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A U.S. Marine Corps sergeant services an FLW 200 Remote Weapon Station outfitted with a Browning M2 .50 caliber machine gun during Adversary Force Exercise 3-22 at Marine Corps Air Ground Combat Center. During each Service-Level Training Exercise, the adversary force is augmented with advanced equipment from the Office of Naval Research to test emerging technology to understand what is effective in the multi-domain force-on-force exercise environment. Photo by Cpl. Shane T. Beaubien

Special Operations Forces Enterprise: Strategic Intelligence and Emerging Technology

Editor's Note: This article was recognized as a top paper by the Joint Special Operations Forces Senior Enlisted Academy (JSOFSEA), Class 59.

Introduction

In March of 2014, the Federal Republic of Russia annexed Crimea. BBC journalist John Simpson described Russian forces' swift and unanticipated military action as "the smoothest invasion of modern times."¹ It was a bloodless but aggressive act of defiance. Russia made it clear to the world that they were still a superpower. Fast forward nearly a decade later, in February of

2022, Russia once again defiantly launched another attack against the whole of Ukraine with total impunity. How did Russia conduct this military operation with such stealth?

These actions demonstrated to the Special Operations Forces (SOF) enterprise that there are existing blind spots regarding strategic intelligence and capabilities in emerging technology. Was Russia's success a fluke or was it foreshadowing a much broader problem—not only to the competitiveness of the U.S. armed forces but also to the competitiveness of the SOF enterprise? These are the questions SOF must ask. To remain

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competitive on the modern battlefield, SOF must leverage emerging technologies and further develop strategic intelligence capabilities to stay ahead of its competitors.

Environment

Despite SOF's robust presence in Europe since the 1950s, they could not exploit strategic intelligence mechanisms or emerging technology to predict what would happen with a peer/near-peer strategic competitor such as Russia. Currently, Russian ground forces and the armed forces of Ukraine are pitted against each other in large-scale combat operations trying to adapt, improve, and develop emerging technologies that will help them gain an edge on the battlefield.

The conflict between Ukraine and Russia is a microcosm of the complexity of strategic intelligence capabilities and how to use emerging technologies. As the SOF enterprise watches and waits for an opportunity to enter the conflict, questions about their capabilities become obvious. How can SOF best identify emerging technologies to exploit and use? Can the enterprise use this conflict as a case study about disruptive technologies to transform its future? How can SOF intelligence exploit technology while keeping a healthy skepticism of its promises?² The U.S. Special Operations Command (USSOCOM) Campaign Plan for Global Special Operations (GSO), as briefed in 2018 by then-USSOCOM Commander Gen. Raymond A. Thomas, describes the challenges SOF face today as transregional, multi-domain, and multi-functional.

Strategic Guidance

The primary catalyst for developing strategic intelligence and identifying emerging technologies is

the increased aggression by strategic power competitors, primarily Russia and China. SOF operate in a rapidly evolving technological landscape, making it critical to stay ahead in identifying, assessing, and adopting emerging technologies. The stated intent of USSOCOM's campaign plan is to transform through relentless innovation and experimentation in every domain to provide access to knowledge and understanding to support the nation's ability to deliver asymmetric dominance against adversary capabilities.

The end state of the GSO calls for SOF to relentlessly adapt, experiment, and innovate to seek advantages across multiple domains and remain fit-for-purpose over time.³ Technological advancements and innovations like cyber capabilities, AI, and autonomous systems are reshaping warfare, enabling more precise and lethal operations. Long-range precision weapons and cyber warfare compress decision-making cycles and increase risks of miscalculation. SOF must be a first mover and early adopter to leverage these technologies to enhance irregular warfare capabilities in complex environments, as seen in Ukraine.⁴

Relevant History

Anne Clunan writes in her essay, "In Russia's Pursuit of Great Power Status and Security," that having the status of great power on the world stage has historically been the driving force for Russia's security, and remains the "unifying element" for Russia, especially in the current operational environment in Ukraine and NATO expansion.⁵ Russia is rapidly pursuing technological and strategic mechanisms to stop what it perceives as NATO expansionism in Ukraine. Similarly, in the pursuit of power, Chinese Communist Party President Xi Jinping recently

addressed the National Congress of the Communist Party of China stating, “We have stepped up weapons and equipment development and made major progress in enhancing military preparedness. The people’s armed forces have taken solid strides toward building a powerful military with Chinese characteristics.”⁶ Russia and China have both demonstrated a concerted effort to rapidly innovate technically and technologically.

Political, Military, Economic, Social, Infrastructure, and Information Analysis

Given the stances of Russia and China, SOF need to make rapid changes to policy and governance to shape how emerging technologies are adopted. Alliances and partnerships must be reviewed to see how strategic intel-sharing agreements influence technological integration. The Department of War (DoW) needs to analyze whether historical, legal, and ethical guidelines for armed conflict are still relevant for future engagements. The U.S. military needs to advance the study of the impacts of AI, machine-learning, big data analytics, and real-time intelligence in SOF mission planning and execution.

Despite efforts by the DoW and the Defense Advanced Research Projects Agency, budgetary and fiscal constraints must be addressed to keep pace with testing and emerging technologies. Human capital and talent management will become increasingly critical for mission success. Further, digital infrastructure must be improved to facilitate AI and predictive analytics. All these elements need to come together to create the desired state—an operational environment where improved SOF lethality at a

strategic level is achieved through the fusion of AI-driven intelligence and emerging technologies at all levels of SOF operations.

Problems

The top three challenges to achieving the desired state are acquisition and bureaucratic red tape, data storage and interoperability issues, and talent management. The first challenge results in the slow adoption of innovative technologies. Procurement processes exceed the lifespan of emerging technologies in most military units. The second challenge addresses how to facilitate adequate information sharing. Seamless information sharing requires data storage in centralized and secure facilities. Anything that inhibits interoperability can hinder strategic analysis. Regarding talent management, SOF need to recruit, train, and retain personnel with the requisite skills and expertise in fields like AI. SOF must also make these career fields competitive with the private sector to retain talent.

Opportunities

The USSOCOM Joint Acquisition Task Force within the SOF Acquisition, Technology, and Logistics (SOF AT&L) Center fosters rapid prototyping and experimentation with emerging technologies relevant to enhancing mission success.⁷

Expanding partnerships with the private sector increases opportunities to find human talent and emerging technologies. Start-ups and commercial solutions openings benefit from advocating for SOF to test their products. Start-ups also have the talent, expertise, experience, and foresight to rapidly assist SOF in establishing a baseline

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for scrutinizing and acquiring any emerging technologies.

Recent advancements in AI and machine learning have made significant strides. With funding from the DoW and USSOCOM, generative pre-trained transformers can experience rapid growth and help with data processing, predictive analytics, and task automation. The problem statement that needs to be at the forefront for USSOCOM is: How can SOF reconcile government bureaucratic policies and create actionable steps to acquire, rapidly train, cultivate, and employ emerging technologies and strategic intelligence capabilities while remaining relevant and lethal in today's modern battlefield?

Approach

The SOF enterprise should divide the approach into three lines of effort (LOE). To be successful, LOEs need to provide a clear path by emphasizing the problem statement as the specific objective, outlining the desired state by listing actions in sequence, and using measurable progress to reinforce the stated approach. LOEs are synchronized with the DoW National Defense Strategy and support the USSOCOM Commander's vision.

Line of Effort 1: Overcome Bureaucratic Hurdles

This LOE will require congressional intervention to help alleviate bureaucratic hurdles. The Senate Armed Services Committee—specifically, the subcommittee on emerging threats and capabilities—can prioritize these efforts.⁸ The USSOCOM Commander already has unique acquisition authority and

responsibilities with SOF AT&L under Title 10, U.S. Code 167.

Line of Effort 2: Develop Combat Support Organizations

USSOCOM should conduct an in-depth analysis with established private-sector partnerships to develop combat support organizations and identify the most effective means of employment against strategic competitors. Think of the Joint Improvised Explosive Device Defeat Organization, but for strategic intelligence fusion; emerging technologies research; and development, data storage, and interoperability. The challenges of this LOE are a lack of prioritization and partnerships outside of the DoW. The SOF enterprise is prioritized in the DoW Data, Analytics, and AI adoption strategy at the tactical, operational, and strategic levels as the DoW implements open-standard architectures.⁹ However, establishing partnerships requires USSOCOM to identify private entities, develop internship programs, and create liaison officer (LNO) positions within the private defense sectors. SOF LNOs can collaborate and build trust to fuse strategic intelligence and emerging technologies at all SOF levels. This LOE serves to recruit and retain talent and craft interoperability within the enterprise and develop partnerships in the private sector. SOF must also develop requisite courses and programs to advance AI-driven intelligence systems and emerging technologies.

Line of Effort 3: Establish a Plan of Action and Milestones

The third LOE will establish a Plan of Action and Milestones (POAM) to develop, test, and integrate strategic intelligence and emerging technology capabilities into SOF.

The establishment of this POAM is the most critical LOE because will help leaders visualize the problem statement and be held accountable. The POAM should encompass every aspect of the quantifiable goals for the problem statement: acquire, train with, cultivate, and employ emerging technologies and strategic intelligence capabilities. Legislated policy could then be enacted to support USSOCOM rapidly. Shortcomings in talent management could be identified and solved through partnerships and incentives. SOF could leverage new partnerships to overcome gaps in predictive analytics that are vital for AI utilization, intelligence analysis, pattern recognition, and threat assessment. Mechanisms for cybersecurity and interoperability would be identified and executed at the designated point in the POAM timeline. The final stated approach would be for congressional mandates to eliminate acquisition and financial obstacles to enhance SOF support. Expanding partnerships with the private sector is no longer a 'nice-to-have' but a strategic imperative.

Conclusion

The SOF enterprise faces a rapidly evolving threat landscape that demands agility and innovation. Relying solely on internal development and traditional acquisition processes is insufficient to maintain a competitive edge in strategic intelligence and emerging technologies. To remain competitive on the modern battlefield and stay ahead of its strategic power competitors, SOF must leverage emerging technologies and further develop strategic intelligence capabilities. The employment of enhanced strategic intelligence systems provides a faster and clearer picture of the battlespace. The adoption of emerging technologies helps SOF at tactical, operational, and strategic levels. Planning and targeting cycles will be improved, shortened, and made more lethal with reduced collateral concerns. SOF operators can withdraw from direct engagements with emerging technologies, operate remotely through a partner force, and better anticipate the actions of the nation's adversaries. ♠

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NOTES

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