirely different skill set. As in the intelligence world, one of the challenges in this area of talent management is sufficiently incentivizing high-priced talent into government ranks.

Uneven Playing Fields

As the SOF community undertakes an examination of future roles, they reach a transition point, one where the geopolitical context forming the foundation of the global system has shifted. As Western governments have focused significant resources on nonstate extremist organizations, the West's adversaries have utilized all facets of state power to redefine the international order. This includes dominance and influence over multilateral organizations. In his article, "Hybrid Warfare: The New Face of Global Competition," author Scott Tait suggests that adversaries are "taking on capitalist democracies and hoping to re-make the international political, economic and trade systems through a co-ordinated hybrid effort that is taking place largely outside the traditional military or diplomatic realms."[6]

To compete in the uneven playing field where Western nations are held to account to international and national norms and regulations and authoritarian rivals are not, new approaches must be devised. There is a need to reassess counterinsurgency and counterterrorism to conduct operations below the level of conflict which would influence state behavior and adherence to

international obligations. Through the conduct of counter-hybrid operations, SOF would collaborate with various partner agencies to undertake, *inter alia*, counterfinance and offensive cyber and counterintelligence operations, which would have a direct impact on adversaries' intelligence collection. This activity would be conducted with the objective of degrading an adversary's capability while potentially sending cautions regarding state behavior or activity. This level of operations would be undertaken in a context where trade with the adversary would advance unabated and where trade negotiations might be accelerated by SOF operations in the hybrid space. Importantly, this will require reimagining the level of cooperation with private sector partners given their position on the front line of the hybrid equation.

From an interagency perspective, however, this is a competitive space. There are a myriad of intelligence and military organizations considering the capabilities that will be needed to conduct unconventional operations aimed at degradation, coercion, or misinformation. These hybrid operations will be largely conducted in such a way that they are deniable, aimed to "delay recognition that an attack is under way, paralyze decision making through confusion and discourage the victim from responding forcefully due to the absence of 'legitimate' military targets."[7] Given the highly sensitive and political implications for activity, coordination across the national security and private sectors will be set at a premium. The interplay between military/intelligence structures and the private sector has the highest potential for growth given the reactively modest connectivity that currently exists.

Conclusion

The 2020 SOF symposium offered the opportunity for a multidisciplinary group to examine coming threats, contexts, and adversaries. At the time of the symposium, few would have imagined that a global pandemic would impact organizations, communities, and society so fundamentally. That the pandemic stands to accelerate a number of the trends examined is clear. As fiscal restraints impact nations, it is important to recognize that declining multilateralism and investment in developing nations could lead to greater insecurity, extremism, and the advance of adversarial influence. In a context where the rules-based international order is in decline, the West faces security futures that will test its collective resolve.

In this chapter, the Western democratic brand was discussed, which has proven resilient for several generations. If one of SOF's community objectives is to influence adversarial behavior as well as reinforce allied compliance, SOF have done poorly to define or defend their fortress or modern brand. If the West cannot collectively define this core value or sanctum, influencing behavior or compliance will be consistently miscued. If liberal democracy is not championed by its traditional proponents, it will ultimately decline and fail to attract adherents. If, in another generation, the West could advance a Marshall Plan (large-scale economic recovery program) to demonstrate collective purpose, how does the West respond to a scenario where state adversaries can incentivize state cooperation with greater alacrity and impact?[8]

Clearly aligning desired outcomes to strategies is an important step in ensuring the proper application of scarce resources. An important component of any strategy, however, will be the employment of SOF, coupled with a close cooperation with its interagency partners (e.g., intelligence, signals intelligence, and cyber). Capable of operations under the threshold of war but also a valued partner in supporting conventional operations, SOF remain a relevant force multiplier and a national strategic asset.

Endnotes

1. The term was first coined by Admiral Bill McRaven on his retirement. Dan Lamothe, "Retiring Top Navy SEAL: 'We Are in the Golden Age of Special Operations'," *The Washington Post*, 29 August 2014, https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/checkpoint/wp/2014/08/29/retiring-top-navy-seal-we-are-in-the-golden-age-of-special-operations-2/.
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5. Colin Gray, *Explorations in Strategy* (Westport: Praeger, 1996), 149.

6. Scott Tait, "Hybrid Warfare: The New Face of Global Competition," *Financial Times*, 14 October 2019, https://www.ft.com/content/ffe7771e-e5bb-11e9-9743-db5a370481bc.
7. Tait, "Hybrid Warfare."
8. The Marshall Plan refers to the 1948 American initiative to assist with the recovery of Europe after WWII. It provided more than $15 billion to help with the rebuilding of Europe.

Chapter 3. Mission Over Tasks: SOF Transformation

Dr. Bernd Horn

Undeniably, change is difficult. Within organizations, change simply for the sake of change may be seen as irresponsible. Nonetheless, there is a very real cost to the failure to evolve, which can often result in irrelevance and demise. Sadly, too often, people and indeed organizations get trapped in their own identity and are unable to recognize the need to change. For some individuals, the organization and culture in which they have grown, been promoted, and gained experience as well as reputation becomes so embedded that it is difficult to see another reality.

For modern Special Operations Forces (SOF), however, evolution, particularly in light of the "pivot" to great power competition, is anything but a simple task. Patently, though, there is a need to shift. The dynamic and ambiguous security environment demands that SOF take a very disciplined and careful analysis of how they must evolve and transform to meet future challenges. Indeed, there is a precedence for this type of adaptability. The British Special Air Service (SAS) in WWII is an excellent example. Undeniably, the context was relatively simple. It was total war, and the opponents were crystal clear. It was a no-holds, barred fight, and the overall objective was abundantly transparent—the annihilation of Nazi Germany. For the SAS, the emphasis was laser focused on the mission and not on particular tasks. And here lies the lesson for modern SOF. As difficult as it may be, the focus must always be on the larger mission and not mired in preferred tasks or roles.

The Past Is Prologue

The example of the SAS in WWII provides a perfect example of adaptation to ensure relevance and effectiveness. Their focus was on the mission, not tactics, techniques, and procedures (TTPs) or a favored role. In the summer of 1941, Lieutenant David Stirling convinced General Claude Auchinleck, commander-in-chief of Middle East forces, to allow him to raise a small

commando force capable of raiding German airfields deep in enemy territory. Stirling believed that small groups of approximately 5 to 12 men each could wreak more havoc on the enemy than large, cumbersome commando units.

To prove the value of his unit, SAS Brigade "L" Detachment,[1] he proposed to attack five enemy airfields well behind enemy lines to destroy the German fighter and bomber facilities the night prior to a major Allied offensive, namely Operation Crusader, scheduled for dawn 18 November 1941. The plan, which was based on his concept of deployment, was to drop five groups of men by parachute into the desert 12 miles south of the objective two nights prior to D-Day. Once landed, they were to make their way on foot to the objective, attack the night prior to the offensive, and then withdraw to an established rendezvous about 45 miles in the desert's interior where a patrol of the Long Range Desert Group (LRDG) would pick them up and ferry them back to base.

Despite counsel from various sources to cancel the drop due to a raging storm, Stirling refused and conducted the drop. It was an unmitigated disaster. Only 21 of the 55 SAS troops who participated in the drop made it to the rendezvous points. None of them had engaged any enemy airfields. "As far as I know," Stirling conceded, "no party was dropped within 10 miles of the selected DZs [drop zones]."[2]

Although Stirling admitted that he found parachuting "most disagreeable," he did initially believe it was an effective means to get behind enemy lines, where "you could blow things up and find your way home by other means."[3] However, after his initial foray, he realized that parachuting was not necessarily the best means of reaching desert objectives. Rather, he felt that the LRDG, who ferried them home, would be a most effective manner of delivering his raiders close to the enemy airfields.

Between December 1941 and March 1942, the SAS conducted 20 raids against various targets, primarily enemy landing grounds. They destroyed 115 aircraft and a considerable number of enemy vehicles. These raids were conducted in conjunction with the LRDG, who were able to accurately deliver the sabotage teams within striking distance of their objectives. By the end of June 1942, "L" Detachment had raided all of the more important German and Italian airstrips within 300 miles of the forward area at least once or twice.

Not surprisingly, by this time, the enemy increased their defensive posture. In addition, the SAS had developed their own capability to navigate

and traverse the desert. As a result, the SAS developed a new concept of using jeeps with two sets of mounted machine guns themselves, as opposed to infiltrating the objectives by foot after the LRDG dropped them in the desert. Stirling explained, "The astonishing agility of the jeep enabled us to approach a target at night over almost any country. The technique turned out to be most successful and enabled the Unit to be very much more flexible in its methods of operation."[4]

The autonomous, jeep-mounted SAS continued to raid German airfields and harass the enemy lines of communication for the rest of the North African campaign. By January 1943, they conducted raids behind enemy lines. The SAS had evolved from parachute insertion, to being ferried by the LRDG, and finally to conducting jeep raids themselves. Throughout the campaign, the focus was on the mission—destroying the German war machine—and not on any specific TTPs or perceived roles.

When the North African campaign was completed, the SAS continued to evolve by means of mission focus. The original "L" Detachment, which had absorbed Free French paratroopers and the Special Boat Section to form 1st SAS Regiment in late 1942, was transformed into the Special Boat Squadron and the Special Raiding Squadron. Along with the 2nd SAS Regiment, they went on to conduct long-range penetration patrols and seaborne raids during the Sicilian and Italian campaigns.

Furthermore, when the Allies invaded Occupied Europe in June 1944, SAS personnel conducted deception operations, and they worked with French Resistance forces to harass German lines of communication and relay information/intelligence. Later, SAS personnel dropped into Belgium, as well as the Netherlands, and conducted operations in conjunction with Allied forces during the battle for Germany. In addition, in December 1944, SAS elements worked with Italian partisans, and when hostilities ceased in May 1945, the SAS Brigade assisted disarming Germans in Norway.

The SAS example is extremely pertinent as it underscores the importance of adaptation and change while remaining mission focused rather than mirrored in the methods of accomplishing a specific tactical action. The SAS continually changed its TTPs, modes of operation, and tasks as the situation and context of the war changed. They were never wed to a single concept. Rather, they focused on the mission—the defeat of the Nazi war machine. As a result, they remained relevant and extremely effective throughout the war.

The Golden Age of SOF

Patently, the context for the SAS was relatively simple—participation in a total war. The situation is not so clear for contemporary SOF. For the past two decades, SOF have been involved in and led the Global War on Terror and counterinsurgency (COIN) across the planet. And, they have been very good at it, arguably creating an "easy button" for political and military commanders when faced with a global problem. In fact, the former commander of the United States Special Operations Command (USSOCOM), Admiral Bill McRaven, on his retirement from the military in 2014, proclaimed that SOF were in "the golden age of Special Operations." He elaborated, "[It's] a time when our unique talents as special operators are in the greatest demand. A time when the nation recognizes the strategic value of our services. A time when all that we train for, all that we work for, all that our predecessors planned for has come together."[5]

McRaven's remarks were exactly on point. His remarks spoke to the impact of both SOF's unique capabilities as well as the influence and impact they have had on operations across the globe. It has been, however, a very long road. From their inception at the start of WWII, SOF have, for most of their history, been viewed as a distraction, if not a nuisance, to real soldiering. Conventional military commanders despised SOF and consistently pushed them to the periphery of military capability. Only the inimitable patronage of a few power politicians and high-ranking officers ensured SOF's survival in this inauspicious environment. Not until 1987, with the creation of USSOCOM, did SOF finally find themselves in a position to control their own destiny.[6] By the 1990s, SOF were becoming the go-to force for political and military decision makers.

It took the cataclysmic terrorist attack on the twin towers of the World Trade Center in New York on 9/11, however, to propel SOF into the mainstream of recognized national military capability. Decision makers were looking for a means of striking back swiftly and effectively. SOF once again provided the answer. As part of Operation ENDURING FREEDOM in Afghanistan, the insertion of the first American Special Forces teams with Northern Alliance (anti-Taliban) forces to the fall of Kandahar and the rout of the Taliban and al-Qaeda took only 49 days.[7]

In the aftermath of this success, SOF were clearly on an up-swing. Not surprisingly, a 2003 House Armed Services Committee report assessed,

"[SOF] is clearly a treasured national asset in the war on terrorism and our best asset in disrupting the enemy in foreign lands."[8] General Wayne A. Downing asserted, "SOF was structured for and conducted short-duration deployments and combat operations, but by 2005, SOF operators were conducting more operations in a week, at a higher rate of complexity, than their pre 9/11 predecessors conducted in a career."[9]

This reliance on SOF was clearly evident. A 2014 report revealed that USSOCOM, since 2001, had witnessed its manpower nearly double, its budget nearly triple, and its overseas deployments quadruple.[10] Not surprisingly then, General Joseph Votel III proclaimed, when he assumed command of USSOCOM in August 2014, "The command is at its absolute zenith … and it is indeed a golden age for special operations." He continued, "Our nation has very high expectations of SOF. They look to us to do the very hard missions in very difficult conditions."[11]

Predictably, with the increased responsibilities and tempo of operations, USSOCOM's budget mushroomed to $10.8 billion in 2017.[12] Moreover, that same year, U.S. SOF alone deployed to 149 countries around the world.[13] In May 2017, General Raymond (Tony) Thomas III, the commander of USSOCOM at the time, briefed the Senate Armed Services Committee that "Since 9/11, we expanded the size of our force by almost 75 percent in order to take on mission-sets that are likely to endure. Since 2001, from the pace of operations to their geographic sweep, the activities of U.S. SOF have, in fact, grown in every conceivable way." He added, "On any given day, about 8,000 special operators are deployed in approximately 80 countries." Significantly, he revealed, "[SOF] are the main effort, or major supporting effort for U.S. violent extremist organization (VEO)-focused operations in Afghanistan, Syria, Iraq, Yemen, Somalia, Libya, across the Sahel of Africa, The Philippines and Central/South America—essentially, everywhere Al Qaeda and the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria are to be found."[14]

The SOF footprint on military operations led one American think tank to assert, "U.S. SOF has been virtually synonymous with the American way of war since 9/11."[15] And yet, there were whispers of change on the horizon. Andrew Knaggs, Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defense for Special Operations and Combating Terrorism, announced, "It is fair to say you will see a rebranding of special operations forces."[16] Although SOF, since 9/11, have been at the forefront of the U.S.-led global war on terror, the current 2018 American national defense strategy (NDS) steered a shift away, a pivot,

from a focus on counterterrorism and COIN to an emphasis on traditional big power rivals. As such, under the 2018 NDS, Europe and Asia are once again the "priority theaters" for U.S. forces. Paradoxically, for the past two decades, politicians, practitioners, scholars, and strategists have touted SOF as the "Force of Choice."[17] They have consistently been the go-to force due to their effectiveness and efficiency. As such, one must ask what the pivot actually means for SOF and how the organization will transform to meet this new focus. More importantly, have the previous two decades of direct action (DA)/capture-kill missions stunted SOF's ability to evolve or adapt as required?[18]

The Pivot

The 2018 NDS leaves no ambiguity with regard to what the U.S. strategy is going forward. The pivot, or in other words, the transition from the Department of Defense's (DOD) primary focus on counterterrorism as part of the Global War on Terror and COIN is a fundamental shift of emphasis to great power competition with its "peer and near-peer" rivals (i.e., China and Russia) and international rogue state competitors (e.g., Iran and the Republic of North Korea).[19] The 2018 NDS clearly states that the DOD's "enduring mission is to provide combat-credible military forces needed to deter war and protect the security of our nation." Significantly, the strategy document also notes:

> Today, we are emerging from a period of strategic atrophy, aware that our competitive military advantage has been eroding. We are facing increased global disorder, characterized by decline in the long-standing rules-based international order—creating a security environment more complex and volatile than any we have experienced in recent memory. Inter-state strategic competition, not terrorism, is now the primary concern in U.S. national security.[20]

The document plainly labels Russia and China as revisionist powers who are set on remodeling the international system, and as such, pose "the central challenge to U.S. prosperity and security." The conclusion drawn is resoundingly clear, namely a return of the big power rivalry reminiscent of the Cold War but now in an increasingly multipolar world. From the perspective of

the 2018 NDS, this evolution has become the defining element of the international environment.

Not surprisingly then, the strategy document advocates enhancing the lethality of American military forces through such means as greater deployment of autonomous robotic weapons, the modernization of missile defense and nuclear weapons, as well as the deployment of U.S. forces to fight from smaller, dispersed bases. The 2018 NDS underscores that, for the first time in a generation, the strategic focus of American defense policy is to compete with near power rivals in a multipolar world. As a result, in 2019, acting Secretary of Defense Patrick Shanahan stated that the DOD's focus was "China, China, China."[21] This belief was later reinforced by his permanent replacement, American Defense Secretary Mark Esper, when he confirmed, "We are focused on great power competition, first with China, then Russia." Esper conceded, "My aim is to adjust our [military] footprint in many places."[22]

Arguably, the 2018 NDS is exactly what the four traditional Services have waited for since the demise of the Warsaw Pact and the fall of the Soviet Union—namely a return to high-end state threats, which allow the conventional Services to focus their efforts on conventional force capability development, deployment, and funding.[23] Predictably, this focus is more centered on traditional capabilities and threat scenarios than it is on the issue of "competition." Culture and deeply rooted perspectives based on Service affiliation, training, and experience are difficult to change.

Understanding the Pivot

The "pivot" is unsurprising in its own right; however, the challenge comes in correctly identifying the threats to counter and the actual context of the battlespace. For too many conventional military commanders, the pivot is seen as a return to high-intensity combat harkening back to the Cold War standoff between superpowers. General Martin E. Dempsey acknowledged, "It's the first time in 41 years we've had a legitimate risk emanating from state actors, and we clearly have a persistent threat emanating from sub-state and non-state actors."[24] And that is exactly the issue—namely understanding the competition space and balancing resources correctly. A return to a traditional warfare model mindset has clear dangers, as does ignoring the capability of current rivals and rogue states. Brigadier General Don Bolduc, a former commander of USSOCOM-Africa, argued, "The biggest problem with

DOD strategy development is it is tied to an antiquated organizational structure." He insisted, "The department is in need of serious reorganization."[25]

Bolduc's concern is well founded. Retired admiral and former NATO Supreme Allied Commander James Stavridis warned of an overreliance on the military for the American approach to foreign policy. He reasoned, "Diplomacy is preventive medicine that will help avoid costly surgical procedures (i.e., military operations) in the future."[26] This overdependence on military solutions, or the use of force to achieve desired political outcomes, has left the U.S. in a poor position to compete in the new "competition" battlespace. General Michael Mullen, a former chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, lamented:

> My fear, quite frankly, is that we aren't moving fast enough in this regard. U.S. foreign policy is still too dominated by the military, too dependent upon the generals and admirals who lead our major overseas commands. It's one thing to be able and willing to serve as emergency responders; quite another to always have to be the fire chief.[27]

Mullen's concern was that political decision makers were too quickly dependent on the military to deal with an ever-increasing gamut of missions in a constantly evolving, complex, international forum. As a result, they are competing with a limited tool set while their competitors utilize the entire array of national resources.

The issue is an absence of a deep comprehension of what great power competition is as well as what it looks like. As a RAND report noted, "If the assertion that international politics is entering a new period of strategic competition has been widely accepted, there is no consensus about what this shift means."[28] For the previous two decades in the fight against terrorists and insurgents, the U.S. and its Western allies have been able to compensate for any lack of a strategic coherence in their approach to less capable opponents through technological and resource advantages. Against more formidable adversaries, its technological and military capabilities may be matched or even surpassed. As such, what will be important is a change in strategic thinking that recognizes the exact nature of the current and future battlespace, or in other words, the competition domain.[29]

In this light, the prognosis for a high-intensity, traditional war scenario is ominous, if not downright horrendous. Globalization, the proliferation of

technology, and their exponential and consistently increasing capability has made a traditional war almost incomprehensible. An increasing number of nations with substantial nuclear arsenals, the global propagation of stand-off precision missile systems and platforms (including highly maneuverable cruise missiles), as well as hypersonic weaponry (weapons that travel at five times the speed of sound) and glide vehicles, matched with networked sensors are capable of delivering large payloads of munitions at increased ranges so that targets can be engaged and destroyed almost anywhere, with accuracy, and within a short period of discovery and decision-making.[30] Space-based weapons, lasers, directed-energy munitions, and high-powered microwaves will only increase lethality and reach.

As a result of this array of lethal ordnance, the delivery of timely and accurate munitions will not be problematic. As innumerable analysts have identified, the world has become one "big sensor," making the masking of military deployments or actions virtually impossible. As one researcher noted:

> The amount of data generated by networked devices, is on pace to triple between 2016 and 2021. More significant, the proliferation of low-cost, commercial sensors that can detect more things more clearly over greater distances is already providing more real-time global surveillance than has existed at any time in history. This is especially true in space. In the past, the high costs of launching satellites required them to be large, expensive, and designed to orbit for decades. But as access to space gets cheaper, satellites are becoming more like mobile phones—mass-produced devices that are used for a few years and then replaced. Commercial space companies are already fielding hundreds of small, cheap satellites. Soon, there will be thousands of such satellites, providing an unblinking eye over the entire world. Stealth technology is living on borrowed time.[31]

This reality makes the fielding of large conventional armies and their platforms laden with risk. Added to this formidable range of threats is a myriad of additional perils. Jamming of communications, electronic warfare and cyberattacks that target networks, and the vulnerable software programs that seemingly run the entirety of today's society and militaries will only increase risk and consequence of a high-intensity war. The increasing development and deployment of autonomous systems only adds to this complexity.[32] In

light of the lethality of the modern battlespace, as well as the substantive, imposing American military capability, no nation would purposely attempt to compete with the U.S. in a traditional conventional war setting if at all avoidable.[33] However, this situation is not to say American rivals and competitors will not wage a different form of conflict or competition.

Although competitors such as China and Russia maintain large military forces and continue to improve and expand their arsenals, arguably leading to a renewed arms race, they remain careful to avoid actions that would possibly activate the conventional war "trip wire." Rather, they maintain the military capability as a substantial, viable, and overt threat but compete on various levels under the threshold of a "hot" or "shooting war." In fact, they utilize "hybrid warfare," defined by NATO as "a wide range of overt and covert military, paramilitary, and civilian measures [...] employed in a highly integrated design."[34]

In essence, the new competitive landscape blends conventional, irregular, asymmetric, criminal, and terrorist means and methods to achieve a political objective(s). Importantly, this approach actuality makes the opponent largely irrelevant. Whether a state or nonstate actor, adversaries will make use of the proliferation of technology and information that has accompanied globalization. Instruments such as cyber warfare, economic coercion, or even blackmail, exploitation of social/societal conflict in a target country, and the waging of disinformation campaigns and psychological warfare are all in the inventory. Criminal behavior and terrorism are also in the repertoire of opponents. General Valery Gerasimov, Chief of the General Staff of the Russian Federation, distinctly articulated the application of this methodology of competing (or more accurately, great power competition/conflict). In "The Value of Science in Prediction," Gerasimov explained, "Moscow is increasingly focusing on new forms of politically focused operations in the future… new tactics are needed which focus on the enemy's weaknesses and avoid direct and overt confrontations."[35] To be blunt, these are tactics that NATO—still, in the final analysis, an alliance designed to deter and resist a mass, tank-led Soviet invasion—finds hard to know how to handle.

General Gerasimov was adept at identifying the weakness of modern states by highlighting the enormous power of civilian populations to determine the level of peace or conflict. He argues that history has shown that "a perfectly thriving state can, in a matter of months and even days, be transformed into an arena of fierce armed conflict, become a victim of foreign

intervention, and sink into a web of chaos, humanitarian catastrophe, and civil war."[36] This state of affairs is due, in his estimation, to the fact that "the role of nonmilitary means of achieving political and strategic goals has grown, and, in many cases, they have exceeded the power of force of weapons in their effectiveness."[37]

In essence, rather than a kinetic solution to conflict, Gerasimov argues that the focused application of political, economic, informational, humanitarian, and other nonmilitary measures, when applied in a coordinated manner with internal discontent and protest, can wield significant results. In addition, all of these actions are also combined (at the right moment, normally to achieve final success) with concealed military action, often "under the guise of peacekeeping and crisis regulation." Gerasimov insisted, "Asymmetrical actions have come into widespread use, enabling the nullification of an enemy's advantages in armed conflict. Among such actions are the use of special-operations forces and internal opposition to create a permanently operating front through the entire territory of the enemy state, as well as informational actions, devices, and means that are constantly being perfected."[38]

In fact, from a strategic perspective, the methodology of rivalry in great power competition entails the mobilization of a wide range of a state's resources, primarily non-violent, to achieve a desired political end state. In fact, the use of violence is not remotely desired. In essence, a hybrid warfare approach is seen as a methodology of achieving the political end state without tripping the threshold of war, which would allow an opponent the recourse to legally use force and/or attract international intervention.[39] In fact, hybrid warfare creates a perfect ambiguity that paralyzes opponents since they are not even aware that they are under attack. The case of the Russian annexation of Crimea and the conflict in Ukraine are good examples. Russia was able to skillfully manipulate the U.S. and its NATO allies to remain largely passive while Russia dismembered Ukraine.[40] It was so successful that the Supreme Allied Commander-Europe at the time, General Phillip Breedlove, proclaimed that Russia's use of hybrid warfare in Eastern Ukraine represented, "the most amazing information warfare blitzkrieg we have ever seen in the history of information warfare."[41]

Consequently, the challenge is recognizing that great power competition, as well as dealing with rivals and rogue states, is on a completely different playing field. Although conventional military capability will always be

required as both a deterrent and backstop to military aggression, the majority of the never-ending competition/conflict will be waged on economic, informational, political, societal, and technological planes. The Chinese use of cyberattacks; the purchase of Western key industries and natural resource producers as well as entertainment outlets; the dumping of steel thus choking Western steel producing capability; the strangulation of the flow of the Mekong River in China, thus creating water shortages and drought in its neighbouring countries;[42] the building of foreign infrastructure and loaning of money to underdeveloped countries (e.g., Belt and Road Initiative) thereby allowing economic dominance and control; and trade boycotts are all examples of how China is working to expand its influence and control in the international arena.

The COVID-19 pandemic is just another example of how China sees great power competition. They are using the downturn in Western economies as a great opportunity. They have sought out more foreign direct investment, are working hard to seize market share in key industries, and are overproducing goods to flood markets to achieve the same effect. They are also surging production of medical supplies and pharmaceutical ingredients in an attempt to increase trust and dependence on China (although many of those goods have proven to be shoddy and not within required standards).[43] Concomitantly, China has been working diligently at countering the West's, particularly the American, criticism of its coronavirus culpability and subsequent disinformation campaign. In addition, it has consistently tried to chip away at U.S.-European relations.[44]

The Russians are no different. A substantive reform of the Russian military in 2008 was based on the premise that large-scale war was unlikely and that modern wars between advanced militaries with nuclear weapons would be centered on the aerospace domain.[45] Although conventional capabilities continue to be upgraded and deployed, the actual method to advance political objectives rests largely within the realm of hybrid warfare. As such, the use of proxy forces in Libya, Syria, and Africa; the use of state hackers and their cyberattacks on its former republics and international competitors; interference in U.S. elections; troll farms dispensing disinformation meant to create cleavages in the social fabric of target nations; the RT (formerly Russia Today) news agency; and the use of private military contractors and "little green men" (SOF) to agitate, disrupt, and divide opponents all speak

to the use of mostly nonmilitary means to reassert their position and gain advantage.

Within this competitive arena, the 2018 NDS clearly stated that the U.S. strategy was to "compete, deter, and win in this environment. The re-emergence of long-term strategic competition, rapid dispersion of technologies, and new concepts of warfare and competition that span the entire spectrum of conflict require a Joint Force structured to match this reality." Therefore, the strategy called for "a more lethal, resilient, and rapidly innovating Joint Force."[46] But again, the conventional military component is a small fraction of what is required. To compete on an equal footing, competition must be seen beyond the traditional warfare scenario. As Katherine Zimmerman, an analyst with the American Enterprise Institute in Washington, D.C., assessed, "It's [the U.S.] not losing militarily, but in the soft-power space."[47]

What Might Change?

The shift ushered in by the 2018 NDS has created some renewed interest in large exercises and the increasing funding for conventional military capability, as well as new, modernized armaments. In fact, from May until the end of September 2019, "93 separate military exercises were held, with forces operating continuously in, above and around 29 countries." The exercises were clearly designed to send a message to Moscow. Significantly, they represented "the most intense uninterrupted set of drills since the end of the Cold War."[48] Although the U.S. military was busy fighting in a number of theaters (e.g., Afghanistan, Syria, and Iraq) and engaged in crisis deployments in response to both Iran and North Korea, the shift to practicing "high-end" warfare scenarios still prevailed. "We still tend to view the enemy through the narrow bores and restricted optics of our existing national security structure," Brian Michael Jenkins, a senior advisor to the president of the RAND Corporation, cautioned. "The 9/11 Commission hearings," he continued, "reveal the difficulty we have in addressing foes that fall outside our normal field of vision." He added, "We tend to focus on what we can hit with our capabilities."[49]

Nonetheless, despite the apparent willingness of conventional military commanders to return to a Cold War mentality, the pivot will not dramatically change the world. Great power competitors, rivals, rogue states, nonstate actors, and VEOs will continue to wage "war" to gain political objectives such as increased influence, access, economic gain, military advantage, and

power. The full gamut of resources available to an opponent will be used, whether proxy forces, cyberattacks, economic and political coercion, as well as disinformation meant to disrupt and divide societies. A focus on purely traditional war fighting scenarios and an abandonment of current realities is a cataclysmic mistake.[50]

West Africa, specifically the Sahel, is a case in point. The American desire to withdraw from Africa to focus on great power competition misses the entire point of the current competitive battle space. American Secretary of Defense Mark Esper confirmed, "Mission No. 1 is compete with Russia and China."[51] But to relax the focus on the smoldering state of the globe is arguably irresponsible, not to mention it defies the actual great power competition underway.

For example, initially, it is important to look at what has been done by the Americans and their allies and coalition partners in West Africa. They have deployed an impressive array of troops in the Sahel since 2014: 1,500 plus Americans; 6,100 French; 5,000 G5 Sahel Joint Force (Burkina Faso, Chad, Mail, Mauritania, and Niger); 13,289 United Nations (UN) troops and 1,920 police under UN Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in Mali; 7,500 Multinational Joint Task Force military and nonmilitary personnel; and 3,000 African Union emergency contingency troops for an approximate total force of 38,000 personnel.[52] Yet, despite this enormous effort, the Western Sahel has experienced unprecedented terrorist violence with more than 4,000 deaths reported in 2019, a fivefold increase in the number of fatalities caused by terrorist attacks since 2016. Burkina Faso alone accounted for 1,800 of the deaths reported last year, an increase of 2,150 percent over four years.[53] In the last two years alone, violence by terrorist groups in West Africa soared 250 percent. Moreover, the violence has displaced well over half a million people.[54] Significantly, extremist groups are now creeping south from the Sahel toward coastal countries such as Ghana and Côte d'Ivoire.

Notably, Africa is not an outlier. Global terrorism continues unabated. The European Union's crime agency, Eurojust, revealed it dealt with 222 terror cases in 2019 compared with 191 in 2018.[55] Britain's MI5 is faced with more than 43,000 people who pose a potential terrorist threat to the UK.[56] In addition, the threat of terrorism in Southeast Asia (e.g., Malaysia, the Philippines, and Indonesia) remains extremely high.[57] Central to the continuing scourge of terrorism is the continued existence and global expansion of the Islamic State and al-Qaeda, as well as the explosion of Iranian-supported

popular mobilization forces in Iraq. Furthermore, there is no end in sight for a multitude of slow-burning insurgencies and conflict in a myriad of at-risk states (e.g., Burma, Colombia, India, Peru, the Philippines, Sudan, and Sri Lanka), not to mention the festering conflict in Afghanistan, Syria, and Libya.

The growth and expansion of the terrorist groups and the apparent inability to defeat or even constrain them is worrisome in its own right. Additionally, the terrorists and militants have shown a disturbing ability to learn from their mistakes. Furthermore, they share their lessons learned worldwide with the fraternity of terrorists.[58] In fact, experts believe there is evidence of growing coherence amongst the global jihadist movement. Rather than disintegrating, they appear to be developing and strengthening their connections.[59]

These are but a few examples of the current state of affairs, which will not go away simply because great powers decide to rekindle Cold War-like competition. All of these issues cannot be left to fester unattended because the consequence, as was seen by the rise of Daesh in Syria and Iraq, has global implications.

Aside from the need to deal with ongoing terrorism and insurgencies in order to create a stable and secure global landscape in which to continue to allow countries to politically and economically flourish, the struggle in these regions is also part of the great power competition for influence, access, and economic supremacy. For instance, both Russia and China have quickly tried to backfill the apparent American desire to withdraw from the Sahel and other regions. Both nations have extended offers of military equipment and training to the struggling West African countries. Additionally, China has heavily invested economically in the region. In Senegal, Beijing paid local farmers a premium to buy the bulk of their harvest. In Mauritania, China is building ports and other infrastructure, as well as investing in local fisheries.[60] Furthermore, China has been offering African countries "smart cities" technology equipped with facial recognition technology (and using that information for itself before delivering it to the host countries).[61] In fact, Johns Hopkins University research indicates that China has "wooed" African nations with an estimated $5 billion per year.[62]

Chinese interest in Africa is not surprising. Africa represents an important playing field in the great power competition, mainly due to its resources and economic and demographic potential. It is a continent rich in raw

materials such as diamonds, gold, and rare earth minerals. It has excellent farmland and other natural resources, including oil and vast, flowing rivers. Economically, Africa is the second-fastest growing continent in the world in terms of population. It already represents 16 percent of the world population with 1.3 billion people, projected to grow to 2.5 billion by 2050 and perhaps 4.5 billion by the century's end.[63]

The point is, despite the desire to pivot, the world has not dramatically changed. Great power competition focusing on traditional war-fighting scenarios represents a small component of the actual competition. The major moves and flashpoints remain in the shadows, clandestine in nature and most often in the difficult human terrain where fighting the war of information and competing narratives for the support of the people remains omni-important. As Jenkins insisted:

> It is time for us to take a deliberately unconventional, broad, and inclusive approach. The objective here is to avoid depicting the enemy as a convenient mirror image of our existing organization, missions, capabilities, and preferences, and instead to sketch a dynamic group portrait of the foes we are already dealing with today and will be dealing with for the foreseeable future … The enemies of yesterday were static, predictable, homogeneous, rigid, hierarchical, and resistant to change. The enemies of today are dynamic, unpredictable, diverse, fluid, networked, and constantly evolving.[64]

Implications for SOF

The implications for SOF are substantial as the constancy of which the world will move forward suggests a continued reliance on SOF as the force of choice. The pivot, as well as the continually transforming and evolving security environment, does require SOF to transform. Much like the conventional Services can often be accused of being rooted in traditional structures, doctrines, and threat scenarios, SOF must ensure they are not transfixed with counterterrorism, COIN, and capture/kill DA missions. Although the pivot may entail some additional tasks (or perhaps a resurrection of forgotten mission sets), the nature of conflict and great power competition actually makes a strong case for the continuation of SOF saliency.

Quite simply, since global competitors wish to ensure their actions remain under the threshold of a shooting/hot war, the struggle for access, influence, and political and economic advantage will remain in the shadows. As such, irregular warfare will be a dominant methodology. Disinformation campaigns meant to sway, alienate, and/or divide populations; cyberattacks; use of proxy forces; agitation; and support for political opposition and insurgent movements will be predominant, as will economic and political strategies. Consequently, SOF will remain an influential military instrument for governments to employ in the great power competition.

This continued importance was reinforced by former USSOCOM commander, General Thomas, who insisted that the murky domain between hot and cold war "is arguably the most important phase of deterrence."[65] And, he noted, this is where SOF excel. A report from the Army Lessons Learned Center echoed his thoughts. It stated:

> Pure military skill is not enough. A full spectrum of military, paramilitary, and civil action must be blended to produce success. The enemy uses economic and political warfare, propaganda and naked military aggression in an endless combination to oppose a free choice of government, and suppress the rights of the individual by terror, by subversion and by force of arms. To win this struggle, our officers and men must understand and combine the political, economic and civil actions with skilled military efforts in the execution of this mission. Regardless of the name we use—special warfare, counterinsurgency warfare, irregular warfare—one thing is for certain: it characterizes the nature of warfare we are experiencing, and will experience, for the foreseeable future. We must recognize that "pure military skill" will not be enough. While the ability to conduct high-end, direct action activities will always remain urgent and necessary, it is the indirect approaches, working through and with others in building a global network of partners, that will have the most decisive and enduring effects.[66]

This rationale is why SOF will always maintain a pivotal role in the great power competition. Their characteristics and skill sets are perfectly geared to irregular warfare and war in the shadows. SOF operations, and those who carry them out, are positioned to conduct clandestine, time-sensitive, high-risk (i.e., political and to-the-force) missions in hostile, denied, or politically

sensitive environments. Much of the great power competition is taking place in the obscure domains and in regions around the world where gaining access and influence to populations and regional governments is key. On this playing field, information warfare, the competition over narrative and gaining acceptance, goes hand in hand with having impact (i.e., economic, military, political, and social) on the ground. Dr. Jonathan Schroden elucidated, "Access equals influence; influence equals alignment; and alignment equals power."[67]

SOF, through their military assistance/special warfare[68] irregular warfare programs of security force assistance,[69] foreign internal defense (FID),[70] and unconventional warfare (UW),[71] allow for a low-cost (both in personnel and financial terms) methodology of developing favorable foreign relations with friendly and at-risk states to further political objectives. Their ability to train foreign security forces to deal with real or potential threats also works to preempt crises before they become out of control or trigger larger conflagrations.

SOF operations around the globe also act to create networks and important "lily-pads" should the larger, conventional Joint Force require basing options in times of crisis or war. In short, SOF programs develop access and influence that further favorable foreign relations in support of national objectives. Moreover, SOF's situational awareness around the globe through the cultivation of long-term partnerships and creation of networks provides comprehension of emerging trends and threats worldwide. It also allows for influencing actors and events to coincide with desired outcomes. Admiral McRaven asserted, "SOF are rapidly deployable, have operational reach, are persistent and do not constitute an irreversible policy commitment." He emphasized that "military success in today's environment is about building a stronger network to defeat the networks that confront us." He unscored that "the [SOF global] network enables small, persistent presence in critical locations, and facilitates engagement where necessary or appropriate."[72]

In essence, SOF allow for continual competition under the threshold of war through their non-kinetic activities and targeting of key actors and audiences. Admiral Olsen, also a former USSOCOM commander, underscored the non-kinetic activities and targeting of friendly and at-risk states. He stressed that "direct action is important, not decisive; indirect action is decisive."[73] Notably, he was not alone in his assertion. "While the direct approach captures everyone's attention," McRaven acknowledged, "we must not forget that these operations only buy time and space for the indirect

and broader governmental approaches to take effect. Enduring success is achieved by proper application of indirect operations, with an emphasis in building partner-nation capacity and mitigating the conditions that make populations susceptible to extremist ideologies."[74] He insisted, "The 'dead of night' direct-action operations will be fewer in number, while the more touchy-feely missions 'by, through and with' partner nations will increase."[75]

It is SOF's ability to excel at their non-kinetic mission sets that creates security capability within partner nations; develops relationships and networks; targets hostile agents, agitators, insurgents, and terrorists; as well as promulgates a narrative that counters opponent disinformation. This makes SOF an important player in the great power competition. As two SOF strategists assessed:

> SOF is uniquely positioned, across the globe to thoughtfully combine intelligence, information, space and cyber operations to affect an opponent's decision making, influence diverse audiences, and unmask false narratives. Furthermore, SOF can coordinate operations, activities, and actions in the information environment with those across the other operational domains and, as a matter of routine, fuse "cognitive" and lethal effects to obtain favorable outcomes. The SOF enterprise can inform more comprehensive understanding of adversary global operating systems and develop options that exploit vulnerabilities in those systems. Especially when paired with capabilities in the cyber and space domains, special operations allow the Joint Force to gain positional, political, or informational advantage in competition and enable a rapid transition to combat operations should the need arise.[76]

General Richard D. Clarke, the current USSOCOM commander, accentuated SOF's role in the era of the pivot. He explained, "Moving forward, particularly in great power competition, our SOF are not necessarily going to be in that fight because the whole idea of the strategy is to avoid a kinetic confrontation." He added, "I think the special operations community is uniquely suited to build networks of partners and allies around the globe to put us in a position, first of all, to compete for that influence and legitimacy in peacetime."[77]

Notwithstanding SOF's non-kinetic capabilities, SOF must still be able to transition to kinetic (or warfighting) ability seamlessly. As such, their ability

to undertake kinetic actions as part of UW, COIN, or counterterrorism tasks, as well as DA missions or special reconnaissance (SR) on order without delay, will always be a critical capability to maintain their strategic utility. In addition, in spite of the importance of non-kinetic actions, SOF can also be a substantive player in a conventional, traditional warfare scenario such as peer-on-peer conflict. They can undertake a myriad of tasks:

a. Provide "break-in"/access into theatres (i.e., seizure of airfields, ports, or identified entry points)

b. Provide targeting processes/systems to strike opponents key infrastructure, weapon platforms, as well as command and control (C2) nodes

c. Disrupt adversary anti-access/area denial (A2/AD) platforms and networks

d. Conduct SR

e. Shape theaters for arrival of conventional forces

f. Conduct DA raids and sabotage missions in enemy occupied territories targeting key personnel, systems, and networks (e.g., interdiction/disruption of sea and land lines of communications, C2 nodes, and nuclear delivery systems)

g. Conduct deception operations

h. Conduct UW operations with resistance movements/guerrillas behind enemy lines

i. Penetrate and disrupt enemy networks

Despite the pivot that moves focus to great power competition, particularly with rivals such as China and Russia, as well as a resurgence in an emphasis on the three conventional Services, SOF's current monikers of "Force of choice" and the "golden age of special operations" will not soon fade away. After all, SOF remain an essential, if not pivotal, tool in a government's arsenal. Renowned strategist, Colin Gray, declared, "Special operations forces are a national grand-strategic asset: they are a tool of statecraft that can be employed quite surgically in support of diplomacy, of foreign assistance (of several kinds), as a vital adjunct to regular military forces, or as an independent weapon."[78]

In this comment, Gray captured the essence of SOF. Simply put, SOF are/have indispensable relevance to decision makers, providing them with a wide scope of cost-efficient, low-risk, and effective options, which is precisely the driving force behind SOF power. Their ability to produce, on short notice, courses of action and desirable outcomes in a number of domains, regardless of location, with a high probability of success gives them great saliency to political and military decision makers. After all, arguably, the acid test of strategic utility is what an organization contributes to national power and the ability to project or defend national interests. Therefore, the requirement for and reliance on SOF will not end any time soon.

Potential Issues and Potential Solutions

Despite SOF's strategic relevance, there is still some reason for trepidation. Undeniably, the nature of the strategic battlespace has changed and continues to evolve. Equally apparent, SOF are a scarce resource. They cannot be applied to all problems in all parts of the world. Additionally, their selection and training must be scaled and calibrated to the actual tasks they must perform, particularly as the security environment transmutes. As such, as competition/conflict becomes more nuanced and is conducted under the threshold of war, SOF must ensure they evolve accordingly. For instance, the requirement for "apex-predator" door-kicking, DA-centric operators may wane and other specialist skills (e.g., cyber; social media; influence activities; chemical, biological, radiological, and nuclear (CBRN); and autonomous systems) may need to be created or increased. As some analysts have pondered, will the operator become the supporter/enabler of the future?

Importantly, SOF transformation must focus on the mission and not TTPs or cherished tasks. They must ensure they have the correct personalities, aptitudes, skill sets, and experience to meet the requirements. This necessity means that, potentially, selection requirements, education, and training, as well as the actual profile of individuals needed must be carefully examined. As such, a number of key issues and potential solutions are fielded:

1. New/evolving SOF tasks: Few nations, with the exception of the U.S., have resources to create distinct units/organizations to deal with all potential tasks and mission sets. Even for the U.S. with its seemingly endless resources, simply creating new units to address evolving needs can be wasteful and redundant and can cause stress on limited

resources, particularly skilled personnel. Therefore, the following considerations should be undertaken:

- Review and confirm actual government/DOD mandates. Has there been mission creep?
- Conduct a careful review of "who does what" and identify potential redundancies. For example, the Special Forces Crisis Response Units have been identified for possible disbandment because they are underutilized, represent a redundant capability, and the specialized manpower can be used to backfill vacancies elsewhere.[79]
- Confirm the capability does not reside elsewhere (e.g., with conventional Services, law enforcement, other government agencies, and other SOF entities).
- Re-role organizations that represent a redundant, expired, or non-specialist capability.

2. Proliferation/expansion of SOF demand: The current great power competition puts a premium on both irregular warfare tasks as well as potential high-intensity warfare. The potential demand can outstrip supply or create "operational tempo" problems. Possible fixes include the following:
   - Devolve some current SOF tasks to conventional forces (e.g., military assistance, FID, UW, and capacity building).
   - Niche certain SOF capabilities in an international/NATO structure.
   - Optimize interoperability/consider a modular approach (e.g., special operation task forces comprised of specific capabilities such as CBRN, cyber, DA, and SR provided by different organizations/allies).
   - Create regional specialties for SOF partners (e.g., SOF lead in Africa–France or in the Arctic–Norway or Canada).

3. Evolution of the SOF enterprise: Analysts and competitors have articulated that in the current and evolving security environment, kinetic action is undesirable and often counterproductive. For example, the elimination of Qasem Soleimani, the commander of the Islamic Revolutionary Guards' expeditionary unit, the Quds Force, on 3 January 2020, resulted in 52 percent of respondents to a USA Today/Ipsos poll believing the U.S. had become less safe.[80] More to the point, the increasing reliance on hybrid warfare has made other methodologies

(as described above) more relevant, effective, and potentially damaging. Although the requirement for SOF kinetic capabilities will never disappear, if SOF are to remain the force of choice and maintain their strategic utility, as well as become an innovation disruptor, they must evolve and/or transform in a manner that cannot only react to the threats of the opposition but displace and disrupt those threats before they emerge. As such, selection criteria for some elements of SOF may need to change. The operator of the future may not look like the stereotypical SOF operator of today. For example, Special Forces Colonel Patrick M. Duggan proposed the idea of hybrid special operations teams in 2015. He explained these teams could conduct cyberwarfare. In fact, he recommended the creation of cyber unconventional warfare pilot teams.[81] The obvious question is, Would teams such as this, or teams focused on social media exploitation, look the same as the current SOF personnel, teams, or task forces?

Challenges to SOF Transformation

The evolution/transformation of SOF is not an easy process. SOF have proven extremely effective in the past two decades. Why change something that works? What are the risks of moving to new force structures, changing current selection standards and organizations? No one can predict the future, so what would warrant change? However, as Admiral McRaven elucidated:

> The world today is as unpredictable as ever. As such, the American people will expect us to be prepared for every contingency, to answer every call to arms, to venture where other forces cannot and to win every fight no matter how long or how tough. They will expect it because we are the nation's special operations force.[82]

This requirement is a tall edict. In order to be able to meet, counter, disrupt, and preempt opponents, constant innovation and risk is required. Status quo is not always, if not seldom, the answer. Moreover, internal introspection is not always "all-seeing." Individuals who are rooted in a SOF culture, who have passed selection and qualifying courses, who have years of SOF experience, and who have been promoted and received laurels for tasks well done normally have difficulty seeing beyond the current paradigm.

A world where the operator is not king is simply anathema to many in the community.

Adding to the difficulty is a SOF culture that holds selection and badged operators as the sole authority to determine what SOF "look like." It is also a culture that values tactical skill, experience, and deployments as the only real determiner of SOF legitimacy and expertise.[83] It also drives a continuation of the "perspective [that] killing [or capturing] the people on the 10 most wanted list was a priority for everyone."[84]

But, maintaining relevance, trust, and credibility (which equal freedom of maneuver/action) requires looking at options and courses of action that may be uncomfortable. It is not easily done, particularly when a tight brotherhood of action-orientated alphas have a single outlook on what is required and fail to see the value of outside expertise (which arguably they often dismiss as unqualified commentary). The desire to stay rooted to tasks that have been their bread and butter for almost 20 years can be very overpowering.

Conclusion

Despite the 2018 NDS "pivot," SOF have and will always retain a critical role in kinetic and non-kinetic military operations. As such, SOF must remain prepared to conduct their wide range of irregular warfare tasks, as well as support "peer-on-peer" conflict. However, they cannot sit on their laurels and believe that nothing will change and that status quo will see them through the next two decades. The nature of warfare (e.g., range/lethality of non-state actors, autonomous systems, A2/AD, lethality of weapons, range, and detection) will continue to evolve. As already witnessed, the indirect approach (e.g., cyber, social media, hybrid and asymmetric methodologies, and economic/political/social means of attack) has taken center stage to allow antagonists to achieve their political objectives without tripping the threshold of a hot war from which no one can realistically expect to emerge unscathed. Therefore, SOF must objectively examine how they must evolve/transform. Being an innovation disruptor, or more simply, preventing the next attack that no one sees coming before it happens requires foresight, adaptability, access to expertise and experts who have different perspectives, as well as risk acceptance. SOF must find the redundancies, identify the gaps, and establish a lead. Essentially, SOF must provide answers to the classic five "Ws": who, what, where, when, and why.

There must be a realization that, as difficult as it may be to fathom and accept, the SOF operator of the future may not be singularly the door-kicking, "apex-predator" of the beginning of the new millennium/last two decades. In the end, SOF must remain all about the mission and there needs to be an understanding and acceptance that the mission is evolving.

Endnotes

1. Colonel David Stirling, "Memorandum on the Origins of the Special Air Service," in *The SAS Pocket Manual*, ed. Christopher Westhorp (London: Conway, 2015), 51.
2. Stirling, "Memorandum on the Origins of the Special Air Service," 53.
3. Fitzroy Maclean, *Eastern Approaches* (London: Penguin, 1991), 191.
4. Stirling, "Memorandum on the Origins of the Special Air Service," 55.
5. Dan Lamothe, "Retiring top Navy SEAL: 'We are in the golden age of Special Operations'," *Washington Post*, 29 August 2014, https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/checkpoint/wp/2014/08/29/retiring-top-navy-seal-we-are-in-the-golden-age-of-special-operations-2/ accessed 15 January 2020.
6. The creation of United States Special Operations Command provided an important benchmark in SOF evolution. The Americans, who were normally the trendsetters in military affairs in the post-WWII era (whether equipment, doctrine, organization, or technology oriented), recognized SOF as an independent joint command. SOF now had control over their own resources so they could better modernize their organizations. They had a single commander who could promote interoperability and ensure all SOF assets could operate effectively together. Finally, the provision of a four-star commander-in-chief and an Assistant Secretary of Defense for Special Operations and Low Intensity Conflict gave SOF representation in the highest councils of the DOD. Quite simply, SOF had come of age. They were now masters of their own destiny and could grow their force accordingly, both from the perspective of people and equipment.
7. Sean Naylor, *Not a Good Day to Die: The Untold Story of Operation Anaconda* (New York: Berkley Books, 2005), 14. This success was achieved with 316 U.S. Special Forces (SF), some Central Intelligence Agency operatives, and precision close air support. The SF operators rallied and forged cohesive teams out of the unorganized, anti-Taliban opposition groups and more importantly, using a small amount of sophisticated targeting equipment, brought the weight of American airpower down on Taliban and al-Qaeda fighters.
8. Cited in Mike Moyer, *Oppose Any Foe: The Rise of America's Special Operations Forces* (New York: Basic Books, 2017), 277.
9. Jim Thomas and Chris Dougherty, *Beyond the Ramparts: The Future of U.S. Special Operations Forces* (Washington, D.C.: Center for Strategic and Budgetary

Assessments, 2013), 6, 32. Of note, the raid on bin Laden on 2 May 2011 was only one of 14 operations conducted that night.

10. David Barno and Travis Sharp, "SOF Power," *Foreign Policy*, 14 February 2012, http://www.foreignpolicy.com/articles/2012/02/14/sof_power.
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15. Alice Friend and Shannon Culbertson, *Special Obfuscations: The Strategic Uses of Special Operations Forces* (Washington, D.C.: Center for Strategic & International Studies, 2020), https://www.csis.org/analysis/special-obfuscations-strategic-uses-special-operations-forces.
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17. See Bernd Horn, "SOF Success, Political Success and the Murky Middle: Potential Benchmarks for SOF in Countering Transregional Terrorism," in *Countering Transregional Terrorism*, ed. Peter McCabe (Tampa: JSOU Press, 2018), 137; Lamothe, "Retiring SOCOM Chief"; Jacob Siegel, "How Special Forces Bury the True Cost of America's Wars," *Vice.com*, 11 December 2017, https://www.vice.com/en_ca/article/evax3a/how-special-forces-bury-the-true-cost-of-americas-wars; and Interdisciplinary Perspectives on Special Operations Forces, ed. Gitte Højstrup Christensen (Copenhagen: Danish Defence College, 2017), 43-45.
18. As an example, Linda Robinson wrote an assessment in 2012 explaining that raids and drone strikes were not necessarily the best tactics to achieve long-term solutions. Rather, she emphasized a focus on indirect action and interagency cooperation. Eight years later, arguably not much has changed. See Linda Robinson, "The Future of Special Operations: Beyond Kill and Capture," *Foreign Affairs* 91, no. 6 (November/December 2012), https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/united-states/2012-11-01/future-special-operations.
19. The terms "peer" and "near-peer" competitors often create push back, with detractors citing the fact that none of those entities listed are actually peers or near-peers and none could militarily defeat the U.S.. However, all of those states, as well as a number of non-state actors, have the capability and have in reality undertaken actions that have frustrated, delayed, and in some cases prevented the U.S. and its allies from being able to realize their political objectives.

20. Department of Defense, *Summary of the 2018 National Defense Strategy of the United States of America* (Washington D.C.: Department of Defense, 2018), 1.
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forces and when their precision rocket artillery wiped those forces off the map." Christian Brose, "The New Revolution in Military Affairs," *Foreign Affairs* 98, no. 3 (May/June 2019), https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/2019-04-16/new-revolution-military-affairs.

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Section B: Reviewing and Reassessing SOF Culture

Chapter 4. Breaking Philoctetes: United States Special Operations Command's Contribution to Moral Injury

Lieutenant Colonel Michael P. Manning

Introduction

Although a necessary start, the United States Special Operations Command (USSOCOM) commander's comprehensive review of U.S. special operations culture and ethics issued in January 2020 leaves significant aspects of the warrior experience unaddressed. The comprehensive review focuses on the leadership, mentorship, and ethics training elements of force generation and development given persistently high rates of operating tempo (OPTEMPO). All of the issues identified in the review are valid and important, but, as this chapter argues, paint an incomplete picture for mitigating the ethics problem afflicting U.S. Special Operations Forces (SOF). Indeed, U.S. SOF are not alone in dealing with a recent spate of ethics concerns; allied SOF are also struggling with their own investigations, which suggests a broader trend stemming from the endless, kinetically oriented counterterrorism (CT) fight.[1]

What the commander's comprehensive review fails to address is the concept of moral injury—the moral and ethical wounds that occur in individuals due to repeated exposure to high end combat. (A full description of the concept is elaborated upon in the first section of the chapter). For an enterprise that now prides itself on its ability to kinetically degrade terrorist networks,[2] redressing the moral injury component of the ethics challenge requires leaders at the highest levels of the SOF enterprise to reimagine how they employ the Force. Additionally, moral injury affects both the warrior and the family, and while USSOCOM has known about the effects of its culture on both for close to a decade, how it has chosen to think about and position itself to support them has arguably been part of the problem. Whereas in 2011 USSOCOM recognized the "pressure on the force and family" under then-commander Admiral Eric Olson, it thereafter adopted a language of "preservation of the force and family" under every subsequent commander.

The former framing was meant to break the cycle straining the Force, but the latter framing sought to keep SOF and their families in the fight just with fewer negative side effects.

SOF are not the first to experience the effects of moral injury after long periods of war. Indeed, the ancient Greeks wrote about the same phenomenon, most notably in the parable of *Philoctetes* by the great Athenian general and poet Sophocles. As an elite warrior, Philoctetes was critical to winning the Trojan War in its tenth year according to the story, but he was broken by the experience. Healing Philoctetes, as will become apparent in the following pages, required the intervention of a higher power—a demigod—because the war machine could not change its approach to how it consumed its warriors to achieve the objective of defeating Troy.

This chapter presents the case that USSOCOM, too, needs an intervention by a higher power to alter how the bureaucracy employs SOF. It argues that the existing CT paradigm of U.S. SOF contributes to an enterprise-wide moral injury problem that an emphasis on unit leadership and ethics cannot fix. In particular, it argues that SOF leadership at the three- and four-star levels has a moral obligation to consider the organizational contribution to moral injury and ethical drift instead of placing the sole focus on the individuals who cross the line. In short, it argues that, in the CT fight as currently conceptualized, moral injury among SOF and their families is likely the rule, not the exception, and ethical lapses will consequently persist despite attempts to reform leadership and ethics training. If not SOF leadership, a different higher power, perhaps Congress, could conceivably intervene with possibly negative consequences to the SOF enterprise.

The chapter proceeds in four parts. It first introduces the concept of moral injury and provides a literature review on how moral injury contributes to ethical drift, especially in the complex, ambiguous environments in which SOF regularly operate. Next, it demonstrates how the comprehensive review fails to address the issue of moral injury by contrasting it with the 2011 Pressure on the Force and Families (POTFF) "Task Force Findings Report" that did, in fact, describe the deleterious effect of the CT fight on the force and family.[3] Third, the chapter introduces the story of Philoctetes to demonstrate the timeless problem of the almost automatic, bureaucratic approach to endless conflict and how Sophocles relayed to his own society the necessity of a higher power coming down to break the system that broke the elite warrior Philoctetes. It concludes with recommendations on how this metaphor can

help the leadership of USSOCOM to navigate the sensitive waters of moral injury to relieve the pressure on the Force.

The Connection between Moral Injury and Ethical Drift

USSOCOM and the SOF enterprise have devoted enormous amounts of time and resources to healing the physical wounds SOF operators and enablers have suffered in the nearly two-decade war against violent extremist organizations (VEOs). This is absolutely laudable, and the author personally knows warriors who have benefitted from the care and rehabilitation the SOF enterprise has devoted to the Force. While it is possible to now talk meaningfully about the robust rehabilitation services available, it is important to remember that it took many years for the enterprise to transition from the expectation that SOF would self-report injury to a policy that assumes repeated combat deployment will physically debilitate the individual at some point; indeed, it took the POTFF report to institutionalize the support across the enterprise. The extraordinary resources now available represent the learning of USSOCOM over the years that it needed to assume physical harm to the Force as a systemic reality, rather than place the onus on individuals to self-report injury and risk their careers by being taken out of the fight.[4]

In much the same way, many in the SOF enterprise are coming to realize that there has been a hidden moral injury affecting the Force beneath the surface. Professor Tom Frame, Director of the Public Leadership Research Group at the University of New South Wales Canberra, defines moral injury as "the result of harm or damage (which leaves a wound) that reduces the functioning or impairs the performance of the moral self (which causes an injury), which is that part of a person where moral reasoning and moral decision-making takes place."[5] Frame asserts that participating in or being exposed to actions that violate one's own moral code or personal ethic causes moral injury. He further suggests that these actions or activities destabilize the moral construct one uses to make sense of both themselves and the world in which they operate. To this end, acts of commission and omission can sustain moral injury.[6]

The concept of moral injury solidified around 2014 as researchers and medical professionals recognized that post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), which is fear conditioned, could not explain the distress many veterans were feeling.[7] Moral injury, in contrast, is rooted in perceived or actual

transgression—either by the individual against others or others against the individual.[8] The severity of moral injury is informed by the extent to which the individual's moral norms are denied, ignored, or betrayed in conjunction with the power of the beliefs and their nature within one's moral self. Moral injury differs from PTSD, psychological disorders, and occupation-related mental health conditions given the salience of morality to the injury. Consequently, a robust literature and research program developed that validated the concept through empirical tests and new diagnostic tools.[9]

How does moral injury impact an individual actor? The literature asserts it weakens one's character and alters the ideals which one holds dear, the ambitions to which one aspires, and one's personal attachments.[10] Instead of fear, moral injury's emotional underpinnings are "guilt, shame, and raging resentment."[11] The individual moral values affected the most by a moral injury are trust, loyalty, confidence in judgment, and adherence to conviction. How an event is interpreted by an individual actor also plays a crucial part in determining whether moral injury occurs (i.e., whether a person sustains a wound and the resulting nature of the injury). Deeply held and diverse personal beliefs, convictions, and values subjectively influence the interpretative process. Thus, two people might participate in or observe the same activity and come to completely opposite or contradictory conclusions about the moral status of the event.[12]

A fair question here would be, If individuals perceive and interpret a combat situation differently, is it possible to identify individuals at risk for moral injury? To a certain extent, the answer is that the propensity for moral injury is positively correlated with exposure to high-end combat irrespective of assessment and selection criteria. Military studies starting in the late-2000s concluded that "Soldiers on their third or fourth deployment were at significantly higher risk than Soldiers on their first or second deployment for mental health problems and work-related problems."[13] It is unfortunately common for SOF to have over five combat tours of between three to six months with dozens of raids—if not over one hundred—per tour. This is not to say that every individual will experience moral injury but that the propensity for moral injury increases with the number of combat tours. By law of averages, then, the employment of force within the kinetically oriented, CT and counterthreat network SOF culture places the Force at higher risk for experiencing moral injury.

Empirically, there is a growing body of research raising concerns about the moral trauma associated with combat. For example, William Brown, Robert Stanulis, and Gerrad McElroy collected data on a sample of 258 veterans from 16 different states comprised of 96 veterans who were defendants in criminal cases and 162 veterans of Iraq or Afghanistan who were not. Brown et al referred to the two groups as "veteran defendants" (VD) and "non-arrested cohort" (NC), respectively. Of note, over 60 percent in both groups of the participating veterans held combat arms military occupational specialties.[14] As it pertains to trauma sustained in combat, the VD group was less likely to have spoken to someone at length about the trauma (42 percent in the VD group versus 47 percent in the NC group). Both groups reported high rates of regret, shame, and guilt (64 percent in the VD cohort versus 59 percent in the NC). Over 50 percent of respondents in both cohorts indicated now regretting the violence in which they had participated while enjoying it at the time.[15] The data about individual changes from war is also consistent with high rates of moral injury. Over 90 percent of both groups described themselves as changed from war, and over half thought the change was for the worse. Both groups reported shame following deployment with VDs less guilty but more confused than the NCs. Only about 10 percent of both groups felt relieved and/or satisfied about their deployments.[16]

Similarly, Blair E. Wisco et al determined that in a sample of 564 military professionals who experienced combat, over 35 percent reported performing or witnessing an act that violated their own morality while 25 percent reported feeling betrayed during their deployment.[17] Sheila B. Frankfurt, Patricia Frazier, and Brian Engdahl found in a smaller study that one-third of the respondents felt guilt for a near-transgressive act against their sense of morality and that this moral injury was more important to suicidal ideation than traditional combat exposure.[18]

To compound the issue, morally ambiguous situations and environments with respect to an individual's own moral identity exacerbate moral injury,[19] and it is to these environments that SOF personnel regularly deploy. Manifested in SOF personnel is an incredible power which has been bestowed upon them by the instruments of violence and influence they employ. In war, SOF contend with more disparate emotionally and morally challenging extremes than any other human profession. Nathan R. Stein et al discovered an important correlation between exposure to a traumatic event and moral injury while testing a trauma diagnostic tool:

> As expected, Moral Injury by Self and Moral Injury by Others were more strongly correlated with post trauma reactions than with peri trauma reactions. This indicates that intense emotions are more likely to appear following an event with moral and ethical implications than during it (presumably due to the additional time afforded for reflection). It appears that service members may feel guilty about their actions even though they can understand the underlying rationale for them and the influence of the unique context.[20]

This finding is particularly disturbing for SOF, who are regularly required to engage in situational ethics whereby the decision to lie, deceive, steal, or kill depends on the mission's requirements. Over time, it becomes difficult to turn on and off situational ethics upon returning home, especially when the operator knows "the new normal isn't simply deployed; it's deployed in combat, preparing for combat, and/or on alert status."[21]

Dr. Jonathan Shay, who first codified the term "moral injury," looks at the problem of moral injury at the organizational or institutional level. He writes, "The social institution of modern war makes a soldier a captive, but unlike other forms of captivity, the role of his captor is continuously shared by the enemy and the soldier's own army."[22] Shay's assertion invites the question: What responsibility does the command or organizational structure have in creating moral injury? If the extant research on moral injury is accurate, it is reasonable to project that USSOCOM contributes to moral injury in important ways and has struggled to lower its extraordinary deployment rates (1:1 to 2:1)[23] due to the counterthreat network theory of victory underlying the CT paradigm of SOF.

First, extremely emotionally and morally challenging circumstances contribute to moral injury,[24] and SOF contend with such situations significantly more than other professions. The fight against an enemy whose values clearly diverge from Western warfighting values only amplifies the potential distress. Situational relevance is context dependent and informed by external drivers, and here the problems associated with asking the Force to persistently engage in situational ethics take hold; it becomes very difficult for SOF in a rapid deployment cycle to reconcile the different values and ethics with each identity and situation. Taken together, multiple identities operating in tandem create a "salience hierarchy;" context or situational relevance determines which identity(s) has primacy over the others. As such, people

behave in conjunction with their most important or salient identities. As an example, if "Operational Detachment Alpha (ODA) 944 Member" is regarded as being the most salient identity, then objectives, priorities, and values in use will shift to the identity of "Team Member" as opposed to member of the Special Forces Regiment, soldier in the U.S. Army, father, or American citizen.[25]

Dr. Olenda Johnson at the U.S. Naval War College explains, "Social identity processes also extend to the subunit and workgroup levels, resulting in multiple work-related identities within a single organizational context." As such, at any given moment or situation, it follows that an operator must deliberately (or perhaps subconsciously) reconcile among multiple and concurrently held identities, such as husband and pre-deployment operator. Of note, one identity is not "more right" than an identity of a different type.[26] Subjective importance, along with situational awareness of given identities, serves as the determinant of behavior, actions, attitudes and enacted shared values.[27] Subjective importance is internally driven, relatively stable, and speaks to the supreme importance of a given identity relative to a person's self-concept. Due to deployment rates, however, SOF have been incentivized by "the new normal is deployed" to favor the operator identity. The POTFF report noted that:

> Two very prevalent themes come to surface when talking to SMs [service members] or their spouses. First, this war has changed us and secondly, we have little time to meaningfully process or work through that change. Additionally, adolescents and teens that have grown up in a "single-parent," war-time families are showing signs of emotional, behavioral, and disciplinary problems. Warriors who are heroes at work become zeros at home. Couples live in parallel and very different worlds, his world/her world. The SMs world is very rewarding and fulfilling with a clear mission and purpose in which lives hang in the balance. Her world consists of holding together schedules of children, events, activities and if possible a job in order to support their warrior."[28]

The subjective importance of the SOF identity is thus reinforced by the organizational culture of the SOF enterprise with a consequent betrayal to someone—either the family if the operator focuses on work or his brothers-in-arms if he takes a knee to be with his family.

In sum, it is for the individual to decide what is most meaningful on a personal level, and for many SOF, the operator identity is paramount. For example, the automatic reply to the question "Who am I?" indicates the degree of significance a person affixes to a specific identity. For a member of an ODA, it might look like "I am a weapons sergeant" or "I am a member of ODA 944," or "I am a member of the Special Forces Regiment." Unlike subjective importance, situational relevance relates to the primacy of a specific identity in a particular environment. Subjective importance determines what the social norms are and context suggests what is important.[29]

Second, a mission-first culture across all units exacerbates the impact to moral injury.[30] For many, SOF's singular focus on mission accomplishment means "getting to yes" without regard for the consequences. A culture that most values mission accomplishment invites short cuts, creatively working in the ambiguity of legal or regulatory limitations and exceeding the scope of ethical boundaries, especially when strategic and operational command guidance are opaque. The identity associated with what it means to be an American soldier both prescribes and proscribes specific behaviors and actions due to the reflective nature of American espoused values and values in use. By extrapolating this concept further, it becomes even more acute in the lives of SOF personnel: violate the SOF Truths and core values despite the moral injury to the individual and, if habitual, organizational culture is affected over time. A situational ethics approach fails as a framework of action not because it is morally wrong or unethical per se (although this author submits that it is). Rather, it fails as a framework because it increases the propensity for moral injury the more that operators are sent down range and forced to employ the behavior. Most human beings, with deeply held beliefs and mental models, along with American culture and its associated structures, do not operate this way, which puts operators in a constant state of shifting values between the defined, traditional American identity and the situational ethics of the SOF professional identity.[31]

Third, there is a clear disconnect between USSOCOM espoused values (SOF Truths) and its current cultural climate and values in use. To this effect, the POTFF task force findings report explicitly states:

> Many SOF operators believe they are taking on missions that could and should be handled by the general purpose forces (GPF). SMs expressed a sense of expendability to the mission rather than a

> precious resource used surgically for strategic results. SMs and many leaders privately question the viability of strategy and associated losses. They understand decisions are based on a broader series of factors; however, it is a weight they bear. There is a shared belief among SMs that SOF Truths are being compromised for the sake of saying "yes" to the mission.[32]

In this context, many SOF personnel find meaning in the sacrifice by demonstrating personal loyalty toward one's teammates, a foundational value in small unit culture. Loyalty to team above all else represents a disordered values system, an unhealthy cultural climate, and, left unchecked, brings discredit to the organization.[33] In concert with the first two elements, the propensity for moral injury increases significantly both for the operator and the family.[34] Dr. Johnson further concludes, "The indication is that when the centrality of an organization or work-related identity is coupled with salience of the same identity, then organizational values become internalized for, and enacted by, the individual."[35]

Further, in order for a warrior to habitually align his personal values in use with the espoused values of the organization, the innate significance and extrinsic primacy must exist. When an operator associates a high degree of importance and meaning to belonging to the SOF community and the external garrison, training, or operational environment underpins identity as a member of the community, the accompanying professional ethic moves from one of simply a framework of rules with which an operator complies to a significant component of self that becomes unquestioned assumption.[36] But, as the comprehensive review notes, the erosion of leadership led to some units acculturating new entrants to subcultures at odds with the SOF Truths and values. The mark of leadership often became experience in combat at the expense of traditional, structured officer and noncommissioned officer (NCO) education, which amplified the opportunity for morally unsound leaders to influence others.[37] When Service members (SMs) prioritized the small team, the potential for poor leaders to affect others increased markedly. The primacy of the team identity in SOF culture, along with its related subunit values and ethics, has consequently created a higher likelihood for ethical drift stemming in many cases from moral injury.

Given the strains, there is a high propensity for something morally or spiritually to break such that USSOCOM should assume its personnel will

experience harm after a certain number of deployments. For instance, the Wave 5 Needs Assessment and Program Evaluation issued by USSOCOM *Preservation of the Force and Family* in 2018 indicates that underlying issues along these lines still exist.[38] For instance, it acknowledges that over 80 percent of respondents reported low levels of PTSD with another 7.2 percent reporting moderate levels and 12.3 percent reporting high levels. Unsurprisingly, the assessment notes, "When examining the differences between those who were exposed to those who had no exposure to direct combat, the former scored significantly higher in PTS [post-traumatic stress]."[39] It also notes in a graphic that up to 30 percent of SOF are "at increased risk of negative physiological and neurobehavioral functioning" due to low hours of quality sleep.[40] However, the CT and counter-VEO identity of USSOCOM and the organizational culture of the SOF enterprise prevent questioning how the system or environment contributes to the propensity for moral injury and ethical lapses.

In the 2015 Joint Staff report on moral injury titled "Promoting Trust, Enhancing Resources, and Reducing Risk," working group lead Bill Nash posits that, while the Department of Defense (DOD) has fielded a myriad of programs to both select for and increase resiliency in individual SMs, the Department has mostly ignored the environmental and social factors that encourage healthy welfare in organizations.[41] Nash suggests that the Department's focus on the individual as the origin of every problem has failed to produce the desired results. He concludes a more holistic perspective including environmental and social considerations might be more productive. Importantly, Bill Nash's work on moral injury for the Joint Staff suggests that USSOCOM will continue to face a problem with ethics because its conclusions in the comprehensive review relate to team culture and leadership development, not to the circumstances and environments to which the USSOCOM deployment machine repeatedly sends its personnel.

United States Special Operations Command Commander Responses

> There is growing evidence of an increased pressure on the force and their families in SOF ….The demand for, reliance on and increasing global application of the SOF tradecraft has created an unprecedented physical, mental and spiritual strain on SOF and their

> families ….Some symptoms of this pressure are increased domestic, family relational and behavioral issues; problems with substance abuse and self-medicating behaviors; risk-taking behaviors; Traumatic Brain Injury, PTS/PTSD; and both SM [service member] and spouse suicides, to site [*sic*] a few.[42]

As indicated by the quote above, USSOCOM identified fissures among the Force over nine years prior to the Comprehensive Review. The findings of the 2011 POTFF study communicated in no uncertain terms that special operations personnel and their families were bending under the yoke of repeated deployments, long stretches away from home, and an overall culture that was not conducive to meeting the needs of its people. To repair the damage, the task force proposed "major paradigm shifts in the holistic organizational culture and behavior of the force …":

> Anecdotally and perhaps fairly viewed as controversial, the culture of doing more with less must change. Qualitative research and analysis advocate a force *reaping measurable rewards from doing less more efficiently with greater strategic value* while sustaining, preserving, and developing the future force and their families.[43] (emphasis added)

While the study recommended specific interventions designed to address these shortfalls, the Command failed in implementing the interventions and inviting change.

As a consequence, USSOCOM released the results of the Comprehensive Review on U.S. special operations culture and ethics on 28 January 2020. The review was informed by input from personnel across USSOCOM and was inclusive of feedback originating with both an advisory and review team.[44] USSOCOM Directive Number 10-1 ensures that special operations organizations and components "are organized, manned, trained and equipped to execute assigned primary, secondary and supporting core activities in denied, hostile and politically sensitive environments."[45] The review team found that a negative byproduct of adapting special operations organizational force structure to meet the demands of CT and counter-VEO missions sets was the creation of a culture singularly focused on mission accomplishment and force employment.[46] Further, it created a habitual cycle through the employment of special operations teams that rationalized and normalized

this culture. As the Command and subordinate formations adjusted to the CT fight and its associated constraints, sets of individual force-generation periods were routinely disrupted, and teams that had been purposefully built were disaggregated.[47]

As the command responded to counter-VEO requirements, two key tenants of force structure came to the fore pertaining to the Force generation process: empowering deliberately built teams and developing leaders to maximize the organization's ability to support the highest number of counterterror and counter-violent extremism requirements.[48] However, the CT fight negatively impacted this force generation structure by creating a requirement to return SOF to the field as fast as possible. Further exacerbating these disruptions to the special operations force generation model was the employment of special operations teams as substitutable direct action, counterinsurgency, and CT units regardless of guidance stemming from Directive Number 10-1 relative to force generation specific to component and sub-unit organizations and functions.[49] In other words, the majority of SOF operators were repurposed for the kinetic CT fight irrespective of their primary missions. The normalization of employing special operations formations in this manner resulted in a SOF culture with an almost singular focus on kinetic activities at all levels. SOF leaders oriented unit training on counterinsurgency, direct action, and CT activities in advance of deployment cycles focused on unilateral, combined, or partnered raids and the conduct of a targeting cycle specific to finding, fixing, finishing, and exploiting enemy forces.[50]

The comprehensive review revealed that operators and support personnel alike, across the Command and at all levels of authority, recognized this as negatively impacting SOF culture. However, and despite acknowledging this gap, there exists a lack of focus on leadership development and management; rather, the enterprise has become a self-replicating special operations force structure focused on counterinsurgency and CT activities. This orientation comes with a cost because the Command continues to autonomously replicate these structures for employment of the Force and perpetuates a culture oriented on kinetic activities, which by their very nature increase the propensity for moral injury and ethical drift. As a result, it is failing to develop special operations personnel and leaders to meet the challenges associated with full-spectrum special operations, actions, and activities along with component and sub-unit specific capabilities and skills.[51] Further, given

this orientation, and by placing the same people into perpetually morally ambiguous circumstances, the likelihood of moral injury occurring among members of the special operations community increases exponentially.[52]

While the comprehensive review team did not conclude that the SOF enterprise has a systemic ethics problem, it did assert that high OPTEMPO force employment had negative, cascading effects across all elements of its focus areas and created the "contexts and situations allowing for misconduct and unethical behavior to develop within the SOF enterprise."[53] But none of these maladies in the enterprise would have been possible without a leadership that allowed the situation to persist. The comprehensive review concludes that the SOF culture has led to "an institutional incentive structure characterized by the perceived necessity for forward-deployed, career enhancing opportunities as opposed to actual validated operational command and control requirements. SOF organizational culture prioritizes the perception of force employment leadership over force generation leadership."[54] In other words, the SOF enterprise's leadership—the officer corps, in particular—has been complicit in perpetuating a system that was known to generate stress on the Force and family.

In contrast, the 2011 POTFF study conducted by USSOCOM found that after a decade of persistent combat, the Force and families were already frayed and fatigued due to unsustainable OPTEMPO.[55] The report placed the onus directly on the decisions of senior leaders. It states:

> With regard to senior level leadership's strategic and operational pressure to provide forces, capabilities or systems; subordinate commanders' and lower level leaders' concerns are trumped despite valid argument that supports a contrary assessment and risk mitigation questioning the proposed OPTEMPO … One SM [service member] captured what many said in different ways about leaders, "blind subservience to accomplish the mission is rewarded but a critical thinking leader who seeks to accomplish the mission while taking care of the men is not moving up the ladder… Consensus among the rank and file is that many leaders are too busy with the mission, often detached from the people they lead, and driven by external pressures.[56]

Even in 2011, the drivers of OPTEMPO were varied but included senior leaders. The study notes, "DOD, the Services, Combatant Commanders, SOF

Component, and internal organic leadership looking to make their mark, press many units beyond their maximum sustainable operating capacity."[57] If this were true in 2011, it is hard to believe that the situation is not the same in 2020 given the emphasis on OPTEMPO in the comprehensive review.

The indicators of the troubles to come due to OPTEMPO were clearly identified. In particular, the study recognized that personnel with combat experience were accelerated up the leadership chain even if they lacked the traditional training, education, and maturity from which previous generations of SOF benefitted.[58] Additionally, the study notes, "Selfless service to the nation and mission accomplishment as the high moral ground appears confused with a failure to see family members as an essential element of those making the sacrifice."[59] By 2011, the perception was that prioritizing the job was more important than family, especially for those who wanted a career in the enterprise.[60] The stress on NCOs was assessed as being especially problematic. The report states:

> For the NCO who is a lifelong operator there is no honorable way out; no honorable way to take a break or an ability to "take a knee." The train is "out of the station" and getting off often leaves one with no place of reinsertion, perceived loss, upward movement or needed jobs for progression. "If you can't do it we will get someone who can" is the often heralded line. This creates a significant tension for the special operator, negatively influences their developmental and decision-making process and in turn forces the "mission over family" decision which consequently has second and third order effects.[61]

Through the decisions and priorities of senior leaders, later automated by the bureaucracy, the SOF enterprise reversed the family cycle and created the Gordian knot, or an insoluble problem, of betrayal noted earlier. The high OPTEMPO perversely made deployment the predictable period in the lives of the Force and family and made dwell time feel strained. The study found, "The SM would rather be deployed where there is a real sense of purpose, mission, and relevance than at home station where the unpredictable realities of the training calendar affects their professional and personal lives negatively … SMs and families universally acknowledged that predictability ceases when the SM returns home and continues until deployed again."[62]

Even if the changes in the comprehensive review restore ethics down range, it failed to address the moral injury the system imparts on the

family. With the comprehensive review acknowledging still high rates of OPTEMPO, it infers the continuation of the operator's dilemmas and tensions with family—the inability to reconstitute relationships, the pains of betrayal when family commitments are broken, the loss of trust, and the absence in caring for children who depend on them for affirmation and love.[63] The study overtly attributed poor decisions and unethical behavior to family stress,[64] noting that upon returning home, SOF are often too tired to deal with difficult family issues and choose to return where they are affirmed instead of dealing with the realities of perceived failure at home.[65]

The differences between the comprehensive review and the POTFF study are stark when considered from a moral injury perspective. Wounds from moral injury can occur from extreme circumstances or from a thousand cuts, yet they are nevertheless real. An enterprise that continues to prioritize through action, if not intent, deployment time in direct action combat environments cannot avoid incurring moral injury to the Force. To increase operator predictability in 2011, the recommendations are to "push back on immediate fills; help components and commanders to say 'NO,'" and "Capture impact of no fail or short notice missions on the human dimension. Identify the 2nd/3rd order effects of this over time on people."[66] In the end, reducing the propensity for unethical conduct is a function of reducing the propensity for the moral injury that contributes to poor decision-making down range. Only senior leaders can break the bureaucracy that now automatically replicates the OPTEMPO, but senior leaders must recognize that system—the paradigm of counter-VEO as it currently stands—is the principal factor underlying the institutional context in which unethical behavior occurs. Only they can break the system they have created, but they can find comfort in the fact that others through history have shared the same burden.

Moral Courage of Leaders: A Lesson from the Greeks

To be perfectly fair, many of the diagnostic tools now used to identify moral injury were only validated in the last five years and were consequently not available to USSOCOM in 2011. However, now that the concepts and tools are available, it is incumbent on senior leaders to take moral injury seriously and set the SOF enterprise on a more sustainable—and strategically impactful—course. Given how entrenched the counter-VEO/CT culture is in the SOF enterprise, only dedicated three- and four-star intervention can lead

SOF to a new future. The ancient Greeks experienced a similar dilemma in their time, and the great poet Sophocles felt compelled to relay to his society the necessity of senior leaders charting a new course for their warriors in the play *Philoctetes*.

The tragedy of *Philoctetes* serves as an excellent metaphor for the state of SOF today when viewed through a moral injury lens. Tragedies serve as a blueprint for shared experience. They frame how people can respond to moral and ethical matters with emotions that assist those responsible to empathetically see multiple perspectives "thereby forging a new way of connecting and relating with people who may not typically share similar views."[67] The value of exploring today's problems through myths is in disrupting the common experience, in time and space, by transporting back to the beginning and bringing seemingly unique and new challenges into contact with something deep within the human experience.[68] Indeed, Peter Meineck contends that many of the characters in Greek tragedies struggle with "the havoc they caused while in the frenzy of battle and how they faced what they had done" upon returning home.[69] In other words, guilt, shame, and regret—all hallmarks of moral injury—pervade the classics.

Philoctetes tells the story of a decorated, elite warrior who alone wields the magical bow of the demigod Herakles, a human soldier-turned-god. Philoctetes suffers a chronic, anguishing wound *en route* to the Trojan War and is abandoned on a deserted island by his operational commander, Odysseus, who fears that his cries of pain will alert the Trojans to their presence and weaken Greek morale. Nine years later, the Greeks learn from an oracle that in order to win the war, they must rescue him from the island because his magical bow holds the key to victory. When Odysseus finally comes for the bow, Philoctetes, the physically and emotionally wounded warrior, has to overcome both shame and resentment in order to receive assistance from those who previously betrayed him after nearly a decade of isolation on the island.[70] Knowing his betrayal prevents him from approaching Philoctetes, Odysseus enlists Neoptolemus—literally translated as "new warrior" and the son of the now-deceased hero Achilles—to retrieve the bow.

While Odysseus has come for the bow, a weapon of war, it becomes clear as the play unfolds, however, that at the heart of Greek victory is not simply the return of the bow. The bow belongs to a man, Philoctetes, who has been physically injured and then morally injured by his organization through the wounds of abandonment and the violation of trust. The play begins with

Odysseus warning Neoptolemus that the mission is to retrieve the bow, but to do so requires "clever speech" through the use of persuasion and even deception. Neoptolemus objects to Odysseus's command to take the bow in this way because he is hesitant to lie; he associates lying with a lack of nobility and honor. For Neoptolemus, it is preferred to secure the bow forcefully, without lies and with honesty, rather than stooping to the less than desirable moral ground of deceit. However, Odysseus insists, and the "new warrior," Neoptolemus, is confronted with the objective of submitting to his commanding officer's wishes and retrieving the bow as Odysseus has directed. Neoptolemus believes that being a noble and good man demands adherence to a higher standard of honor; it also requires obedience to one's commanding officer all the while supporting the larger strategic objective of defeating the Trojans and winning the war. For Neoptolemus to lose the bow or disobey Odysseus, and in so doing lose the Trojan War, would represent a behavior or action not in keeping with the son of the great Achilles. In the play, Neoptolemus represents a struggle between integrity or honoring both personal and organizational values and mission accomplishment. In essence, Odysseus has ordered Neoptolemus to engage in situational ethics, which causes a wound, however minor, to the new warrior. Though it may scar, the memory now becomes part of the guilt with which Neoptolemus must contend forever more.[71]

As Neoptolemus moves from dishonesty, with a singular focus on mission accomplishment, to genuine care and empathy for Philoctetes, as well as a return to truthfulness, there is a turning point. But it is not Neoptolemus alone who grows. After being abandoned by the Greeks, Philoctetes desires a total withdrawal from the Greek nation-state or body politic. He desires to be taken home where he can live his life apart from those who deserted him. He does not desire to return to the war. It is understandable that Philoctetes wants to depart from the painful memories of betrayal and abandonment and to separate himself from those who harmed him. However, for Philoctetes, Neoptolemus advocates for a different path, a path of reconciliation. Neoptolemus suggests to Philoctetes that he should neither retreat nor disengage altogether nor respond in anger. Rather, Neoptolemus indicates that, by returning to the community with an open and realistic expectation of the way his life can be, Philoctetes can find meaning once again in this flawed and imperfect community which produced him. Healing for Philoctetes is only by returning to the war to help the Greeks win

once and for all and to return to his community, a community comprised of fellow warriors. If Philoctetes can will himself off the island both physically and metaphorically, he can then be healed in body with a magic staff, but, more importantly, be emotionally and psychologically healed by rejoining the community itself.[72]

It is important here to note that Odysseus, as operational commander, is not a monster who lightly abandoned his warrior; indeed, such a decision would be abhorrent to SOF. Remember the context of the times: festering, putrescent wounds and unending pain could not be alleviated; sacrifices to the gods interrupted by the screams of the wounded could result in their retribution; and the wounded could not be immediately transported to bases for medical care.[73] Instead, Odysseus represents the objective-oriented leader who must balance the needs of the Force against the larger objective. But after ten years of persistent, high-end combat, Odysseus is spent by the experience and only wishes the war to end.

He is willing, therefore, to place mission objectives over the Force because he is tired. Once again, the concept of moral injury and ethical drift enter the story of Philoctetes in overt ways. Once Philoctetes realizes that Odysseus is behind Neoptolemus's engagement with him, he instantly shuts down, and the three are unable to negotiate a way forward. They are at a complete impasse where Philoctetes will neither leave the island, surrender the bow, nor return to the war to achieve final victory for the Greeks who abandoned him. In metaphorical terms, the war machine—the bureaucracy—cannot reconcile all the tensions and overcome the range of moral injury inflicted on the Force by ten years of war. To the operational commander Odysseus, Philoctetes was a means to an end without care for his humanity; metaphorically, Philoctetes was the career NCO clearly described in the POTFF report and Neoptolemus the junior officer.

At the end of the play, the demigod Herakles, metaphorically representing senior leaders, appears on stage to command the protagonists toward a solution. He represents the Command; he knows the tensions between core values and operational reality and where there is dissonance. He is the command structure that may be perceived as absent to the guy on the ground. Herakles tells Philoctetes that he has a mission to go in friendship with Neoptolemus to defeat the Trojans and find glory. In *Philoctetes*, Herakles is the miracle worker who brings about resolution when before, the situation was untenable. This resolution supports all sides: Neoptolemus is

vindicated by holding onto core values, Odysseus' mission is accomplished, and Philoctetes is brought home.[74]

But Herakles' resolution requires a final end to the war—a point that must be stressed. Persistent war, as Sophocles himself experienced, damages the Force and family physically and emotionally. Through Neoptolemus and Herakles, Sophocles offers insight about how to restore good order to the Force: Missions must happen, but all people associated with employing force are going to be impacted. The new entrants—the ones who have not yet been scarred by moral injury and situational ethics—offer a chance for resetting the organization if the senior leaders can provide the Force with the space to not have to compromise values for the expedient solution to achieve mission objectives.

Conclusion

> Leaders must model how to balance taking care of self and family as an organizational behavior trait and indicative of a new culture of care and concern. SMs take their cues from leaders. This is paramount and sets the conditions for subordinate SMs and their families to accept and embrace the future even in adverse demanding times. Leaders who delegate this responsibility may miss opportunities to encourage and embolden SMs and their families to unconditionally commit to a better future.[75]

The preceding pages are meant to help the SOF enterprise address an insidious threat, not cast aspersions. Nevertheless, the bottom line is that SOF's culture is breaking the Force and family in a way that the comprehensive review cannot resolve. Only a metaphorical Herakles can stop the large, nearly automatic bureaucracy that gives power to a culture in use at the expense of the SOF Truths. SOF have the option of who the Herakles will be. Either he will come from and be of the SOF community, or he will be a truly external power with less familiarity with the enterprise and a less nuanced approach to reform. U.S. allies are already experiencing the non-SOF version of Herakles, and it is painful. The author truly hopes that no such situation will befall U.S. SOF, though the congressional interest in SOF indicates it might not be an option far in the future.

Although the counter-VEO mission is not going away, how USSOCOM engages the counter-VEO mission can change. A SOF enterprise that defines

counter-VEO as kinetic CT operations will likely continue to contend with unacceptably high rates of unethical behavior because moral injury from combat will continue to pervade the Force and family. Although more tools now exist to identify and assist afflicted personnel, damage will most certainly occur, and time between diagnosis and treatment will lead to unethical behavior.

Early in the war, USSOCOM developed a counter-VEO model that emphasized kinetic operations as creating the space for non-kinetic operations to systemically reshape the operating environment. That model has effectively disappeared, but perhaps it is time to revive it. Indeed, the transition to great power competition perhaps provides some rationale for doing so. If competition is to occur below the level of armed conflict, then non-kinetic capabilities become even more important to special operations. There appears, then, to be a confluence of reason to reevaluate if counter-VEO can achieve more sustainable strategic effect with non-kinetic operations at the center of strategy through integrated campaigning. Kinetic operations, in turn, would serve a supporting role. Such a transition in the counter-VEO strategy would align both the counter-VEO and great power competition missions of USSOCOM while relieving stress on the Force and family. Alternatively, recognizing that repeated exposure to high-intensity combat is correlated with moral injury could develop a force designed for shorter enlistment periods than traditional SOF. In this scenario, the entity would be modeled with a force generation model designed to mitigate the propensity for moral injury. Or, the SOF enterprise could press for burden sharing the counter-VEO mission with conventional forces.

As it currently stands, the SOF enterprise is locked on a path-dependent course; the culture-in-use is replicating itself, not the espoused values in the SOF Truths. USSOCOM will continue to cultivate a force with a higher propensity for moral injury and ethical lapses. Sophocles's message through Philoctetes is that it is incumbent upon the leader to take care of their people. The leader needs to restore espoused values by mitigating the culture (or values) in use. In the end, this is the role of the Command, the commander, and the senior leaders across the SOF enterprise.

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Chapter 5. Embedding Culture

Lieutenant Colonel Jay Lachine

Maintaining a strong, vibrant, principled culture is extremely important, especially for the Canadian Special Operations Forces (CANSOF) community. The CANSOF community is relatively small, but due to its nature and tasks, it is a very visible entity within the Canadian military framework. As such, the continued trust and relative freedom of maneuver bestowed on the Canadian Special Operations Forces Command (CANSOFCOM) by the Canadian Armed Forces (CAF) chain of command and the Government of Canada depend on its ability to maintain its credibility and hard-earned reputation for excellence and professionalism. The bedrock for this trust is rooted in ensuring the CANSOF culture is positive and inculcated to all its members. An important part of this task rests with the Canadian Special Operations Training Centre (CSOTC). CSOTC supports the operational requirements of CANSOFCOM.[1] This chapter focuses on the CANSOFCOM culture and how the CSOTC assists in embedding that culture. Leadership and education reinforces the core values and provides guidance and a way ahead when faced with adversity and/or ambiguity. First, the chapter will define culture and describe CANSOFCOM values as well as the challenges to achieving a desired culture. Finally, the chapter will show how CSOTC reinforces CANSOFCOM culture.

Setting a Baseline: What is Culture?

Initially, it is important to deal with terminology. Topics such as culture are too often spoken about without ensuring that there is a common understanding of what exactly is being talking about. What frequently makes discussions on culture so difficult is the fact that culture is not tangible. It is not something that can be touched or felt. In many ways, it is an abstract concept. Yet, it is a formidable force within any group or organization. As renowned sociologist Edgar Schein explains:

> Organizational culture is a powerful, latent, and often unconscious set of forces that determine both our individual and collective

> behavior, ways of perceiving, thought patterns, and values. Organizational culture in particular matters because cultural elements determine strategy, goals, and modes of operating. The values and thought patterns of leaders and senior managers are partially determined by their own cultural backgrounds and shared experience.[2]

In essence, an organization's culture is impacted by a number of factors such as the institutional and environmental influences, as well as social dynamics (e.g., personalities, relationships and practices, and organizational history). Over time, these influences shape what is seen as reality. Not surprising then, culture is very slow to change because, for those within the group/organization, the culture is a reflection of the collective, specifically their view of who they are, the world around them, and their place in it. Newcomers are quickly indoctrinated to, and assimilated in, the group culture.

Although culture may be intangible, there are distinct conceptual frameworks that are overt manifestations of an organization's culture. These include artifacts, values, and underlying assumptions. Artifacts are readily identifiable. They have both a physical component (e.g., building structure and layout, enclosed compounds, available technology, and specialized equipment), as well as a social component (e.g., special uniforms, badges, symbols, language, ceremonies, traditions, and myths). Although easily recognizable, artifacts endow only an insubstantial understanding of the organization.

Additionally, there are an organization's values, which theoretically underscore what is important to the organization and its personnel. When faced with ambiguity and complex situations, organizational core values provide guidance and an anchor for individual behavior and actions. Importantly, experts caution that often the existent organizational culture does not always align with the espoused values.

Finally, there are basic underlying assumptions within a group. These assumptions evolve over time. They are based on continuous, repeated decisions and behaviors designed to provide solutions with regard to problem sets. Over time, the accepted behavior and responses become unconsciously recognized as the only accepted solution to similar problems. Schein, for example, argues that the essence of an organization's culture is its basic underlying assumptions, which are often taken for granted by members.[3]

Most importantly, underlying assumptions often drive values and function as a set of unwritten rules upon which people base behaviors.

To summarize, in essence, culture refers to a common set of beliefs and values within a group of people that, when combined, transform into attitudes that are expressed as behaviors. As Dr. Emily Spencer explains, "Culture is meaning." Essentially, culture provides meaning for what they do, how they understand events, and how they see their place in the world. Culture reflects "how we do things around here." Ultimately, it becomes the unconscious processing mechanism.[4]

Culture is exceedingly important because it has a significant impact on determining organizational strategy, objectives, and manner of doing business. Moreover, cultural background and shared experience shape the values and thinking processes of leaders at all levels. Behavior is the outward expression of culture and most importantly, the behavior of leaders sets the standard for the organization.

CANSOF Values

As noted above, espoused values are an important component of an organization's or group's culture. They provide everyone with a clear sense of what is important and what the members purport to be true. Furthermore, the core values create a foundation, a striving for a commitment of individuals to behave and perform in a manner that is essential to the well-being of the entire community. In essence, values provide members with guidance in the face of ambiguity and complexity.

There are three principal tenets of CANSOF culture:

a. It is unique as all members of CANSOF are Canadian Armed Forces (CAF) members but not all CAF members can be CANSOF members.

b. It is positive as it strives to create a positive work environment and maintain a positive relationship with partners built on trust and transparency.

c. It is driven by core values, which are not just words but the foundation that makes them who they are.

For CANSOFCOM, the CAF core values of duty, loyalty, integrity, and courage are sacrosanct. However, based on the nature of the SOF community,

Figure 3. Graphic showing CANSOFCOM core values. Source: Author

the roles and tasks that SOF are envisaged to undertake, as well as the expectations of those who are expected to undertake SOF missions, CANSOFCOM has articulated specific CANSOF values that furnish additional guidance but more so expectations of its personnel. The sum total of the CANSOFCOM core values becomes integral to the CANSOF culture. Each core value interprets to a specific belief/expected behavior, specifically:

- **Relentless Pursuit of Excellence** entails an uncompromising, persistent effort to excel at everything they do. It is the consistent and driving focus on attaining the highest standards of personal, professional, and technical expertise; competence; and integrity. This is a continual push to innovate, adapt, learn, and achieve operational excellence.
- **Determination** is the unconquerable desire to fight and win and the belief that no challenge is too great. Its a tenacious, unyielding, and unremitting pursuit of mission success and disregard for discomfort.
- **Shared Responsibility** entails the exercising of professional military judgement and disciplined initiative to achieve the commander's intent. Its an acceptance that neither rank nor appointment defines sole responsibility for mission success. This is also the requirement for everyone to contribute to mission accomplishment through

collaborative planning, innovative ideas, feedback, loyalty, support, and trust up and down the chain of command.

- **Creativity** is the understanding that agility of thought and action as well as inventive and unconventional solutions to unexpected problems are vital in an operating environment that is rife with ambiguity, uncertainty, and change. It requires embracing smart risk acceptance to continue to evolve and stay ahead of adversaries.
- **Humility** is simply adherence and dedication to quiet professionalism. This is essential in earning trust and respect with partners, superiors, and the nation.

Potential Challenges to Achieving the Desired Culture

As important as culture is in shaping behavior and decisions within organizations and groups, it should not be a surprise that culture is dynamic, and albeit slowly, culture does change over time. Often, alteration in culture is due to changing environmental and organizational undercurrents. Sometimes strong personalities can change the culture for the better or worse. However, there are also significant potential challenges to espoused values within an organization that can lead to an undesirable SOF culture. These challenges include:

a. **Distortion of Popular Culture.** Hollywood depiction of SOF, as well as action novels, purported first person narrative books, etc. can skew the understanding and perception of SOF. This erroneous insight can bleed over to personnel within the community, particularly those who are new and inexperienced in the general military at large.

b. **The Dark Side of the "Brotherhood."** Camaraderie and primary group cohesion is a vital component of military effectiveness and combat motivation. The benefits of a highly cohesive unit (e.g., resilience, high morale, and combat effectiveness) are without debate. However, when the "brotherhood" or commitment to the primary group overshadows the core values of the organization and acts in ways that support the good of the primary group rather than the maintenance of good order and discipline essential for the effectiveness of the organization, then the brotherhood is threatening to the culture.

c. **The Dark Side of Elitism.** Much like the brotherhood, elites provide a great deal of value to the military institution (e.g., cohesiveness, leadership nursery, source of inspiration, and battlefield laboratory).[5] However, they can also be a divisive force. If an elite organization, which includes SOF organizations due to their careful selection processes and the tasks they undertake, allows individuals to denigrate others in the military or ignore rules, regulations, and protocols, then the behavior, which runs counter to the espoused core values, will erode the desirable culture into one that is viewed with enmity and hostility by others.

d. **Lack of Understanding or Forgetting, Conventional Military Culture, and Protocol.** SOF are a component of the larger military institution. For most SOF communities, their personnel were taken from the other traditional Services. This rooting is important in the formation of any SOF operator. These pedigrees provide the comprehension of how the conventional military works with all its protocols, disciplinary approaches, rules, and regulations. Although SOF operate differently in many ways, their constant interaction with conventional military leadership, personnel, and units demands that SOF individuals respect their roots and the larger military establishment. Failure to do so undermines the foundation of military discipline and effectiveness. This result, in turn, creates antagonism and resentment from outsiders, and equally significant, an erosion of SOF culture.

e. **Feeling of Entitlement.** For SOF to be effective in the dynamic and complex security environment, their personnel and leadership must be capable of agility of thought and action. Highly trained, well-equipped, enhanced by a flat organizational model, and entrusted by senior military and political leadership, SOF live in a privileged space. When individuals and leadership begin to take this dispensation for granted, the risk increases to eroding the culture built on the espoused values.

f. **Lack of Humility.** For all the reasons noted above, the special skills, distinctive equipment, and privileged space that SOF benefit from in a military institution sometimes creates an inflated sense of self-worth of individuals who then manifest this belief in behavior (e.g., arrogance, rude and dismissive attitudes to others, and failure to

abide by conventional military protocols), which runs counter to the desired culture.

g. **Weak Leadership.** Strong leadership is the key to a resilient, vibrant, efficacious culture. To ensure none of the challenges noted above take root, leaders must resist the pull of being "one of the boys," or taking the easy route by not saying anything or ignoring behavior that runs counter to the espoused values and organizational culture. Simply put, a weak or toxic culture is the result of weak leadership.

The Canadian Special Operations Training Centre's Role in Reinforcing Canadian Special Operations Forces Culture

The importance of a strong and vibrant culture has been underscored throughout this chapter. Although maintaining the desired culture rests with leadership throughout CANSOFCOM, the CSOTC has a major responsibility in embedding the desired culture through its many activities. Specifically, CSOTC reinforces CANSOF culture by:

a. **Reinforcement of core values in all courses.** All courseware run by CSOTC is rooted in, reinforced by, and highlights the CANSOF core values. This continuous exposure, buttressed by anecdotal stories, case studies, and factual accounts by experienced operators, acts to harden the comprehension of what the core values are and why they are important.

b. **Rotation of CANSOF operators from all units through the school as instructors.** CSOTC is manned by personnel from all of the CANSOFCOM units. This cross-pollination serves many purposes, most notably to ensure that CANSOF culture as a specific concept is understood and practiced in a homogenous manner. The ability to train and educate members from across the Command, by individual instructors from across the Command, strengthens the comprehension of and adherence to CANSOF values, thus buttressing the CANSOF culture.

c. **Centralized leadership courses.** CSOTC conducts all leadership training for all non-commissioned rank levels. This centralization of leadership courseware ensures that CANSOF core values, culture, and leadership philosophies are standardized across the Command. This

methodology ensures there is a coherent, homogenous approach to inculcating the desired leadership philosophy and Command culture.

d. **Special operations common environmental training (SOCET) for all new personnel.** Every year, a large portion of the CANSOF support positions, filled by non-SOF personnel pulled from the conventional Services, are rotated out. With a large influx of newcomers not necessarily versed in CANSOF culture, specific steps have been taken to provide them with a rudimentary understanding of CANSOF culture to make their integration easier, as well as to reinforce the values expected of them to follow. Every incoming person who does not undertake one of the operator qualifying courses is required to attend the one to two week SOCET course. Although only an introduction, it provides a foundational knowledge on which personnel can build during their time in the Command.

e. **Cultural intelligence (CQ) and emotional intelligence (EQ) debriefs/coaching.** CQ and EQ education is vitally important for operational effectiveness in the dynamic and complex security environment. It allows for a greater understanding of others as well as self. This expertise is directly translatable on how one treats others and how one can effectively use this knowledge to attain objectives in the field, as well as in garrison or any other setting. In essence, this knowledge also reinforces the CANSOF core values and strengthens the Command culture. As such, CQ and EQ courseware are included on all leadership courses, as well as stand-alone briefs and workshops.

f. **Creation of a distinct CANSOF body of knowledge.** Key to a distinct CANSOF culture is a philosophical and practical understanding of the history, underpinning, and practices of SOF and specifically CANSOFCOM. Although a great deal of literature exists on SOF, particularly American and British SOF, for a long period, there was a void in specific CANSOF-centric information. To overcome this shortfall, CANSOFCOM has published a number of strategy documents. In addition, largely through its Education and Research Centre, the Command has created a distinct CANSOF body of knowledge[6] ranging from historical matters, to practical guides, to theoretical publications.

This concentration on capturing a unique Canadian SOF perspective is important in embedding CANSOF culture.

In the end, ensuring the organizational culture remains true to the espoused core values is a leadership responsibility at all levels. Moreover, individuals also have an important part to play in understanding and living the core values. In this journey, CSOTC plays an integral role. As the Command leader for individual training and education, CSOTC provides careful, continuous, and indispensable stewardship in regards to underpinning and reinforcing the Command's culture. This leadership and education reinforce the importance of staying true to the core values and their role in providing guidance when faced with adversity and ambiguity. This direction unequivocally strengthens the CANSOF culture. In sum, this adherence to the CANSOF culture and values embodies a common mantra: "When in doubt, trust your education, trust your training, trust your team, and do your best."

Endnotes

1. For more information on the Canadian Special Operations Training Centre, see "Canadian Special Operations Training Centre (CSOTC)," Canada.ca, accessed 28 August 2020, https://www.canada.ca/en/special-operations-forces-command/corporate/organizational-structure/so-training-centre.html.
2. E.H. Schein, *The Corporate Culture Survival Guide* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass Publishers, 1999), 14.
3. Schein, *The Corporate Culture Survival Guide*, 22.
4. Dr. Emily Spencer, *Solving the People Puzzle: Cultural Intelligence and Special Operations Forces* (Toronto: Dundurn Group, 2010), 75-76.
5. With regard to the definition of "elite," Tom Clancy wrote, "It's not just the weapons you carry that matter, but also the skill, training and determination of the troopers … Elite is as elite does. Elite means that you train harder and do somewhat more dangerous things—which earns you the right to blouse your jump boots and strut a little more ..." Tom Clancy, Airborne (New York: Berkley Books, 1997), xviii.
6. See "CANSOFCOM Professional Development Centre monographs," Canada.ca, accessed 28 August 2020, http://publications.gc.ca/site/eng/9.832874/publication.html.

Chapter 6. Evolving SOF Culture

Chief Warrant Officer Jason Yeremiy

Great power competition is a relatively new resurrected catchphrase that is commonly used to describe the evolution of old power brokers (e.g., Russia and China) and the emergence of new ones (e.g., Iran and India) set on challenging each other on the world stage, either through direct or indirect means, to establish themselves as a new partner of choice or global power broker. The results of this struggle are displayed globally, and Western Special Operations Forces (SOF) must decide how to evolve to meet this challenge head-on.

Interestingly, initial brainstorming of how to prepare for this challenge often raises the notion that what was once old is now new—in essence, the idea that SOF must go back to doing what they did during the Cold War. That would be a worthwhile idea if technology and the rest of the world had not evolved over the last 30 years.[1] Unfortunately, global stagnation is not the case. Technology, globalization, and broader military evolution will prevent what was previously old from becoming the norm once again. There is simply no "back to the future." Ignoring the changes that have occurred is not an option. As such, there is a need to re-evaluate the tasks, roles, and composition of SOF to determine what is possible to prepare for the renewed great power competition.

The evolution of SOF is no different than the progression of any organization or business. There is a requirement to stay relevant, competitive, and effective. Laying the foundation to transform SOF culture is the first step in this evolution. In order to do this effectively, the first analysis is to take an internal look. Importantly, everyone must park their individual and organizational egos at the door and ask some hard questions. Current practices must be challenged, and there needs to be a willingness to let go, or grab hold, as required.

Moreover, the learner's mindset must be embraced. Psychologists suggest that there are two mindsets one can adopt when responding to situations—judgmental or learning. The judgmental mindset wants to control the situation and tends to focus blame on others, while the learner's mindset tends to

observe situations to fully understand them, reserving judgement for later.[2] Through this chapter, several focus areas will be identified that may impede SOF evolution, offer potential solutions, as well as raise some questions that must be answered if SOF wish to evolve. The chapter first tries to unpack the nature of culture and the importance of understanding ourselves as well as others. The term "anchoring" will be explored and its importance to decision-making. This is followed by a discussion on defining SOF and SOF operators. The chapter concludes with a look at SOF values and a warning to keep SOF culture aligned with those values.

What Is Culture?

For someone to know where they are going, they need to know where they've been and how they got there. Culture plays a big role in answering those questions. It is important to share a common understanding of what is meant when using the term "culture." Culture is often thrown out as a catchall when describing the values, actions, habits, attitudes, appearances, norms, customs, and traditions of an organization. Edgar Schein, an influential scholar of organizational theory, offers:

> Culture is a pattern of shared basic assumptions, learned by a given group as it solves its problems of external adaptation and internal integration that has worked well enough to be considered valid and therefore to be taught to new members as the correct way to perceive, think and feel in relation to those problems.[3]

Recognizing and understanding that the way of solving problems reflects culture may be new to some, and it challenges what is traditionally thought of when using the term "culture." Schein also offers that the overt phenomena, which tends to be associated with culture, directly relate to and can impact a culture, but those phenomena are not in themselves culture. Those phenomena include observed behavior regularities (e.g., language, customs and traditions, and rituals); group norms (e.g., standards, values, and what is fair); espoused values (publicly stated and commonly known); formal philosophy (e.g., policies and ideological principles); embedded skills (e.g., special competencies and abilities passed from generation to generation); habits of thinking (taught to new members); shared meaning (created by group members); and integrating symbols (i.e., images the group develops

to characterize themselves).[4] This insight is worth internalizing. Too often, cultural artifacts (e.g., badges and uniforms) as well as unit historical roles and tasks are associated to our culture. This approach can lead to anchoring, which will be discussed later.

When looking at culture, it is important to take into account which lens one is looking through and recognize that the perspective/interpretation is different at each rank level. A young SOF operator does not necessarily think about culture but rather lives it every day unconsciously, conducting themselves in a manner that they perceive to be in line with the prevailing desired culture similar to Schein's definition.

So, who thinks about culture? Old "grey beards,"[5] that's who. Why? Mainly because they have had the time to reflect on their career and the implications that come with a misaligned culture. They have learned over time, either through experience or education, what is acceptable and what is not. They understand the fragility of culture if left unwatched, unnurtured, or unchecked. They are the guardians of the culture but can also be the destroyers. Their actions, and more importantly, their inaction, directly impact how a culture evolves based on the perceptions of the group. Over time, these perceptions become the learned, underlying assumptions, which, if left unaddressed, will become recognized as acceptable and therefore immutably part of the culture.

If senior noncommissioned officers (NCOs) have one leadership imperative, it would most likely be tied to culture. It is the one issue that keeps them up at night, and if it does not, it should. This concern is not just because of the old grey beard analogy, but rather because an important part of their duty is to set the tone for what is acceptable and what is not acceptable. This responsibility is exercised through official military requirements (e.g., dress, deportment, and discipline) as well as organizational culture. They are the ones that have to be accountable when a member's action calls into question the culture of an organization.

The influence that a senior NCO can have over the evolution of a culture cannot be overstated. Influence can be defined as "the power an individual has to affect others, either overtly or inadvertently, as a consequence of the presence of such characteristics as expertise, position, authority, abilities, charisma or prestige."[6] Think back to Schein's definition, "…solves its problems of external adaption and internal integration…" Now think about the influence a senior NCO has in solving those problems.

So, what has been offered so far? First, culture is far more complex than one thinks, and one often thinks of the wrong conception when using the term "culture." Also, significantly, cultural understanding, stewardship, and perception change with age, rank, and experience.

By extension then, SOF culture, in accordance with Schein's definition, is healthy and ably suited to meet the challenges of great power competition or whatever challenges the future brings.[7] This conclusion is offered because SOF breed problem solvers. But it's not all high fives and chocolate cake. SOF have to remain vigilant and cognizant to what affects their culture. SOF have to ask themselves those hard questions to challenge their culture and ensure SOF are valuing, privileging, and reinforcing the right things. After all, culture will eat strategy all day, every day.

Anchoring—A Sure Way to Hold Someone Down

The term "anchoring" comes from the field of psychology and is used to identify cognitive biases that impede individual or group decision-making. The word anchor is defined as "a heavy object that is dropped into water to prevent a boat from moving."[8] The word can be used as either a noun or a verb centered on the concept that an anchor prevents movement or change. As a cognitive bias, anchoring occurs when "individuals or groups rely too heavily on pre-existing information or current status while problem solving."[9] This tendency can lead to other biases that influence decision-making or can result in individuals or groups making poor decisions by not recognizing their cognitive biases.

Anchoring does not always have to be associated negatively to the decision-making process. Sometimes a person wants to anchor decisions that are aligned with morals, values, ethics, and the law. An important aspect is when anchoring prevents creative problem-solving or evolution. To effectively guard against the anchoring bias, or to remain cognizant of its presence, an organization must not be afraid to question itself and what it values. Are organizations anchoring decisions to protect cultural artifacts and/or group image? Are organizations anchoring decisions to protect group norms? Are organizations anchoring decisions to protect espoused values? Are organizations anchoring decisions to protect embedded skills and/or historical unit tasks? Each of those questions can have either positive or negative effects. The author would offer that if a person or organization is

anchoring decision-making to protect anything other than the core values of the organization, then that organization is being held back from evolving.

This observation ties back into what defines the culture of an organization. Do not be afraid to question matters and be reminded of what actually makes an organization different—not special, or better, or unique, but different. If anchoring to something that can be taught, bought, or observed, maybe a little self-reflection is required.

Anchoring can inhibit evolution, but it can also lead to hubris. And both of these outcomes can lead to irrelevance or demise. Ever wondered what happened to Blockbuster LLC? They were once the home movie and video game rental-store giant. At their peak, they employed 84,300 employees and had 9,094 stores around the world. Within North America, they were the go-to place for home entertainment. However, their mighty empire crumbled because they failed to evolve. Blockbuster LLC is all but forgotten unless a person grew up in the 1980s and 1990s.[10]

Similarly, for a lesson on hubris, read the article "Lessons in Organizational Ethics from the Columbia Disaster: Can a Culture be Lethal?"[11] Not only does it describe the negative effects of hubris, but it also touches on the importance of understanding the effects of organizational culture and how to guard against hubris and complacency in high-reliability organizations.[12]

Thinking Inside the Box—The Danger of Doctrine and Terminology

Hearing the term "SOF" tends to equate to out-of-the-box problem solvers—soldiers that are doctrinally employed outside of conventional warfare[13] to conduct unconventional warfare,[14] irregular warfare,[15] special warfare,[16] or hybrid warfare.[17] Ironically, that appears to represent a whole lot of different boxes. The question is how to define SOF without defining how or where they can be employed. That is not an easy question to answer. Understanding that funding and justification must be tied to employment models and assigned tasks, the struggle is similar to trying to answer the question of what came first—the chicken or the egg. After all, the term "SOF" or "SOF-like" is also used to describe or define any unit or organization that operates outside of the conventional box.[18]

An alternative to the circular argument is to employ a little abstract thinking. To do that, SOF cannot solely think about the specialized capabilities that have come to define them but rather think about the specially

selected and trained individual—specifically, the person that has undergone psychological testing and attribute assessment to ensure that they are capable of working in a multitude of environments. These settings range from the mundane (e.g., garrison training) and well-defined (e.g., foreign internal defense or military assistance) to the highly dynamic (e.g., operational or combat) and situations that include all shades of grey (e.g., counterinsurgency) where mission command is the only effective option.

The author deliberately did not use the term "operator" when describing this individual. Quite simply, it can be used to describe anyone that is highly effective at their job. So how is SOF defined? Amongst the inner circles of every unit that calls itself a SOF organization is an unwritten understanding of who the operator is and how to define SOF. That definition is largely shaped by the "Grey Beards"—the members that have matured beyond tying themselves to stereotypical looks, traditional tasks, high speed/attractive insertion methods, or the latest and greatest piece of equipment. They understand that the value proposition of SOF is the individual—that specially selected and trained individual capable of providing creative solutions to seemingly complex problems, a person that is capable of assimilating multiple pieces of information, sorting through the noise, and focusing on the desired effect.

By defining what boxes SOF can operate in, limiting creativity and normalizing expectations going forward is risked. The global war on terror is a perfect example. It has come to define SOF as experts at conducting direct action missions during counterterrorism operations. One could say that SOF have been anchored to being the only ones that can conduct these types of missions. While this may be true for any operation in which highly specialized or compartmentalized SOF capabilities are required, it should be the exception and not the norm.

Hubris—Inadvertently Anchoring

There are two things that SOF operators hate: the way things are and change. SOF can be their own worst enemy sometimes when too comfortable and confident in the traditional tasks and roles given. SOF strive for the platinum standard in everything and do not accept anything less. But that desire to be seen as the force of choice has negative impacts on their ability to evolve. Blockbuster LLC wanted to be the best home movie and video game rental

company in the business. So, where did it get them? In the end, they went bankrupt because they became irrelevant.

The lesson here is, rather than becoming rooted in today, SOF must focus on being the force of choice for new and emergent threats and the force of choice only for those problems that require highly specialized or compartmentalized SOF capabilities. To do that, SOF must be comfortable with shedding tasks that have traditionally become associated as SOF tasks. As SOF accept new capabilities, tasks, or equipment, they must off-load capabilities, tasks, or equipment in order to balance out strain on limited resources. If this balancing is done effectively, a parallel evolution should occur between SOF and conventional forces. In the end, this balancing would mean that both SOF and conventional forces are accepting new capabilities—in essence, SOF onboarding capabilities to tackle new or emergent threats and conventional forces onboarding former SOF capabilities to increase their effectiveness against current threats.

For this parallel evolution to work, SOF units must not be afraid to divest skills, tasks, or capabilities. Change and evolution are constants, whether SOF choose to acknowledge them or not. SOF do not live in bubbles that protect and shelter. The aversion to change is normally tied to hubris (which can lead to anchoring) or the discomfort that comes with change. After all, SOF are human, and change can invoke a multitude of emotions.[19]

Change, like stress, can be turned into positive motivators if SOF choose to view them that way. To effectively do this, there are three simple steps that can employed: see it, own it, and use it.[20] Importantly, SOF must recognize that change is constant, take control of how and when change will happen, and leverage those opportunities to maintain relevance.

In essence, the question SOF need to ask is, Why are we doing what we are doing? Are SOF trying to master something because SOF enjoy it? Are SOF trying to achieve a platinum standard? Are SOF holding on because letting go is like losing, and losing is not in their vocabulary?

Back to the Future—Remembering First Principles

While the author would never suggest that SOF go back to doing what they did during the Cold War, some of the lessons learned along the way should not be discounted. There have been many great, smart, and influential leaders that have helped lay the foundations to guide SOF. SOF sometimes get too

focused on hitting five-meter targets that they fail to check the blind spots and remember what is behind them. Buzz words and fads come and go, but those practices and concepts that have proven timeless, those that can be related to and embraced, will survive the test of time.

The SOF truths are a good example of this. Originally written as basic guidance for SOF units and to inform the non-SOF audience on factors that made SOF distinct from conventional forces, they have become immortalized through posters and handed down through formal instruction and storytelling. Arguably, these truths can still be reflected on and learned from as SOF evolves going forward. The five SOF truths[21] are:

1. **Humans are more important than hardware.** This speaks to the fact that behind every weapon, computer, radio, or whatever widget, there is an individual required to operate it. SOF must select the right individuals and invest in those individuals to be the problem solvers. SOF must also take steps to ensure their survivability both in and out of battle. The training and education provided must focus on more than just tactical actions. SOF must ensure they know how to think and can apply problem-solving techniques across multiple domains and environments.

2. **Quality is better than quantity.** The challenge here is educating the non-SOF audience (conventional military leaders) as to the scarcity of the commodity and how precious a resource it is. Not every member of the Armed Forces can become SOF. There are huge risks that come when changing standards to produce more. There are also risks with associating more and more units as SOF. There is a lot more to being SOF than a title or dressing the part. Outside of personnel, this truth should also be applied to the type of tasks/missions that are given to SOF. Are SOF employed to conduct tasks that can be accomplished by any competent conventional force? Does this mission/operation truly require the specialized and/or compartmentalized capabilities that SOF can bring to the table? Has this operation become an enduring operation because SOF want it to be so, or because of the requirements of national policy?

3. **SOF cannot be mass produced.** This truth ties directly to the two previous truths. It also speaks to the requirement to be judicious

with what tasks are given to SOF and what tasks SOF seek out. As one former Canadian Special Operations Forces Command commander articulated, "Because we can, or because we enjoy doing something does not mean we should do it."[22] A significant loss due to battle, attrition, or burn out, cannot be easily replaced. It takes years to create competent, capable units.

4. **Competent SOF cannot be created after emergencies occur.** Competent SOF are built from individuals that are selected, educated, trained, and most importantly, experienced. They also require individuals that have built relationships, trust, and a network beyond their unit. These individuals have been tested through exercises designed to identify breaking points and/or failure so that on game day, there is no doubt of their ability to perform. Importantly, these individuals understand their place and role within the bigger picture. They internalize their value and only seek out opportunities that sharpen their skillsets without impacting their readiness or tempo.

5. **Most SOF operations require non-SOF support.** This statement is probably the second-most important truth behind the phrase "humans are more important than hardware." Original interpretation focused on the fact that SOF required support from large conventional platforms to transport them in and out of areas of operation. But that is just a small piece of the requirement now. "Teams of Teams"[23] and "it takes a network to defeat a network"[24] highlight the requirement for SOF to leverage relationships beyond just the conventional force. Preparing for complex or wicked problems that affect more than just national sovereignty or security means that SOF must build and maintain relationships that go beyond the traditional interagency and national security partners. Are SOF effectively enabling this to happen, or are they creating stovepipes and an inefficient system because of doctrine and traditional relationships?

Viam Inveniemus—SOF Will Find a Way

Whether it's great power competition or just natural forces at work, SOF evolution is going to happen. The capabilities and skill sets that come with this evolution will largely be driven by emerging threats and technological

advances. SOF cannot fully control either of these two factors. To best position themselves, SOF should focus on what they can control and free up capacity to take on whatever the future brings or requires of SOF. SOF need to anchor their values and ensure their culture always remains aligned with those values. SOF actions and words should mirror each other and reflect those values. In addition, SOF must constantly ask themselves "why." If they cannot answer why they are doing particular tasks; behaving in a certain way; or continuing to utilize dated tactics, techniques, procedures, or processes, then they need to re-evaluate. They should never settle for just trying to justify what they do with a simplistic "because we've always done it (that way)."

The lessons that have been learned, either through combat or contingency planning, should not be forgotten. And, while these lessons can assist in shaping and guiding development, SOF should not be focused on preparing to re-enact the past. In the world where SOF must operate, there are no mulligans or do-overs.

Endnotes

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12. High-reliability organizations are organizations that successfully operate or work in environments that are traditionally filled with risk and complexity.
13. Conventional warfare is a form of warfare conducted by using conventional weapons and tactics between two or more states in open conflict.
14. Unconventional warfare is activities conducted to enable a resistance movement or insurgency to coerce, disrupt, or overthrow a government or occupying power by operating through or with an underground, auxiliary, and guerrilla force in a denied area.
15. Irregular warfare is defined as a violent struggle among state and non-state actors for legitimacy and influence over the relevant populations.
16. Special warfare encompasses aspects of irregular warfare, security force assistance, foreign internal defense, and defense diplomacy and military assistance.
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Section C: Great Power Competition

Chapter 7. Great Power Competition and Operating Challenges for SOF

Lieutenant Colonel Andrew Brown, PhD

The possibility for conflict with non-Western great powers has significant implications for Special Operations Forces (SOF). Ambitious states such as China and Russia aspire to assert themselves as regional authorities and to displace Western influence.[1] These powers, which have both undergone recent military modernization, pose complex threats to Western powers and their allies. China, for example, projects its influence in the East and South China Seas by taking a range of aggressive activities short of war—such as demonstrating a willingness to employ limited military force—that have challenged the U.S. and its regional allies.[2] Meanwhile, Russian military forces and state agencies apply various hostile measures during high-intensity conflict and in the "gray zone" that exists short of conventional war.[3] What does all this mean for Western SOF, given the genuine possibility of some form of conflict (short of armed conflict) with non-Western great powers and/or their proxies? In particular, what are the implications of great power competition for Western SOF, especially as they pertain to potential operating challenges?

The potential for conflict with great powers could bring challenges that SOF have not had to contend with in almost two decades of counterterrorism operations. Fortunately, enough is known about how certain potential adversaries plan to fight to deduce what some of these challenges might be. This chapter focuses on Russia as a potential great power competitor. Recent Russian military operations, especially in Ukraine, suggest the types of threats Western SOF would face in a contest with a great power competitor. The aim here is to use what is known about Russia to raise questions that help discern at least some of the field-level implications for SOF. While certain questions posed below are not new, the intent is to stimulate thought about the potential operating challenges associated with great power competition.

The Future Face of Conflict

To begin, it is useful to consider what the face of conflict might be. Competition between Western and non-Western powers may one day occur anywhere along the spectrum of conflict, which progresses from stable peace on the far left side to high-intensity conflict on the far right.[4] For now, sustained conflict near the right side of the spectrum is not a significant possibility given America's sheer overmatch in military power relative to any other state. But as SOF start to move away from high-intensity conventional war and towards limited conventional or blended forms of warfare, conflict becomes more feasible. In fact, today, even though Russia has modernized its conventional military capabilities in the last decade or so, Moscow generally prefers to avoid expensive conventional campaigns.[5] Instead, to achieve political objectives, Russia favors using asymmetric means below the level of intense conventional war. Russia can sustain such efforts for prolonged periods and realistically may decide do so in places where Moscow decides that it must assert its interests. Indeed, Russia's 2015 national security strategy acknowledges the potential for conflict with the West.[6] It does so for good reasons. Russia could feel compelled to respond to perceived Western or NATO encroachment in the so-called "near abroad," which comprises former Soviet states that the Kremlin considers within its sphere of influence. And Russia's sphere of influence overlaps with the West's in certain former Soviet states that are now NATO members, such as the Baltic states of Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania. The West and Russia also have overlapping interests in several non-NATO former Soviet states, such as Belarus, Georgia, Moldova, and Ukraine—states that Russia deems within its sphere of influence but that the West considers sovereign nations that have every right to join Western institutions and reject Moscow's control.[7] Western and Russian interests overlap in the Middle East, too. In short, then, a genuine potential for conflict exists wherever the West has overlapping interests with Russia and other great powers or strategic competitors.

Given that, what might fighting look like on the spectrum of conflict, below the threshold of intense conventional warfare? Some form of conflict that blends both conventional and irregular characteristics, often called hybrid warfare, is plausible. Hybrid warfare, which in recent years has received a great deal of attention as a concept, essentially blends conventional, irregular, terrorist, and criminal tactics.[8] It is a form of warfare that

suits the Russians particularly well, especially for operations anywhere in their sphere of influence. For one thing, Russian forces enjoy a home field advantage in their "near abroad." They and their proxies have the cultural profile to blend into the local population while conducting covert or clandestine activities, and, in certain enclaves, to generate local support for Russian operations. Relatedly, Western forces infringing on Russia's sphere of influence would face an exceptionally capable and aggressive intelligence threat. Should Russia decide to act aggressively against Western forces deemed a threat to Moscow's interests in any place where Russian and Western interests overlap, Western SOF would likely face several thorny operating challenges, which are the focus of this chapter. Of course, no short essay can probe the full depth and breadth of the matter. Thus, the four themes that follow—a compromised electromagnetic spectrum, the adversary's SOF, survivability, and organizational considerations—seek only to chart some of the most evident challenges.

A Compromised Electromagnetic Spectrum

In any theater in which Western and Russian forces compete, Western SOF would probably face challenges in their use of the electromagnetic spectrum. We know that Russia has robust electronic and cyber warfare, as well as other related capabilities. This is especially true the closer one gets to Russia, where the government promotes a "whole-of-society" approach to operations that draws on the support of state actors, quasi-state actors, and private enterprise.[9] This means that Russian forces can leverage cooperation from a wide range of supporters such as manufacturers, internet service providers, and other government agencies, which strengthens the home field advantage. Recent Russian cyberoperations in the Donbas region of eastern Ukraine give hints of what to expect. At the tactical level, Russian electronic warfare units seek to degrade an adversary's ability to operate by attacking multiple targets simultaneously with persistent efforts to compromise both hardware and software.[10] In Donbas, for example, they have been successful in disabling things like Ukrainian unmanned aerial vehicles (UAVs) and hardline secure voice and data communications. They have even captured Ukrainian UAV signals, allowing Russian stations to tap into video feeds.[11] They almost certainly possess the capability to spoof GPS signals, feeding certain GPS receivers falsified data that indicate incorrect coordinates. This suggests

the potential vulnerability of electronic networks, such as command, control, and communications suites or systems that rely on GPS. These threats are real enough that some argue that Western militaries ought to consider training with denied GPS systems, similar to how the U.S. Air Force trains during Exercise Red Flag in a GPS-compromised environment. Because of hostile jamming capabilities, "no comms" drills may prove another necessary requirement. Another known Russian practice is to target the cell phones of individual soldiers.[12] This includes malware distribution and the monitoring of two-way voice and text communications. For instance, in Donbas, Russian electronic warfare operators intercepted pictures sent via text, infected with them with malware, and sent them on to the intended recipients. Phones thus affected compromised their geolocations. In other cases, Russians sent messages to Ukrainian soldiers' family members, indicating that loved ones had been killed. Notwithstanding the obvious operational security practices to avoid such scenarios such as prohibiting the use of personal cell phones, wholesale Russian effort to exploit public communications systems may have implications for Western forces that rely on local cell or landline networks to communicate with local citizens, such as host nation government and security officials or civilian service providers. Quite aside from this, given Russia's demonstration of capability and intent to conduct information operations against service members' families, regardless of the medium, suggests a requirement to inoculate families against such threats.

There is a flip side to all this. Within the next decade or so, Western forces—indeed, all forces—may experience a significant degradation in their ability to exploit an adversary's use of electronic communications. This is because advances in quantum computing may result in the widespread public use of almost unbreakable encryption. As the Center for Advanced Studies on Terrorism warns, the potential result is a world that "goes dark," with all users enjoying secure communications.[13] In other words, the end of the so-called Golden Age of signals intelligence may soon become a reality. The evident implication will be an increased reliance on other intelligence collection methods, such as special reconnaissance, human intelligence, imagery intelligence, and even open source intelligence—particularly the mining and analysis of constantly evolving social media platforms. However, in a world in which everyone has access to unbreakable encryption, and in which communications intelligence may be difficult or impossible to gather, Western forces will still be able to discern useful information from

analysis of the adversary's signals (the so-called "external" information, or technical data). While target development, from a signals perspective, might become more complicated, forces may find that adversary communications still yield valuable, and potentially even actionable, information. The key will be learning how to leverage whatever data and traffic analysis that electronic warfare teams can glean from the adversary's encrypted communications.

The Adversary's SOF

The adversary's SOF merit consideration. To be sure, the increasing prominence of SOF is not limited to the West. Ambitious, non-Western powers now invest heavily in their own SOF organizations. In the last twelve years or so, Russia in particular has developed a new special forces organization that emulates Western SOF.[14] The public announcement in 2013 that Russia established Special Operations Forces Command, or KSSO as it is known—and the employment of KSSO elements (along with various Spetsnaz forces) in Crimea, eastern Ukraine, and elsewhere—demonstrate that SOF now hold a prominent place in Russia's armed forces. In fact, Russian military authorities have placed SOF at the heart of how Russia's armed forces conduct warfare.[15] This emphasis on using modern, Western-inspired SOF makes perfect sense for Russia given that it favors using asymmetric means below the level of intense conventional war. Thus, in any scenario in which Western and Russian forces square off, Russian SOF will likely pose a significant threat. What does that mean for Western SOF? Will they have a role to play in countering Russian SOF or perhaps at least advising and assisting conventional forces in guarding against the threat of hostile SOF elements? And if so, what might this entail?

When considering such questions, one ought to consider the likely ways that Russian SOF would operate against the West. For instance, as soon as Western forces enter a theater, Russian SOF and/or their proxies may pose a serious threat to Western rear areas. Several factors suggest that this will be the case. Colonel Vladimir Kvachkov (ret.), a former *Glavnoye razvedyvatel'noye upravleniye* (Russian intelligence directorate) *Spetsnaz* commander, who from 2004 to 2008 worked on developing Russian SOF theory, wrote that "the purpose of all special operations is a radical change of the situation in the enemy's rear areas."[16] He proposed that Russian SOF could tie down a significant proportion of an adversary's armed forces by

forcing them to deal with rear-area threats. This concept, regardless of whether or not it became doctrine, aligns with how we expect Russian forces would act when facing a powerful adversary, attempting to paralyze decision-making by presenting multiple, simultaneous threats to force an adversary to dissipate its combat power. In fact, the Russian Ministry of Defense considers sabotage a role for Russian SOF.[17] And it is a role where Russian SOF have operational experience. For instance, in Ukraine, it appears that Russian SOF have conducted sabotage in the Ukrainian forces' rear areas, sometimes in concert with local rebels, doing things like blowing up train cars, laying mines, and attacking Ukrainian convoys.[18] Of course, sabotage is but one example of the mission sets that Russian SOF could execute in Western forces' rear areas. Intelligence gathering, tactical cyberoperations, raids, and so on constitute hostile activities that Western contingents might have to deal with. Would Western SOF have a role to play in countering such threats? If not directly combating enemy SOF in their rear areas, perhaps Western SOF would at least assist conventional and host nation forces in planning to deal with hostile SOF threats. Or, perhaps, Western SOF would simply advise their own forces on vulnerabilities from a "red team" perspective—that is, advising on how Russian SOF might operate against Western forces. If nothing else, when Western forces conduct intelligence preparation of the battlespace, there is no one better suited to assess hostile SOF capabilities and plausible courses of action than Western SOF.

To this end, Russian operations in Ukraine raise a few other questions that Western forces may have to consider in any contest. For instance, how do they even identify Russian SOF, especially as events move further left on the spectrum of conflict, away from conventional warfare and into that murky realm of hybrid warfare? The picture may become blurry, and things may not be as simple as tracking KSSO or Spetsnaz orders of battle. In Crimea and Donbass, Russia famously deployed the so-called "little green men," or soldiers in unmarked uniforms posing as local self-defense groups, as unattributable advance forces—some of whom were likely Spetsnaz. Russian SOF, and/or their proxies, could appear in many other guises or forms given the near-certain intent to operate throughout Western contingents' depth. They might dispatch SOF in plain clothes. Or they might employ private military contractors, as they have already done in Syria and other places, or locally recruited and trained personnel—in other words, tools of the state but not the state.

Survivability

Another subject that warrants consideration is SOF's survivability in a clash with Russia, or perhaps a Russian-sponsored force, especially if the conflict starts creeping towards the right on the spectrum of conflict. Russia has the capability to prosecute high-intensity conventional operations for limited periods. For instance, today's Russian army has a formidable indirect fire capability, comprised of modernized weapons, devastating munitions such as thermobaric top-attack rounds, a system of UAVs and observers for target acquisition and fire control, and rocket and artillery batteries that, by design, respond rapidly to calls for fire.[19] In Ukraine, Russian forces demonstrated the capability to use UAVs to spot targets for multiple launch rocket systems that fired from across the border with devastating effectiveness.[20] The Russians also used electronic warfare systems to locate headquarters and vector long-range artillery onto them.[21] So what does all this mean for Western SOF in a conflict? In a hot conflict with Russian forces or their proxies, especially one in which they enjoy a home field advantage, one ought to consider that they would have a network of eyes and ears throughout Western forces' depth to vector in fires from robust and modernized rocket and artillery establishments. Survivability may mean rethinking things like camouflage—both physical and electronic. Ukrainian forces certainly learned the importance of physical camouflage and started shrouding their vehicles with bushy vegetation and, on halts, with cam nets.[22] They also learned that headquarters must never give away their position with antenna farms, and that antennae must be placed a safe distance from operations centers. For those who entered the service before the Cold War ended, these procedures are familiar echoes from the past, and the Ukrainian experience suggests that some of these old considerations have taken on a renewed importance. Survivability might mean considering how to avoid being detected and targeted, for example, by moving frequently. It might necessitate minimizing signatures by concealing tell-tale equipment, such as vehicles or antennae, and looking as generic or benign as possible. Survivability might require minimizing the number of static locations. From an electronic camouflage perspective, Western forces might find that unfettered use of communications systems is no longer possible and that transmissions must be short and intermittent. Conversely, Western forces might consider how they can conceal their communications merely by blending in. There may be good potential for hiding in the noise,

using things like veiled speech or the virtual private networks that are so popular with the general public.

Russian air defense systems may prove to have implications for SOF's survivability. In a great power conflict, Western forces may not achieve sustained air superiority, let alone the air supremacy that they have enjoyed in recent decades. This would have apparent repercussions on the viability of things like close air support, medical evacuation, and intelligence, surveillance and reconnaissance.[23] With Russian air defense and a compromised electromagnetic spectrum degrading Western forces' capacity in these areas, SOF may be forced towards a greater acceptance of risk—from the tactical level through to the strategic.

Organizational Considerations

Finally, the potential for great power competition could compel SOF organizations to examine if they are organized and structured for conflict with great power forces and/or their proxies. Hostile forces' efforts to overwhelm decision-making by projecting simultaneous threats throughout Western SOF's depth in an attempt to force an unmanageable operational tempo might accelerate the speed with which all friendly forces need to share situational awareness. This leads to several questions that merit consideration. For example, when an enemy seizes the initiative, even if only for limited durations, by imposing rapidly changing, dynamic threats, will Western forces be manned, equipped, and prepared to push, receive, and process information across or between task forces, between coalition partners, or with interagency partners? In other words, are SOF ready to handle the tremendous volume of information that will rocket through the battlespace? In conflicts that occur below the threshold of conventional war—where the Russians prefer to operate—should SOF take steps to ensure that they are organized to harness the potential of interagency partners? If so, how will interagency collaboration look differently than it does today? And what are the organizational implications for operating in an environment in which the electromagnetic spectrum is compromised? For instance, if Russian cyber or tactical electronic warfare operations degrade or deny SOF's ability to communicate by radio, what would this mean for command and control (C2), fires, medical support, and so on? In the same vein, what are the organizational implications for SOF when all possible hostile actors possess

unbreakable encryption? Will there be an intensifying dependency on the various forms of human intelligence or perhaps on lesser-used forms of intelligence gathering, such as measurement and signature intelligence? Finally, if we start to move towards the right end of the spectrum of conflict, are SOF organized to withstand being on the receiving end of an adversary's sustained targeting efforts? Will SOF, like other forces, need to consider what C2 resiliency looks like? Things like keeping forces dispersed and, for tactical missions, increasing the number and capacity of teams that can step up to provide C2 may become important considerations. Increasing survivability might also merit investing in a robust deception capability designed to thwart the adversary's targeting efforts with a steady stream of disinformation.

Conclusion

In the interests of space, this discussion focused on Russia because there are concrete examples of how Russian forces currently operate, and familiarity with Russian methods makes the exercise of discerning the implications of great power conflict a little less abstract. But surely, the themes discussed here relate to other potential strategic competitors. Finally, in considering the potential operating challenges for SOF in a great power conflict, this essay raises more questions than it provides answers. That is by design. Again, the aim here is to start mapping out the broad contours of the issue and to stimulate questions and thinking about how SOF might orient towards the potential threats looming on the horizon.

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Chapter 8. Role of SOF in Great Power Competition

Charles Barham

The Department of Defense (DOD) is implementing the 2018 national defense strategy (NDS).[1] Most of the attention is on Service modernization programs to prepare for armed conflict with peer or near-peer competitors, here after referred to as "adversaries." This includes a drive for new weapons systems, programs that increase lethality in support of armed conflict, and programs which require vast resources to develop and field. But armed conflict is only a portion, albeit an important portion, of the NDS. Competition short of armed conflict is what precedes, and if successful, prevents armed conflict. Special Operations Forces (SOF) in general, and civil affairs (CA) specifically, should be at the forefront of competition short of armed conflict. This competition is where SOF and CA efforts can have the greatest impacts. This chapter focuses on the competition-short-of-armed-conflict phase of the NDS, the opportunities for SOF and CA contributions to combatant commanders (CCDRs) in their efforts to be successful in the competitive space short of armed conflict, and why it is critical that SOF and CA capabilities are not only sustained but that their employment should be encouraged.

The NDS signals a "back-to-the-future"-like change in the focus of the DOD, with the DOD continuing the enduring mission to provide combat-credible military forces needed to deter war and protect the security of the Nation. Of course, should deterrence fail, the mission is to win in war. The mission has not changed. But the threats have and so has the environment in which the Joint Force will fight. The NDS is clear that "inter-state strategic competition, not terrorism, is now the primary concern in U.S. national security."[2] Similar to the heady Cold War days of old, the great powers will square off on the global stage—only now there are three: the U.S., Russia, and China (as well as other lesser regional actors). Not unlike the Cold War, the great powers will compete largely through proxies. The great power nations will develop and support smaller combatant nation-states

that serve their interests instead of waging war directly between themselves. The great powers will conduct this competition in an increasingly complex environment. This environment includes rapid technological change across multiple domains.

To be successful in this competition, the NDS speaks to three lines of effort (LOE):[3]

1. Build a More Lethal Force
2. Strengthen Alliances and Attract New Partners
3. Reform the Department for Greater Performance and Affordability

Implementing these LOEs requires tough decisions such as trade-off analysis on where to cut funding in order to resource new capabilities. The first LOE, rebuilding military readiness and a more lethal force, rests largely with the Services who have the Title X responsibility to organize, man, train, and equip the Forces and to develop the doctrine for employing those Forces. The second of these LOEs, strengthening alliances and attracting new partners, is largely the domain of the Joint Force CCDRs who must take the Forces and the doctrine generated in the first LOE and employ them as part of a whole-of-government approach across all phases of military operations. The third LOE, reform the department for greater performance and affordability, although important, does not have a direct impact on the thesis of this chapter and is not discussed in any detail.

Similar to what the U.S. saw in the Cold War, the NDS calls for increased lethality. During the Cold War, this resulted in weapon systems such as the Army's Pershing II missile system, M1 main battle tank, multiple launch rocket system, and AH64 attack helicopter; the Air Force's B-1 bomber and F-15 and F-117 fighter and attack aircraft; and the Navy's OHIO class submarines, AEGIS combat system, F-14, and F/A-18 fighter and attack aircraft. These weapon systems not only increased lethality but also the tactics, techniques, and procedures to harness and enable a synergy from those systems, working together in an increasingly complex environment. Toward the end of the Cold War, the doctrine was "Air Land Battle."[4] Today, the emerging doctrine is "Multi-Domain Operations (MDO)."[5]

The concept of MDO is supported by a "continuum of competition" that spans three phases: cooperation, competition short of armed conflict, and armed conflict.[6] It is the competition phase where the employment of SOF

and CA assets can have the greatest impact, operating in the gray zone between peace and war.[7] During competition, these forces strengthen the position of the United States Government (USG) by building a proxy base, denying space to other adversaries, and turning denied space secured by those adversaries into contested space. A successful competition phase sustains USG partners and deters armed conflict indefinitely on terms favorable to the USG.

Strengthening USG existing alliances and attracting new partners or proxies generally takes place during what the DOD called the shaping and deterrence phases of a campaign, and what MDO now refers to as cooperation and competition short of armed conflict. In competition, the DOD seeks to advance national interests without large-scale violence. The intent is to deter, or if necessary, defeat the efforts of the USG's adversaries and their proxies to deny space, while maintaining conditions favorable to USG interests. At the same time, where there is denied space secured by USG adversaries, competition seeks to turn these areas into contested spaces. A primary means by which the DOD achieves this end state is stabilization actions. Stabilization actions are a subset of irregular warfare and are discussed in detail in Joint Publication 3-07, *Stabilization*. Stabilization actions include a wide array of functions such as security cooperation, counterinsurgency (COIN), and foreign humanitarian assistance and disaster relief.[8] All of these actions can provide positive stabilization effects and thereby contribute to success in the competitive space.

The Joint Force, along with USG interagency partners and international community partners, conducts stabilization campaigns designed to enhance a partner nation's security, governance, and ability to provide basic services. In stabilizing these countries, the USG builds the proxy base and strengthens the USG position in the competitive space. From a DOD perspective, many of the stabilization actions conducted in this competitive space are considered a part of security cooperation (SC), which provides the principle means by which the CCDR achieves national security and foreign policy objectives (described in detail in Joint Publication 3-20, *Security Cooperation*). It emphasizes the importance of defense relationships with partner nations or proxies to advance national security objectives and at the same time prevent or reduce the risk of armed conflict.[9] The military's contribution to routine USG stabilization efforts is usually part of the shaping activities of the CCDR's campaign plan. If properly resourced and executed, these

activities prevent armed conflict. Stabilization can occur as a result of SC activities such as joint-combined exercises for training conducted by either Service or SOF (to include CA) component units.

In addition to being exceptionally lethal, SOF are some of the premier trainers in the security cooperation environment. SOF members' thorough knowledge of foreign languages, customs, and cultures allows for quick acceptance by the host or partner nation. SOF's ability to partner and work closely with host nation militaries contributes directly to increased security of the host or partner nation. In addition, when called upon to turn denied spaces into contested spaces, SOF service members are masters at training and organizing insurgents, surrogate fighters, native forces and foreign armies as part of unconventional warfare.[10]

The CA component of SOF is a critical enabler for the CCDR in the competitive space. CA fills an important niche for the CCDR. CA personnel provide a capability focused on understanding the civil conditions and dynamics and then developing and leveraging host nation, interagency, and non-governmental capabilities to address the problem(s). When coupled with intelligence, CA provides a commander comprehensive situational understanding of the operating environment and an ability to address civil factors that jeopardize mission accomplishment. CA personnel can provide expertise to the host nation government and improve that nation's ability for security, governance, and service delivery. Finally, CA is the primary DOD element that links into the USG interagency to enable whole-of-nation/whole-of-government activities.[11]

Operating with the population of partner nations' CA personnel are critical information gathering and predictive analysis assets. CA personnel gain an in-depth understanding of the population itself by assessing the various groups, understanding the friction points, and determining who is on which side of various issues. CA personnel offer the CCDR and interagency partners solutions to problems impacting the population. CA personnel also identify various non-governmental organizations, private volunteer organizations, and other international organizations operating in the battlespace. Additionally, CA personnel identify protected targets such as religious sites (e.g., churches, temples, and mosques), schools, and hospitals.[12] In short, CA engages in the human domain and can be a dominant force. However, for SOF and CA to be successful, the Joint Force must be willing to employ these assets.

CCDRs, working with interagency partners, should identify countries that are important to USG national security, determine the stabilization needs of these countries while considering the human domain, and develop strategies and plans that will address these needs. The next step is to implement stabilization activities as outlined in the plans and which are designed to improve security, governance, and service delivery. This, in essence, is the bulk of the contribution of the DOD toward successful competition short of armed conflict. Two examples follow.

United States Africa Command has employed CA as part of the Command's shaping or competition efforts. Charlie Company of the 490th Civil Affairs Battalion was in the northeastern Uganda area of Karamoja. The unit employed a small veterinary civil action program team (VETCAP), which partnered with USG interagency, the Uganda People's Defense Force-Civil Military Coordination Center, and locals to conduct stabilization activities in a volatile and remote region. The population's livelihood was entirely dependent on cattle and other livestock and had been plagued by cattle raids. Over the course of one year, the VETCAP trained more than 100 community animal health workers and treated over 30,000 head of cattle and goats. Treatment included deworming, tick treatment, vitamin supplements, and blood draws to track diseases. The teams also helped repair infrastructure that also helped the local herdsmen. The Combined-Joint Task Force-Horn of Africa commander stated, "The future of Karamoja is bright and with improving security conditions, thanks to the Uganda Peoples Defense Force and the work of the U.S. Army Civil Affairs team, there is no limit to what the region can accomplish."[13]

In another example, United States Southern Command employed CA as part of a merging of CA and medical exercises referred to as medical readiness training exercises (MEDRETEs). On average, a MEDRETE allowed more than 1,000 people living in remote environments to receive medical, dental, and preventive care. Members of Joint Task Force Bravo (JTF-B) developed the requirements for MEDRETEs working with the Honduran Ministry of Health, the Honduran military, local leaders, and school teachers and principals. JTF-B stressed that partner nation involvement in the planning process contributed to the long-term benefits of the MEDRETEs. Further, the planning and execution allowed for increased understanding of current environmental risks as well as the medical capabilities of the local communities. This process also allowed for a discussion about the analysis

of the population, its behaviors, and changes. Over the past two and a half decades, JTF-B conducted more than 300 MEDRETEs. These MEDRETEs treated more than 326,000 medical patients; 69,670 dental patients; and allowed the Honduran government to provide basic services to a portion of the population that normally would not receive them.[14] Simple actions such as handing out basic healthcare education pamphlets to the local population can be very effective in the long run. JTF-B noticed positive behavioral changes as a result of the MEDRETEs and cited comments by numerous villagers regarding the positive experience.[15]

These examples demonstrate the value and capabilities of CA units to the CCDR as a component of theater stabilization and security cooperation activities in the competitive space. In this environment, CA forces identify friction points and nominate and implement solutions, thereby contributing to strengthening the partner nation's (proxy's) security, governance, and service delivery capabilities. Building a network of strong, reliable proxies places the USG in a position of strength, denies access to USG adversaries, and places these adversaries in a position of weakness. But the USG can only achieve this competitive success if the DOD continues to adequately resource those capabilities and the doctrine for their employment. Of course, this is the friction point between the Services and the Joint Force.

Given finite resources, the DOD and specifically the Services face tough decisions with respect to allocation of those resources. The Services focus on warfighting and increasing the lethality of the Force, while harvesting the resources of organizations and capabilities that do not directly contribute to this increase in lethality as bill payers. For example, the Army had planned to shutter the Peace Keeping and Stability Operations Institute (PKSOI). This move appears to be a result of some Army leadership laser focused on a return to peer competition using largely conventional ways and means. This position is in contrast to that of other Army leaders who support the future requirement for COIN, and specifically the stability component of COIN, as a future multi-domain operations warfare requirement. Even in great power competition, USG adversaries will likely not fight the U.S. head-to-head. They will use other countries as proxies or attempt to destabilize nations that the USG considers a proxy. Institutions such as the PKSOI exist to provide DOD leadership and Joint Force commanders with a broader range of options to employ in the protection of USG interests.[16]

The Air Force has also signaled a shift towards more lethal capabilities. Similar to what the Army is doing, Air Force Special Operations Command is already conducting a strategic shift from a focus on COIN operations to preparing for "high-end" combat against technologically advanced adversaries. Although this shift includes a range of missions from COIN to major war and identifies a "combat continuum" for special operations missions that includes low-intensity conflict operations, the continuum does not guarantee that appropriate attention and resources will be given to the "low-end" of that spectrum.[17]

In both examples, the Army and the Air Force are focused on increasing the lethality of the Force in support of the less likely but most dangerous scenario of the armed conflict phase of multi-domain operations. However, in doing so, the Services are potentially placing the DOD, and by extension, the USG, at risk by under resourcing the DOD's capability to effectively engage in competition short of armed conflict. This situation is exacerbated by the implementation of the 2018 Stabilization Assistance Review (SAR).[18] The SAR was essentially a USG effort that included Department of State (DOS), the United States Agency for International Development (USAID), and the DOD. The SAR made a number of recommendations to improve USG stabilization processes. These recommendations included clearly defining what stabilization is; identifying roles and responsibilities for the DOS, USAID, and DOD; and driving home the concept of "burden sharing."[19] As the Office of the Secretary of Defense implements the SAR's recommendations in the form of new stabilization policy, the policy acknowledges that the DOS is the overall lead for stabilization activities, with USAID as the lead for implementation.[20] The DOD is relegated largely to a supporting role. The new policy does not preclude the DOD from conducting stabilization activities, but the policy is restrictive in that these activities must be coordinated with the DOS and USAID to ensure these activities support DOS and USAID country strategies and plans and to determine who (i.e., the DOS, USAID, or the DOD) will execute these activities.[21] This process could allow for potential gaps during stabilization activities. This weakening of the DOD with respect to stabilization activity execution, coupled with the shifting of focus toward increased lethality, creates an imbalance and places the DOD at risk in the era of great power competition.

The DOD must not lose focus of the larger picture. Unmatched lethality is important. However, the pathway to success is achieving a balance

between unmatched lethality in support of armed conflict and sustaining DOD capabilities in support of competition short of armed conflict, as well as a willingness to employ those capabilities. During a time that institutional DOD (i.e., the Services) is shifting resources in order to increase lethality and prepare for the possibility of the first big, multi-domain armed conflict operation, CCDRs (i.e., the Joint Force) will fight hundreds of non-kinetic battles out in the competitive spaces between USG proxies and the proxies of America's adversaries. If the DOD is successful in this nonlethal competition, the USG will gain an advantage and deter multi-domain armed conflict operations. If the DOD is not successful, the USG will be placed at a competitive disadvantage, which may perhaps actually lead to multi-domain armed conflict operations. The DOD would be foolish to allow great power adversaries to succeed in the competitive space, gathering support while the USG is marginalized and placed in a position of weakness. SOF, and specifically CA, represent one of the best assets the DOD and the USG can employ in order to win in the competitive space (short of armed conflict) as part of great power competition.

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Section D: Concluding Thoughts

Chapter 9. Keynote Address: The Risk of Failing to Evolve

Simone Ledeen, SOF Transformation Symposium Remarks (transcribed), 9 January 2020[1]

Introduction

Good afternoon. My name is Simone Ledeen, and I am the Principal Director for Special Operations and Combating Terrorism in the Office of the Under Secretary of Defense for Policy. In this role, I help lead the Department's policy and oversight of all special operations and irregular warfare issues globally, including counterterrorism, counterinsurgency, unconventional warfare, information operations, and sensitive special operations.

Thank you for the chance to speak here today to help close out this excellent symposium. I am grateful to JSOU [Joint Special Operations University] and Colonel Edwards for hosting everyone here in Tampa, and to SOCNORTH [Special Operations Command, North] for helping to organize the event. I'm particularly grateful to our Canadian counterparts from CANSOFCOM [Canadian Special Operations Command] for co-hosting here these past few days. As I've learned both back in the Pentagon and overseas, our decades of partnerships on the battlefield are only as good as our ability to work together at the strategic level as well.

Much of the discussion here at JSOU has focused on how we must transform Special Operations Forces to meet future challenges, specifically those posed by our near-peer and great power competitors. I'd like to focus my remarks today on why we must make these transformations, or stated differently, the risk of failing to evolve to meet these challenges.

As events over the last few weeks in Iraq have proven painfully true, we do not have the luxury of standing by and waiting for our adversaries to fight the way we want to fight. Competition is not a concept we can game out and plan for on a ten-year time horizon, to be debated endlessly in theoretical terms and arbitrated out in the POM [program objective memorandum] process. Competition is here and now. The SOF [Special Operations Forces]

enterprise, with our forces continuously deployed worldwide on the front lines of every major conflict and competitive arena we face, remains the indispensable force in this fight. Failing to evolve is simply not an option.

Thankfully, I believe we're uniquely capable of rising to the occasion in great power competition. In fact, I believe that the SOF enterprise must lead this transformation for the broader Joint Force, just as it did in the CT [counterterrorism] fight, if we are to be successful.

Evolving in the Counter-Violent Extremist Organization Fight

Our national defense strategy, and its emphasis on shifting the Department away from counterterrorism and towards great power competition, has led many to argue that the SOF community is stuck fighting yesterday's wars. Nearly two decades of conflict in Iraq, Afghanistan, Syria, Yemen, and across Africa has proven more costly than I think most of us in this room would have ever imagined in the days after the September 11th attacks. Despite significant investments in both blood and treasure, the threat of violent extremism remains potent in 2020, and much work remains to be done. At face value, the breadth and depth of the terrorism problem today—including the potent threats still posed by al-Qaeda some 19 years after the start of the war in Afghanistan—would suggest we have struggled to evolve over the years.

And yet, today's VEO [violent extremist organization] campaigns scarcely resemble yesterday's War on Terror. Where we used to rely upon large footprints of American and Allied troops for combat operations, we now emphasize building partnerships to enable local solutions to local problems. Where we used to conflate military defeat with success in counterinsurgency, we now prioritize close cooperation with our interagency partners to support diplomatic and economic outcomes. And where we have often lost sight of the core national interests at stake in the CT fight, we now emphasize the need to protect the Homeland as our first priority.

This approach was enshrined in the President's 2018 national strategy for counterterrorism—the first robust and fully articulated counterterrorism strategy for the United States since 2011. It emphasizes the use of all instruments of American power to counter terrorism, including an unprecedented focus on the role of nonmilitary capabilities to support CT objectives. It also places greater emphasis on targeting terrorist networks that directly threaten

the United States and our allies' core interests. And it emphasizes the need for improved partnerships across the globe in the CT fight, encouraging our highly capable partners to address local and regional terrorist threats organically.

The tenets of this strategy may seem obvious to those of us in this room here today. That's because they represent hard lessons the SOF enterprise has learned year-in and year-out at the operational level. But I can say that this represents a significant change at the strategic level in our whole-of-government ability to address enduring VEO threats in a resource-constrained environment. That we have broad consensus on these issues at the policy level is a testament to the SOF community's ability to help transform our broader military doctrine, policy making, and even our public discourse on these issues toward a more realistic approach.

The Rise of Great Power Competition

This approach is absolutely necessary if we are to implement the national defense strategy's declaration that great power competition, and not terrorism, is the primary threat to our nation's security. The NDS [national defense strategy] directs the Department, and particularly SOF, to become more efficient and effective in our counter-VEO campaigns, acknowledging that success in this domain requires a resource-sustainable approach. This is, in many ways, the natural evolution of our lessons learned over the years. And yet, our new mandate to balance enduring CT requirements with rising great power competition represents a massive inflection point for the Department and the SOF community more generally.

The NDS did an effective job forcing the Department to embrace the competitive space as something distinct from both peace and war. Rather than a simple, binary choice between the two, the NDS makes clear that we are in a state of active competition with revisionist powers and rogue regimes. Its emphasis on building high-end readiness, increasing lethality, and strengthening alliances has redoubled the Department's focus on deterring conventional threats from near-peer competitors and other adversaries.

But as a department searching for ways to compete with great power adversaries, we must be honest about our natural preference for the familiarity of the high-end war fight and not lose sight of the lessons we have learned after two decades of conflict in the Middle East. Throughout our

nation's history, we've been slow to accept the irregular character of the conflicts we've faced, and we've too often favored conventional options as the primary response. When we have chosen to embrace IW [irregular warfare], we've been prone to overextending ourselves. And when ultimately given the chance to right-size our approach, we've too easily discarded our ability to wage IW in favor of focusing on conventional readiness and traditional warfare. This pattern has left the United States, our allies, and partners underprepared for the full spectrum of global threats, leading us to become reactive to our adversaries' advances rather than proactive in the pursuit of our own goals. Although this cycle describes our past, it need not define our future.

To its credit, the NDS points to the threats posed by Russian, Chinese, and Iranian malign influence, coercion, subversion, and the use of proxies as integral to competition below armed conflict and irregular warfare. In Ukraine, and indeed throughout much of Europe and even here at home, Russia has applied a tailored mix of cyber activity, malign influence, and in some cases, military force to sow political discord and create opportunities to expand Russian influence and weaken institutions. In the South China Sea, the People's Republic of China has aggressively built artificial island bases and used arcane legal claims to resist international pressure, thereby threatening the maritime sovereignty of our allies in the region. And throughout the Middle East, Iran has asserted an arc of influence and instability, using state-sponsored terrorist activities, a burgeoning network of proxies, and its missile program to vie for regional hegemony.

These competitors have mastered the art of slowly and meticulously shaping the conditions in which they interact with the United States through their own methods of applying hybrid and irregular warfare. They have smartly diagnosed America's strategic reliance on conventional overmatch in order to deter major conflict and have instead sought to achieve their objectives through irregular approaches that limit the effectiveness of our preferred conventional toolkit.

As a result, the special operations community's ability to wage irregular warfare as part of great power competition, not just counterterrorism, must become and remain central to our operational culture in this new competitive space. In this rising era of asymmetric challenges, a singular emphasis on designing the Joint Force solely to fight conventional wars will fail to address the true nature of the great power challenges we face today. More importantly, these failures may even lead to the very conflict we seek to deter

in the first place. SOF's ability to influence the Department's thinking on great power competition and to achieve real success through the application of SOF-unique capabilities will affect the likelihood our nation as a whole will succeed in great power competition. And while much of the Department may prefer to operate on a linear battlefield, we're actually fighting in a gray zone where SOF were built to thrive.

Way Ahead for SOF

For the special operations community to meet the demands of this new era, a few critical changes must occur. First, our nation's special operators must lead the way at working in lockstep with the Interagency for competition, not just counterterrorism. Revisionist adversaries have long viewed America's soft power capabilities as a critical threat to their interests, fearing the moderating influences of an open press, free market economy, and stable democratic elections.

The SOF community must widen the aperture on its current CT cooperation with our interagency partners and harness our country's natural strengths in law enforcement, development, and diplomacy to enable non-military successes in competition. Rather than simply support each other from inside our own foxholes, the Interagency must find better ways to operate jointly and leverage each other's unique capabilities. Ideally, the sum of our combined efforts must be greater than the sum of its parts. Integration with non-military partners, not simply deconfliction, must be our gold standard.

Second, and equally as important, the SOF community must focus its efforts on building resilience and capacity amongst our allies and vulnerable partners to resist the unconventional threats we all face. Our unique system of alliances and partnerships around the world is one of our strongest assets—one that no revisionist power or rogue regime can match. SOF must continue to work to strengthen these alliances globally, not just for counterterrorism, but also for great power competition. We must stand ready to engage proactively with our allies and partners and explore where we can operate in concert, share the burden where necessary, and complement each other's approach to competition. The deep relationships we have built over the years can serve as a bulwark against the rising malign influence of our

competitors. In so doing, we amass the greatest possible strength for the long-term advancement of our shared interests.

Finally, and most importantly, we must become more proactive, and less reactive, in our application of irregular warfare capabilities. The global CT fight has led us to think of the SOF toolkit as primarily responsive in nature. But, that would be a mistake when applied against nation-state competitors. The Russians, Chinese, and Iranians have proven that their own irregular activities can proactively shape the environment to their advantage in the pursuit of their national interests, without giving us the chance to respond using our preferred approaches.

Given that reality, the United States and our allies and partners must embrace the potential for SOF to deter, shape, and compel would-be adversaries short of war. We must be willing to impose costs and create dilemmas to secure our interests in advance, not just in response to provocations by our competitors. As Secretary Esper stated earlier this week, the game has changed, and we are prepared to do what is necessary to defend our personnel, and our interests and our partners in the region. To be clear, this posture is not intended to antagonize our adversaries or escalate toward conflict. But rather, it aims to disrupt their strategies, manage escalation, and draw down the risk of both hybrid and high-end conflict. SOF there must become the Department's go-to capability for efficient and effective competition in the steady-state, not just in crisis.

Closing Remarks

While the United States today faces a more competitive and volatile security environment than seen in a generation, I'll conclude by reiterating my belief that the SOF community is uniquely prepared to address these challenges. The NDS declares that the Joint Force has never been more proficient at the conduct of irregular warfare, much to the credit of the SOF enterprise. That is, in part, an acknowledgment of SOF's transformative role in driving the Department's modern approach to combating global terrorist threats.

Yet is also a demand signal for the future. As we collectively turn towards an era great power competition, we will not turn our backs on the enduring threat of terrorism; nor can we ignore the unique role SOF must play in challenging our competitors' asymmetric approaches to competition. Rather,

we must continue our work to transform and pursue innovative solutions to the full range of irregular threats we face today.

Endnotes

1. Simone Ledeen, "The Risk of Failing to Evolve, " 9 January 2020, keynote address, SOF Transformation Symposium, Tampa, FL, transcribed.

Acronyms

A2/AD	anti-access/area denial
C2	command and control
CA	civil affairs
CAF	Canadian Armed Forces
CANSOF	Canadian Special Operations Forces
CANSOFCOM	Canadian Special Operations Forces Command
CBRN	chemical, biological, radiological, and nuclear
CCDR	combatant commander
COIN	counterinsurgency
CQ	cultural intelligence
CSOTC	Canadian Special Operations Training Centre
CT	counterterrorism
DA	direct action
DOD	Department of Defense
DOS	Department of State
EQ	emotional intelligence
FID	foreign internal defense
GPF	general purpose forces
IW	irregular warfare
JIIM	joint, interagency, intergovernmental, and multinational
JSOU	Joint Special Operations University
JTF-B	Joint Task Force-Bravo

KSSO	Russian Special Operations Forces Command
LOE	line of effort
LRDG	Long Range Desert Group
MDO	multi-domain operations
MEDRETE	medical readiness training exercises
NC	non-arrested cohort
NCO	noncommissioned officer
NDS	national defense strategy
ODA	Operational Detachment Alpha
OPTEMPO	operating tempo
PKSOI	Peace Keeping and Stability Operations Institute
POTFF	Pressure on the Force and Families
PTSD	post-traumatic stress disorder
SAR	Stabilization Assistance Review
SAS	Special Air Service
SC	security cooperation
SM	service member
SOCET	special operations common environmental training
SOCNORTH	Special Operations Command, North
SOF	Special Operations Forces
SR	special reconnaissance
TTP	tactic, technique, and procedure
UAV	unmanned aerial vehicle
UN	United Nations

USAID	United States Agency for International Development
USG	United States Government
USSOCOM	United States Special Operations Command
UW	unconventional warfare
VD	veteran defendants
VEO	violent extremist organization
VETCAP	veterinarian civil action program