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**To Serve the Nation**  
*U.S. Special Operations Forces  
in an Era of Persistent Conflict*

By Michele L. Malvesti



Center for a  
New American  
Security

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### Cover Image

U.S. Navy SEALs conduct a fast-rope insertion demonstration from an MH-60S Seahawk helicopter onto a beach overlooking the Chesapeake Bay during a capabilities exercise at Naval Amphibious Base, Little Creek, VA in July 2009.

(MASS COMMUNICATION SPECIALIST 2ND CLASS JOSHUA T. RODRIGUEZ/U.S. Navy)

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## *About the Author*

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## INTRODUCTION

U.S. Special Operations Forces (SOF) are experiencing their most extensive use and greatest transformation of the modern SOF era.<sup>1</sup> In playing direct and leading roles in Iraq and Afghanistan, as well as in the broader U.S. effort to defeat al Qaeda and violent extremism across the globe, these forces have become more operationally adept, endowed with more resources and organizational capacity, and are encountering greater demands for their leadership and expertise than ever before. SOF are in the midst of a resurgence, with their core capabilities aligning with the irregular and potentially catastrophic security threats of today's geostrategic environment.

In spite of these developments, SOF are not yet optimized for success. In order to enhance the strategic value of SOF and facilitate their continued evolution in service to the nation, three challenges should be addressed.

First, SOF can advance U.S. efforts to disrupt and—perhaps more important—help prevent threats and challenges that emanate from beyond traditional battlefields. However, the United States continues to struggle with how best to apply force in general, and Special Operations in particular, outside theaters of combat. While SOF are operating on an unprecedented scale across the globe, both their capabilities and the 21st-century threat environment are in many ways outpacing the nation's policies for employing SOF.<sup>2</sup>

Second, the various components within SOF have diverse proficiencies, cultures, and approaches to Special Operations that provide the United States a broad spectrum of capability in addressing an equally diverse set of security challenges. However, not all units and skills are being leveraged or enabled to maximum effect. While operational imperatives associated with the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan are contributing factors, other issues that undermine more effective utilization of SOF include outdated articulations of Special Operations missions and activities, internal and external challenges

## POST-9/11 EVOLUTION OF SOF

*While the 1980s and 1990s witnessed a steadily growing use of SOF, the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, accelerated this trend and marked a watershed moment for these strategic assets.<sup>3</sup>*

Before 9/11, SOF primarily conducted two types of deployments: military-to-military exchanges in order to enhance U.S. and partner country capabilities, relationships, and area knowledge; and discrete operations that not only tended to be tightly scoped in geography, duration, and force size, but also were often reactive in nature.

Before 9/11, SOF had not fully leveraged interagency partnerships in their operations and activities.

Before 9/11, Special Operations tended to be viewed as incidental to conventional warfare.

Before 9/11, SOF offered senior defense and national security officials an important but often niche perspective in the development of policy and strategy.

Today, the SOF community is an active and persistent war-fighting force, with thousands of personnel engaged in combat and other efforts in support of U.S. interests. SOF activities and operations are occurring across entire countries, such as Iraq and Afghanistan, and across multiple national borders, such as in the pursuit of terrorists and other violent extremists.<sup>4</sup> While some of these operations are unilateral, SOF primarily partner with host nations and indigenous populations in addressing shared security challenges.

Today, the SOF community has invested in strategic and operational relationships across departments and agencies in Washington, as well as achieved forward, on-the-ground success by fusing intelligence analysis and exploitation with operations through Joint Interagency Task Forces (JIATFs). In many ways, SOF are now serving as both a nucleus of action and as the center for a community of practice, frequently driving interagency discussions on operations and activities against al Qaeda and its affiliates as well as other national security threats and challenges.

Today, SOF are a central—and often the primary—strategic component in addressing national security challenges. This has enabled SOF to enhance their long-standing roles as change agents—sparking innovation in technology, tactics, and baseline capabilities across the military writ large.

Today, SOF expertise and leadership are in high demand. The number of general and flag officers in SOF has more than doubled since 9/11,<sup>5</sup> and many of these officers not only are serving in roles traditionally held by General Purpose Force officers, but they also are occupying senior interagency positions outside the Department of Defense.<sup>6</sup>

to resourcing and prioritization, and command and control structures that impede better synchronization of effects on the battlefield.

A third challenge arises from the significant growth that has occurred across SOF over the past decade. While this growth—in budget, manpower, capacity, volume of work, and level of achievement—is in many ways positive, it also comes at a cost. Endowed with greater resources, an organization may have more complex demands placed upon it, incur greater constraints, and even invite more rivals.<sup>7</sup> The full effects of SOF's growth—both positive and negative—might be neither discernible nor understood for several years. However, the community's leaders and advocates should remain aware of the possible downsides of growth that could divert SOF from preparing for missions only they can conduct, conventionalize their experience, and potentially blunt their trademark innovative mindset.

Exploring ways to change and elevate the performance of a successful organization can be difficult. Previous calls to reform SOF or reassess their use generally have been spurred by strategic, operational, or political failures, such as those that occurred during the 1980 attempt to rescue Americans held hostage in Iran, the 1993 battle in Mogadishu during the larger mission to capture Somali warlord Mohamed Farah Aideed, and, most recently, the 2001 terrorist attacks on U.S. soil, which became the watershed event for today's generation of Special Operators.

Yet these forces and the nation should not wait for failure before taking steps that will enhance SOF performance and contributions to national security. SOF should seize their current position of strength in order to bolster their ability to address security challenges that arise in countries with which the United States is not at war, fully leverage and enable the diverse skills and units across the community, and mitigate the potential drawbacks of growth that could adversely affect the evolution of the force. Failure to act now is a missed opportunity.

## WHY THE NATION NEEDS SOF

U.S. Special Operation Forces are ideally suited to help protect and advance U.S. security interests in an increasingly complex geostrategic environment. Their significance and value derive from the complexion of the security threats and challenges confronting the United States today, the military capabilities needed in order to address those challenges, and the distinguishing attributes and core capabilities of SOF that align with those requirements.<sup>8</sup>

### Key Characteristics of the Security Landscape

Four characteristics of the 21st-century security landscape are worth exploring here briefly given their direct implications for SOF.

*Asymmetric and irregular forms of conflict and warfare* are eclipsing conventional confrontations between nation-state militaries and have come to dominate the post-Cold War era security environment.<sup>9</sup> The United States and its allies and partners will continue to face both traditional state adversaries and sub-national groups who employ or sponsor the use of terrorism, insurgency, information operations, and other irregular aspects of warfare for the foreseeable future.<sup>10</sup> Accompanying this trend is a shift from interstate to intrastate conflicts<sup>11</sup> and the security challenges that emanate from within weak, fragile, and failing states. Such states can produce and exacerbate humanitarian emergencies that may call for external intervention, and they can serve as breeding and recruiting grounds, transit points, and sanctuaries for insurgents, terrorists, and other violent sub-national actors. For example, those areas designated by the United States as terrorist safe havens are predominantly states, areas within states, or areas between or across states that are assessed to be significantly vulnerable to conflict or collapse.<sup>12</sup> Not all irregular threats and challenges will arise from these environments. Indeed, terrorists and other extremists often leverage virtual sanctuaries that exist in the inadequately protected or insufficiently strong legal,



financial, and cyber systems of stable countries and the larger international system. But with nearly two billion people living in states assessed as significantly vulnerable to collapse or conflict, weak and failing states are a global geostrategic challenge and represent a “new class of conflict” in and of themselves.<sup>13</sup>

*Changing demographics* also are affecting international security. Over the next decade and a half, the world population is likely to reach eight billion.<sup>14</sup> By 2050, there likely will be more than nine billion people—over two billion more than there are today.<sup>15</sup> The majority of population expansion is projected to occur in developing countries that will struggle to accommodate the broad social, economic, and environmental strains likely to accompany this growth.<sup>16</sup>

One consequence of rapid growth is not just a larger population but a younger one that is likely to press for employment and educational opportunities in societies that may not be able to effectively absorb the demand.<sup>17</sup> This could lead to a frustrated and disaffected population segment that is ripe for strife or exploitation by others.<sup>18</sup> Migration and urbanization also are key aspects of this demographic landscape. The current transnational migration of opportunity-seeking individuals from youth-laden, growing, and under-developed countries into richer nation-states is expected to continue. Migration from the countryside to urban areas also is likely to persist. Based on current trends, nearly 57 percent of all people will be living in urban centers by 2025,<sup>19</sup> and some estimates project that nearly 70 percent of the world’s population will be residing in cities by 2050.<sup>20</sup> Absent effective assimilation, migration and urbanization could lead to tension and discord and increased susceptibility to violent radicalization within disaffected communities.

*The diffusion of global power across multiple actors* gives populations an increasing ability to exercise choice and sway over their lives. Power and authority no longer rest solely with states. Civil

society organizations, corporations, and ethnic and religious organizations, not to mention violent extremist groups, increasingly are providing state-like services to individuals and various segments of society. Sometimes these actors are filling gaps left by failing states; other times they are providing alternatives to otherwise capable governments. In either circumstance, more individuals and populations can assert greater choice and, at the most extreme, grant power and authority to criminal cartels, terrorists, or insurgents if they perceive these actors to be better able to address their specific political, economic, social, or security needs. This has led to a competition for suasion and influence over relevant populations.<sup>21</sup>

*A highly interconnected world is facilitating the distributed and lethal activities* of dangerous states and non-state groups and actors. Empowered by the proliferation of advanced communication and information systems and the diffusion of advanced military technologies and light weaponry, both state and non-state actors are creating lethal and resilient networks and conducting operations and illicit activities at greater distances and across multiple borders. They are, in effect, creating networked and geographically unconstrained battlefields. And by employing local actions to strategic effect, they also have given global significance to issues once deemed to have only local or regional implications.

Most troubling within the trend of lethal transnational networks is the potential for an attack involving a weapon of mass destruction (WMD). WMD-related materials, scientific knowledge, and expertise are proliferating throughout the public domain. Their convergence in today’s interconnected world increases the potential that more actors will be able to acquire these weapons or their components through clandestine production, theft from poorly secured stockpiles, or directly from a rogue state or criminal network. Use by a state cannot be ruled out, but arguably the gravest threat to U.S. national security is WMD in the hands of terrorists.<sup>22</sup>



## SOF Contributions Across the Security Landscape

Protecting and advancing U.S. security interests in this 21st-century environment requires the coordinated application of all instruments of national power and influence—diplomatic, informational, military, economic, financial, intelligence, and law enforcement—across multiple departments and agencies. While no one instrument of power, executive department or agency, or sector of society will be the singular solution, SOF have competencies that align with today’s security challenges. Four are discussed herein.

### COMPETENCY IN IRREGULAR FORMS OF WARFARE

While retaining a relative advantage in conventional warfare, the United States also must continue to invest in and maintain capabilities across the full range of irregular forms of conflict and warfare that will arise from rogue states, violent sub-national groups and extremists, and their associated networks. SOF were designed to address such irregular threats and challenges. Four of the five activities and operations the Department of Defense (DOD) identifies as irregular warfare also are specified as Special Operations core activities: counterinsurgency, counterterrorism (CT), foreign internal defense (FID), and unconventional warfare.<sup>23</sup> (See textbox *Core Activities of Special Operations*.) SOF also contribute directly to DOD’s fifth area of irregular warfare—stability operations.<sup>24</sup>

### ENGAGEMENT WITH HOST NATIONS AND INDIGENOUS POPULATIONS

Success in today’s strategic environment mandates an intimate understanding of foreign governments and their populations throughout the world. The United States requires fluency in a variety of cultures, languages, politics, and religions, and the ability to develop and leverage partnerships with foreign leaders, change agents, and populations at large. SOF have long-standing and well-regarded

## CORE ACTIVITIES OF SPECIAL OPERATIONS

The U.S. Special Operations Command (SOCOM) currently cites 12 core activities as they relate to Special Operations. Contrary to perception, SOCOM does not assert exclusivity or ownership over these areas; rather, the list articulates activities that require tasks or skills peculiar to Special Operations:<sup>25</sup>

- Direct action
- Special reconnaissance
- Unconventional warfare
- Foreign internal defense
- Civil affairs operations
- Counterterrorism
- Psychological operations
- Information operations
- Counterproliferation of weapons of mass destruction
- Security force assistance
- Counterinsurgency operations
- Activities specified by the president or Secretary of Defense<sup>26</sup>

There have been modifications to the list since originally defined by Congress in 1987, but the majority of these activities have characterized Special Operations for more than two decades.<sup>27</sup>

expertise in working with and through host nation security forces and broader indigenous populations. While each of the four aforementioned core activities require—to greater or lesser extents—the capability to work with and among foreign populations, other SOF activities also use this same set of competencies. For example, SOF leverage local relationships, along with their understanding of a country’s cultural, economic, and political

landscape, in order to identify critical needs of the population in conducting civil affairs operations. Various types of information operations, such as psychological operations, also depend upon familiarity with local people, customs, and mores in order to shape behavior, attitudes, or the environment. The importance of engaging with host nations and indigenous populations also is intertwined with an imperative to strengthen partnerships in the face of enumerable security challenges and drivers of instability. Enhanced partner will and capacity are force multipliers that account for limited resources and inherent U.S. domestic and international political constraints on the use of force.<sup>28</sup>

#### NON-TRADITIONAL BATTLEFIELDS

Given the sensitive, ambiguous, and non-traditional settings from which security challenges can emerge, the country must be able to operate across environments as varied as cities, failing states, and countries with which the United States is not at war.<sup>29</sup> In this regard, it is not just SOF's core activities that render them highly relevant but also the nature of Special Operations and how they are executed. Special Operations are "conducted in hostile, denied, or politically sensitive environments" and "often require covert, clandestine, or low visibility capabilities." (See textbox *Special Operations Defined*.) Unlike conventional military activities, they tend to require less support and use small, tailored teams with a low signature that reduces some of the risk of operating in precarious environments and circumstances.

The atypical battlespaces of the 21st-century also extend to information networks and platforms. Not only do U.S. enemies seek to exploit cyber networks that underlie many of the nation's critical infrastructures and key resources, but they also engage in information-based forms of confrontation and conflict that play out across the media battlefield. SOF's ability to conduct information operations, which includes electronic warfare, computer network

#### SPECIAL OPERATIONS DEFINED

Special Operations are "operations conducted in hostile, denied, or politically sensitive environments to achieve military, diplomatic, informational, and/or economic objectives employing military capabilities for which there is no broad conventional force requirement. These operations often require covert, clandestine, or low visibility capabilities. Special Operations are applicable across the range of military operations. They can be conducted independently or in conjunction with operations of conventional forces or other government agencies and may include operations through, with, or by indigenous or surrogate forces. Special Operations differ from conventional operations in degree of physical and political risk, operational techniques, mode of employment, independence from friendly support, and dependence on detailed operational intelligence and indigenous assets."\*

\*From DOD Dictionary of Military and Associated Terms.

operations, and psychological operations, suggests another unorthodox environment—the virtual battlefield—on which they operate.

#### DISRUPTING CATASTROPHIC THREATS

The United States requires the ability to defeat the threat or use of WMD and related material and supply networks in the face of catastrophic capabilities that are increasingly available to a wider range of actors. It is here that SOF contribute to arguably the nation's most critical capability by virtue of their counterproliferation mission. By conducting operations to detect, intercept, destroy, or otherwise render safe WMD and related material, SOF can respond to such potentially catastrophic threats from rogue states, as well as help to keep WMD out of the hands of illicit non-state actors.

This cursory review of key themes in today's security environment, the concomitant capabilities

required to protect and advance U.S. interests, and the relevant characteristics of SOF reveal the value of these strategic assets: their ability to help prevent and respond to irregular and potentially catastrophic security threats and challenges. More specifically, SOF contributions today rest with their diverse set of skills that help the nation to:

- Counter state, non-state, and networked actors who use or threaten to use irregular warfare or weapons of mass destruction;
- Engage and partner with foreign governments, populations, and audiences; and
- Operate in unorthodox environments as varied as urban settings, virtual battlefields, failing states, and, more broadly, in countries with which the United States is not at war.

However, SOF face challenges—from within their own community and in their relationships with the larger U.S. national security apparatus—as they continue to demonstrate their value to the nation. We turn now to an exploration of those challenges.

## CHALLENGE ONE: LEVERAGING THE DIVERSE CAPABILITIES OF SOF

### SOF Tribes—An Overview

U.S. Special Operations Forces tend to be referred to as if they were a singular entity, but the SOF community comprises many tribes with diverse cultures and niche areas of specialization.<sup>30</sup> Three broad categories of tribes are outlined below—service SOF components, mission forces, and approaches to Special Operations—although additional distinctions occur within each category. These categories are not mutually exclusive; over his career, a Special Operator is formally a part of and identifies to greater or lesser extents with multiple camps across the community.

### SERVICE COMPONENTS

The U.S. Special Operations Command has four service component commands, one each for the Army, Navy, Air Force, and the Marine Corps. (See textbox *U.S. Special Operations Command and its Component Commands*.) They differ most fundamentally in their primary operating environments, as well as in the platforms, training, and cultures required for operating in those environments. Variance also exists within each service component, such as between psychological operators in Army SOF who develop and disseminate information to foreign audiences, and Army Special Forces who tend to focus on raising surrogate forces and training foreign militaries.

### MISSION FORCES

There are two distinct mission forces within SOF: Theater Mission Forces and National Mission Forces. Theater Mission Forces are assets assigned or attached to Theater Special Operations Commands (TSOCs). They are designed to maintain a persistent presence and cultivate long-term military-to-military relationships within their respective regions, as well as provide the Geographic Combatant Commanders (GCCs) dedicated Special Operations capability. The

## U.S. SPECIAL OPERATIONS COMMAND AND ITS COMPONENT COMMANDS\*

### U.S. Special Operations Command (USSOCOM)

This unified command was activated on April 16, 1987, at Florida's MacDill Air Force Base in response to the Goldwater-Nichols Defense Reorganization Act of 1986 and the Nunn-Cohen Amendment to the National Defense Authorization Act of 1987. In its functional role as a force provider, SOCOM organizes, trains, and equips SOF and provides these forces to support Geographic Combatant Commanders as well as U.S. ambassadors and their country teams. In its role as a combatant command, SOCOM synchronizes DOD plans for global operations against terrorist networks and other violent extremists and, when directed by the president or defense secretary, will conduct operations. SOCOM comprises four service component commands, one sub-unified command, and a university element:

### U.S. Army Special Operations Command (USASOC)

Established Dec. 1, 1989, at Fort Bragg, N.C., USASOC is the largest command under SOCOM and is responsible for organizing, training, equipping, and deploying Army SOF. USASOC includes the John F. Kennedy Special Warfare Center and School, the Army Special Forces Command, the 4th Psychological Operations Group, the 95th Civil Affairs Brigade, and the 528th Sustainment Brigade, all at Fort Bragg. USASOC also includes the 75th Ranger Regiment at Fort Benning, Ga., and the 160th Special Operations Aviation Regiment at Fort Campbell, Ky.

### Naval Special Warfare Command (NAVSPECWARCOM)

Established on April 16, 1987, at the Naval Amphibious Base in Coronado, Calif., NAVSPECWARCOM maintains operational readiness of and deploys Naval Special Warfare Forces in order to accomplish SOF missions worldwide. This component command includes five Naval Special Warfare Groups (three are located in Coronado, two in Little Creek, Va.), the Naval Special Warfare Center in Coronado, and the Naval Special Warfare Development Group in Dam Neck, Va.

### Air Force Special Operations Command (AFSOC)

The air component of SOCOM—established May 22, 1990, at Hurlburt Field near Pensacola, Fla.—presents and is responsible for the combat readiness of Air

Force SOF in order to conduct and support Special Operations worldwide. The major active operational commands within AFSOC's purview include the 23rd Air Force, the 1st Special Operations Wing, and the 720th Special Tactics Group, all at Hurlburt Field; the 27th Special Operations Wing at Cannon Air Force Base in New Mexico; the 352nd Special Operations Group at RAF Mildenhall in the United Kingdom; and the 353rd Special Operations Group at Kadena Air Base near Okinawa, Japan. Also key to AFSOC is its Air Force Special Operations Training Center at Hurlburt Field.

### Marine Corps Forces Special Operations Command (MARSOC)

After the Secretary of Defense directed the formation of a Marine component to SOCOM in October 2005, MARSOC was activated on Feb. 24, 2006, at Camp Lejeune, N.C. This most recent addition to SOCOM's component commands is responsible for organizing, training, equipping, and deploying Special Operations Marines worldwide. MARSOC's structure includes the Marine Special Operations Regiment, the Marine Special Operations Support Group, and the Marine Special Operations School.

### Joint Special Operations Command (JSOC)

JSOC, which straddles Fort Bragg and Pope Air Force Base in North Carolina, was established on Oct. 22, 1980. This sub-unified command is responsible for studying SOF requirements, developing joint plans and tactics, ensuring equipment standardization and interoperability, and conducting joint training and exercises.

### Joint Special Operations University (JSOU)

Since its formation in September 2000, JSOU has conducted important research, teaching, and outreach in order to educate SOF, other military and civilian national security leaders, and select international counterparts in the art and science of joint Special Operations. It is located at Hurlburt Field in Florida.

\*Information derived from U.S. Special Operations Command Public Affairs, *Fact Book: United States Special Operations Command* (2010).

National Mission Forces, on the other hand, are designed for high-end, extremely sensitive operations, often of national importance. National forces tended to be used episodically before 9/11, but they are increasingly maintaining a persistent posture in high-interest regions today in order to address significant transnational security challenges.

### APPROACHES TO SPECIAL OPERATIONS

SOF have a dual heritage that captures two distinguishing characteristics of Special Operations: a “commando” role and skill set that places a premium on speed, surprise, stealth, and precision in the use of force, and a “warrior-diplomat” role and skill set that privileges the use of cross-cultural engagement skills for influencing, training, and conducting operations with indigenous populations and foreign forces.<sup>31</sup> Many units and commands have proficiency in both roles and draw from both skill sets, although they tend to have a comparative advantage with one approach over the other.

These diverse tribes give SOF a broad spectrum of capability to accomplish their operations and contribute to the security interests of the nation. Still, not all forces and skill sets are being utilized or enabled to maximum effect. Impediments to better leveraging the diversity across SOF flow, in part, from outdated articulations of Special Operations missions and activities, challenges regarding resourcing and prioritization, and command and control arrangements that affect better synchronization of activities.

### Outdated Articulation of Missions and Activities

SOCOM currently cites 12 core activities as they relate to Special Operations. (See textbox *Core Activities of Special Operations*.) Unfortunately, tendencies to associate these activities—often strictly—with either one of the two mission forces, approaches to Special Operations, or specific units and commands create unintentional divides and inefficiencies that undermine the potential

contributions of SOF. The divides manifest themselves in at least three ways.

First, there is a tendency to align each of the 12 activities with how SOF bring force to bear or otherwise achieve effects: either through a “direct” approach that generally highlights the commando skill set, or an “indirect” approach that underscores the warrior-diplomat role.<sup>32</sup> Counterterrorism, counterproliferation, direct action, and special reconnaissance are often associated with the “direct” approach, while civil affairs operations, FID, psychological operations, and unconventional warfare tend to be characterized as “indirect” approaches to Special Operations.<sup>33</sup>

Aligning specific activities on the list with one category or the other may be a useful typology, but stringently equating them with a single approach can obscure a full appreciation of how SOF can better achieve enduring results: by more fully leveraging all competencies along both approaches and synchronizing the effects. If an activity is thought to apply almost exclusively in support of direct efforts to disrupt and defeat a threat, for example, it discounts how that same activity reinforces and is often indistinguishable from indirect efforts to shape and enable the environment. Additionally, binary categorization magnifies the perceived divide between the two approaches. For instance, SOF can successfully attack a training camp in a terrorist safe haven, thereby helping to dismantle an organization intent on attacking U.S. security interests. Such operational successes, however, will be limited in their strategic utility and unlikely to achieve lasting results if the effects are not synchronized with long-term engagement activities, such as training and enabling that host nation’s security forces.

Second, equating SOF core activities with specific units, branches, or commands can lead to unyielding lines—neither entirely accurate nor useful—regarding which parts of the community can conduct particular activities or operations. To



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*The diverse tribes give SOF a broad spectrum of capability to accomplish their operations and contribute to the security interests of the nation. Still, not all forces and skill sets are being utilized or enabled to maximum effect.*

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be sure, the distinct proficiencies and specialization across SOF are important to acknowledge and retain. Even when the capabilities of SOF units overlap, there are good reasons for units to have primary, secondary, and even tertiary areas of focus and responsibility. This increases the likelihood that units will be properly prepared and that the most well prepared unit will be employed for the mission.<sup>34</sup> Yet while specialization is important, it should not lead to rigidity in application. A particular situation might call for a unit with a secondary or tertiary focus area to conduct a mission based on its proximity and access to the target, relationships on the ground, or other operational imperatives.

Comparative advantages exist across SOF, but even those units that tend to undertake a more engagement-oriented or warrior-diplomat approach to Special Operations also are skilled in the more kinetic, commando approach, and vice versa. While some elements of Theater SOF may have a comparative advantage in FID, for example, they also are skilled in direct action, which they use in combat mentoring of indigenous forces. Even beyond combat mentoring, these forces are proficient in direct action. Combined with their

relationships among the local population, the credible capacity to use force accords them additional leverage in engaging host nation forces and other foreign partners. Similarly, although their comparative advantage and primary focus lie elsewhere, the National Mission Forces also train, mentor, and conduct operations with host nation partners and indigenous forces in select countries. While everyone must be disciplined in embracing and mastering their niche roles, SOF should avoid inflexible thinking regarding the application of capabilities given the varied and complex circumstances in which they will find themselves operating. Such rigidity undercuts the resourcefulness and imagination that are hallmarks of SOF. It also could undermine overall effectiveness if all competencies are not being fully leveraged based on rigid notions of “who gets to do what.”

Third, the current list of SOF activities conflates core mission areas with the means by which they are accomplished. Counterinsurgency, counterproliferation of WMD, counterterrorism, and unconventional warfare are currently presented as activities but are better defined as core mission areas in that they align with U.S. strategies for addressing irregular, asymmetric, and potentially catastrophic security challenges and provide the context in which SOF operate.<sup>35</sup> The remaining activities on the list are more appropriately conceptualized as activities used to execute or support the mission areas.

The example of counterterrorism illustrates this conflation. According to the official DOD definition, counterterrorism includes the offensive measures taken to prevent, deter, preempt, and respond to terrorism.<sup>36</sup> SOF help to prevent terrorism by training and enabling the security forces of vulnerable partner countries and engaging the indigenous population in order to identify local needs—efforts that help build environments that are inhospitable to terrorists. SOF are deterring terrorists from acting or receiving support for their operations by disseminating information that challenges their violent

ideology and creates doubt among audiences regarding their causes and tactics. SOF are preempting or disrupting terrorist operations by uncovering the activities of terrorists and capturing or killing them in a raid, and they are responding to specific acts of terrorism, such as the kidnapping of Americans, by rescuing those held captive. In other words, SOF are countering terrorism by conducting FID, civil affairs operations, information and psychological operations, special reconnaissance, and various types of direct action. Counterterrorism is the mission area. The other activities occur within the context of countering terrorism; they are the ways in which SOF execute, support, and ultimately accomplish the CT mission.

The current conflation has significance beyond mere semantics. It risks creating counterproductive divisions and inefficiencies when one unit or command becomes closely associated with a SOF activity and another is more closely linked with an activity that is actually a mission area. This could lead to resources, advocacy, force structure, and overall utilization being disproportionately weighted in favor of the latter unit or command when, upon closer reflection, multiple SOF units and commands can and should be leveraged in order to accomplish the same core mission areas.

This conflation is further exacerbated when a mission area becomes highly identified or even virtually synonymous with a particular activity. This can lead to the exclusion of other activities that also are central to the mission, potentially blinding military leaders to the full range of SOF capabilities they have at their disposal. For example, many of SOF's pre-9/11 counterterrorism operations were direct action-centric and conducted almost exclusively by National Mission Forces. Indeed, CT operations were often identified with reactive efforts to resolve specific and discrete events, such as hostage situations or hijackings of cruise ships and airliners. Combating terrorism in a post-9/11 world, however, is much more expansive. Yet if

SOF or their key advocates and constituents view counterterrorism through a lens that privileges direct action as the embodiment of CT operations, then activities such as FID, civil affairs operations, and information and psychological operations may not be seen as equally integral to one of the country's foremost security challenges; accordingly, these critical activities are likely to be deprived of resources, given only perfunctory attention, or not performed or employed to maximum effect.<sup>37</sup>

#### **ADVOCATING A NEW FRAMEWORK**

Developing a new framework that differentiates SOF core mission areas from the activities that are used to execute or accomplish them will have at least two benefits. First, it will help focus decisions regarding resource allocation, force structure, training, and human capital development against the activities SOF perform rather than trying to prioritize these same investment decisions against the various operating contexts in which the activities will occur. Second, it will highlight for the various tribes across the Special Operations community what are often shared goals and common operating contexts in which the specialized skills of multiple SOF units and commands should be brought to bear.

Constructing this new framework should proceed in three steps. First, the current list of 12 SOF core activities should be re-categorized into core mission areas and core activities. In this proposed construct, counterinsurgency, counterproliferation of WMD, counterterrorism, and unconventional warfare are defined as core mission areas. Additionally, the President of the United States (POTUS) or Secretary of Defense (SECDEF) can direct SOF to undertake additional specific missions, and these should be distinguished from SOF activities and included as a core mission area. All mission areas, while distinct, are not mutually exclusive. Depending upon the situation, they can be mutually reinforcing and even inseparable. For example, counterproliferation and counterterrorism will overlap in order to keep WMD out of the hands



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*While everyone must be disciplined in embracing and mastering their niche roles, SOF should avoid inflexible thinking regarding the application of capabilities given the varied and complex circumstances in which they will find themselves operating.*

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of terrorists or their state sponsors, and an effective approach to counterinsurgency should include elements of CT as well. Similar synergies will arise between and among the other operating contexts.

The remaining activities—direct action, special reconnaissance, FID,<sup>38</sup> civil affairs operations, psychological operations, information operations, and security force assistance—thus are differentiated as core activities. SOF will draw from among these activities as they execute their mission areas. For instance, just as they use direct action, FID, and information operations in the context of combating terrorism, they use those same activities in the context of counterinsurgency as well. Depending on the circumstances on the ground, SOF can conduct each core activity either unilaterally or in partnership with host nation forces or other indigenous surrogates.

The second step is to eliminate redundancy and add clarity to the mission areas and activities. For example, FID and security force assistance both involve training and mentoring in order to enhance the security capabilities of U.S. partners and allies. They could

be conceived as one activity called building partner capacity (BPC).<sup>39</sup> Also “psychological operations” is defined and listed separately from “information operations,” which is somewhat redundant and confusing, given that psychological operations are a specific sub-set of information operations, according to the current DOD description.<sup>40</sup> SOCOM should work with its policy advocates in DOD and Congress to develop streamlined terminology and new doctrine for information operations that better accounts for the hardware-infrastructure-systems aspects of information that is distinct from its cognitive-intellectual-emotional aspects. This should include discussions of how SOF support and use military deception, which, like psychological operations, is a sub-set of information operations.<sup>41</sup> Military deception is an important tool in achieving surprise—an essential principle of war, particularly in the case of Special Operations. Any new definition and associated doctrine should account for how the various components of information operations intersect with the broader roles of strategic communications, public affairs, and public diplomacy.

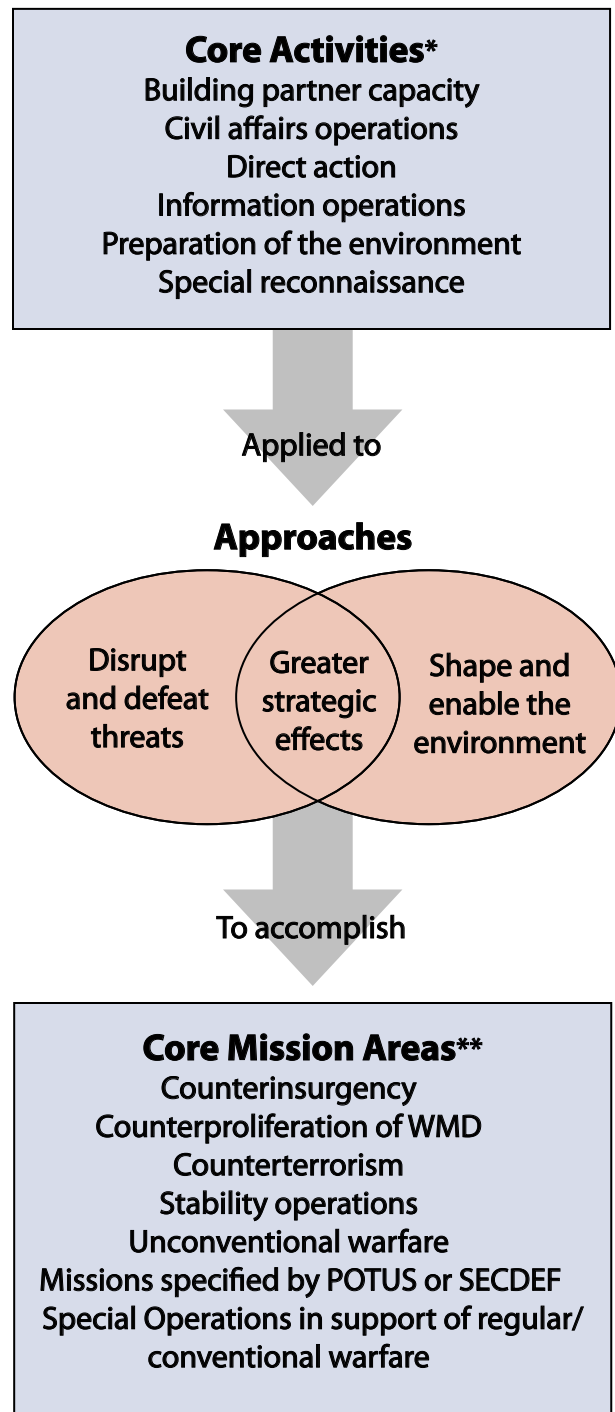
Current SOF missions and activities were conceived in a different geostrategic era more than two decades ago and then modified over the ensuing years. Accordingly, the third step is to examine whether the current core mission areas and activities best reflect what the nation requires and should expect of SOF in addressing 21st-century security challenges. In this light, stability operations should be considered a core mission area for three reasons: the 2010 Quadrennial Defense Review cites the importance of enhancing competency in this area; stability operations captures a significant context within which SOF conduct many of their activities; and trends across the security landscape suggest the country will need SOF to help stabilize various environments in this era of persistent irregular conflict.<sup>42</sup> Additionally, traditional military threats from state adversaries remain part of the landscape, and SOF must continue to prepare to

conduct their operations in support of regular or conventional warfare; this distinct operating context should be acknowledged and included as a core mission area. Finally, preparation of the environment should be identified as a core activity as it relates to Special Operations. This would capture the various anticipatory actions SOF undertake in advance of conducting potential operations.

If senior SOF leaders seek to further expand these mission areas and activities, they should guard against the potential downsides of either expanding SOF’s purview or defining it too precisely. This could embolden detractors or bureaucratic rivals in ways that limit the flexible application of SOF in the future. “If you impose too many rules, you limit what you train to and how you are resourced, and you constrain your ability to operate more broadly. Articulating general missions and activities works well as long they are loosely defined and allow SOF the greatest latitude possible,” noted one former SOCOM commander.<sup>43</sup>

If SOCOM and its partners in the policy community develop and implement the framework proposed herein, the community also should resist the urge to stringently associate the core mission areas and activities with one of the two approaches to Special Operations or draw immutable lines regarding which units, commands, or parts of the force can conduct specific missions or activities. SOF should retain appropriate specialization and comparative advantages across the force, and all units must remain disciplined in embracing and mastering their primary roles. But the SOF community also should conceive of itself as a more unified and flexible force that operates within many common contexts and can leverage the full range of SOF capabilities toward accomplishing shared missions to greater strategic effect. (See figure 1: *A New Framework for SOF Core Mission Areas and Activities*.)

**FIGURE 1: A NEW FRAMEWORK OF SOF CORE MISSION AREAS AND ACTIVITIES**



\*Conducted unilaterally or in partnership

\*\*Often interconnected and mutually reinforcing

### Resourcing, Advocacy, and Prioritization

There is a perception that SOF as an institution values its commando-focused units, and especially the National Mission Forces, over their warrior-diplomat counterparts. In this regard, leveraging the specialties of the Theater Mission Forces and SOF engagement activities to better strategic effect requires more than a re-conceptualization of approaches, missions, and activities. It also necessitates addressing shortfalls in resourcing and incentive structures.

#### RESOURCING

One area commonly cited as evidence of SOF preference for commando skills is an imbalance in resource allocation. Two former commanders of SOCOM acknowledge that Theater SOF require greater investment than they have received through the years: “They have been on a very lean diet,” said one.<sup>44</sup> However, the National Mission Forces remain better equipped, have more extensive training opportunities, and are supported and enabled for operations to a much higher level than are Theater Mission Forces. There are valid operational reasons for the comparatively higher degree of National Mission Force resourcing, including the level of technology required for many missions, as well as the national psychological import and strategic consequences of failure associated with certain operations. These assets must remain robustly resourced. However, gaps in capability, missions, and expectations between the two forces have narrowed in recent years, and Theater SOF in Iraq and Afghanistan have performed at an increased level of proficiency against many types of targets similar to those traditionally actioned by National SOF.

This paper offers no recommendation on what the specific apportionment of investment should be across SOF, but two points should be considered. In some instances, an additional dollar spent on an already well-resourced organization might

yield less value than the same dollar spent on an organization with greater potential for improved capability. In other instances, however, improving an organization’s capability might require moving a finite resource on the battlefield, such as a helicopter. Yet while allocating this helicopter to a lesser-enabled unit might measurably increase that unit’s capability (by 25 percent, as an example), it could simultaneously decrease another organization or unit’s capability by an even greater percentage (perhaps 60 percent). SOF should not strive for institutional balance in resourcing its forces, since different units will need to be enabled and equipped differently, but the operational needs of all SOF units and commands must be met.<sup>45</sup>

#### INCENTIVE STRUCTURES

While resourcing is important, more effective employment of engagement-oriented approaches to Special Operations also rests with the broader incentive structure. For decades, SOF’s warrior-diplomats have been underrepresented among the highest leadership and command ranks within the community.<sup>46</sup> While recent combat experience and other significant command opportunities in Iraq, Afghanistan, and the Philippines may help to close this gap in the coming years, this is not a given. Unfortunately, the military as a whole continues to struggle with the proper incentivizing and rewarding of those within its ranks who focus on engagement and mentoring activities.<sup>47</sup>

Senior SOF advocacy, resourcing, and prioritization of engagement activities in the current operating environment are essential elements of a more equitable strategic incentive structure. Take the war against al Qaeda and its affiliates. Engagement efforts—building the security capacity of partners and allies around the world, discrediting the ideology of violent extremism, and alleviating the underlying political, social, and economic conditions that terrorists seek to exploit—will be determinative in winning this fight over the long run. SOCOM’s commander has emphasized the importance of this approach, observing

that SOF efforts to capture, kill, or otherwise defeat terrorists and their networks—while necessary—are not decisive; rather, enabling partners and stabilizing environments will yield the enduring results against terrorist enemies that are needed to ensure success over the long term.<sup>48</sup>

Yet even while senior leaders advocate for rebalancing SOF priorities and incentives, the imperative to defeat immediate security challenges invariably intervenes. The United States faces capable terrorist enemies intent on attacking the country again, and priority is given to disrupting these threats. Such operational imperatives have skewed within SOF the prominence of direct action-focused units and especially the National Mission Forces, which are often best positioned to address such exigencies. This also has resulted in many policymakers and other key constituents, including those in Congress, becoming more familiar with National SOF than they are with Theater SOF, an issue addressed later in the paper. SOCOM must work with policymakers and the GCCs in prioritizing SOF engagement activities that, in the long run, will help to prevent the emergence of significant security threats to the country. It also is incumbent upon the national security establishment as a whole to disrupt and defeat today's threats in ways that do not divert attention or resources from those efforts that may take years to yield results but also would be decisive over the course of time.

In the absence of direct intervention to the contrary, operational imperatives, historical situations, and organizational structures have contributed to a dominant culture and incentive structure within SOF focused on the commando skill set. The formative years of organizations affect succeeding generations, and the first two decades of the modern SOF era were primarily dedicated to reforming Special Operations in the wake of the 1980 failed attempt to rescue 53 Americans held hostage at the U.S. embassy in Tehran. After the commander aborted the rescue attempt when mechanical failures reduced the number of helicopters available to continue the

mission, a helicopter and aircraft collided during departure preparations, killing eight U.S. servicemen. The failed mission—commonly referred to as Desert One, the name of the rendezvous site in Iran where the tragedy occurred—diminished the confidence of the American people in their government's ability to conduct such rescues, undermined perceptions of American military strength on the world stage, and contributed to President Jimmy Carter's re-election defeat at the polls later that year. Post-Desert One reform focused attention, resources, and advocacy on SOF's commando role, the direct action skill set, and the National Mission Forces in particular. It also likely affected the attitudes and contributed to a particular outlook of those who later joined SOF.<sup>49</sup>

Many competing cultures can arise in organizations that have more than one goal and engage in more than one activity.<sup>50</sup> Competing or different cultures within SOF, however, are not inherently detrimental, but the leadership should continue to explore ways for all cultures to be fully leveraged in service to the nation.<sup>51</sup> One option is to develop a better incentive structure for engagement activities.

In this vein, some have called for the creation of a new sub-unified operational command—often referred to as a Joint Irregular Warfare Command or Joint Unconventional Warfare Command—under SOCOM.<sup>52</sup> Sometimes a structural reorganization can help a separate culture struggling to advance its interests.<sup>53</sup> While not often successful, reorganizations that shift the flow of resources, redistribute career enhancing rewards and incentives, or redefine tasks to better effect can make meaningful differences in organizations.<sup>54</sup>

However, any one organizational solution could create new or different problems in the future.<sup>55</sup> Advocates of this option should consider the possible downsides of establishing a new structure. For example, will a new command facilitate an acceptable level of satisfaction regarding the internal distribution of influence and prioritization across



*There is a perception that SOF as an institution values its commando-focused units, and especially the National Mission Forces, over their warrior-diplomat counterparts.*

SOF? Or will changes to the status quo, while perhaps not ideal, lead to additional divides and counterproductive competition? A new command might simply build another wall that further bifurcates SOF. Any new structure should be founded and constructed in order to achieve better operational and strategic results for Special Operations, not simply as an institutional counterweight.

### JOINT TASK FORCE FOR IRREGULAR WARFARE

One alternative to a stand-alone Joint Irregular or Unconventional Warfare Command is a deployable Irregular Warfare Joint Task Force (JTF), commanded by a SOF three-star general or flag officer. Unlike a stand-alone organization, it might be less cost prohibitive and less resource intensive.

The ability to place a SOF-led or SOF-centric JTF on the ground for command of a theater campaign when SOF competencies are central to mission accomplishment—such as in addressing irregular threats and challenges—provides the nation enhanced flexibility in operating across today's security landscape. A SOF-led JTF should be prepared to receive and employ GPF as necessary and, when SOF competencies are no longer central to the mission, transition to a GPF-led headquarters.

### Enhanced Synergy on the Battlefield

In his 2010 Commander's Guidance, the current SOCOM commander noted the need to “synergize the effects of National Mission Forces and Theater Mission Forces.”<sup>56</sup> One inhibitor to realizing better synergy has been a bifurcated command and control (C2) structure that has Theater and National Mission Forces operating under separate chains of command, even when these forces are in the same country or battlespace.<sup>57</sup> This section considers some of the challenges in synchronizing SOF activities in three different hypothetical scenarios: inside a General Purpose Forces (GPF)-dominated combat theater; outside a traditional war zone but in a situation where engagement activities are the primary focus; and in countries or regions that are not declared combat theaters but are key battlegrounds in the global campaign to defeat al Qaeda.

### SOF IN A GPF-DOMINATED WAR ZONE

While the specifics of each war zone may vary, Theater SOF inside a combat zone dominated by GPF live and work in an area or sector commanded by a conventional battlespace owner and operate in support of that battlespace owner's objectives. National SOF, on the other hand, tend to conduct operations that might support—but also transcend—the objectives of the conventional force commander. National forces in a given scenario might be charged with pursuing high-level actors and dismantling their networks. While these activities could facilitate military objectives in a particular sector, they also are likely linked with a broader global campaign, such as defeating al Qaeda's transnational network. Accordingly, there are often two separate yet overlapping SOF efforts inside the same battlespace. Just as National forces may be tracking terrorists, insurgents, and other individuals across the country, so, too, are Theater forces pursuing terrorists, insurgents, and other individuals who threaten stability in their sector. This can lead to unproductive redundancies in targeting and intelligence gathering, with the two

## SOF AND CAMPAIGN DESIGN\*

Within a combat zone dominated by General Purpose Forces (GPF), Special Operations should support the theater commander's overarching campaign plan. Yet simply because the battlefield is dominated by GPF does not mean that Special Operations should be directed by GPF. In this regard, SOF require a campaign design that clearly articulates how SOF will support conventional plans and activities to optimal effect. Absent such strategic design, conventional commanders could make sub-optimal decisions about how to employ SOF in their battlespace. While it is true that GPF have significantly increased their understanding of Special Operations after nearly nine years of working alongside SOF in Iraq and Afghanistan, it may be a mistake to equate this increased familiarity with a fundamental knowledge of how to use SOF to maximum utility. The relative and absolute differences between GPF and SOF underscore this experiential gap.

In their warrior-diplomat role, SOF use intimate knowledge of the local culture, language, and social order in order to build and leverage the capacity of host nation forces, develop partnerships with key leaders and change agents, and influence local conditions and the populace at large. These are non-traditional military activities that require specialized training and capabilities and, in many ways, represent an absolute difference in skills between SOF and GPF.<sup>58</sup> The SOF commando role, on the other hand, draws from core competencies similar to those held by GPF. True, the use of force in SOF-led raids often occurs in denied or sensitive environments (often

clandestinely), is more technology-enabled, and often applied against networked actors across multiple geographic boundaries; these are not common GPF skills. However, the differences in capability and proficiency tend to be more relative than absolute. GPF tend to have greater familiarity with SOF commando activities since these are more congruous with the conventional warfare operations for which GPF are organized, trained, and equipped.

Lesser familiarity with SOF warrior-diplomat activities, combined with greater affinity for SOF commando activities, could potentially lead a conventional battlespace owner to under-utilize, misuse, or conventionalize SOF. A lack of comfort with Special Operations also could delay the timely execution of a mission or otherwise impede its effectiveness. For example, a conventional commander might not understand how best to plan for, support, or organize SOF assets to live and work among indigenous populations in order to uncover an enemy's network. In other cases, a commander might not value Special Operations that are incongruent with more traditional military tasks or might choose to repurpose SOF for more conventional activities, whether or not they are viable or appropriate for SOF. GPF knowledge of and appreciation for Special Operations will vary across individuals and situations. Ultimately, SOF leaders broadly experienced in the spectrum of Special Operations will employ SOF to optimal effect.

\*Discussions regarding SOF on a GPF-dominated battlefield are based on background interviews with multiple Special Operators.

forces potentially working inefficiently at best, and at cross-purposes at worst, in developing priorities, linking uptakes, and facilitating overall activities.

Even if there is an institutionalized forcing function to synchronize—not merely deconflict—efforts across these two forces, a second issue comes into play: the speed and agility with which

National forces can act relative to Theater forces. While the relative flexibility of both forces will decline over time as battlefields mature and countries reclaim more of their sovereignty, National forces tend to have more streamlined approval processes or standing orders to act on a GPF battlefield. They are often less bureaucratically hampered than their Theater brethren, who may be

subject to more powerful coordination lines with GPF commanders. National forces also tend to be better enabled on the battlefield, as noted earlier. Accordingly, even if both National and Theater SOF assess that the Theater forces are better positioned to conduct an operation based on their proximity to the target, in-depth knowledge of the area, or their relationships with local partners, it can often be more timely or expedient for National forces to act.

New C2 arrangements should be considered in order to strengthen unity of effort and synergize effects between Theater and National SOF inside GPF-dominated battlefields. While co-locating SOF headquarters or establishing joint planning cells with the authority to synchronize intelligence gathering, targeting, and campaign effects might be one approach, a more powerful arrangement is to have one SOF general or flag officer commanding both National and Theater SOF on the

battlefield.<sup>59</sup> Not only would this enhance SOF unity of effort, but such senior representation of all SOF equities also would help to employ SOF capabilities to better effect in the overall campaign effort. One challenge with this arrangement is that the National Mission Forces also must retain focus on their transcendent missions. While some might fear subordination of these more transnational or global efforts to local battlefield concerns, the leadership could make appropriate arrangements to ensure such missions are appropriately prioritized.

#### **SPECIAL OPERATIONS OUTSIDE COMBAT THEATERS**

In contrast with most war zones where GPF dominate, SOF often will be the primary and leading military force when operating beyond traditional battlefields. While this role helps to alleviate some of the complexity surrounding C2 relationships, SOF still must work to synchronize effects when operating in countries with which the United States is not at war.

Take countries in which the primary SOF effort is to enable the host nation to build an environment inhospitable to terrorists, insurgents, or other extremists. In large-scale operations, the commander on the ground is managing multiple engagement efforts—capacity building, combat mentoring activities, and civil affairs operations—and is often thrust into a highly visible public relations role, working to reassure the local population that U.S. efforts are in direct support of the host government's objectives, in compliance with their laws, and respectful of their customs. In these cases, Theater Mission Forces, which have significant country knowledge and in-depth partnerships with host nation leaders and security forces that have been developed over years of formal training and assistance in the region, tend to have a comparative advantage over their National counterparts and are in the lead.

Yet even if National forces are not present in country, there is still a need to synchronize the work of

#### **ROLE OF SOCOM**

The issues surrounding Command and Control and the application of SOF on the battlefield raise the question: how much authority should SOCOM have over its deployed forces? SOCOM develops and prepares Special Operations Forces and then recommends how they should be used in support of national interests. However, once SOCOM provides its forces to a Geographic Combatant Command, the operational commander is responsible for and ultimately decides how to use SOF on the battlefield. A discussion on the evolution and proper role of SOCOM is beyond the scope of this paper, but independent analysis should be conducted regarding circumstances under which SOCOM would be a war-fighting headquarters and have global combatant command for some or all its forces.



these two forces. For example, while the primary threat to the host government's security interests might be local extremists and insurgents, sometimes these local players will have ties to a global network, such as al Qaeda and its affiliates. Accordingly, Theater engagement efforts should be coordinated with any potential National force effort that tracks targets across multiple areas of operation. Likewise, it is equally important that the transnational activities of the National forces positively reinforce or, at a minimum, do not inadvertently have a negative effect on the work of Theater forces in a given country, even when those National activities occur elsewhere. Better synchronization of the two efforts will create value and serve as a force multiplier in addressing these security challenges.

In other countries, SOF's primary and immediate focus might be to work with the host nation in conducting high-end capture or kill operations against al Qaeda senior leaders or other targets who may be operating in, transiting, or preparing for attacks within that country. In many of these cases, the National Mission Forces will have the comparative advantage, given their global focus on networks and the speed with which they can act across multiple boundaries. Yet, as noted previously, SOF efforts in disrupting immediate threats are unlikely to achieve enduring effects if they are not synchronized with and followed by more long-term engagement activities, such as those where Theater SOF have a comparative advantage. Accordingly, it is important to establish a long-term collaborative relationship on the ground between the two forces, as well as ensure a seamless transition to Theater forces after an immediate crisis subsides or other imperatives pull away the National forces.

Traditional concepts of authority are, in many cases, giving way to more informal collaboration and interpersonal alliances. Still, command and control relationships remain a significant determinant of how SOF are used and to what effect; SOCOM, the TSOCs, and the GCCs should continue to explore

## INTEGRATED SOF CAMPAIGN ANNEXES AND JOINT SOF DOCTRINE

Whether SOF are operating inside war zones or in countries beyond the traditional GPF-dominated battlefield, all Special Operations would benefit from integrated SOF campaign plans or campaign plan annexes that account for both National and Theater activities in a particular country or region. Rather than simply identifying end states and lines of operations, integrated annexes would help articulate clear lanes in the road and array SOF resources against the larger campaign plan. SOF, in general, are dynamic and enterprising. In the absence of specific guidance to the contrary, they will profit from ambiguity and seize the initiative. While such enterprising determination is a hallmark of SOF, it also can lead to the inefficient use of time and resources. Integrated campaign plans and annexes can help mitigate the downsides of this enthusiasm and leverage all SOF competencies across the two forces to better effect.<sup>60</sup>

SOF also would benefit from more fully developed joint SOF doctrine. Currently, service doctrine describes how component SOF fight, but even a former SOCOM commander acknowledges that SOCOM through the years has not prioritized its Title 10 responsibility to develop doctrine that articulates how SOF fight in a theater as a joint force.<sup>61</sup> Tactics, techniques, and procedures (TTPs) as well as lessons learned have filled this void, but they might not provide a sufficient intellectual underpinning. SOCOM is currently in the process of developing SOF doctrine with an operational framework that will articulate how SOF will operate, practice their profession, are distinguished from other forces, and should be employed relative to the rest of the joint force.<sup>62</sup>

new arrangements for these relationships across the National and Theater forces that will facilitate improved employment of their diverse skills and capabilities. In some instances, formally embedding liaison elements will be sufficient to help synchronize effects. In others, however, a new C2 relationship that formally incorporates or deputizes the relevant Theater or National commander might be appropriate. This would allow the forces to better leverage the capabilities, relationships, and access of the other, as well as enhance interoperability over the longer term. Variations in the C2 structure will depend upon the mission, operational imperatives, host nation relationships, the broader political context, and even the specific personalities at play.

#### **BLENDED FORCE CONSTRUCTS**

Across each of these scenarios, there is a compelling case for considering a substantial blending of National and Theater forces when their mix of core competencies best matches the requirements of the mission. For example, if the National Mission Forces were directed to pursue a line of action that involves raising or employing a surrogate force in order to gather intelligence or conduct an assault for a National-level mission, there likely will be better allocation of resources and application of skills if an appropriate Theater SOF element with greater relative competency in partnering with indigenous forces is attached.

#### **STRENGTHENING INTRA-SOF RELATIONSHIPS OFF THE BATTLEFIELD**

Enhanced synergy of SOF's diverse units and capabilities begins off the battlefield. Some of the tribal distinctions, however, hinder the building of better cross-force relationships that likely would yield improved application of the specialized skills that exist across SOF. In some cases, once an individual is selected for assignment within the National Mission Forces, he might not leave those walls to conduct a tour within Theater SOF. This trend is more pronounced among the Army's SOF units.

Although greater cross-pollination is occurring today, there has been a nearly unyielding bifurcation between the Army's Theater and National SOF going back to the 1970s. Individuals within Naval Special Warfare (NSW), on the other hand, have moved more easily between Theater and National assignments through the years, although NSW also should continue to guard against bifurcation or more one-way movement into the National forces.

An enhanced flow of personnel across the various units and commands, especially between National and Theater Mission Forces, will help SOF become more knowledgeable about and skilled in the application of specialized SOF capabilities. It also will strengthen personal relationships that will carry over to the battlefield. Just as SOF have built strategic and operational relationships across multiple departments and agencies in Washington, they should invest in similar cross-assignments throughout their own community. These must be true exchanges—not one-way streets—that will enhance rather than impede career progression. As SOF continue to cultivate a generation of leaders dedicated to bridging internal divisions, these forces will become better equipped to leverage diverse SOF skills on the battlefield.

## CHALLENGE TWO: EMPLOYING SOF OUTSIDE THEATERS OF COMBAT

Approximately 12,000 U.S. Special Operations Forces are currently deployed in more than 70 countries across the globe.<sup>63</sup> While the sheer number of deployed SOF has increased dramatically since 9/11, their worldwide engagement is not new. Nearly a decade ago, on the eve of the attacks of September 11, 2001, SOF were deployed in 67 countries and foreign territories, and afloat in multiple areas of operation.<sup>64</sup> Global presence and engagement have been a touchstone for SOF activities throughout the modern era.

What is new today, however, is the staggering concentration of SOF—84 percent—in one geographic region and principally within two war zones. (See table *Comparison of SOF Deployments*.) SOF have played important roles inside Iraq and Afghanistan, and as strategic assets, they should be employed wherever they can be effective and add value.

Yet even as SOF continue to apply their skills in Iraq and Afghanistan, they likely will be used to greater effect and provide policymakers enhanced flexibility when they operate beyond traditional theaters of combat and in countries with which the United States is not at war. There are two primary reasons for this. First, as described earlier, trends in the 21st-century geostrategic landscape indicate many security threats and challenges will continue to emanate from beyond traditional battlefields, including from urban areas and failing states. SOF competency in conducting clandestine and low-visibility activities in sensitive and hostile environments aligns well with the operating requirements that flow from this landscape. Second, war zones are dominated by GPF. As a consequence—and putting aside the specific cases of Iraq and Afghanistan—SOF tend to serve in supporting roles in such scenarios, conducting operations that facilitate conventional force goals where SOF participation may or may not be

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*Yet even as SOF continue to apply their skills in Iraq and Afghanistan, they likely will be used to greater effect and provide policymakers enhanced flexibility when they operate beyond traditional theaters of combat and in countries with which the United States is not at war.*

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necessary for success. In playing this supporting role SOF potentially could find themselves underutilized or misused by the battlespace owner, as previously described. Outside a combat theater, however, SOF tend to be the lead military force, with conventional forces often providing logistics and other important support.<sup>65</sup> In this leading role, SOF are likely to be used to greater effect since they provide the principal effort and execute their activities according to the practices and principles of Special Operations.<sup>66</sup>

Special Operations conducted outside war zones can be either sporadic or persistent, although a mixture of both is often required for decisive effect. SOF might need sporadic access—quick ingress and egress—in order to disrupt and defeat an immediate threat, such as by capturing or killing a high-value individual inside a denied area, or disabling a weapon of mass destruction inside a rogue state. On the other hand, SOF also require sustained presence in order to facilitate longer-term engagement efforts, such as building partner

capacity. The relationships established with host nation forces and populations through persistent presence also can serve to support episodic disruption operations, when needed. Taken together, these suggest that an enduring and distributed platform of access and presence is necessary.

### Considerations for Policymakers

The ability of SOF to operate beyond theaters of combat often requires the approval and concurrence of the broader national security decision-making apparatus. This is especially true for SOF's high-end kinetic operations, such as the targeted use of force, but also applies to certain engagement activities, such as working with tribal partners or other surrogates in politically precarious regions. Underlying the need for approval are policy and legal constraints, combined with a degree of additional policymaker hesitancy to approve Special Operations in countries with which the United States is not at war. There are various reasons for these constraints and hesitations, and five are discussed herein. Not all five are unique to Special Operations. Some are symptomatic of broader policy challenges regarding how to apply force and engage the military in environments outside theaters of combat.<sup>67</sup>

#### WEIGHING NATIONAL INTERESTS WITH RESPECT FOR SOVEREIGNTY

Respect for sovereignty and the associated norm of non-intervention remain the basis of today's international order. A tension often exists, however, between this entitlement and the obligations of being a state. Policymakers must weigh respect for sovereignty and territorial integrity against the security interests of the United States, and this will vary by country and situation. For example, they may be more inclined to approve an operation that places SOF on the ground for kinetic attacks in a country like Somalia, the state assessed to be most vulnerable to collapse or conflict in the world.<sup>68</sup> The United States risks fewer ramifications for operations in a country that, *inter alia*, has

virtually no functioning state institutions and also ranks as one of the world's most corrupt states.<sup>69</sup>

In other cases, however, different considerations must be balanced against a country's inability or unwillingness to extend its writ. If the host nation is unwitting of the U.S. action, for example, the United States risks undermining future cooperation with that country. At the most extreme, the country might also perceive "boots on the ground" or other SOF territorial violations to be a grave provocation, even an act of war. While some concerns can be mitigated with host nation cooperation and involvement, there are risks even when the host nation is witting. If the operation becomes public—as operations often do—it might embarrass the host nation, empower that leader's critics, increase internal conflict, or ultimately lead to a backlash that adversely affects U.S. strategic interests. Such ramifications are aggravated if the operation fails, but they also can occur when successful operations enter the public domain. Policymaker hesitancy to use SOF in countries with which the United States is not at war is often grounded in respect for sovereignty and associated international law, combined with assessments of whether non-lethal instruments of national power also could achieve U.S. foreign policy objectives,<sup>70</sup> not necessarily a lack of confidence in SOF capabilities.

#### ACCOUNTING FOR RISK

That said, Special Operations are intrinsically risky, given their variance in outcome: they can produce detrimental political and operational consequences if they fail, yet generate highly effective political and operational results when they succeed.<sup>71</sup> This inherent risk is a second issue for policymaker consideration. Most peculiar to SOF are the potential strategic consequences that can flow from missteps or failure. While such risk is inherent in engagement-oriented activities in highly delicate political situations, it tends to be more pronounced in kinetic operations that could more readily lead to the death or capture of an operator. The latter

especially has weighed on senior policymaker minds, not just for the personal consequence to the operator involved, but due to the possibility that an enemy would use captured SOF as public leverage against U.S. policy interests.<sup>72</sup>

Moreover, as the country's most elite and highly trained and equipped forces, SOF failure in an operation—real or perceived—can undermine international perceptions of American military strength, erode the U.S. public's confidence in its government, and incite a domestic political backlash back home. Both the failure at Desert One and the battle in Mogadishu exemplify these risks. In the immediate wake of 9/11, policymakers became more risk acceptant in using SOF to combat terrorism. However, this propensity arguably is situation-dependent and can either attenuate or fluctuate over time.<sup>73</sup>

#### SIZE AND VISIBILITY

Contrary to both doctrine and perception, SOF have a record of operating with a large footprint. SOF were designed to operate in small, flexible, often clandestine teams, and policymakers generally prefer this lower visibility in order to mitigate some of the political risk associated with potential or perceived violations of sovereignty. Yet one way the military has opted to mitigate some of the operational risks linked with SOF through the years—perhaps as an overreaction to lessons learned from the failure at Desert One—has been to add more capabilities, enablers, and arguably unnecessary bells and whistles for many kinetic operations.<sup>74</sup> As the force packages for such operations grew bulky and cumbersome through the years, policymakers became more hesitant to employ a large and increasingly visible military presence outside war zones. In some cases, policymakers have been disinclined to ask for smaller packages if doing so would hurt the extraction capability of the force in a given operation.<sup>75</sup>

#### NARROW VIEW OF SPECIAL OPERATIONS

Not all senior officials understand the full range of SOF capabilities that can be leveraged in support of broader U.S. foreign policy objectives. Most individuals outside of SOF equate Special Operations almost exclusively with snatch-and-grab missions, efforts to rescue hostages, aircraft and ship takedowns, and other kinetic operations. Many remain unaware of the warrior-diplomat role and the unique, culturally attuned capabilities SOF bring to bear in working with foreign governments and populations. Unless they have had the opportunity to witness, for example, how civil affairs operations or Military Information Support Teams (MIST) directly support U.S. foreign policy and host country objectives in the field, many outside SOF will not appreciate these forces for their engagement skills and their preventive or deterrent value. It has been easier for SOF to demonstrate their commando skills for senior government officials and other external advocates and constituencies through elaborate capability exercises and real-time operations; it is much more difficult to showcase warrior-diplomat activities to equally impressive effect.

Unfortunately, two issues exacerbate this lesser familiarity with SOF's engagement roles and activities. In the first instance, even those who are cognizant of warrior-diplomat activities sometimes are under the false impression that these efforts are always a prelude to kinetic attacks. True, the local relationships that SOF build and the in-depth knowledge of the environment acquired through engagement efforts and persistent presence can and should be leveraged appropriately if security requirements demand kinetic operations. However, conceiving of SOF's engagement-oriented activities only through this preparatory lens discounts how they can directly contribute to regional and country engagement priorities and serve a preventive function. Intertwined with the fear that SOF's warrior-diplomat activities will necessarily lead to



*Not all senior officials understand the full range of SOF capabilities that can be leveraged in support of broader U.S. foreign policy objectives.*

kinetic action is a perception held or propagated by some that SOF create more problems than they solve when they come into a country. While not altogether accurate nor emblematic of the entire force, some of SOF's reputational issues have been earned through the years. Whether warranted or not, some policymakers and their departments or agencies perhaps have developed a "learned vulnerability"<sup>76</sup> with regard to SOF. This, in part, may have led some policymakers to be cautious—perhaps extremely so in SOF's eyes—in granting access and presence outside theaters of combat in order to avoid this vulnerability in the future:

Every organization, like every person, learns from experience what behavior will create big problems; but compared to people, organizations have longer memories and are more risk averse. Once burned, forever shy. . . . When something goes badly wrong at a high political cost the incident enters the agency's memory as a legendary horror story. A great deal of the time and energy of agency officials is devoted to creating mechanisms designed to insure that the horror never recurs.<sup>77</sup>

#### **GREATER FAMILIARITY WITH OTHER RISKY INSTRUMENTS OF POWER**

Many policymakers may also have greater familiarity and thus comfort with other instruments of national power. This includes covert action as an instrument available to the president and, to date, executed by the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA). Like Special Operations, covert action carries inherent risk. Yet policymakers may be more comfortable with accepting the risk associated with these activities for several reasons.<sup>78</sup> In the first instance, covert action is deniable. According to statutory definition, the role of the U.S. government in covert action is intended not to be apparent or acknowledged publicly.<sup>79</sup> This can mitigate some of the actual or perceived inherent risk (even though many operations ultimately find their way into the public domain and either explicitly reveal the U.S. hand or otherwise tacitly signal U.S. involvement, as noted earlier). Additionally, covert action requires the explicit approval of the president through a Finding, as outlined in Title 50 of the U.S. Code. Although Title 50 does not grant approval to any particular department or agency nor assign covert action authority exclusively to the CIA, historical precedent has privileged CIA as the covert action arm of the U.S. government. Accordingly, through the years, the CIA has developed a close, highly accountable relationship with the president and, by extension, his national security Cabinet members and other senior policy advisors. The Iran-Contra affair in the 1980s led to even tighter White House and congressional oversight of covert action.

Moreover, the CIA has had a long-standing, institutionalized seat alongside policymakers at the national security decision-making table.<sup>80</sup> This regular, often daily, interaction on a multitude of issues beyond covert action likely has helped to breed a measure of familiarity, and thus comfort, among policymakers with the agency and the activities it conducts. Particularly salient within

this context is the Department of State. While all departments and agencies with a seat at the table have an important voice, the Department of State asserts primacy overseas. Access and presence to countries outside theaters of combat often hinges on State concurrence or approval, and continual interaction with the CIA may have helped to facilitate greater acceptance through the years.

### **Addressing Policymaker Considerations**

External concerns in leveraging SOF capabilities throughout the globe are largely derivative of questions regarding how the United States should apply force in countries with which it is not at war. In this respect, SOF capabilities for addressing irregular security challenges on non-traditional battlefields are in many ways outpacing the nation's policies for optimal SOF employment. Accordingly, senior decision makers should undertake a deliberative process that not only accounts for strategic ways to leverage all instruments of national power, but also rationalizes approvals for Special Operations in these environments. As part of this process, it is incumbent on SOF to bring policymakers innovative ways to operate across the 21st-century security landscape.<sup>81</sup> Innovation should focus not just on kinetic actions to defeat imminent threats in hot areas, but also on prevention-oriented engagement activities that will stabilize the environment and allow for critical follow-on development aid and assistance in simmering regions of the world.<sup>82</sup>

Acquiring such approvals in the short term is important, particularly if doing so affords SOF opportunities to further demonstrate their strategic value and support the nation in confronting significant security challenges. That said, any decisions regarding SOF might not be enduring. Given the intrinsic risks and sensitivities involved with Special Operations, SOF often need the direct support and approval of a powerful constituent in order to operate outside theaters of combat. In several cases this may involve only an audience of

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*It is incumbent on SOF to bring policymakers innovative ways to operate across the 21st-century security landscape.*

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one: the president. Certain presidential decisions, however, will not survive beyond any one particular administration or even a specific operation. Additionally, many interagency decisions are continually re-litigated among the various stakeholders. Even if SOF receive approval for a course of action, any department or agency not satisfied with that decision often will continue to raise and debate the issue until it achieves a different outcome. Finally, when policymakers are confronted with a specific national security challenge, they tend to convene in order to discuss the situation, determine what they want to accomplish, and then think through which tools are available that will resolve the issue, previous decisions or codifications in SOF's favor notwithstanding.

Even as SOF continue to receive approvals to appropriately employ their reactive, disruptive, and preventative capabilities in today's era of persistent irregular conflict, they may be more successful if they focus on investments that will minimize external concerns regarding the use of SOF over the long term. These include taking steps that will better equip policymakers with more comprehensive knowledge on SOF capabilities, minimize learned vulnerabilities, and institutionalize ways for SOF to serve as problem solvers in support of a myriad of foreign policy and national security challenges. "The status quo is bendable, but you cannot participate appropriately nor survive long outside the process," General Schoomaker has said.<sup>83</sup>



### INVESTING IN RELATIONSHIPS

The Special Operations community recognizes the importance of investing in partnerships across departments and agencies. In addition to the operationally focused Joint Interagency Task Forces (JIATFs), SOF have been enhancing their relationships with U.S. government counterparts in other ways, most notably through SOCOM's Interagency Partnership Program (IAPP). This program seeks to assign or place personnel from SOCOM and its component commands throughout various departments and agencies. Part of its formal mission is to:

establish and maintain a system of policies, procedures, programs, and personnel to influence the full spectrum of interagency operations, actions and activities associated with synchronizing strategic planning in support of the Special Operations Force (SOF) operator's execution of global operations against terrorist networks and other emerging national security challenges...<sup>84</sup>

Informally, however, the program serves as an important bilateral educational exchange.

Of the 94 planned positions established through the IAPP, more than half are allocated across the Intelligence Community (IC). The interaction between SOCOM and the IC, born primarily out of operational necessity, must continue to develop and endure. However, given both the incomplete knowledge base among many policymakers regarding the full range of SOF capabilities and the importance of these skills in addressing 21<sup>st</sup>-century security challenges, SOCOM likely will reap greater return on its interagency investment if it targets SOF partnerships beyond the IC and into departments and agencies responsible for the policy and operations of other instruments of national power. This would help create a widespread cadre of current and future senior policy officials more knowledgeable about how Special Operations can contribute to multiple national security objectives.

SOCOM has IAPP positions at the departments of the Treasury, State, Justice, Homeland Security, and Energy, as well as with the Coast Guard, Federal Bureau of Investigation, Drug Enforcement Administration, and the Agency for International Development, to name a few. These positions account for less than one-third of the overall program. However, rather than expanding the number of personnel in these agencies, which could lead to counterproductive redundancy and confusion, SOCOM and its component commands should aim to have the right mix of SOF positioned in the right offices at each department and agency. While tailoring will occur, detailees should be seasoned SOF veterans who are drawn from a variety of units, commands, and specialties so that policy officials will become more familiar with the full complement of SOF capabilities over time. At the same time, SOF should be serving in a variety of offices that can utilize their diverse skills and approaches. For example, while SOF play important roles in State's Office of the Coordinator for Counterterrorism, they also can contribute to larger foreign policy objectives when they are positioned or working in direct support of State's regional bureaus. In light of the State Department's primacy overseas and the importance of SOF activities outside theaters of combat, SOCOM also should explore placing a general or flag officer at State, just as State has a senior political advisor at SOCOM.

Decisions to reconfigure or reposition SOF personnel do not rest entirely with SOCOM; the senior leadership at each department and agency must come to appreciate that enhanced partnerships can yield current and future dividends. In this vein, it is important for the SOF community to continue to demonstrate its value in today's security environment and better equip policymakers with new and innovative ways to employ the spectrum of Special Operations capabilities in support of U.S. national interests. Not all policymaker concerns regarding SOF will be easily overcome, nor will a closer

relationship with departments and agencies ensure more effective SOF utilization overseas. But over time, a more deliberate, focused investment with a range of policy and operational departments and agencies outside the IC can help broaden officials' knowledge on the value of Special Operations and help SOF institutionalize themselves as problem solvers in support of many national security challenges. It also will help to counter misperceptions regarding the force and foster familiarity and more enduring partnerships for the future.

#### **STRENGTHENING THE RELATIONSHIP WITH CHIEFS OF MISSION AND COUNTRY TEAMS**

Another way SOF can mitigate potential concerns and optimize their strategic value while operating overseas is to strengthen their relationships with U.S. Chiefs of Mission and country teams. One obstacle to this in the past has been the perception that SOF sometimes operate outside of Chief of Mission authority and intent. There has been much discussion supporting and opposing the status of SOF personnel with respect to National Security Decision Directive (NSDD 38). The current SOCOM commander holds the following position:

While the doctrinal military chain of command for deployed SOF—under the GCC and normally executed through the TSOC—is unaffected by NSDD 38, SOF personnel should operate under NSDD 38 protocols whenever and wherever feasible. This has the effect of weaving SOF into the fabric of the country team under broader Chief of Mission authority and responsibility—especially important considerations where the SOF presence is continuous or near-continuous. The Chief of Mission should clearly have primacy in determining the level and type of SOF presence, as well as the general activities and locations of SOF within that country. Although temporary presence will be the norm for most SOF trainers and exercise participants,

#### **NSDD 38**

National Security Decision Directive 38 (“Staffing at Diplomatic Missions and their Overseas Constituent Posts”), dated June 2, 1982, gives the Chief of Mission control over the size, composition, and mandate of overseas full-time mission staffing for all U.S. government agencies.

other SOF (advisors, liaison personnel, civil-military support elements, military information support teams and the like) will be more enduring. Longer term assignments for SOF with language skills and regional expertise, with their families wherever possible, are preferable to a continuous rotation of SOF temporary “visitors.”<sup>85</sup>

#### **Additional Challenges to Global Employment**

Even as SOF receive greater approval and concurrence in operating outside theaters of combat, they still will need to overcome additional obstacles to positioning themselves globally in support of U.S. national interests. Multiple years of concentrated effort in Iraq and Afghanistan have cost SOF much of their global depth. Almost inversely proportional to SOF’s overwhelming mass and length of commitment within those two countries is their presence in other regions of the world. (See table *Comparison of SOF Deployments*.) Aside from the adverse affect this has had on engagement and training missions, it also has affected proficiency in language and cultural skills.

Additionally, current manpower management programs do not incentivize a more permanent, forward presence for SOF, and it is often easier to place these forces in temporary duty status rather than to permanently change their duty station to one overseas. Compounding this problem is that, institutionally, the military writ large has not valued long-term investment in language, cultural,

Table 1: Comparison of SOF Deployments

AVERAGE NUMBER OF SOF DEPLOYED AND PERCENTAGE IN EACH AREA OF RESPONSIBILITY <sup>86</sup>	
FY 2001 <sup>87</sup>	FY 2010 <sup>88</sup>
Average # deployed 2,886	Average # deployed 12,560*
AFRICOM n/a	AFRICOM 4.04 percent
CENTCOM 17.48 percent	CENTCOM 84.48 percent
EUCOM 38.60 percent	EUCOM 2.18 percent
JFCOM 1.40 percent	JFCOM n/a
NORTHCOM n/a	NORTHCOM 0.19 percent
PACOM 27.46 percent	PACOM 6.67 percent
SOUTHCOM 15.06 percent	SOUTHCOM 2.45 percent

and other engagement skills, as noted earlier; today, keeping someone in a country for the time needed to develop relationships and skills to maximum effect almost ensures that person will not be promoted past a certain level of seniority. SOCOM and the services should explore the development of a viable career path for SOF regional experts in order to incentivize long-term engagement, as well as to create a dedicated platform for Special Operations in priority countries built on a cadre of professionals who will be recognized and rewarded.

\*As of May 21, 2010. Data provided to author from SOCOM

### CHALLENGE THREE: GROWTH OF SPECIAL OPERATIONS

Special Operations Forces have experienced significant growth over the past nine years across five interrelated dimensions: budget, manpower, capacity, volume of work, and level of achievement. (See textbox *Growth Across SOF*.) Some of this growth is necessary. For example, the expanded force structure and increases in manpower help SOF keep pace with an unprecedented operational tempo and continuing demands for their capabilities. Other aspects of this growth, such as the more than doubling of SOF general and flag officers over the past decade, are testaments to the recognized success of SOF.

Yet bigger may not always be better. Growth has the potential to adversely affect organizational strength and impose additional demands on SOF that might conventionalize their experience, lead them into counterproductive conflicts with other agencies, or divert them from preparing for activities that only they can conduct. It also could blunt their imaginative mindset, undermining the discriminators that keep SOF special. The full consequences of SOF's growth are not likely to be apparent or understood for several years. However, senior SOF leaders, advocates, and constituents should consider how they can help to mitigate the potential downsides as they continue to evolve the force, accumulate lessons learned, and ultimately define the legacy of SOF for the post-9/11 era.

#### Organizational Strength

Despite demand, there are certain limits to the growth of SOF. The current SOCOM commander has testified, "SOF cannot grow more than three to five percent per year in those key units and capabilities that must be developed within our own organizational structures and training pipelines. And this growth rate will not meet the appetite for the effects of SOF in forward operating areas."<sup>89</sup> Developing experienced, fully qualified operators, as well as SOF-specific intelligence analysts and

#### THE FIVE SOF "TRUTHS"\*

- Humans are more important than hardware
- SOF cannot be mass produced
- Quality is better than quantity
- Competent SOF cannot be created after emergencies occur
- Most Special Operations require non-SOF support

\*Fact Book: United States Special Operations Command (2010).

other critical enablers involves considerable time. Yet the community broadly is expected to reach more than 68,000 personnel over the next five years and, in doing so, risks contravening two of the five SOF truths: that SOF cannot be mass-produced, and that quality is better than quantity.

While questions of quality in the face of rapid growth might focus on the competency of newly selected and trained individuals, this paper offers no data or analysis that support a downward trend in individual excellence. The issue explored here is retaining institutional strength as the community expands. The current commander of SOCOM notes that while "individual quality remains up, organizational quality is down."<sup>90</sup> Personnel growth, combined with time-consuming workloads, training requirements, and unprecedented operational tempo, are eroding the close-knit, almost familial nature of units that were once trademarks of SOF. "People do not know one another like they once did. Not only are SOF organizations too big, people are just too busy and fatigued."<sup>91</sup>

Additionally, unit expansion is important in meeting current operational demands, but it is not yet clear what effect it might have on SOF application. While a larger size could hinder SOF's ability to remain innovative and niche in application (particularly for more

## GROWTH ACROSS SOF: BUDGET, MANPOWER, CAPACITY, VOLUME OF WORK, AND LEVEL OF ACHIEVEMENT

The SOF community is experiencing growth across five dimensions.<sup>92</sup> First, funding for SOF has more than doubled, from roughly 3.8 billion dollars in fiscal year 2001 to more than 9.8 billion dollars requested for fiscal year 2011.<sup>93</sup> This funding has supported, in part, dramatic increases in manpower across the SOF community, which is a second signal of growth. Over the same nine-year period, SOCOM's manpower increased by more than 28 percent, growing from 45,655 to 58,657 individuals. The command and its components are projected to add more than 10,000 additional people by fiscal year 2015. This would mean a roughly 50 percent increase in SOCOM manpower end strength over a 14-year period.<sup>94</sup>

A third way the community is growing is in its overall physical capacity. Capacity involves the continued acquisition of SOF-peculiar equipment and technologies, but its most prominent feature is the expansion of force structure. This includes, *inter alia*, the 2006 activation of a new service SOF component—MAR-SOC—and the establishment in 2008 of a sub-unified Special Operations Command for Africa (SOCAFRICA). Other current or forthcoming additions to the force structure for fiscal year 2010 alone include one new Army Special Forces battalion, a new MH-60 company,

a new signal detachment for SOCAFRICA, and one new active Army Psychological Operations Company.<sup>95</sup>

Perhaps the most significant way SOF have grown is in terms of the volume of work they have been called upon to perform since 9/11. While difficult to encapsulate with a single definition, the marked increase in the deployment of SOF personnel is one indicator of the demand for Special Operations. During fiscal year 2001, the average number of SOF personnel deployed overseas was 2,886. As of mid-May 2010, these numbers had roughly quadrupled, with the average number of SOF deployed overseas rising to 12,560 (although 84 percent are in one geographic region and principally within two warzones). (See figure *Comparison of SOF Deployments*). Directly proportional to this unprecedented operational tempo is a fifth area of growth: SOF level of achievement during this time. This is even more challenging to define or quantify. One gauge of achievement is the high level of demand for SOF expertise in senior national security positions and the more than doubling of SOF flag officers since 9/11. (See textbox *Post-9/11 Evolution of SOF*). These expanded leadership positions are a testament to the recognition of SOF success.

clandestine activities that are likely to be required in operating outside traditional battlespaces)<sup>96</sup> this does not mean SOF necessarily will be employed in a cumbersome manner. It will be important to monitor the effects of growth on SOF application in the future.

Growth has the potential to affect organizational strength in other ways. Some research has shown a positive relationship between organizational size and productivity; that is, larger organizations, broadly defined, appear to produce more absolute outputs. However, more output does not necessarily mean that larger organizations will be more efficient.<sup>97</sup> Given the volume of work and immediacy of the issues on their

plates, SOF may find it difficult to undertake and act on long-term strategic planning, for instance. Most strategic planning processes focus on assessing the environment in which the organization will be called upon to act over the next few years, and then aligning capabilities and resource requirements with emerging missions and laying the foundation for more detailed operational planning. Yet SOF easily can find themselves shifting abruptly from one operation or crisis to another, often devoid of time to take a deep breath, prioritize for the future, and implement an optimal way forward. This could contribute to loss of efficiency and possibly to a loss of innovation as well, particularly if larger bureaucratic processes consume



SOF. In aggregate, the overall expansion has the potential to undermine key hallmarks associated with SOF. “The community’s increasing size marginalizes the ability of SOF to be unique,” noted SOCOM’s deputy commander.<sup>98</sup>

### **Demands on SOF**

Endowed with greater resources and in light of their success in recent years, the community is likely to experience increasing demands from senior government officials and other stakeholders who have invested in SOF, benefitted from their accomplishments, or both. In general, demands for greater SOF employment in helping to defeat imminent threats and prevent or deter other security challenges, particularly outside theaters of combat, should be embraced, given SOF’s value to the nation in this regard. But not all demands placed upon SOF will be in their best interests over the long term.

For example, SOF have been invaluable in helping the United States achieve its national security objectives in Iraq and Afghanistan, and demand for SOF contributions will continue for the foreseeable future. While SOF have gained unprecedented combat experience in these two countries, there also could be downsides to this experience. First, SOF could be at risk of growing accustomed to operating in relatively permissive and highly enabled environments. This could take a toll on SOF’s trademark unorthodox thinking over the long term if a generation of SOF develops an operating mentality that tilts toward technology and brawn to the detriment of ingenuity, imagination, and cunning.<sup>99</sup> Additionally, these relatively permissive and primitive environments may not prove to be the best training grounds for possible future SOF missions, such as for operations against or within a more technology-enabled and capable state.<sup>100</sup>

Second, with more than half of today’s Special Operators entering the community after 9/11, SOF are now more operationally adept than at any other time in the modern era. Yet even while recognizing the aptitude of the force, the current SOCOM

commander has said, “Most recent SOF combat experience is not Special Operations specific; rather, it has tended to be more conventionalized experience.”<sup>101</sup> The modern SOF force may be more skilled and combat-capable, and given the right resources, it is likely to adapt to virtually any situation. Yet current combat experience may not be directly fungible to all types of Special Operations, especially if it contributes to a potential degradation in SOF innovation or hinders operating proficiency in less mature environments—where little support is available and SOF encounter a sophisticated defense against their access to the area of operations.

Greater demands on SOF also could lead them into conflicts with other departments or agencies. As SOF are increasingly called upon to do more, both SOF and their advocates must consider if the tasks are already being performed by others.<sup>102</sup> Generally, an organization is likely to fight others who seek to infringe upon the tasks within its purview. Such confrontations could be particularly combative if SOF are tasked or seek to assert themselves in areas that represent the defining competency or core mission of another department or agency. Even if the work that SOF seek to perform or expand upon is similar to but not necessarily duplicative of another organization’s role, the latter may seek to define or reinforce its own mission or tasks in ways that deny SOF—a potential bureaucratic rival—the chance to encroach on its turf.<sup>103</sup> This is not to suggest that policymakers or SOF themselves should shy away from expanding or evolving SOF roles in service to the nation. Redundancy is not necessarily wasteful, and overlapping and improved capabilities across the U.S. government can help to generate more options for senior national security decision makers. The creation of alternatives for policy consideration will become more important in a world of increasing security threats and challenges and shrinking budgets and resources.

Greater demands also have the potential to divert SOF from preparing for missions or activities that

only they can conduct. Over the past nine years SOF have focused on unconventional warfare, counterinsurgency, and most prominently and extensively, on CT operations. Such time and attention appropriately match the nature of the conflicts in which SOF are engaged today.

Yet arguably the gravest threat to U.S. national security is WMD terrorism. The proliferation of WMD capabilities to state actors presents a related challenge for the future. While there is some overlap in the counterterrorism and counterproliferation missions, SOCOM must continue to ensure that it has established and regularly reviews the right readiness metrics for WMD counterproliferation, with SOF fully exercising and maintaining a robust ability to locate, capture or destroy, or render safe weapons of mass destruction in a variety of situations and environments. Virtually no other military component or U.S. department or agency has the ability to conduct the full range of counterproliferation missions or address WMD networks under the unique set of conditions in which SOF have been trained to operate and complete such tasks. Given the gravity of a WMD event, the national importance of reducing vulnerability to such threats, and SOF's discriminators in this area, SOF cannot be diverted from preparing for this mission.

Beyond counterproliferation, SOF also must continue to prepare for other important operations the nation expects them to conduct, including legacy missions such as resolving airliner and ship hijackings and other hostage barricade situations. Some in the past have questioned whether SOF retain appropriate readiness in this area given their commitments in Iraq and Afghanistan.<sup>104</sup> The 2009 rescue of the *Maersk Alabama* captain off the coast of Somalia demonstrated that SOF remain capable of rapid projection of power into immature theaters with no fixed support infrastructure.

Still, as SOF continue to prepare for their legacy mission responsibilities, they should keep two issues

in mind. First, virtually all missions involve multiple moving parts and stages. While SOF today likely have an even better level of proficiency in accomplishing each stage as compared to before 9/11, the orchestration of all these pieces remains an overriding challenge.<sup>105</sup> SOF prove their proficiency nearly every day in relatively permissive operating areas, but the inherent vulnerabilities of orchestration will be exacerbated in truly non-permissive environments, such as in the territory of peer or near-peer competitor states, as noted earlier. Even as SOF retain their operational readiness for legacy missions, there is a second issue: SOF also must rely upon a specific, time-sensitive approval process for these operations. While SOF are exercising their operational skills every day on the battlefield, the policymaker approval process can atrophy if it also is not routinely exercised. Unfamiliarity with the process could adversely affect SOF's ability to complete legacy missions. Continued efforts by senior SOF leaders to equip and inform the national security decision-making process (as well as the GCCs) remain highly valuable in this regard.

### Keeping SOF Special

Implicit throughout this discussion is how the community will retain discriminators that allow SOF to remain special. Doing so will require mitigating the potential negative effects that could result from growth. Simply because SOF *can* do just about anything does not mean they *should* do everything. Accordingly, SOCOM and the senior SOF leadership should work with policymakers, the GCCs, and other relevant constituents in order to identify and shed work that is of marginal value, distracts SOF from conducting and acting on critical long-term strategic planning, or has the potential to divert SOF from maintaining readiness for those missions only they can conduct.<sup>106</sup> While the volume of work occupying SOF today generally results from the nation's need for Special Operations capability and expertise, the SOF community also should look internally to ensure that having a greater number



of people available to do work does not lead SOF to seek out more work to do.<sup>107</sup>

In remaining special, SOF also must account for today's evolving GPF. Some of the comparative advantages SOF have long held over their GPF counterparts are beginning to contract. After nearly nine years of combat in Iraq and Afghanistan, GPF are closing the capability gap, particularly in small unit actions such as company or platoon-size raids. Additionally, GPF are being given tasks and called upon to develop competencies in areas that once were the province of SOF—such as building partner capacity and working with indigenous populations. In other words, some of the differences that once defined SOF as special, such as relative differences with the GPF in operational proficiency and absolute differences in unique mission areas, are gradually beginning to erode.<sup>108</sup>

While the niche roles SOF play are unlikely to be filled by others in the near term, the ability of GPF to undertake or contribute to certain mission areas and activities traditionally associated with SOF is important for two reasons. First, reconciling overlapping roles between SOF and GPF will facilitate more effective employment of capabilities across the two forces and allow SOF to focus on those missions and activities only they can conduct. Second, as GPF expand their core competencies, the competition will serve SOF well. In general, competition will force SOF to remain innovative—seeking the leading edge—not just in the application of technology, but also in pushing the envelope of ideas and unconventional thinking.<sup>109</sup> In the end, innovation and unconventional thinking will continue to discriminate SOF from other forces.

One area where SOF are continuing to innovate and distinguish themselves is by focusing on individuals as units of action. Admiral Olson describes training and educating the “Three D Warrior”—SOF operators skilled not only in war-fighting, but also in diplomacy and cultural understanding. As part of a

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*Simply because SOF can do just about anything does not mean they should do everything.*

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multi-dimensional effort, these warriors help to “lay the groundwork in the myriad diplomatic, development, and defense activities that contribute to the U.S. Government’s pursuit of vital national interests.”<sup>110</sup> Today’s geostrategic environment increasingly mandates such savvy in order to operate beyond traditional battlefields and work among indigenous populations in precarious regions of the world. Collective skills units will remain important building blocks for Special Operations. However, the evolution of the individual will be a key differentiator in conducting missions that increasingly require judgment and ingenuity more than they require military mass or might. In this regard, SOF should continue to invest in linguistic and cultural training. More important, the community must also strengthen the strategic mindset of SOF through the dedicated, multidisciplinary education of its forces. Fostering such intellectual and human capital will be challenging in the face of their current volume of work and operational tempo, but it should not be short-changed.

Senior SOF leaders should continue to nurture innovation throughout the force. They should continue to institutionalize educational opportunities and incentive structures that foster creativity, as well as work both internally and externally to ensure that growth does not mar SOF’s ability to remain progressive in either application or mindset. In the end, SOF must continue to be not only strategic but also dynamic assets—forces that look across the geostrategic landscape, seize opportunities, and apply imagination to go where others cannot go and do what others cannot do in addressing the key security problems confronting the United States today and in the future.<sup>111</sup>

## ENDNOTES

1. The author dates the modern SOF era to the Goldwater-Nichols Defense Reorganization Act of 1986 and the Nunn-Cohen Amendment to the National Defense Authorization Act of 1987.
2. The author thanks Commander Jeff Eggers for capturing this point. Correspondence with author (11 April 2010).
3. According to the *United States Special Operations Command History*, the operational tempo, or OPTEMPO, of SOF increased significantly during the tenure of SOCOM Commander General James J. Lindsay (April 1987-June 1990); rose 35 percent during General Carl W. Stiner's tenure (June 1990-May 1993); and increased again during the command of General Wayne A. Downing (May 1993-February 1996). Overall, SOF operations increased by more than 51 percent and personnel deployments increased 127 percent between 1992 and 1997. See U.S. Special Operations Command Public Affairs, *United States Special Operations Command History*, 6th edition (2008): 8-9.
4. Linda Robinson provides an account of the evolving role of SOF since 9/11; information here is drawn, in part, from her work. Robinson notes four attributes that now characterize Special Operations: "The most intensive use ever made of SOF, including deployments of unprecedented size, duration and repeat rotation; Missions that span entire countries and multiple areas of operation; Concomitantly extensive demands on SOF command and control; [and] SOF and conventional forces operating on the same battlefields for extended periods." See Linda Robinson, "Inside the 'New' Special Operations Forces," *Proceedings Magazine*, vol. 135, no. 7 (July 2009).
5. Who constitutes a SOF general or flag officer is admittedly imprecise. While the services or the Office of the Secretary of Defense may define SOF personnel as those with specific skill codes or those in a designated SOF billet, the SOCOM leadership takes a more expansive view of who is considered SOF. According to information provided to the author by SOCOM, the U.S. Marine Corps does not consider Marine general officers to be SOF unless they are sitting in a SOF billet, yet current SOCOM leadership still considers those Marine generals who have served in SOF billets to be SOF, whether or not they are in a current SOF billet. Due to data availability, the "more than doubling of SOF general/flag officers" relies on the more restrictive definition in counting SOF general or flag officers. These data indicate there were nine SOF general or flag officers as of Aug. 31, 2001. As of Sept. 30, 2009, there were 21 SOF general or flag officers. Source: *Active Duty Military Personnel Inventory Files* provided to the author by SOCOM Headquarters (11 January 2010). As a comparison, the more expansive SOCOM inventory places current SOF general and flag officers at 66, as of January 13, 2010. Source: *SOCOM Internal SOF General/Flag Officer list data*, provided to author (13 January 2010).
6. A few examples: as of March 30, 2010, SOF general or flag officers were serving in the following positions: the top U.S. and NATO commander in Afghanistan; the senior military assistant to the Secretary of Defense; the Chief of Staff of the Air Force; and the head of the Directorate of Strategic Operational Planning at the National Counterterrorism Center (NCTC). Another example of a senior interagency position recently held by a Special Operator is the Coordinator for Counterterrorism at the Department of State (rank of Ambassador-at-Large), held 2007-2009 by retired three-star SOF leader LTG (ret.) Dell Dailey.
7. This line of discussion regarding the potential downsides of growth draws, in part, from the work of James Q. Wilson. Although not directly related to all aspects of growth occurring in SOF, Wilson observes that government organizations often face tradeoffs, particularly in their autonomy, when they receive larger budgets. "The view that all bureaus want larger budgets ignores the fact that there is often a tradeoff between bigger budgets on the one hand and the complexity of tasks, the number of rivals, and the multiplicity of constraints on the other. All else being equal, big budgets are better than small. But all else is not equal. Part of the 'all else' I call autonomy." James Q. Wilson, *Bureaucracy: What Government Agencies Do and Why They Do It* (New York: Basic Books, 1989): 182.
8. This approach to describing the strategic value of SOF draws, in part, from the work of David Tucker and Christopher J. Lamb. They observe, "Defining the strategic value of military forces is difficult. It requires understanding three factors that interact and change over time: the intrinsic and distinguishing capabilities of the forces; the nature of the most important security challenges facing the nation; and the military requirements that emanate from the nation's strategy for dealing with those challenges." See David Tucker and Christopher J. Lamb, *United States Special Operations Forces* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2007): 144.
9. Andrew Krepinevich notes, "The current trend toward irregular warfare did not begin with the counterinsurgency (COIN) campaigns that the United States has undertaken in Afghanistan and Iraq. In fact, the entire post-Cold War era has been dominated by irregular warfare contingencies." See Andrew F. Krepinevich, "Department of Defense Language and Cultural Awareness Transformation: Testimony of Andrew F. Krepinevich," Center for Strategic and Budgetary Assessments (9 July 2008): 2.
10. The National Intelligence Council projects that a key feature of conflicts in 2025 will be irregular warfare tactics employed by state and non-state actors against advanced militaries, as well as the increasing prevalence of non-military means of conflict, including information-based aspects of warfare, over the next two decades. See National Intelligence Council, *Global Trends 2025: A Transformed World* (November 2008): 71.
11. The 2009 Failed States Index, a collaborative effort between *Foreign Policy* and *The Fund for Peace*, notes, "In essence, scholars agree that interstate wars are declining but that internal conflicts have been increasing since the end of the Cold War." See *Foreign Policy*, "Failed States Index 2009:FAQ and Methodology" (22 June 2009), [http://www.foreignpolicy.com/articles/2009/06/22/2009\\_failed\\_states\\_index\\_faq\\_methodology](http://www.foreignpolicy.com/articles/2009/06/22/2009_failed_states_index_faq_methodology). That said, conflict still exists between states, and in 2008 the National Intelligence Council assessed the potential for both interstate and intrastate conflict over the next 15 to 20 years to be greater than it had previously projected. National Intelligence Council, *Global Trends 2025: A Transformed World* (November 2008): 61.
12. The 2008 *Country Reports on Terrorism* lists 14 terrorist safe havens: Somalia and the Trans-Sahara in Africa; the Sulu/Sulawesi Seas Littoral and the southern Philippines in East Asia and the Pacific region; Iraq, northern Iraq, Lebanon, and Yemen in the Middle East; the Afghanistan-Pakistan border, Pakistan, and Afghanistan in South Asia; and the Colombia border region, Venezuela, and the tri-border area of Argentina, Brazil, and Paraguay in the western hemisphere. U.S. Department of State, *Country Reports on Terrorism 2008* (30 April 2009), <http://www.state.gov/s/ct/rls/>

crt/2008/122438.htm. Twelve of these 14 terrorist sanctuaries represent states, areas within states, or areas between or across states that are vulnerable to conflict or collapse, as defined in the 2009 Failed State Index. See *Foreign Policy*, "Failed States Index 2009" (22 June 2009), [http://www.foreignpolicy.com/articles/2009/06/22/the\\_2009\\_failed\\_states\\_index](http://www.foreignpolicy.com/articles/2009/06/22/the_2009_failed_states_index).

13. *Foreign Policy*, "Failed States Index 2009: FAQ and Methodology" (22 June 2009).

14. See National Intelligence Council, *Global Trends 2025: A Transformed World* (November 2008): 19.

15. See Seven Revolutions project, led by the Global Strategy Institute at the Center for Strategic and International Studies, [http://gsi.csis.org/index.php?option=com\\_content&task=view&id=20&Itemid=49](http://gsi.csis.org/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=20&Itemid=49).

16. See Seven Revolutions, "Revolution 1 – Population."

17. See, for example, Thomas Fingar, "Remarks and Q&A by the Deputy Director of National Intelligence for Analysis and Chairman, National Intelligence Council" (21 November 2008), [http://www.dni.gov/speeches/20081121\\_speech.pdf](http://www.dni.gov/speeches/20081121_speech.pdf). See also Krepinevich: 4-5.

18. See, for example, Krepinevich, 4-5, and Seven Revolutions, "Revolution 1 – Population."

19. National Intelligence Council, *Global Trends 2025: A Transformed World* (November 2008): 23.

20. Seven Revolutions, "Revolution 1 – Population."

21. SOCOM notes a "competition for influence over relevant populations" in its Strategic Appreciation briefing, which outlines the command's conception and view of the global strategic environment. SOCOM briefing, given to author in Washington, D.C. (19 November 2009).

22. The 2008 Commission on the Prevention of Weapons of Mass Destruction Proliferation and Terrorism concluded "... that unless the world community acts decisively and with great urgency, it is more likely than not that a weapon of mass destruction will be used in a terrorist attack somewhere in the world by the end of 2013." Commission on the Prevention of Weapons of Mass Destruction Proliferation and Terrorism, *World at Risk: The Report of the Commission on the Prevention of WMD Proliferation and Terrorism* (New York: Vintage Books, 2008): xv.

23. Department of Defense Directive 3000.07, *Irregular Warfare*, notes "IW can include a variety of steady-state and surge DOD activities and operations: counterterrorism; unconventional warfare; foreign internal defense; counterinsurgency; and stability operations that, in the context of IW, involve establishing or re-establishing order in a fragile state." See Department of Defense, Directive 3000.07, *Irregular Warfare* (1 December 2008), <http://www.dtic.mil/whs/directives/corres/pdf/300007p.pdf>. Additionally, Field Manual 3-0, *Operations*, states, "Special operations forces conduct most irregular warfare operations." U.S. Department of the Army, Field Manual 3-0, *Operations* (February 2008): 2-10.

24. Civil affairs operations as well as information operations and psychological operations – currently three of the 12 core activities for

Special Operations – also are essential components in stability operations. See U.S. Department of the Army, *Field Manual 3-07: Stability Operations* (October 2008), <http://usacac.army.mil/cac2/repository/FM307/FM3-07.pdf>.

25. Admiral Eric T. Olson, Commander, SOCOM, has stated, "There are currently 12 activities that are specifically assigned to United States Special Operations Command. Most of them are included in the original legislation that establishes they are defined as core special operations activities insofar as they relate to special operations forces. This does not give Special Operations Command ownership of any of these activity areas, but it does mean that within each of these activity areas, there are tasks that are peculiar to special operations in nature and therefore our responsibility to prepare a force to conduct." Admiral Eric T. Olson, "Remarks on USSOCOM: Function and Focus," given at Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS), Military Leaders Forum" (1 April 2010), [http://csis.org/files/attachments/100401\\_olson\\_transcript.pdf](http://csis.org/files/attachments/100401_olson_transcript.pdf).

26. U.S. Special Operations Command Public Affairs, *Fact Book: United States Special Operations Command* (October 2009): 7.

27. Section 167 of Title 10, U.S. Code, directs the U.S. Special Operations Command to be responsible for the following activities as they relate to special operations: (1) direct action, (2) strategic reconnaissance, (3) unconventional warfare, (4) foreign internal defense, (5) civil affairs, (6) psychological operations, (7) counterterrorism, (8) humanitarian assistance, (9) theater search and rescue, and (10) other activities such as may be specified by the president or the secretary of defense. See 10 U.S.C. § 167(j). David Tucker and Christopher J. Lamb provide a detailed account of the evolution of SOF missions and activities. See Tucker and Lamb, *United States Special Operations Forces*: 164-74.

28. Andrew Krepinevich also cites the size limitations inherent in a volunteer military as another argument in favor of a strategy emphasizing partner capacity building. See Krepinevich: 7.

29. The National Intelligence Council assesses that expansion and escalation of conflicts beyond the traditional battlefield is likely to characterize warfare in 2025. See National Intelligence Council, *Global Trends 2025: A Transformed World* (November 2008): 71.

30. In his 2010 Commander's Guidance, Admiral Olson states, "Special operations forces are diverse in their missions, capabilities and cultures. We are many tribes joined by commonality of overall purpose." Admiral Eric T. Olson, "2010 Commander's Guidance," unpublished, unclassified document Olson provided to author in Arlington, Va. (13 January 2010).

31. Tucker and Lamb, *United States Special Operations Forces*: 149-50. See also Christopher Lamb, "Perspectives on Emerging SOF Roles and Missions," *Special Warfare*, vol. 8, no. 3 (July 1995): 4-5.

32. Tucker and Lamb observe, "the categorization of SOF missions as direct and indirect is useful since it underscores the diverse commando and warrior-diplomat skills that SOF must have in order to perform well, and the fact that SOF must specialize between the two to some extent." See Tucker and Lamb, *United States Special Operations Forces*: 154.

33. See Robert Martinage, *Special Operations Forces: Future Challenges and Opportunities*, Center for Strategic and Budgetary Assessments (2008): 42-43; and Tucker and Lamb, *United States Special Operations Forces*: 153. It should be noted that those who tend to classify SOF activities as either “direct” or “indirect” generally acknowledge that their alignments are meant to be useful rather than definitive. See, for example, Tucker and Lamb, *United States Special Operations Forces*: 154.

34. Hy Rothstein, telephone interview with author (13 April 2010).

35. In a working paper, the author initially recommended that counterinsurgency, counterproliferation of WMD, counterterrorism, and unconventional warfare be renamed “core missions” for SOF but acknowledged that experts in doctrine may find better terminology to describe them. Based on subsequent input, the author has revised the proposed terminology here as “core mission areas.” The notion that core mission areas provide a clearer distinction between the *context* SOF operates within and the *activities* SOF conducts comes from USSOCOM, “Developing a Framework for SOF Core Mission Areas and Activities,” Green Paper (4 March 2010). Unclassified, unpublished paper provided to the author during USSOCOM visit (12 March 2010).

36. Department of Defense, *DOD Dictionary of Military and Associated Terms* (April 2010), [http://www.dtic.mil/doctrine/dod\\_dictionary](http://www.dtic.mil/doctrine/dod_dictionary).

37. James Q. Wilson writes, “Tasks that are not defined as central to the mission are often performed poorly or starved for resources.” See Wilson, *Bureaucracy*: 110. He also notes that sometimes individuals or organizations will specifically define or scope a mission “in such a way as to deny to bureaucratic rivals the opportunity to intrude on core tasks.” *Ibid*: 184.

38. A case could be made to categorize FID as a core mission area rather than as an activity. If FID were categorized as a mission area, its overlap with stability operations and even counterinsurgency would need to be addressed.

39. Reform of U.S. security sector assistance is needed in order for SOF to achieve maximum effectiveness in conducting BPC activities. In addressing the importance of security assistance reform in general, the 2010 Quadrennial Defense Review notes, “Despite an increased emphasis on the capacity-building mission over the past few years, America’s efforts remain constrained by a complex patchwork of authorities, persistent shortfalls in resources, unwieldy processes, and a limited ability to sustain such undertakings beyond a short period.” See Department of Defense *Quadrennial Defense Review* (February 2010): 73. The author thanks Colonel David S. Maxwell, U.S. Army, for highlighting the importance of rationalizing security assistance-related authorities and processes in light of SOF’s competencies in BPC. David S. Maxwell, telephone interview with author (12 May 2010).

40. The Department of Defense defines “information operations” as “The integrated employment of the core capabilities of electronic warfare, computer network operations, *psychological operations*, military deception, and operations security, in concert with specified supporting and related capabilities, to influence, disrupt, corrupt or usurp adversarial human and automated decision making while protecting our own.” *DOD Dictionary of Military and Associated Terms* (Emphasis added). SOCOM’s use of a different

definition for information operations that does not specifically include psychological operations as a component only adds to the lack of clarity. According to the *USSOCOM Fact Book*, information operations are “operations designed to achieve information superiority by adversely affecting enemy information and systems while protecting U.S. information and systems.” *Fact Book*: 7.

41. Hy Rothstein emphasized the importance of military deception. Telephone interview with author (13 April 2010).

42. Richard H. Shultz recommended that stability operations would be an appropriate core mission area for SOF. Richard H. Shultz, interview with author (11 September 2009). For additional thinking on stability operations in the 21st-century security environment, see Roy Godson and Richard Shultz, “Adapting America’s Security Paradigm and Security Agenda,” National Strategy Information Center (2010). SOCOM’s Green Paper, “Developing a Framework for SOF Core Mission Areas and Activities,” also recommends adding stability as a core mission area.

43. Retired General Pete Schoomaker, telephone interview with author (4 March 2010).

44. Both retired generals Doug Brown and Pete Schoomaker acknowledge that Theater SOF have been under-resourced through the years. The direct quote is attributed to Schoomaker, based on an interview with author in Arlington, Va. (16 September 2009). General Brown affirmed his position in correspondence with author (3 March 2010).

45. It should be noted that apportionment of resources once deployed is the responsibility of the operational commander, not SOCOM.

46. Robert Martinage has observed, “SOCOM’s direct capabilities benefit immensely in the allocation of resources from their designation as special mission units, and their inclusion in a national mission force, sub-unified command. Owing to their critical importance and command advantage, SOCOM’s direct capabilities also produce the preponderance of SOF officers selected for high command.” See Martinage: 43 (footnote 92). Additionally, according to senior SOF leaders, not a single active duty officer who has spent his career focused on civil affairs operations or psychological operations has been promoted to a general or flag officer.

47. U.S. Secretary of Defense Robert Gates has acknowledged the general concern of rewarding those in the military who focus on engagement work: “One of the enduring issues the military struggles with is whether personnel and promotions systems designed to reward the command of American troops will be able to reflect the importance of advising, training, and equipping foreign troops—something still not considered a career-enhancing path for the best and brightest officers.” Robert M. Gates, “A Balanced Strategy: Reprogramming the Pentagon for a New Age,” *Foreign Affairs* (January/February 2009): 6.

48. Admiral Eric T. Olson, “A Balanced Approach to Irregular Warfare,” *Journal of International Security Affairs* (Spring 2009): 3.

49. Wilson has observed, “Bureaucracies will in time acquire a distinctive personality or culture that will shape the attitudes of people who join these organizations . . . When critics of an older agency complain that



bureaucrats with the ‘wrong attitude’ are determining its behavior, they are often reversing the causal process. The agency is in fact producing certain attitudes in its members.” Wilson, *Bureaucracy*: 68.

50. Ibid: 95-96.

51. Ibid: 105.

52. For examples of those who previously have called for the establishment of a new command—either under SOCOM or separately within DOD—or for its exploration and consideration, see Martinage: 42-44; Michael G. Vickers “Testimony before the House Armed Services Committee Subcommittee on Terrorism, Unconventional Threats and Capabilities ‘Assessing U.S. Special Operations Command’s Missions and Roles’” (29 June 2006), [http://www.fas.org/irp/congress/2006\\_hr/soc.html](http://www.fas.org/irp/congress/2006_hr/soc.html); and David Tucker and Christopher J. Lamb, “Restructuring Special Operations Forces for Emerging Threats,” *Strategic Forum*, no. 219 (January 2006): 3-4.

53. Wilson, *Bureaucracy*: 267.

54. Ibid: 265.

55. Larry E. Greiner, “Evolution and Revolution as Organizations Grow: A Company’s Past has Clues for Management that are Critical to Future Success,” *Family Business Review*, vol. 10, no. 4 (December 1997): 408. Reprinted by permission of Harvard Business Review from “Evolution and Revolution as Organizations Grow,” by Larry E. Greiner (July-August 1972).

56. Admiral Eric T. Olson, “2010 Commander’s Guidance,” unpublished, unclassified document Olson provided to author in Arlington, Va. (13 January 2010).

57. Christopher J. Lamb and Martin Cinnamond discuss the fragmentation in SOF command and control in Afghanistan. They write, “Special mission units conducting direct action against terrorists do not report to the same chain of command as other SOF units. From early on in OEF, SOF operated under the command of multiple joint task forces. Task Force Sword, comprised of SOF special mission units, reported directly to the combatant commander while other SOF such as Task Forces Dagger and K-Bar reported to a Combined Joint Special Operations Task Force (CJSOTF) component commander. A new SOF headquarters established in February 2009 layers a one-star command on top of the CJSOTF command. Ostensibly, the purpose is to enhance coordination between SOF units and conventional international military forces, but many in Army Special Forces worry that the net effect of another layered headquarters will be less, rather than more, unity of effort. In any case, special mission unit forces remain outside this command structure, so the potential for working at cross-purposes remains.” Christopher J. Lamb and Martin Cinnamond, “Unified Effort: Key to Special Operations and Irregular Warfare in Afghanistan,” *Joint Forces Quarterly*, issue 56 (1st Quarter 2010): 48.

58. The concept of relative and absolute differences between SOF and GPF comes from Michael Fitzsimmons, “The Importance of Being Special: Planning for the Future of U.S. Special Operations Forces,” *Defense and Security Analysis*, vol. 19, no. 3 (September 2003): 206-7.

59. Several experienced SOF leaders and experts in the past have testified to the importance of having the two forces operate under one commander. General Wayne A. Downing testified to Congress that “. . . [W]e would like to see the black and the white [SOF] operate together under one commander. You can still have walls for security, but I just think we could get a better application of resources if we did that.” General Wayne A. Downing, “Testimony before the House Armed Services Committee Subcommittee on Terrorism, Unconventional Threats and Capabilities ‘Assessing U.S. Special Operations Command’s Missions and Roles’” (29 June 2006), [http://www.fas.org/irp/congress/2006\\_hr/soc.html](http://www.fas.org/irp/congress/2006_hr/soc.html). During the same hearing, Mike Vickers testified, “SOCOM’s emphasis since 9/11 has been to make white SOF more gray, and black SOF more black. It is imperative, however, that white and black SOF be integrated fully from a strategic perspective. Accordingly, there should be a single SOF commander in theater who controls both black and white forces.” See Michael G. Vickers, “Testimony before the House Armed Services Committee Subcommittee on Terrorism, Unconventional Threats and Capabilities ‘Assessing U.S. Special Operations Command’s Missions and Roles’” (29 June 2006), [http://www.fas.org/irp/congress/2006\\_hr/soc.html](http://www.fas.org/irp/congress/2006_hr/soc.html).

60. The discussion regarding the need for truly integrated SOF campaign plans or campaign plan annexes comes from points made by LTG Frank Kearney, interview with the author in Arlington, Va. (14 October 2009).

61. Retired General Doug Brown, former SOCOM commander, in an interview with the author in Arlington, Va. (26 October 2009).

62. As noted in USSOCOM, *Developing a Framework for SOF Core Mission Areas and Activities* (14 March 2010). Unclassified “Green Paper” presented to author by SOCOM leadership (12 March 2010).

63. On April 1, 2010, during a speech at the Center for Strategic and International Studies, Admiral Olson stated, “Again, last week, United States Special Operations Command forces were present in 79 countries around the world, to the tune of about 12,000 people.” Admiral Eric Olson, “USSOCOM: Function and Focus” (1 April 2010), [http://csis.org/files/attachments/100401\\_olson\\_transcript.pdf](http://csis.org/files/attachments/100401_olson_transcript.pdf).

64. On Sept. 10, 2001, 2,556 SOF were deployed outside the continental United States (OCONUS) to 67 countries and foreign territories, three U.S. state/territories, and afloat in the CENTCOM, EUCOM, PACOM and SOUTHCOM areas of responsibility. Data provided by USSOCOM to author (13 January 2010).

65. One of the five SOF Truths is that most Special Operations require non-SOF support.

66. See, for example, Tucker and Lamb, *United States Special Operations Forces*: 157.

67. Juan Zarate, correspondence with author (13 February 2010).

68. *2009 Failed State Index*.

69. Ibid., Somalia country report.



70. Frances Fragos Townsend, former Assistant to the President for Homeland Security and Counterterrorism, raised this point in an interview with the author in Washington, D.C. (25 March 2010).

71. This concept of risk borrows from an economic definition that assesses risk in terms of relative variance in outcome. See, for example, Rose McDermott, *Risk-Taking in International Politics: Prospect Theory in American Foreign Policy* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1998): 39; and Michele L. Malvesti, "Risk-Taking in Countering Terrorism: A Study of U.S. Presidential Decisions to Use Special Operations and Covert Action" (PhD diss., Fletcher School of Law and Diplomacy, Tufts University, 2002): 10–44.

72. Townsend said this point was raised during senior level policy discussions during her tenure. Interview with author in Washington, D.C. (25 March 2010).

73. This assessment uses a situational analysis of risk-taking: prospect theory. As opposed to theories that associates risk propensity with an individual's personality, prospect theory establishes that the situation—the context of decision—better explains aversion to and acceptance of risk. In its simplest formulation, the theory predicts that individuals are cautious and risk-adverse when they are in a good position, or domain of gains, and open to taking risks when operating from a losing position, or domain of losses. See *Risk-Taking in International Politics*, 12, and "Risk-Taking in Countering Terrorism." U.S. national security leaders arguably perceived themselves and the country to be in a domain of loss after the 9/11 terrorist attacks and thus were more willing to take risks in combating terrorism, including by authorizing a more extensive use of SOF.

74. Richard H. Shultz Jr., "Showstoppers: Nine Reasons Why We Never Sent Our Special Operations Forces After al Qaeda Before 9/11," *The Weekly Standard* (26 January 2004): 32.

75. Townsend, interview with author in Washington, D.C. (25 March 2010).

76. Wilson describes this concept in *Bureaucracy*: 191–92.

77. *Ibid.*: 191–192.

78. Townsend argues that many policymakers generally have greater familiarity with the CIA, and thus perhaps greater comfort with CIA covert action, than they do with Special Operations. Interview with author, Washington, D.C. (7 October 2009).

79. Covert action is defined as "an activity or activities of the United States Government to influence political, economic, or military conditions abroad, where it is intended that the role of the United States Government will not be apparent or acknowledged publicly." "National Security Act 1947." Title 50 *U.S. Code*, Sec. 503 (e), 413b.

80. Through the years, the Director of Central Intelligence, as a statutory advisor to the National Security Council (NSC), attended NSC meetings, as well as meetings of the NSC Principals Committee. The Deputy Director for Central Intelligence also attended meetings of the NSC Deputies Committee. For recent examples, see White House, *Presidential Decision Directive PDD 2: Organization of the National Security Council* (20 January 1993); and White House, *National Security Presidential Directive NSPD 1: Organization*

*of the National Security Council System* (13 February 2001). The *Intelligence Reform and Terrorism Prevention Act of 2004* (IRTPA) created the Office of the Director of National Intelligence (ODNI), and the Director of National Intelligence now serves as a statutory advisor to the NSC and attends meetings of the NSC Principals Committee. The Director and Deputy Director of the CIA, however, continue to attend key meetings as well.

81. Commander Jeff Eggers correspondence with author (11 April 2010).

82. Juan Zarate noted the importance of developing policy for employing SOF in advance of using development aid and assistance for national security purposes. Juan Zarate, correspondence with author (13 February 2010).

83. Telephone interview with author (4 March 2010).

84. All information regarding IAPP comes from USSOCOM, "Interagency Partnership Program," (17 February 2010). Unclassified, unpublished paper provided to the author from SOCOM headquarters (25 February 2010).

85. Olson, correspondence with author (24 May 2010).

86. According to information provided to the author by SOCOM on May 24, 2010, the FY2001 average number of SOF deployed outside the continental United States (OCONUS)—2,886—includes all SOF that reported deployments pre-9/11. The figure cited for FY2010—12,560—includes both additional categories of SOF and their support that did not report in FY2001. If one were to exclude from the FY2010 figure those same units not reporting in FY2001, the average SOF deployed OCONUS for FY2010 is 8,783.

87. Data regarding FY2001 average SOF OCONUS deployments and percentages by AOR were provided to author by SOCOM (21 January 2010).

88. Data regarding FY2010 average SOF OCONUS deployments and percentages by AOR were provided to author by SOCOM (24 May 2010).

89. Olson, "Testimony to Senate Armed Services Committee" (18 June 2009): 12.

90. Olson, interview with author in Arlington, Va. (4 December 2009).

91. *Ibid.*

92. These features of growth across SOF are inspired by the work of John R. Kimberly. Kimberly describes four aspects of size derived from the literature on organizational structure: the physical capacity of an organization, the personnel available to an organization, organizational inputs or outputs, and discretionary resources available to an organization. He defines organizational input as "the volume of work faced by the organization in a given period of time." He defines output as "a level of organizational achievement in a given period." See John R. Kimberly, "Organizational Size and the Structuralist Perspective: A Review, Critique, and Proposal," *Administrative Science Quarterly*, vol. 21, no. 4 (December 1976): 587–88. While Kimberly's concepts might not translate directly to the growth occurring in the SOF community, the author uses his different aspects of size as a starting point to describe the multi-faceted aspects of SOF growth.

93. Funding data for FY 2001 taken from Government Accountability Office, *Special Operations Forces: Several Human Capital Challenges Must be Addressed to Meet Expanded Role* (July 2006): 8; and requested funding data for FY 2011 taken from Admiral Eric T. Olson, "USSOCOM 2010 Posture Statement" (20 April 2010).
94. Information based on data chart titled "SOCOM Manpower End Strength FY00 through FY15" that SOCOM provided to author (12 March 2010). In FY 2001, SOCOM total manpower end strength was 45,655 (Army—25,910; Air Force—10,546; Marines—49; Navy—6,359; and civilians—2,791). SOCOM's FY 2010 total manpower end strength is 58,657 (Army—28,473; Air Force—13,104; Marines—2,524; Navy—8,739; civilians—5,817). SOCOM projects its FY 2015 manpower end strength to be 68,716 (Army—33,990; Air Force—15,666; Marines—2,526; Navy—9,635; and civilians—6,899).
95. Based on USSOCOM data provided in charts titled, "USSOCOM Force Structure and Manpower Changes (FY10)." Provided to author during visit to SOCOM headquarters (12 March 2010).
96. Eggers, correspondence with author (25 March 2010).
97. While research has yielded diverse and contradictory findings through the years regarding organizational size-performance relationships, Richard Z. Gooding and John A. Wagner III conducted a meta-analysis of more than 30 published studies in order to reconcile these differences. Their research concludes, in part, that "organizational size and organizational productivity appear to be positively related, while no positive relationship appears to exist between organizational size and organizational efficiency, subunit size and subunit productivity, or subunit size and subunit efficiency." See Richard Z. Gooding and John A. Wagner III, "A Meta-Analytic Review of the Relationship Between Size and Performance: The Productivity and Efficiency of Organizations and Their Subunits," *Administrative Science Quarterly*, vol. 30, no. 4 (December 1985): 475, 478.
98. LTG Frank Kearney, interview with author at MacDill Air Force Base, Fla. (12 March 2010).
99. Eggers, correspondence with author (14 March 2010).
100. Ibid.
101. Olson, interview with author in Arlington, Va. (13 January 2010).
102. This section draws from Wilson, who outlines six ways for a government executive to minimize constraints and rivals and achieve a mission-jurisdiction match for his organization: "First, seek out tasks that are not being performed by others. . . Second, fight organizations that seek to perform your tasks. . . Third, avoid taking on tasks that differ significantly from those that are at the heart of the organization's mission. . . Fourth, be wary of joint or cooperative ventures. . . Fifth, avoid tasks that will produce divided or hostile constituencies. . . Sixth, avoid learned vulnerabilities." *Bureaucracy*: 188-91.
103. Ibid: 184.
104. See, for example, Martinage: 57.
105. Compound probability indicates that the overall probability of a conjunctive event tends to be lower than the probability of its component stages. For example, if each stage in a three-part operation is estimated to have a 60 percent probability of success, then overall probability of success for the entire operation is not 60 percent but rather only 21.6 percent.
106. In his 2010 Commander's Guidance, Admiral Olson writes, "In general, 2010 will be a year of 'tighten up' for the SOF community in order to ensure we are in fact doing what is most important." Unpublished, unclassified document Olson provided to author in Arlington, Va. (13 January 2010).
107. While an increasing volume of work placed on an organization may necessitate an increase in personnel, at some point the greater number of people available to do work might lead an organization to search for more work to do. Kimberly notes, "One can imagine . . . that at a particular time an increase in the volume of input necessitates an increase in the number of employees, but that at another time the number of employees hired and perhaps locked in to the seniority and civil service system necessitates a search for more inputs." Kimberly: 593.
108. The concept of relative and absolute differences between SOF and GPF comes from Michael Fitzsimmons, "The Importance of Being Special: Planning for the Future of US Special Operations Forces," *Defense and Security Analysis*, vol. 19, no. 3 (September 2003): 206-7.
109. Schoomaker interview with author in Arlington, Va. (16 September 2009).
110. Eric T. Olson, "U.S. Special Operations: Context and Capabilities in Irregular Warfare," *Joint Forces Quarterly* 56, 1st quarter (2010): 68.
111. The concept of SOF being dynamic draws, in part, from the work of Mie Augier and David J. Teece, who use the concept of "dynamic capabilities" to describe sustaining competitive advantage in business. They define this as "the ability to sense and then seize new opportunities, and to reconfigure and protect knowledge assets, competencies, and complementary assets with the aim of achieving a sustained competitive advantage." Mie Augier and David J. Teece, "Dynamic Capabilities and the Role of Managers in Business Strategy and Economic Performance," *Organization Science* vol. 20, no. 2 (March-April 2009): 412.









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