The missions are changing, the priorities are changing, and the authorities are changing. This statement is the clearest way to get the attention of special operations warriors who, in the midst of repeated deployments and counterterrorism training work-ups, are beginning to suffer from an overwhelming sense of ennui as they contemplate the questions of “how should we train, how can we contribute, and what should we prepare to do.” Special operators have focused on the counterterrorism mission for nearly two decades, so cultural and organizational changes face internal challenges and barriers. How should special operations forces (SOF) view the emerging era of great power competition with an eye on offering relevant capabilities that assist in the achievement of U.S. national security objectives?

To address this question, it is necessary to summarize the rapid onset of new threats that have captivated U.S. policymakers. The first section of this paper highlights key characteristics of great power competition and the arrival of a new strategic environment to inform a subsequent discussion of future missions, priorities, and authorities. Next, a brief review of the impacts of the unrestrained growth of the SOF community during the counterterrorism era helps identify the challenges inherent to the necessary tasks of re-stratifying SOF capabilities and right-sizing the formation so it is relevant, affordable, and manageable for helping address great power competition. The final section offers a short discussion on which SOF capabilities should be emphasized and honed for the strategic environment of great power competition.

The Decline of the U.S.-led World Order and the Onset of Great Power Competition

Great power competition became the dominant paradigm for explaining U.S. foreign policy relatively quickly, after several challenges hastened the end of America’s post–Cold War “unipolar moment” of unrivaled global influence. First, the 2008 financial crisis produced domestic turmoil that altered
perceptions about the role of the United States in the world.\footnote{1} Second, despite years of efforts and generous investment, the inability of the U.S. government to attain tangible strategic objectives in the Global War on Terror called into question the real extent and reach of US power.\footnote{2} Finally, emergent rivals like China and Russia began testing U.S. leadership and the stability of key geographic regions. In less than a decade, U.S. leaders found themselves facing an increasingly challenging, multipolar world.

Their political differences notwithstanding, the administrations of former presidents Barack Obama and Donald Trump and that of current President Joe Biden all identified Russia and China as rising strategic competitors.\footnote{3} Successive U.S. nuclear posture reviews called for the renewal of strategic deterrence in response to China’s and Russia’s growing conventional and nuclear capabilities.\footnote{4} The Pacific “rebalance” strategy highlighted growing U.S. security interests in the Pacific region involving trade, alliances, military posturing, and intelligence sharing.\footnote{5} The Trump administration’s 2017 National Security Strategy bluntly states, “China and Russia challenge American power, influence, and interests, attempting to erode American security and prosperity. They are determined to make economies less free and less fair, to grow their militaries, and to control information and data to repress their societies and expand their influence.” President Biden’s speech to the June 2021 summit of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) sought to reassure U.S. partners of America’s responsibilities to them. “NATO stands together,” he stated. “That’s how we’ve met every other threat in the past. It’s our greatest strength as we meet our challenges of the future—and there are many. And everyone—everyone in that room today understood the shared appreciation, quite frankly, that America is back.”\footnote{6} At the rhetorical level, the United States has embraced great power rivalry.

“At the rhetorical level, the United States has embraced great power rivalry.”

At the Cabinet level, the strategic design for great power competition is nearly complete. There is an ideological component: democracy versus authoritarianism.\footnote{8} There is a diplomatic component: revitalized alliances and partnerships versus territorial expansion and efforts at regional intimidation manifested through psychological irredentism. There is an economic component: market economics and trade partnerships versus coercion and trapping partners under heavy debt. And there is a military component informed by the elements of collective security, posturing,\footnote{9} irregular warfare,\footnote{10} peacetime competition, and “integrated deterrence.”\footnote{11} While there is more work to be done, the important shift in emphasis away from global counterterrorism and toward great power competition has been achieved. Bipartisan political support and understanding undergird this transition, and contemporary debates revolve around how to posture, prepare, and respond rather than whether Russia and China are the next threats.

Great power competition, in turn, relates to other trends in the international security environment. One such trend is the U.S. foreign policy community’s growing, broad-based concerns over the fate of weak and struggling states.\footnote{12} Of the 179 nations listed in the 2022 “Fragile States Index” published by a nonprofit research institute called the Fund for Peace, 117 were characterized as being in either “alert” or “warning” states, indicating that they were not stable.\footnote{13} Further, the March 2021 edition of the National Intelligence Council’s Global Trends 2040 report stated, “At the state level, the relationships between societies and their governments in every region are likely to face persistent strains and tensions because of a growing mismatch between what publics need and expect and what governments can and will
deliver.” This fragility creates opportunities for U.S. rivals to increase their influence by exploiting state weaknesses, serving as an alternative source of economic and political support for distressed governments, and employing cost imposition strategies intended to slowly drain other adversaries of their resources while trying to maintain their own current levels of influence.

There are also growing questions over the utility of military forces for achieving political objectives. Perhaps the two decades of the U.S. government’s counterterrorism efforts that followed the 9/11 attacks provided the necessary protection from repeat attacks on the U.S. homeland, but the corresponding U.S. military efforts overseas fell short of creating stable environments from which terrorism would no longer emerge. Hard power will always be an essential tool of foreign policy, but the complexity of contemporary problems can rarely be solved by rote use of force. As a Duke University political science professor named Bruce Jentleson has explained, in today’s strategic environment, “military power ‘currency’ is less convertible to other forms of power and influence.”

Great power competition will present more scenarios in which U.S. hard power, long associated with the country’s dominant military, is neither centrally relevant nor effective. Terms like irregular warfare, gray zone activity, competition below armed conflict, and proxy warfare point to two important central attributes of this emerging strategic environment. First, although the employment of large conventional forces in regional conflicts remains possible (in cases like Taiwan and Ukraine), much is being done by all competitors to steer away from what could escalate into a third world war—a conflict that would have no unscathed victors. Second, strategic influence remains a goal for competitors, and indirect paths—taken via proxy forces, unattributable efforts, and technological subterfuge—may be the most effective.

While the onset of great power competition happened quickly in less than a decade, it will probably last a long time. Great power competition is truly the “long game,” and while related efforts will be costly and deliberate, progress is likely to be slow. Both Chinese Chairman Xi Jinping and Russian President Vladimir Putin have engineered internal changes to extend their tenures well into the next decade. Both leaders have consolidated power in their respective nations, removed competent opposition, and implemented their personal visions for the future. (Even if Putin falls as a result of the war in Ukraine, his successor may not be any more liberal or positively disposed toward the United States.) With such centralized power, they can intensify their national efforts to increase influence, impose costs on the United States and its allies, and sustain their strategic ambitions for lengthy periods with little internal dissent. In all likelihood and barring any internal threats to the Putin and Xi regimes, their rivalries with the United States will carry into at least the next decade.

Shifting Strategic Priorities and an End to the SOF Honeymoon

SOF doubled in size after 9/11. They enjoyed generous resourcing from Congress and the secretary of defense, their recommendations regarding counterterrorism efforts were widely sought by policymakers and senior military officials alike, and SOF commanders enjoyed tremendous latitude in the execution of their disparate counterterrorism campaigns. If there were ever a “honeymoon” period for U.S. special operations, this was it.

The Kissinger Center Papers | sais.jhu.edu/kissinger | 3
Additionally, an overwhelming majority of special operators on duty today have only served during an era of armed conflict. It may therefore be initially difficult for them to fathom periods of strategic normalcy during which armed conflict is unusual, tied mostly to crisis response, and beholden to extensive political approval and oversight. Overseas combat rotations are an accepted part of the routine, and the counterterrorism tasks during these rotations are familiar, usual, and well understood. Yet this state of affairs is changing. Policymakers and senior interagency leaders view the challenges of great power competition through a new prism, and the implementation of a more restrictive policy approach will require SOF to make significant adjustments to their habitual norms.

There is another important variable: effort. Despite the accurate claim that Special Operations Command (SOCOM) requires less than 2 percent of the U.S. defense budget and less than 3 percent of the Department of Defense’s manpower, SOCOM creates costs in other important ways. The management and sustainment of the burgeoning crop of SOF flag officers poses challenges for the services, which must manage ill-fitting SOF senior leaders into the broader force or continue to bifurcate its senior officer progression into two distinct communities: SOF and conventional. The quantity of SOF flag officers reflects an appropriate representation of the 70,000-member force, but it seems that the Army is the only service that has been repeatedly successful at reintegrating its SOF flag officers back into the broader conventional force. Next, SOF management is, at best, difficult to execute in the Pentagon. Not having an actual service secretary and not having a seat on the Joint Chiefs of Staff, the SOCOM commander and the assistant secretary of defense for special operations and low intensity conflict struggle to perform similar policy, budgetary, and statutory responsibilities.

While these effort-related costs had been tolerable for the last two decades, they now detract from other defense priorities. Having doubled its size and increased its budget sevenfold since 9/11, SOCOM now represents an organization whose reversion from the Pentagon’s main focus (counterterrorism) to a supporting role (amid the shift to address great power competition) must experience the consequential reductions and right-sizing. If this effort is not undertaken thoughtfully yet aggressively, SOF leaders will find themselves anchored to an ill-fitted structure that is top-heavy, intractable, guided by sunk costs, unmanageable at the policy level, and of only marginal utility to national security policymakers.

“SOCOM now represents an organization whose reversion from the Pentagon’s main focus (counterterrorism) to a supporting role (amid the shift to address great power competition) must experience the consequential reductions and right-sizing.”

The Effects of Great Power Competition on SOF

SOF’s transition to the era of great power competition has manifested more slowly simply because SOF still conduct counterterrorism missions in multiple theaters. In fact, SOF will continue to do so to allow the rest of the military to transition more quickly. In his March 2021 “Interim National Security Strategic Guidance,” President Biden highlighted the importance of SOF during this transition. He noted, “We will maintain the proficiency of special operations forces to focus on crisis response and priority counterterrorism and unconventional warfare missions. And we will develop capabilities to better compete and deter gray zone actions.” With the August 2021 withdrawal of U.S. forces from Afghanistan, the removal of combat units from Iraq at the end of 2021, and the adjustments made to force levels in Syria and
elsewhere, it is time for SOF professionals to embrace the difference between great power competition and the U.S. military’s receding (but not disappearing) global counterterrorism efforts.

“it is time for SOF professionals to embrace the difference between great power competition and the U.S. military’s receding (but not disappearing) global counterterrorism efforts.”

Authorities

The 2001 Authorization for Use of Military Force (AUMF) delivered vague mission parameters and significant strategic latitude to the president to contend with the threat of terrorism. Now, political pressure is growing for the U.S. government to rescind existing AUMFs and introduce more narrow authorizations in ways highly relevant to SOF. This issue has surfaced in both the executive and legislative branches. Secretary of State Antony Blinken directly addressed this issue in his confirmation testimony, and a bipartisan group of senators has called for the existing authorizations to be rescinded. The momentum behind these efforts reflects the urgent need to repurpose many interagency priorities (involving the intelligence agencies, diplomatic corps, and military) to address the coercive efforts of China and Russia to weaken America’s global influence. The secretary of defense’s concept of integrated deterrence prioritizes new efforts to deter great power competitors and promote the inherent strategic advantages of U.S. military capabilities. Additionally, the secretary of state has renewed efforts to thicken US alliances, to invest in strategic partnerships, and to counter Chinese and Russian influence where vital U.S. interests are being impacted. These activities occur below the level of armed conflict and do not require the types of authorizations that undergirded the War on Terror. As AUMFs become less central to U.S. foreign policy efforts, SOF priorities and the derivative tasks will consequently change.

These political efforts highlight that great power competition will, hopefully, occur almost exclusively below the threshold of armed conflict. Eventually, the standing authorities for using force against adversaries will be revamped and narrowed to allow only “priority counterterrorism” missions. SOF, while maintaining the responsibility for self-defense, will soon operate predominately in environments where entering into hostilities would exceed their mission. Great power competition will not frequently have an overt, kinetic component. Consequently, special operations leaders will be challenged to prepare for rotational deployments differently.

Resources

Dramatic changes in how the military resources its efforts will be equally significant in shaping how the shift to addressing great power competition will affect SOF. In 2009, then president Obama worked with Congress to reshape how U.S. military operations in Iraq, Afghanistan, and elsewhere were funded. Instead of “[Global War on Terror] supplementals,” he introduced “overseas contingency operations (OCO)” as a more comprehensive way to include the needs of other interagency elements to sustain U.S. counterterrorism efforts. Title 10 defines “contingency operations” as “a military operation that is designated by the Secretary of Defense as an operation in which members of the armed forces are or may become involved in military actions, operations, or hostilities against an enemy of the United States or against an opposing military force.” OCO proved to be a valuable resourcing method for sustaining U.S. forces deployed to combat zones, funding requirements-driven efforts by tactical commanders, and enabling tactical and operational flexibility for regional commanders. Understanding the need to reprioritize defense spending, policymakers excised OCO funding
from the 2022 defense budget and returned to a more traditional top-down strategic budgeting model.29

“Dramatic changes in how the military resources its efforts will be equally significant in shaping how the shift to addressing great power competition will affect SOF.”

Demonstrating a more centralized strategic design and exhibiting increased policy oversight, today’s national security apparatus is less amenable to “bottom-up” requirements and unlimited spending. Instead, the era of great power competition calls for a cost-sensitive, highly managed approach. As highlighted in a previous article, the importance of cost imposition through coercive or attritionist approaches is founded on activities that are affordable and sustainable to the United States but that also force a competitor to cease activities, change activities, or overspend for the desired result.30 Consequently, the U.S. military’s budgeting approach in response to the shift back to great power competition has demonstrably changed. SOF may rotate into the contact layer (areas in which U.S. forces “work by, with, and through allies and partners to compete and defend U.S. interests below [the threshold of] armed conflict”)31 to engage in strategic cost-imposition activities32—with the ends and means already decided. In these circumstances, traditional budgeting activities (planning, cost capturing, efficiency, and oversight) will return as a centerpiece of special operations planning and preparation. Cost imposition relies on limiting the cost of U.S. activities while triggering an adversary to increase its costs to maintain influence; this approach begins with cost controls, a new, unfamiliar dynamic for the current U.S. special operations formation.

Risk
Great power competition also brings a broader risk spectrum to deployed special operators. For nearly two decades, declared adversaries were merely capable of tactical escalation (by, for instance, downing a helicopter, shelling a U.S. base, detonating an improvised explosive device, or ambushing a U.S. patrol). That is no longer the case. A glance at the situation in Ukraine highlights the new risk paradigm.

Prior to Russia’s full-scale invasion in February 2022, U.S. special operators were working with Ukrainian security forces to increase their ability to counter Russian encroachment (inherently a cost-imposition activity), but they were doing so in proximity to Russian conventional military forces and Russian proxy forces, both of which were capable of escalation with strategic implications. In this situation, U.S. policymakers clearly identify greater political risk. An accidental skirmish resulting in dead or detained Russian or American soldiers immediately would become a strategic crisis in which neither side would desire to look weak. Future special operations will be conducted in the contact layer and in proximity to great power adversaries that manage risk by co-locating deterrence or escalation capabilities nearby. This approach can be clearly witnessed in Russia’s hybrid warfare doctrine33 and in the Chinese military’s naval deployments in the South China Sea.34

Such threats should not deter SOF; instead, they call for different methods of deployment preparation, a higher level of understanding related to political risk, and narrower tactical latitude during deployments. With an evolved understanding of the risks of great power competition (given that inadvertent missteps could put at risk factors such as host nation support, the support of local populations, cost of continuation, or domestic political blowback), deployments of special operators can support U.S. political objectives while also being mindful of risk-related changes to the strategic environment.

Political Will
Finally, the Defense Department is entering a period of
scrutiny in which both Congress and the American public are more openly questioning whether the military can actually deliver meaningful strategic results in complex operating environments, or those characterized by the intersection of development, diplomacy, counterterrorism, insurgency, and influence campaigns. The two decades of military-led efforts in Iraq and Afghanistan during the Global War on Terror have fallen short of the political objectives for which they were initiated. Neither nation is stable, able to withstand external influence, or free from terrorist activity.

Great power competition arrives, moreover, at a time when America’s political will for military action is at a low, but support for strategic competition is growing. Bipartisan support for deterrence, democracy promotion, and increasing America’s advantages over China and Russia is increasing as Americans learn of domestic election tampering,\textsuperscript{35} cyber attacks,\textsuperscript{36} and aggressive adversarial behavior against U.S. partner nations,\textsuperscript{37} most notably the ongoing Russian war in Ukraine.

SOF will experience challenges in analyzing, designing, and executing significant cost-imposition strategies against adversaries in the short term. In the longer term, the United States will likely find its balance and begin to mobilize popular support to increase competition with China and Russia. The Trump administration’s December 2017 National Security Strategy, the Biden administration’s March 2021 “Interim National Security Strategic Guidance,” and the Biden administration’s recently published October 2022 National Security Strategy all consistently identified great power competition as a growing threat, and both Russian and Chinese activities around the global are deepening this concern.\textsuperscript{38} SOF must be prepared and ready to contribute at the time when political risk tolerance and political will compel U.S. elected leaders to take action.

**SOF Adjustments for an Era of Great Power Competition**

The tasks assigned to U.S. SOF will be somewhat different amid great power competition than they were during the Global War on Terror. Importantly, senior leaders who design, build, and deploy SOF formations for these tasks face strong headwinds resulting from three extant challenges.

First, in order to change the SOF formation, U.S. leaders must shrink what has become a disproportionately large, over-resourced counterterrorism capability within SOF (including almost all of SOF), an element of the special forces that consumes resources and manpower that would otherwise facilitate the U.S. military’s transition to the era of great power competition. The forever wars demanded the reorientation of SOF toward counterterrorism, but the future requires something different. This shift necessitates a kind of change management that rarely succeeds in the military due to the revolving door of senior leaders, cost insensitivity, and an overweighted emphasis on current operations.

\textit{“The forever wars demanded the reorientation of SOF toward counterterrorism, but the future requires something different.”}

Second, senior leaders must simultaneously preserve and employ capable, right-sized counterterrorism forces to address the persistent threat of external terrorist operations against the United States and U.S. interests. Doing so means freeing up conventional formations and other SOF units to transition to the demands of great power competition. During this transition period, some SOF will do missions related to counterterrorism, some SOF will do missions related to great power competition, and a small subset of SOF
will do both. Achieving a satisfactory capability at a much smaller level invites risk. Polling continues to show that the American people have an exaggerated fear of terrorist attacks; no elected official could survive another 9/11, so the easy path is to continue to spend and to use U.S. forces as they are organized today.39 Similarly, senior military commanders, specifically the geographic combatant commanders, have developed an exaggerated appetite for SOF in their daily operations. They also are reluctant to decrease their use of such a capable utility force for current operations. With each counterterrorism deployment to Africa or the Middle East, SOF elements are moving further away from the capabilities they must master to contribute to the age of great power competition.

Finally, much of the SOF formation is in tatters. New senior leaders will have to replenish the SOF formation with peacetime professionals equipped to navigate the era of great power competition. While this last challenge seems manageable; it is clearly the most difficult. The existing SOF community, consisting of members who almost all have spent their entire careers rotating in and out of combat, may feel disheartened by their new peacetime roles and by reductions in organizational resources and in compensation through rolled-back incentives like hostile fire pay and tax-free reenlistment bonuses. When SOCOM doubled in size after 9/11, those who joined knew they were headed to combat. This mentality pervades the community, and a reversion to peacetime competition has triggered a significant exodus.40

Mainstream efforts to prepare SOF for great power competition involve deconstructing the current counterterrorism-weighted formation and instead returning to stratified capabilities more aligned to the characteristics of great power competition highlighted above. To do this, SOF should focus on four broad missions: working with allies and partners, gathering information, responding to crises, and being prepared to conduct strategic raids. Each of these missions require specific training, doctrine, equipment, and personnel to reasonably and consistently succeed. This should be the new direction, and SOF leaders, especially at the senior level, will bear a heavy burden to transform the force by pursuing these mission capabilities.

Working with Allies and Partners

Perhaps the greatest, most-observable contribution that SOF can offer for addressing great power competition will be their ability to work with U.S. allies and partners. This task is not unique to special operations, but SOF clearly provides outsized benefits for minimal investment. Unlike large-scale bilateral and multilateral exercises during which large U.S. and partner elements grow more familiar with each other and operate together, SOF is best suited to contribute at the tactical unit or subunit level—contributing to the professional development of partner forces.

“Perhaps the greatest, most-observable contribution that SOF can offer for addressing great power competition will be their ability to work with U.S. allies and partners.”

When this is true, the United States benefits in two ways. First, a host nation’s security forces become more capable of identifying and mitigating internal and external threats (such as Chinese and Russian influence operations, support for countering insurgent activities, or responding to other malign behavior). Second, the enhancement of a host nation’s basic security objectives thickens the broader U.S. bilateral relationship and may advance other interagency goals such as diplomatic dialogue, intelligence sharing, basing and overflight, and access to markets.
The Department of Defense’s 2018 National Defense Strategy identified contact layer operations and “expanding the competitive space” as key tasks in locations where host nation forces, U.S. forces, and adversaries’ forces are operating.\textsuperscript{41} In the contact layer, rotational SOF elements work with partner forces to enhance the partner unit’s ability to support its national security objectives. Opportunities like this present tremendous benefits. First, SOF efforts contribute to broader assessments of host nations’ military capabilities and of the challenges the host nation faces in achieving security goals. SOF can assist with identifying capability shortfalls that could be addressed through U.S. security assistance initiatives or host-country efforts. Finally, the personal relationships between host-nation security elements and SOF operators open the door for collaboration against common threats. Once a base of trust is established and aligned interests are identified, pathways to collaborative, mutually beneficial endeavors become apparent.

For SOF to contribute in this way, they will need to identify and avoid a few pitfalls to cultivating and managing partner relationships. First, there will be few instances in which U.S. and host nation interests perfectly align; therefore, constant reevaluation and assessment will be needed to ensure that professional relationships and support to respective nations’ policy goals are never compromised. Next, efforts of this nature require a deeper preparation on the part of U.S. SOF operators. Language skills, cultural fluency, intelligence (threat) awareness, and clear understanding of U.S. policy objectives weigh more heavily than they did during the counterterrorism wars. By demonstrating patience and perseverance, SOF elements can build the capacity of U.S. partners.

There is a different context when it comes to SOF support to U.S. relationship with formal allies. Logically, there would be broader alignment of political objectives with allies, so the SOF investment can focus on capability development, integration of efforts, and threat awareness. Unlike the effort necessary with new or transactional partnerships, SOF can thicken relationships with allied SOF forces through challenging exercises, conferences, and exchanges. The clear example here is NATO training exercises in which SOF forces work together to rehearse and test operational plans and capabilities. In this way, the United States relies on allies differently than it does its partners: allies typically have professional military forces, they are part of existing defense plans in which U.S. and alliance forces have specific responsibilities, and they enjoy far greater political involvement in cooperative efforts. All of these characteristics offer benefits to SOF elements selected to work with allies. Smaller exercises using multinational SOF forces are inherently more affordable for all participants. SOF personalities change less frequently and specialize more deeply, making the likelihood of lasting personal relationships much higher than for similar relationships between conventional forces rotating through a theater.

**Gathering Information**

Another important contribution by SOF—demonstrated during the counterterrorism wars and important to the great power competition—will be the gathering of information to support senior policymakers’ understanding of the political/military situation in subregional geographic areas. Candidly, there is more work to be done, at all levels within the Department of Defense, to improve this, but the potential for improving policymakers’ understanding of the situation on the ground and avoiding strategic surprises makes this a worthwhile undertaking. As the commander of SOCOM highlighted during his most recent posture statement saying that SOF elements were in 62 different countries at that moment, the logical question to ask is what’s happening there.

There are two types of information that would readily
be available to SOF elements deployed to foreign nations for training and exercises. The first type is opportunistic information. By virtue of their proximity to host nation forces, local populations, training areas, road networks, transportation hubs, communications infrastructure, and other facilities, SOF professionals can simply record what they see, where they go, with whom they interact, and the ways in which they travel. While this information is basic, it adds data to broader intelligence efforts to understand the environment. Former Defense Intelligence Agency director Michael Flynn and two co-authors described it as a “vast and underappreciated body of information, almost all of which is unclassified.” Opportunistic information gathering offers great potential and requires little preparation. In some cases, these efforts are already being completed in the forms of trip reports or summaries, but both the audience and purpose would be different if this information can be channeled into the intelligence community. To be clear, these activities would further supplement the opportunistic efforts of defense attachés, who provide a similar contribution.

The second type of information gathering that aligns with SOF deployments would be intentional, overt information gathering. This concept contrasts with opportunistic collection in that SOF operators, during their pre-deployment planning, are introduced to information gaps held by the U.S. intelligence community. As a matter of planning, the SOF contingent can prepare to fill those gaps through their interactions with host nation forces during deployment. In a similar role as defense attachés doing overt collection while working in embassies, the SOF team would simply be aware of information gaps that could possibly be filled during their normal deployment duties, seek opportunities to observe and report on those information gaps, and then provide detailed reports during or after their deployment to address such gaps. An important distinction here is that the collection is overt, which means it is neither clandestine nor covert.

It is necessary to emphasize the overt aspect of this endeavor. All SOF should be capable of gathering and reporting open-source information derived from their deployment experiences. These efforts do not constitute intelligence collection like human intelligence, signals intelligence, or others that require different authorities, enhanced tradecraft, and an element of risk. In such instances, SOF operators have been invited by a host nation to contribute to security assistance or to test operational concepts during combined exercises, and those goals must remain their central purpose. There would be some consequential risk if SOF misinterpreted or exceeded overt collection to the detriment of a relationship with a host nation.

Regrettably, most of the opportunistic information collected by SOF during their many deployments ends up in unit files, turnover briefings, or, worse yet, in burn bags. To fully benefit from this form of SOF contribution to the shift to great power competition, this concept must be affirmed and driven at the policy level, instituted and trained at the service level, and understood and supported at the interagency level.

The undersecretary of defense for intelligence and security is responsible to the secretary of defense for all aspects of defense intelligence and is a principal advisor to the director of national intelligence on defense intelligence and the integration of defense intelligence and Department of Defense support with the activities of the intelligence community. For SOF to purposefully contribute to information gathering in the aforementioned ways, this undersecretary’s office should develop a policy framework for opportunistic and intentional, overt collection that empowers and supports such activities; differentiates them from rote intelligence collection activities; and dictates a process through which nuggets of seemingly unimportant data are collected, formatted, reported, and made available.
to intelligence analysts who employ search algorithms, data queries, and other tools to build their understanding of the situation on the ground.

At the individual service level, SOF elements already receive intensive training on information gathering, observation techniques, memorization enhancement, and truncated reporting techniques. The only identifiable shortfall is that this information increases in value if it is usable outside of the military, so reporting formats must be standardized, clear and accurate writing must be emphasized, and a joint process must be established and followed. Great power competition places a high premium on enhanced awareness and understanding of risk at the policymaker level, and SOF can comfortably contribute to this requirement after only slight adjustments to their preparation. Unlike the counterterrorism wars, SOF will not necessarily focus on gathering information that perpetuates the targeting cycle; instead, they will use the same skills to inform a strategic audience, which means that the information must arrive in a timely and usable fashion.

If misunderstood by interagency partners (especially those in the intelligence community), both opportunistic and intentional information gathering could quickly draw opposition. Anticipated concerns might center around disrupting ongoing intelligence community operations, weakening relationships with host nation partners, or blurring intelligence efforts usually found in the National Intelligence Priorities Framework or in geographic combatant commanders’ priority intelligence requirements. These reservations can be obviated through a better understanding of the purpose and limits of this type of information gathering; SOF operators would be simply capturing what they see, who they meet, and where they go during training and exercise events. Additionally, SOF operators must consistently demonstrate the requisite maturity to avoid exceeding their mandate during deployment, which would trigger the aforementioned consequences.

To its credit, the U.S. Army’s First Special Forces Command has recently conceptualized opportunistic and overt information gathering as a network of “strategic sensors.” As long as SOF consistently deploy to scores of foreign countries, information gathering benefits military leaders, intelligence analysts, and policymakers alike. These deployments place operators in the contact layer, where they can aid in understanding the “competition space.” This information complements other information and intelligence collected by the intelligence community and contributes to the assessment of policy objectives, the adequacy of U.S. resource investment, and the viability of U.S. influence in the area.

Responding to Crises

In the era of great power competition, crisis response will remain a task for which SOF elements are ideally suited. Although innumerable contemporary discussions revolve around SOF support to the Baltic nations if Russian forces invade or SOF support to Taiwan if China attacks, those vignettes are outside the scope of SOF-based crisis response. Clearly, SOF has much to offer in preparing Taiwanese and Baltic forces to resist encroachment, but the focus emphasizes preparation prior to hostilities rather than the role of SOF in a broader U.S. response. Nation-state aggression requires hard-power deterrence and plausible coercion during a crisis, and such a pathway exceeds SOF-unique contributions.

Instead, SOF must remain prepared to respond to crises exhibiting certain relevant characteristics. Crises that are time-sensitive and require the near immediate movement of response elements (in hours instead of days) are well-suited for SOF operators. They exist within readiness cycles that ensure that units remain capable and responsive, and they practice mobilization for crisis response. Alerting and
delivering SOF elements to a crisis is second nature for the Pentagon, and the speed with which they can respond occasionally places them ahead of policymakers’ decisions. Because of this, getting close to a crisis and reducing response time while policymakers finalize their decisions constitutes a feasible SOF contribution to reduce crisis risk.

Importantly, SOF are more reliant on outside support and assistance when a crisis becomes prolonged without resolution. Rapid deployment forces travel with limited sustainability and, upon arrival, are at the peak of their tactical readiness. When a force postures near an overseas crisis for weeks or months without receiving orders to stabilize the situation, they will eventually need additional logistical support and time to train in order to perpetuate their heightened posture. This observation should not be interpreted as a problem for policymakers as they work from Washington to resolve a crisis; instead, it should give context to an important limited duration qualifier of SOF support to crisis response.

In the early stages of a crisis, the lack of understanding and ground truth impacts the formulation of policy responses. Yet SOF operators are comfortable in ambiguous environments, and, having arrived near a crisis site, they can assess and report on the situation in a manner that supports the design of feasible policy objectives. As a crisis matures and more information becomes understood, SOF can refine its efforts based on emerging policy guidance. SOF operators anticipate and expect crises to be ambiguous, and they are well-prepared to enter a crisis to immediately resolve it (in extremis) or, more likely, to help policymakers understand the situation, provide options for crisis stabilization, and execute deliberate tactical operations in support of policy decisions.

Understanding these relevant characteristics, potential SOF crisis response scenarios might involve the following: evacuating noncombatants, recapturing U.S. facilities or conveyances (air, ground, rail, or maritime); rescuing Americans in distress (hostages, refugees, detainees, or victims); performing interdictions in the international commons (high-value targets, harmful contraband, sanctions evaders, or weapons of mass destruction); and perhaps responding during the early stages of humanitarian or environmental disasters.46

In crises such as these, speed is typically the critical factor. In the regrettable case of the 2011 terrorist attack on the U.S. facility in Benghazi, SOF sprinted to the area within hours of notification, but they were too late. It is much easier and faster to move a small cohort of highly trained individuals with limited equipment than it is to move large conventional units with mountains of equipment, so SOF is inherently faster. Additionally, SOF operators train in methods to tactically infiltrate a crisis area (by parachute, helicopter, motorcycle, or boat) in ways not common to conventional forces. Doing so adds to the speed of response if entry ports or airfields are inaccessible.

In terms of individual preparation for crisis response, special operators are equipped with advanced skills that are suitable for ambiguous environments. They are formed into well-honed small teams that habitually operate together. The members of such teams have complementary skills, and they tend to be more mature, experienced, and older than their counterparts in the conventional forces.

**Conducting Strategic Raids**

The growth of anti-access area denial (A2/AD) capabilities among great power adversaries introduces the importance of another SOF offering going forward: the strategic raid. Such capabilities were less relevant during the unipolar years in which the U.S. military could feasibly establish land, maritime, and air supremacy in nearly every
operating environment at almost any time. Identified by then secretary of defense Leon Panetta in 2012 as a challenge requiring critical investment prioritization, A2/AD systems pose threats to the safe arrival of forces along with danger to the continued sustainment of forces in an operating area. After a decade of inconsistent investment toward this priority, the United States still harbors significant concerns over competitors’ efforts to deny access to contested areas.

While broader A2/AD is a larger interagency and conventional force concern, SOF elements focus on a subfacet of this operational concept. The strategic raid, at its foundation, revolves around the SOF capability to penetrate conventional A2/AD defenses, conduct tactical action at a target site, and safely withdraw through the emplaced A2/AD system. Advantages emerge from the small size of the SOF element, highly specialized tactics to reduce the risk of detection, and the speed of the operation. Moving quickly enables SOF to create moments of “relative superiority” in which to complete the tactical task—with the understanding that withdrawal must occur before the alerted adversary can effectively mobilize and respond.

The employment of SOF for a strategic raid differs from crisis response in important ways. First, a strategic raid requires significantly more detailed intelligence and planning, some of which has to come from outside the special operations formation. In addition to the normal intelligence targeting approach, the strategic raid force must understand the technical aspects of A2/AD systems and the conditioned adversary decision cycles emplaced to respond to threats. Creating a moment of relative superiority for a strategic raid relies on broader interagency collection and analysis efforts along with the employment of interagency capabilities (such as cybersecurity tools, information warfare, deception, and diplomatic coordination) to support tactical action.

Second, strategic raids designed for great power competition will likely include more conventional forces to assist with the delivery of SOF elements to the raid target as A2/AD challenges require mission initiation from greater offset distances. The integration of these capabilities by combining conventional, interagency, and SOF elements that are relatively unfamiliar with each other requires rehearsals, refinements, and more rehearsals. So strategic raids do not reflect a rapid lunge into an ambiguous environment, as one would expect in a crisis response. Rather, policymakers may direct the development of military options to neutralize a growing threat. SOF planners can offer tactical approaches to accomplish such a task. Afterward, detailed planning and rehearsals, supplemented by additional collected information, help reduce risk and increase a strategic raid’s chances of success. Examples of successful SOF strategic raids—like the one on Osama bin Laden’s compound in Abottabad, Pakistan in May 2011 or the one that targeted Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi in Barisha, Syria in October 2019—have incorporated these important considerations, while unsuccessful strategic raids (like the Son Tay raid during the Vietnam War in November 1970 or Operation Eagle Claw in April 1980 during the Iran hostage crisis) have neglected at least some of these considerations.

**Conclusion**

While the future for SOF looks promising, that future comes with significant challenges. The Defense Department’s refocus on conventional hard power deterrence and the subsequent relegation of SOF to a supporting role in the era of great power competition arrives after SOF has captivated national policymakers for nearly two decades. The introduction of new policy and strategy documents, building on President Biden’s 2021 Interim National Security Strategic Guidance, will solidify the priorities for the country’s national security apparatus and
invite significant changes in terms of intelligence support, diplomatic priorities, and military activity. The future environment calls for competition below armed conflict, in the contact layer, alongside partners and allies, and in proximity to great power adversaries. The rapid arrival of challenges related to great power competition has created demonstrable tension for SOF between ongoing counterterrorism operations and preparing for future threats.

“The rapid arrival of challenges related to great power competition has created demonstrable tension for SOF between ongoing counterterrorism operations and preparing for future threats.”

Fortunately, critical mission capabilities such as working with partners and allies, gathering information, responding to crises, and conducting strategic raids will continue into the era of great power competition. Modest future investments and adjustments including the incorporation of additional cultural and language skills, the adoption of new methods of signature reduction and infiltration, the incorporation of new technologies, and a more clearly defined supporting relationship with other interagency elements that now have the lead for the response to great power competition will allow SOF to maintain their relevance to the security threats and opportunities facing the United States.

About the Author

Tim Nichols served as an intelligence officer in the U.S. Marine Corps for over twenty-one years with extensive experience in the special operations, intelligence, and counterterrorism fields. His overseas experience spanned deployments to Saudi Arabia, Iraq, Afghanistan, and elsewhere in the Middle East, as well as East Africa, Central America, and the Pacific. He was designated a regional affairs officer for East Africa. While in Iraq, he directed a joint interagency task force attempting to track and target foreign extremists traveling to Iraq for violent activities. Nichols is currently a research fellow and visiting professor of the practice in the School of Public Policy at Duke University. He is the director of graduate studies for the Master of National Security Policy program, and he is the executive director of the Counterterrorism and Public Policy Fellowship Program. His research interests and teaching responsibilities include policy analysis, intelligence, interagency coordination, special operations policy, national security, homeland security, and counterterrorism policy.
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