



JSOU Report 22-1

The Fourth Age of SOF

JOINT SPECIAL OPERATIONS UNIVERSITY



The Fourth Age of SOF: The Use and Utility of Special Operations Forces in a New Age is a sweeping monograph that chronicles the history of modern Special Operations Forces (SOF) and insightfully describes their new challenges. The authors have compiled an excellent, concise history of SOF's three earlier ages: 1941–1960, 1961–1979, and 1980–2020, setting the stage for projecting SOF's Fourth-Age roles in the emerging era of strategic competition. The early years were not easy, but with determination and perseverance, the SOF community prevailed, and four decades of remarkable and unprecedented SOF achievements resulted. As they begin their Fourth Age, SOF will again be challenged.

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The Fourth Age of SOF: The Use and Utility of Special Operations Forces in a New Age

Will Irwin and Dr. Isaiah “Ike” Wilson III

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Joint Special Operations University

The Joint Special Operations University (JSOU) generates, incubates, and propagates (delivers and communicates) ideas, education, and training for expanding and advancing the body of knowledge on joint and combined special operations. JSOU is a ‘hybrid organization’ that performs a hybrid mission—we are a ‘corporate university,’ an academic institution serving a professional service enterprise, ‘by, with, and through,’ the United States Special Operations Command (USSOCOM). As such, we are both a direct reporting unit to the Commander, USSOCOM, on all Combined Joint Special Operations Forces education and leader development matters, as well as the educational and leader development component of the Command.

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*The Fourth Age of SOF: The Use
and Utility of Special Operations
Forces in a New Age*

Will Irwin

and Dr. Isaiah "Ike" Wilson III

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On the cover. Special Operations Command, North and 10th Special Forces Group (Airborne) conducted an exercise above the Arctic Circle to validate techniques in extreme cold-weather conditions. The exercise included military free fall operations, maritime operations under seven feet of ice, and other rapid insertion tactics. Photo by Staff Sergeant Justin Smith/Released

Back cover. Top Left: William J. Donovan, founder of OSS. Photo by the CIA. Top Center: Virginia Hall, an OSS operative, accepts the Distinguished Service Cross awarded by the military for her exceptional heroism during wartime operations. Photo from the CIA official website: <https://www.cia.gov/legacy/museum/virginia-hall-oss-operative-accepts-the-distinguished-service-cross-for-exceptional-heroism-during-wartime-operations/>. Top Right: President John F. Kennedy and Brigadier General William P. Yarborough during a visit to Fort Bragg, North Carolina. Photo by Cecil Stoughton, White House Photographs/John F. Kennedy Presidential Library and Museum, Boston. Bottom: U.S. Special Forces are extracted from a mountain pinnacle in Zabul province, Afghanistan by a U.S. Army UH-60 Black Hawk helicopter from Company A, 2nd Battalion, 82nd Aviation Regiment, 82nd Combat Aviation Brigade after executing an air assault mission to disrupt insurgent communication. Photo by Staff Sergeant Aubree Clute, U.S. Army

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Foreword

T*he Fourth Age of SOF: The Use and Utility of Special Operations Forces in a New Age* is a sweeping monograph that chronicles the history of modern Special Operations Forces (SOF) and insightfully describes their new challenges. Authors Mr. Will Irwin, Joint Special Operations University (JSOU) research professor, and Dr. Isaiah Wilson III, JSOU president—brilliant scholars and prolific writers—possess the knowledge and expertise to address SOF’s past and future. They have compiled an excellent, concise history of SOF’s three earlier ages: 1941–1960, 1961–1979, and 1980–2020. This historical context sets the stage for projecting SOF’s Fourth-Age roles in the emerging era of strategic competition.

Throughout their history, SOF have had to overcome serious obstacles and fierce resistance. As their need was totally unforeseen during preparations for World War II, SOF were forces born of necessity. Dismantled after the war, they had to be reconstituted for the Korean War. President John F. Kennedy helped build SOF capability as irregular warfare erupted in Southeast Asia. After the Vietnam War ended, SOF were permitted to atrophy throughout the 1970s with the Pentagon excessively focused on defending NATO Europe and determined to endure no more Vietnams. The inadequacies of SOF and joint operations were laid bare by the failed Iranian hostage rescue mission in April 1980.

The Third Age of SOF, initiated in response to this disaster in the Iranian desert, was different. It saw the creation of enduring organizational arrangements and authorities for SOF that permitted great advances in capabilities, credibility, and influence in decision-making circles. The Cohen-Nunn Amendment (section 1311 of the National Defense Authorization Act for fiscal year 1987) provided the power of law to bring about and sustain historic changes. As the author of section 1311 and first permanent Assistant Secretary of Defense for Special Operations and Low-Intensity Conflict, I was privileged to engage in the initial phases of the Third Age of SOF. Given the Pentagon’s determination to undermine the Cohen-Nunn Amendment, the early years were not easy. It was full-blown bureaucratic guerrilla warfare, but with determination and perseverance, the SOF community prevailed. Four decades of remarkable and unprecedented SOF achievements resulted.

During the last two decades of the Third Age, SOF's position as a central feature of the Nation's defense capability became fully established. As Irwin and Wilson write, "The unmatched professionalism, adaptability, and utility of SOF through a progression of very successful operations during this period resulted in increased confidence among joint force leaders in the dependability and competence of SOF."

As they begin their Fourth Age, SOF will again be challenged. America's last two decades devoted to combating violent extremist organizations have greatly improved certain SOF skills, but others have become dulled. While maintaining their counterterrorism and counterproliferation proficiencies, SOF will need to rebalance and strengthen their capabilities as an agent of influence or coercion in strategic competition with China and Russia. Unconventional warfare, foreign internal defense, military information support operations, and civil affairs operations will require increased emphasis.

The monograph's Task Force 714 vignette provides a profound lesson for SOF's Fourth Age. Major General Stanley McChrystal transformed his task force, pursuing high-value terrorist targets from an industrial-age organization into an information-age network of networks. He turned his organization into a deadly weapon. Fourth-Age SOF will need to be equally savvy in organizational arrangements. They will need to be able to collaborate and network with other U.S. forces, other U.S. departments and agencies, host nation forces and entities, and nongovernmental organizations. Collaborative and networked organizations can outperform any other organizational approach.

This monograph should be read by every special operator, Pentagon and Capitol Hill civilians concerned with SOF, other SOF supporters and critics, and members of the media. It will greatly inform the debates and decisions to come.

Honorable James R. Locher III
Former Assistant Secretary of Defense
for Special Operations and Low-Intensity Conflict

About the Authors

Mr. Will Irwin is a research professor at the Joint Special Operations University's (JSOU) Center for Adaptive and Innovative Statecraft. He is a contractor employed by PAE in support of the JSOU mission. Since his retirement as a U.S. Army Special Forces officer, he has worked as a defense analyst, researcher, historian, instructor, and writer. His career included assignments throughout the United States, Europe, Central and South America, the Near and Far East, and Southeast and Southwest Asia. He is a subject matter expert in strategic intelligence and policy, special operations, resistance, and political and irregular warfare. Mr. Irwin culminated his 28-year military career at the United States Special Operations Command (USSOCOM), where he was a weapons, munitions, and countering weapons of mass destruction (WMD) requirements officer. Since his retirement from active duty, he has served USSOCOM as a contractor supporting the Command's advanced technology program and later as a future concepts developer. He then supported the Command as a countering WMD terrorism analyst and planner in the Defense Threat Reduction Agency, USSOCOM support cell. Upon his return to the Tampa area, he served as an intelligence analyst at the United States Central Command prior to joining the faculty at JSOU.



Mr. Irwin holds a Master of Military Arts and Sciences degree from the United States Army Command and General Staff College and a bachelor's degree in history from Methodist University. He has done additional graduate study at the University of Kansas and the University of Southern California and has served as an Arroyo Center research fellow at the RAND Corporation in Santa Monica, California. He is the author of *Abundance of Valor: Resistance, Liberation, and Survival, 1944–1945* and *The Jedburghs: The Secret History of the Allied Special Forces, France 1944*, as well as several classified and unclassified monographs, reports, and articles. Mr. Irwin's previous JSOU monographs include *Support to Resistance: Strategic Purpose and Effectiveness*, *How Civil Resistance Works (And Why It Matters*

to SOF) and *Decision-Making Considerations in Support to Resistance*. Mr. Irwin has served as a guest lecturer on unconventional warfare at the Naval Postgraduate School in Monterey, California, and the U.S. Army John F. Kennedy Special Warfare Center and School at Fort Bragg, North Carolina.

Dr. Isaiah “Ike” Wilson III (Colonel, U.S. Army, Ret.) has earned a reputation as a versatile and innovative soldier-scholar. A decorated combat veteran with multiple combat tours in Iraq and Afghanistan and extensive operational experience across the greater Middle East, Dr. Wilson is a nationally and internationally recognized leading advocate for change in how America understands and deals with matters of security affairs and uses of force in times of peace and war and at a time when disruptive change continues to outpace organizations and organizational leadership’s ability to think and act fast and effectively. Dr. Wilson’s military career has spanned troop-leading, staff-planning, strategic advisory, and teaching and research assignments, and he has published extensively on organizational politics, civil-military relations, national security (defense) policy, and grand strategy. His 2007 book, *Thinking Beyond War: Civil-Military Relations and Why America Fails to Win the Peace*, along with his service on the 2003 Operation IRAQI FREEDOM Study Group, helped to increase public attention to the problems and errors in U.S. post-war planning for the Iraq War and sparked governmental movement toward policy reforms. He has been at the center of innovative planning in the future of U.S. intervention policy. His most recent military assignment was serving as chief of the Commander’s Initiatives Group for the commanding general, United States Central Command (USCENTCOM). Working in one of the most challenging combatant commands, Colonel Wilson played a leading role in the Command’s overall efforts relating to three major named operational campaigns—Operations ENDURING FREEDOM/FREEDOM’S SENTINEL, INHERENT RESOLVE, and SPARTAN SHIELD—and numerous related supporting operations to include USCENTCOM’s 2013 Operation NIMBLE WARNING, as well as USCENTCOM’s support for the Operation RESTORATION OF HOPE Gulf Cooperative Council coalition in Yemen, among others.



Previously, Colonel (Ret.) Wilson served as a strategic planning advisor to General Stanley McChrystal, commander of the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) and the ISAF combined-joint planning staff in support of Operation ENDURING FREEDOM in 2009, as chief of plans for the 101st Airborne Division (Air Assault), and as resident strategist to the commanding general, David Petraeus, in Mosul, Iraq during Operation IRAQI FREEDOM from 2003–2004. Dr. Wilson holds a Bachelor of Science in International Relations from the United States Military Academy at West Point, master's degrees in public policy and government from Cornell University, master's degrees in military arts and sciences from the U.S. Army's Command and General Staff College School of Advanced Military Studies and the National War College, as well as a PhD in political science (government) from Cornell University.

Prior to his arrival at the Joint Special Operations University and United States Special Operations Command, Dr. Wilson served as director of the U.S. Army's Strategic Studies Institute and U.S. Army War College Press, as well as a senior lecturer with the Yale Jackson Institute of Global Affairs at Yale University. He served as professor of political science and the director of the American Politics, Policy, and Strategy program at West Point from 2005 to 2013 and was the architect and founding director of the West Point Grand Strategy Program. He has taught at the National War College, Yale University, Columbia University, and The George Washington University. Dr. Wilson is a nonresident fellow with the D.C. think tank, New America, and a nonresident scholar with the Modern War Institute at the United States Military Academy at West Point. Dr. Wilson is also a former Council on Foreign Relations International Fellowship Program fellow and has served on the Council's International Affairs Fellowship program selection committee.

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Introduction

This monograph expands upon the “Fourth Age of SOF” concept introduced in a series of white papers by Joint Special Operations University (JSOU) president, Dr. Isaiah “Ike” Wilson III, in 2020 through 2021. As this monograph will show, the Fourth Age is a period in the history of Special Operations Forces (SOF) unlike any previous period in several respects. At a time when defense strategic interest centers on campaigning for influence and integrated deterrence, United States Special Operations Command (USSOCOM) must continue its focus on countering violent extremist organizations (VEOs) and weapons of mass destruction (WMDs), while at the same time engineering a balanced force capable of executing critical influence campaigning and deterrence roles and ensuring readiness for possible future armed conflict.

The United States seeks to extend influence and deter aggression while competing globally to advance U.S. interests and to gain and maintain strategic advantage. America’s SOF contribute to the Nation’s security by reinforcing diplomacy and helping to shape the international environment in a way that protects the interests of the U.S. and its partners. America’s leaders have expressed their commitment to improving their ability to compete in the “gray zone” and to deter or defeat adversarial actions by their rivals below the threshold of war.¹

The Distinct Value of SOF

The most distinctive and respected feature of SOF, the one factor that renders them of such unique value, is the operators. Discriminatingly selected, uncommonly talented, and uniquely trained and educated, they are capable of performing special tasks in an extraordinary manner. Exercising mature judgement and uncompromising integrity—self-disciplined and self-confident—they are crisis-action and population specialists focused on problem assessment and solution execution. Serving as forward-deployed human sensors and refined first responders, they are tactically proficient without equal, flexible and adaptive, versatile enough to be equally capable of executing sophisticated strikes or acting to de-escalate tensions. SOF are threat focused but culturally aware, tolerant of ambiguity and accustomed to functioning

under austere and complex conditions, and conversant with the most sophisticated technologies while remaining fully functional when employing more primitive methods.

SOF are capable of securing U.S. interests by directly targeting threats or by indirectly empowering friendly populations and working with and through partners and allies, allowing the U.S. to leverage the unique capabilities and geographical familiarity of international partners. Globally present and dispersed, persistently engaged, and rapidly employable, SOF are capable of hastily responding to natural or man-made crises, orchestrating preventive action, effecting competitor or proxy disruption, or contributing to influence campaigning and integrated deterrence. SOF have the forward presence and agility to operate at the seams and inside pivot states—within under-regulated, ungoverned, and poorly governed areas—transcending Unified Command Plan boundaries and nation-state borders.

Politically and culturally sensitive, SOF represent the force of choice when the employment of larger, more visible and costly conventional forces would be premature, inappropriate, infeasible, or likely to heighten escalation risk or present unwelcome political liability. They provide policy makers with small-footprint, low-visibility, and low-cost options capable of producing high-payoff returns, even in politically sensitive situations. When necessary, they can be extracted as quietly and as inexpensively as they were inserted. As a uniquely qualified and low-provocation foreign policy tool, they routinely become fully integrated with country teams and joint, interagency, intergovernmental, multinational, and commercial (JIIM-C) partners to reinforce multi-domain operations, helping to shape conditions or deter, disrupt, and impose costs on adversaries. The dispersed nature of SOF's forward presence renders them capable of deterring, sensing, and countering a wide range of threats or of playing a key role in campaigning for influence simultaneously on several fronts.

SOF are mavens of the indigenous approach, steeped in a cross-cultural competence that enables them to help populations solve their problems or to empower people to deal with adversity on their own. At home in the human dimension, they continuously expand their understanding of regions and the people who occupy them, wielding and expanding influence, cultivating trust while building enduring relationships, and achieving effects with and through partner forces. Their intimate knowledge and understanding of local conditions make them capable of sensing trends, detecting emerging

threats, and recognizing opportunity when and where it presents itself. As human sensors capable of informing decision makers, SOF function as policy pioneers. Longstanding relationships with partner and allied nations' military forces, and especially with their special operations units as well as civil government entities, put SOF in a position to serve as America's vanguard in campaigning for influence and building coalition responses. Among indigenous populations, SOF nurture longstanding relationships that build a reservoir of friendship and goodwill upon which the U.S. Government can draw when needed. Because of their reputation, SOF's very presence in a country or region inherently bestows the added value of signaling serious U.S. commitment.

SOF, of course, are equally capable of executing precision targeting operations and managing counternetwork activities. They can demonstrate extraordinary reach and prudent application of force. Responsive and capable of rapidly operating over long distances on short notice, SOF have a proven proficiency at conducting rescue operations or recovering sensitive material. The world has witnessed SOF's unmatched global reach and unsurpassed direct action (DA) proficiency in places such as Son Tay, Panama City, and Abbottabad.

SOF can contribute to integrated deterrence in uncommon ways. They impart a certain psychological deterrent value based on their reputation alone, benefitting from the mystique factor rooted in a proven history of success in carrying out high-risk missions in denied territory. But in one respect, as described in chapter 2, they provide a deterrent value with regard to authoritarian rivals that is unique in the U.S. defense establishment and that is an unrivaled unconventional warfare (UW) competence.

In the course of their daily activities in locations around the world, SOF also serve as the persistent eyes and ears of combatant commanders and national policy makers. Fulfilling a detection-and-reporting capability that complements national intelligence collection efforts, they simultaneously are in a position to act on acquired intelligence. They function, in many ways, as the strategic equivalent of the cavalry screening mission—observing, reporting early and accurately to provide early warning, effecting cross-boundary coordination, providing maneuver space to the Joint Force and decision time

Among indigenous populations, SOF nurture longstanding relationships that build a reservoir of friendship and goodwill upon which the U.S. Government can draw when needed.

to policy makers, developing the situation, and framing reaction options. As such, they are capable of identifying or creating windows of opportunity—seizing, retaining, and being in a position to exploit the initiative. They are often in a position to either initiate persistent surveillance or serve in a cost-effective, economy-of-force role to develop the situation in unprovocative ways. As a shaping mechanism, they can either preclude the need or prepare the way for further military intervention. Their inherent skills and special relationships can help to mitigate the conditions that lead to instability and armed conflict, reducing miscalculation and unintended escalation risks.

Fourth-Age SOF, as described in this monograph, will be better balanced and capable of serving U.S. national interests in at least five ways:

1. Serving as strategic shapers by performing a global special warfare function that provides the Joint Force geostrategic positional and informational advantage over competitors and adversaries
2. Accommodating a strategy of campaigning for influence by serving as an exceptional and versatile agent of influence
3. Contributing in unique ways to a strategy of integrated deterrence
4. Improving America’s ability to pursue the fight against extremists, as well as proliferators and potential users of WMD
5. Preparing for a traditional warfare special operations role or extraordinary crisis-response contingencies

These ways are described in more detail in chapter 3.

To realize a threshold-crossing, rebalancing effort, SOF must recognize that a new compound security environment demands the use and utility of an equally compound special operations capability—a comprehensive combination of all the skills, techniques, operational methods, and tradecraft of the past, amplified by twenty-first century technological advancements. This requires nothing less than a “back to the future” philosophy, mindset, and approach to rediscovering SOF’s full role, purpose, potential, and identity.

The Compound Security Dilemma

In meeting its defense obligations, the U.S. Government faces a geopolitical condition that is best described as a compound security dilemma. The 2018

national defense strategy (NDS) asserted that the U.S. is confronted with “increased global disorder, characterized by decline in the long-standing rules-based international order—creating a security environment more complex and volatile than any we have experienced in recent memory.”² Rival states seek a world of diminishing Western influence and dominance, a world marked by an eastward shift in the geopolitical center of gravity. Revisionist powers and rogue states grow increasingly frustrated with their standing in the international system and seek to gain advantage through campaigns marked by disinformation, deception, cyberattack, economic coercion, intimidation of weaker neighbors, support to terrorists, subversion, sabotage, and proxy warfare.

Meanwhile, continuing instability across the Islamic world, governance and security imbalances worldwide (and most recently now once again in Europe (i.e., Ukraine)), transnational crime, climate change issues, resource scarcities, economic imbalances and financial crises, pandemics and other health concerns, religious and ethnic dynamics, aging populations and other demographic change, the growth of megacities, and the rapid dispersion of constantly developing technologies contribute to a compound security dilemma and a continually changing strategic landscape. The spread of destructive misinformation facilitated by increasingly capable digital technology reinforces distrust in government institutions and further enables self-serving authoritarian rule.

In key locations around the world, populations are losing trust in governments and institutions that are seen as unwilling or unable to address their needs. Governments are facing historic new challenges in a time of diminishing resources, resulting in political volatility and a strain on democratic governance. Meanwhile, major powers are finding it increasingly painless to flaunt international rules, norms, and institutions.

Governments are facing historic new challenges in a time of diminishing resources, resulting in political volatility and a strain on democratic governance.

The Four Ages of SOF Premise

America’s modern SOF can be viewed as having evolved through three phases, or ages, that uniquely prepared them for this challenging period, the dawn of which marks the beginning of a fourth age. While there were

several examples of special operations elements and leaders throughout the early history of the U.S.—Rogers Rangers in the French and Indian War, militia leader Colonel Francis Marion during the American Revolution, and Confederate Colonel John Mosby’s “Rangers” in the American Civil War, to name a few—the four ages described in this monograph refer to the evolution of America’s modern SOF from their World War II predecessors. Earlier special operations units were hastily organized to meet an immediate operational need and just as hastily disbanded at the close of hostilities, never to be recreated. There is a continuing thread, however, connecting World War II SOF with their modern descendants as units were dissolved at war’s end only to be resurrected when the need for them once again became clear, ultimately culminating in the permanent, standing special operations units known today.

As will be described in chapter 1, each of these ages of SOF began with an identifiable event or condition that served as a catalyst for change. The First Age began with the commencement of World War II, when the need for SOF had been unforeseen, but operational requirements of theater commanders soon spawned a vast proliferation of such units in every Service. The dissolution of these units after the war led to their revival at the onset of the Korean War, after which they were once again deactivated. By the end of this period of provisional and impromptu SOF experimentation identified as the First Age of SOF, the Services recognized the need for standing special operations units. Soviet premier Nikita Khrushchev’s January 1961 speech, in which he declared that the USSR would support “wars of national liberation” around the world, served as a catalyst for the Second Age of SOF. It stimulated in newly elected U.S. President John F. Kennedy a conviction that the U.S. military needed to develop a strong counterinsurgency (COIN) capability and that SOF should serve as the vanguard of this transformative effort because of their resident irregular warfare (IW) expertise. This triggered a 20-year period marked by a vast expansion in the size of the Force. The failed April 1980 Iranian hostage rescue mission, Operation EAGLE CLAW, at the staging area known as Desert One, served as the catalyst for change that introduced the Third Age of SOF, a four-decade period that saw considerable organizational change, including the creation of USSOCOM, and a steadily expanding portfolio of SOF capabilities, missions, and core tasks. The termination of large-scale wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, coupled with the challenge of rebalancing the Force for influence campaigning and

integrated deterrence, serves as the threshold to the current Fourth Age of SOF.

As mentioned above, the importance of this review of modern SOF's evolutionary development is to build an appreciation of the combination of skills, techniques, and methods that have benefited SOF over time. This rediscovery of SOF's past will be instrumental in building the compound capability required for the Fourth Age. Any such historical survey also helps to nurture personal and organizational SOF identity and define the Force's collective memory and sense of the past.

History can help in understanding not only who they are as SOF and where they came from, but potentially shed some light on where they are headed. Present day and future successes are rooted in successful achievements of the past. Close examination of past events can have profound meaning as they view how operators and units have faced and overcome adversity, working through moral and ethical dilemmas with lessons in resilience, persistence, and courage. History can thus inspire as well as help them learn from the mistakes of others. The collective experience helps broaden their perspective beyond the limits of their own personal experience.

History also particularly serves SOF as they strive to understand other cultures, helping develop the degree of empathy and understanding of other populations so necessary for activities in the human domain. Societies and cultures are living histories that serve as a laboratory for studying the human experience, helping to understand how things came to be as they are, how societies function, and why people of other cultures behave the way they do.

Organization of the Monograph

This monograph is organized in three chapters. Following this introduction, chapter 1 provides an explanation of the division of America's SOF history into four ages and analyzes how the development of current SOF progressed through these evolutionary stages. The next chapter describes the compound security dilemma that SOF and the military Services face entering the third decade of the twenty-first century. Chapter 3 offers thoughts on the use and utility of SOF in a compound security environment, and the conclusion provides concluding (i.e., "epilogue as prologue") comments and recommendations.

Chapter 1. The Four Ages of SOF

The premise of this monograph is that the history of America's modern SOF, beginning from their closely linked World War II predecessors, can be viewed in terms of clearly defined evolutionary stages. Each of these stages, or ages, of SOF begins with an event or condition that serves as a catalyst for change. This chapter renders a brief summary of each of the first three ages of SOF and presents some of the current conditions and challenges that define the beginning of a fourth age. After two decades devoted largely to the counterterrorism (CT) and COIN campaigns in Afghanistan, Iraq, and elsewhere, SOF must recapture the wide-ranging capabilities and expertise demonstrated throughout their history to prepare for the challenges of compound security special operations.

The First Age of SOF: Conception and Emergence

When General George C. Marshall took office as chief of staff of the United States Army in 1939, he assumed the leadership of a 174,000-man army that ranked 19th in the world in size, behind the army of Portugal and just ahead of that of Belgium.³ In early 1941, he directed a study on the organization, manpower, and equipment requirements for the Army, to include the Army Air Forces, to wage a potential two-theater war against the Axis powers. Called the Victory Program, the study results identified a total Army strength requirement of nearly 8.8 million soldiers,⁴ an estimate that was not far from the actual peak wartime Army strength of 8.26 million.⁵ The study identified ground force requirements, for example, for every conceivable type of combat, combat support, and combat service support unit from armored divisions to tank destroyer battalions and from aircraft warning regiments to signal companies. But nowhere in the final tally was there a single unit of the type that are today referred to as SOF. Nonetheless, World War II saw a staggering proliferation of air, ground, and maritime SOF as the peculiar but unforeseen needs of warfighting theater commanders emerged or as senior political figures directed their establishment and employment for a variety of valid reasons. Special operations units of all Services, in other words, were forces born of necessity.

When attorney William J. Donovan, then a civilian, embarked on fact-finding trips to England for President Franklin D. Roosevelt in 1940 and 1941, British Prime Minister Winston Churchill directed the leaders of that country's Secret Intelligence Service (SIS) and Special Operations Executive (SOE) to brief the Americans on their

Special operations units of all services, in other words, were Forces born of necessity.

concepts for intelligence and special warfare operations in support of European resistance groups. Upon his return to Washington, Donovan proposed that America build a similar organization but one that combined the functions of SIS and SOE—in other words, both special operations and secret intelligence. President Roosevelt approved, and an organization called the Office of Coordinator of Information was established on 11 July 1941 with Donovan as its director. The organization survived in spite of pushback from the military Services, and after a minor reorganization, the Office of the Coordinator of Information was renamed the Office of Strategic Services (OSS) in June 1942. In December of that year, President Roosevelt issued an executive order designating the OSS—largely manned with uniformed personnel detailed from the Services—a military organization directly subordinate to the Joint Chiefs of Staff (JCS). Donovan, who had commanded a battalion and earned the Medal of Honor in World War I, was activated in the rank of colonel. He was promoted to brigadier general in March 1943 and to major general in November 1944.

Unconventional Warfare in Burma

When Japanese forces swept into Burma in December 1941 and January 1942, they drove Burmese, British, and Chinese forces into India and China. In the process, the Japanese cut the Burma Road, which had served as the main supply route from India to China where the U.S. supported Chiang Kai-shek's Nationalist Chinese Army. American engineers went to work building a new road from the India-Burma border, but their progress was blocked by Japanese forces controlling the area around the city of Myitkyina in northern Burma. Moreover, an airstrip near the city allowed Japanese fighter aircraft to attack American transport planes flying supplies over the Himalayas to China.

As both the commander of America's China-Burma-India (CBI) theater and chief of staff to Chiang, Lieutenant General Joseph W. Stilwell needed

ground forces to drive the Japanese out of the area and capture Myitkyina, but he knew that it would likely be at least a year before he could expect any U.S. Army infantry to be shipped to his theater. When Colonel Donovan offered the light, unconventional, and untried OSS Detachment 101 for use in the CBI theater, General Stilwell grudgingly relented and accepted, having nowhere else to turn. He hoped, at the very least, that the detachment could provide intelligence and perhaps put some pressure on the enemy.⁶ Building a guerrilla force of native Kachin tribesmen, Detachment 101 proved surprisingly effective at both providing intelligence and carrying out a campaign of guerrilla warfare in support of Allied forces. Pleased with their progress, General Stilwell eventually authorized the detachment to increase its guerrilla force substantially, after which the OSS and Kachin group cleared an area of roughly 10,000 square miles of Japanese forces. For this action, Detachment 101 was awarded the Presidential Unit Citation. The detachment, which had been formed in April 1942, was the first unit in U.S. military history created specifically for the purpose of conducting UW operations behind enemy lines.⁷ During its service in Burma, Detachment 101 also rescued around 400 Allied airmen.⁸

Operational requirements soon resulted in the formation of other deep-penetration units to augment conventional ground forces engaging Japanese forces in Burma. In 1943, the Allies planned for air operations and a limited ground offensive against Japanese forces in northern Burma. It was necessary to defeat or drive the enemy from this area in order for the Americans to construct a road from Ledo in India to link up with the old Burma Road into China, thus providing a ground logistics route to replace the much less effective resupply flights over the Himalayas.⁹ When British Prime Minister Winston Churchill described the capabilities of Major General Orde Wingate's Chindits to General Marshall, the American general agreed to form a U.S. equivalent to operate with the Chindits in Burma.¹⁰

Modeled after the British unit, the U.S. Army's 5307th Composite Unit (Provisional) was a regiment-sized, long-range penetration force of 3,000 men. To command the unit, General Stilwell chose his friend, Brigadier General Frank D. Merrill, and after, war correspondents christened the force "Merrill's Marauders." Unlike the Chindits, Stilwell and Merrill chose to use the Force as cavalry, making deep penetration envelopments against the Japanese 18th Division while Chinese divisions under Stilwell's command advanced against the enemy. The unit fought 5 major battles and 17 other

engagements with Japanese forces in Burma. Its most significant achievement was the capture of the key airfield at Myitkyina. The Force was disbanded after suffering decimating losses from battle casualties and disease.¹¹

Because the need for a long-range, penetration-light infantry unit remained, the surviving members of the Marauders were reorganized into a brigade-size force with the addition of 600 cavalry-trained troops from Fort Riley, Kansas. The latter were needed to handle the many mules required for transporting crew-served weapons and ammunition over the mountainous terrain. This unit became known as the Mars Task Force, another SOF forerunner, and it fought in Burma and China through the remainder of the war.

Largely due to the effectiveness of OSS Detachment 101, Merrill's Marauders, and the Mars Task Force, British forces advancing from India and Chinese forces advancing from China's southern Yunnan province were able to link up in Burma in late January 1945, thus securing the Burma Road. The first supply convoy from Ledo, India, to Kunming, China, passed through the area in February.

Air Special Operations in Asia

OSS also came to the aid of Major General Claire L. Chennault, commander of the Fourteenth U.S. Air Force and founder of the famed "Flying Tigers" based at Kunming. To remedy Chennault's lack of target intelligence, OSS formed the Air and Ground Forces Resources Technical Staff, or AGFRTS. Before long, the GFRTS proved invaluable to Chennault by providing intelligence that he had been unable to get from other American or Chinese intelligence units operating in China. The unit also helped with the recovery of fliers shot down behind Japanese lines.

Also operating in Southeast Asia in support of the British Chindit force was a special U.S. Army air unit formed in late 1943 and originally called Project 9. General Henry H. "Hap" Arnold began referring to the unit as an "air commando" in deference to British Admiral Lord Louis Mountbatten, supreme allied commander of South East Asia Command, who had earlier commanded all British commando forces in England. In early 1944, Project 9 was officially redesignated the 1st Air Commando Group. The Group carried out extremely hazardous missions over mountainous terrain and jungles, including, for example, Operation THURSDAY, during which its planes inserted more than 9,000 troops, nearly 1,500 pack animals, and over 250 tons of supplies more than 150 miles behind Japanese lines. As the

war progressed, two additional groups—the 2nd and 3rd Air Commando Groups—were formed. The Air Commandos employed a mix of aircraft that included transports, bombers, fighters, gliders, utility aircraft, and helicopters. They are credited with the first combat air rescue by helicopter and the first combat engagement with air-to-ground rockets.¹²

Naval Special Warfare

As mentioned earlier, although War Department planners failed to anticipate the need for such units, operational requirements for SOF quickly became apparent as the war proceeded. Unlike the Army, however, the Navy Department had identified at least one requirement even before the war began. During debates about the future of naval operations in the years following World War I, planners agreed that any future war with the Japanese Empire would entail the seizure of islands to defeat enemy forces and allow for the building of air and naval bases. This would require amphibious assaults, which the Marine Corps viewed as its new priority mission. As early as 1921, a report prepared by a Marine Corps officer identified the need for specially equipped and trained men to lead the first wave of an amphibious landing operation. These men would be equipped with items such as wire cutters and would be trained in the use of explosives to break up or clear obstacles in shallow offshore waters and on the beaches themselves. During the 1930s, Navy-Marine Corps fleet landing exercises highlighted the need for small teams of specially trained men to reconnoiter proposed landing beaches, identify and clear obstacles, and guide landing craft to the beaches.¹³

As early as 1921, a report prepared by a Marine Corps officer identified the need for specially equipped and trained men to lead the first wave of an amphibious landing operation.

To address this requirement, work aimed at creating and training specialized units began.

In late April 1942, Rear Admiral Henry K. Hewitt, newly assigned as the commander of the Atlantic Fleet's Amphibious Force, became responsible for the command's amphibious training. A joint Army-Navy Amphibious Scouts and Raiders School was established in August 1942 at the new Naval Amphibious Base (NAB) at Little Creek, Virginia. Training at the school included the scouting of shorelines and beaches, small boat operations, night navigation, signaling, small arms familiarization, and limited tactical ground

operations. Scouts and Raiders detachments were first employed in Operation TORCH in November 1942, going ashore shortly before the Allied invasion of North Africa. In January 1943, to accommodate year-round training, the Scouts and Raiders School relocated to a new naval amphibious training base at Fort Pierce on Florida's east coast. Scouts and Raiders detachments continued operations in Italy and France into 1944, primarily conducting scouting, reconnaissance, and intelligence-gathering activities as they took part in landings in Sicily, Salerno, Anzio, Normandy, and Southern France.¹⁴

A second Scouts and Raiders contingent was formed in July 1943 for operations in the South Pacific. Known as Special Service Unit No. 1, the group was initially formed as a combined and joint force, but later underwent a change to become a solely U.S. Navy unit called the 7th Amphibious Scouts. It served in the Pacific for the remainder of the war, taking part in more than 40 amphibious landings. One of the Scouts and Raiders School's last contributions to the war effort was the training and fielding of Amphibious Group Roger to work with Chinese guerrillas.¹⁵

As plans were underway for Operation HUSKY, the 1943 Allied invasion of Sicily, intelligence reports indicated that beaches in occupied Europe were being heavily fortified with steel obstacles. To meet this challenge, the Navy organized and trained the first Navy demolition unit. When Operation HUSKY was carried out, the Navy demolition unit found that there were no obstacles on the beaches of Sicily. The unit returned to Fort Pierce, where the Navy demolition unit evolved into the six-man Naval Combat Demolition Unit (NCDU), with their first training completed in the fall of 1943. The beach fortifications of Hitler's Atlantic wall were the target of the NCDUs. On D-Day for Operation OVERLORD, the invasion of Normandy in France, the NCDUs performed well in operations alongside Army engineers but suffered high casualties—31 men killed and 60 wounded on Omaha Beach and 6 killed and 11 wounded on Utah Beach. For this operation, the unit was awarded a Presidential Unit Citation. In the Pacific, six NCDUs operated with the 7th Amphibious Force.¹⁶

U.S. Marines invaded the Tarawa Atoll in the Pacific in November 1943. Because of ignorance of sea conditions and water depth near the landing sites—a shallow offshore reef caused heavily laden Marines to disembark from landing craft and wade hundreds of yards to shore while under fire—casualties were high. As a result, Rear Admiral Richmond Turner, who had commanded the operation, directed the formation of two Underwater

Demolition Teams (UDTs), whose tasks would include hydrographic reconnaissance to help prevent a repeat of the Tarawa tragedy. The Naval Underwater Demolition and Training Base, established on the island of Maui in Hawaii, became the training site for UDTs One and Two, which were ready in time to support the invasion of the Kwajalein Atoll at the beginning of February 1944.¹⁷ In all, 34 UDTs were established, spearheading every major U.S. amphibious operation in the Central Pacific through the remainder of the war.

In addition to the Navy's UDTs, the OSS fielded a Maritime Unit (MU) and operational swimmers who pioneered innovative combat diving gear, including closed-circuit diving equipment as well as flexible fins and face-masks. They also made use of swimmer submersibles and perfected limpet mine attack techniques. Originally established to enable the infiltration and exfiltration of OSS operatives by sea, the MU later expanded its capabilities to include DA against ships at anchor or other targets. Since Admiral Chester Nimitz barred the OSS from operating in his Pacific theater, General Donovan sent MU personnel to the UDT school on Maui, where they helped with the training and later joined a class of new arrivals from Fort Pierce to form UDT Ten.¹⁸

Marine Raiders

Among the first SOF created in the U.S. military were the Marine Raider battalions, formed in response to President Roosevelt's interest in developing a force similar to Britain's Commandos. As commandant of the Marine Corps, Major General Thomas Holcomb chose the name "Raiders" for the Force. Both the 1st Raider Battalion, under the command of Lieutenant Colonel Merritt A. Edson, and the 2nd Raider Battalion, under Lieutenant Colonel Evans Carlson, were activated in February 1942, less than 90 days after America's entry into the war. Organized and trained for spearheading amphibious landings or conducting raids in the enemy's rear area, the lightly armed Raiders began operating in the South Pacific in August 1942. While many encouraged Colonel Edson to prepare his battalion for operations similar to those of the British Commandos, which were then receiving much attention in the press, Edson preferred to view his unit's role differently. In a quote by Edson on 22 April 1952, he considered his battalion to be one fully capable of conventional operations as part of a division in a major offensive, "while still being perfectly capable of carrying out special raiding

operations.”¹⁹ Eventually, two additional Raider Battalions were activated and employed in the Pacific. In all, the Raiders participated in 20 major campaigns, but they were deactivated in January 1944 when it was determined by the Marine Corps that the units had outlived their original purpose. In February 1944, the four Raider battalions were combined to form the 4th Marine Regiment.

Unconventional Warfare in Europe

UW in Europe originally emerged as a British capability requirement, and it was largely a result of the terrible cost in casualties paid by the empire in World War I. In that conflict, out of a total of 8,904,467 service members mobilized, the British Empire suffered 3,190,235 casualties—908,371 killed or died of other causes; 2,090,212 wounded; and 191,652 captured or missing²⁰—for a total casualty rate of 35.8 percent. (By comparison, the U.S. casualty rate in that war was 8.1 percent).²¹ Such devastating losses led Winston Churchill to assert that the war’s outcome had been a victory “bought so dear as to be indistinguishable from defeat.”²² With war looming again in 1939 and 1940, British leaders knew that they could not afford such losses again. Offices within British intelligence and the War Ministry began exploring alternative forms of warfare that might serve to hold down the number of British casualties in the next conflict. When the countries of Western Europe and Scandinavia were invaded and their populations fell under the yoke of German occupation, pockets of resistance began to form. British officers devised a concept for leveraging this indigenous pool of resistance fighters as one means of reducing British manpower requirements. Churchill and others believed that if sufficient training and materiel support could be provided to these groups, the people of occupied Europe could make an important contribution to their own liberation.

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In July 1940, the SOE was created to orchestrate that support effort.

It was in support of this concept that the OSS established its 34-man operational groups, or OGs. Capable of operating in two sections of 2 officers and 15 non-

commissioned officers (NCOs) each, the OGs provided the blueprint for the U.S. Army Special Forces (SF) A-Detachment formed during the Cold War.

General Donovan viewed the ethnic “melting-pot” population of the U.S. as a strategic asset and targeted recruiting from these various population groups produced French, Italian, Greek, Yugoslav, and Norwegian OGs, each manned with first- or second-generation immigrants who grew up speaking the language and learning the culture of their ancestral homelands. A total of 21 groups operated behind enemy lines in France alone.²³

Also taking part in the UW campaign in Europe were the multinational, three-man Jedburgh teams, each composed of a British or American officer, a second officer who was French or Dutch depending on which country the team would operate in, and an NCO radio operator who could be British, American, or of the target country nationality. The mission of the Jedburghs was to help organize, train, and arm the rapidly growing resistance and to serve as a communications link between the Allied high command and the resistance. A total of 93 Jedburgh missions were carried out behind enemy lines in France and Belgium, and another 9 were conducted in Holland.²⁴

Uniformed Allied SF such as the American OGs, the British and French SAS, and the multinational Jedburgh teams were only deployed to the field beginning on the eve of D-Day for the Normandy invasion of France, the night of 5–6 June 1944. But other Allied UW elements began operating in occupied France in early 1941. Teams of usually three personnel were parachuted or landed by sea into France over the next three years prior to D-Day to organize “circuits,” or networks of trained saboteurs. These operators, known as special operations personnel were a mix of military and civilians and included both men and women. They operated covertly, wearing French-made civilian clothing and carrying forged identification papers with fake identities, and because they had to pass as French citizens, the primary recruiting criteria was language fluency. In addition to training saboteurs, the special operations teams also organized escape and evasion routes for downed Allied airmen and performed other preparation-of-the-environment-type activities in preparation for post-D-Day operations. Jedburgh teams were often assigned to work in support of circuit organizers in the field.

All elements engaged in the Allied UW campaign in Europe operated under the control of a combined and joint UW command—Special Force Headquarters and its satellite branch in Algiers, the Special Projects Operations Center. During the war, Allied UW operations were carried out in France, Belgium, the Netherlands, Denmark, Italy, Corsica, Sardinia, North

Africa, Albania, Yugoslavia, Poland, and Norway. Similar UW operations were executed by OSS and SOE during the war in Burma, China, Vietnam, Laos, Malaya, and Thailand.

Special Operations in the Southwest Pacific Area

The American OSS and British SOE represented a bold and innovative approach to special warfare. Never before had nations created uniformed military forces that were organized, trained, and equipped for the express purpose of rallying and directing the operations of irregular partisans deep in enemy territory, supported by uniquely equipped special operations air squadrons. In the Southwest Pacific area (SWPA), however, General Douglas MacArthur found a different solution to the same operational requirement. Like Admiral Nimitz in the Central Pacific, General MacArthur banned the OSS from operating in his theater. He did so not because he believed special operations and secret intelligence to be unnecessary pursuits, but because he did not want an agency in the theater that had a direct line to Washington capable of bypassing him. Whereas General Eisenhower, in Europe, had made control of such operations by the theater commander a condition for his approval of the Jedburgh and other similar concepts, MacArthur chose a different approach. Fully aware of the utility of guerrilla warfare from his study of military history, he incorporated the development and use of irregulars and underground intelligence networks into his war plans prior to the Japanese attack in December 1941.

The rapid fall of the Philippines to Japanese forces, however, left little time for organizing such networks. Upon the surrender of all U.S. forces in the islands and the departure of General MacArthur to Australia, several U.S. Army officers evaded capture and retreated to the rugged inland portions of the islands to organize and lead Filipino irregulars in large-scale guerrilla warfare against Japanese occupation forces. Two of these officers later served on a Pentagon staff element that developed the U.S. Army SF concept during the early years of the Cold War.

Although the OSS did not operate in the SWPA, General MacArthur established his own command and control organization for UW operations in the Philippines. Rather than depending on an air special operations unit such as the Carpetbaggers in Europe, however, his headquarters kept the resistance groups in the Philippines resupplied with a small fleet of submarines, which were also used for inserting additional personnel as needed.

These U.S.-led guerrilla forces played an important role in support of American ground forces in the liberation of the islands.

Lieutenant General Walter Krueger, commander of the U.S. Sixth Army in the SWPA, became frustrated with a lack of strategic and operational intelligence support and poor interservice cooperation. He decided that he needed his own strategic reconnaissance force, and in November 1943, he formed an *ad hoc* Sixth Army special reconnaissance unit to perform deep reconnaissance and raiding missions for his command. The unit, which became more commonly known as the Alamo Scouts, began operating behind Japanese lines in New Guinea and the Philippines in February 1944. Only 138 volunteers served in the Scouts—never more than 70 at one time—operating in six- or seven-man teams deep behind Japanese lines for weeks or months at a time. The unit conducted a total of at least 106 operations without losing a single man, killing some 500 enemy soldiers, capturing more than 60, and taking part in the liberation of two prisoner of war (POW) camps. For their final mission, the Scouts provided a personal escort for General Krueger as he and his Sixth Army arrived in Japan as part of the Army of Occupation. The Alamo Scouts were deactivated in November 1945.²⁵

To perform missions requiring both beach and hydrographic reconnaissance and ground operations, General Krueger and Admiral Daniel E. Barbey combined NCDUs from the admiral's 7th Amphibious Force with ground operators, along with an Australian group, to form the joint (Army-Navy-Marine) and combined 7th Amphibious Force Special Service Unit No. 1.²⁶

Apparently pleased with the return on investment from his *ad hoc* special operations units, General Krueger added yet another. Having followed the development and employment of Army Ranger battalions in Europe and the Mediterranean, he decided that such a unit was needed for executing larger-scale raids behind enemy lines in the SWPA theater of operations. He chose the 98th Field Artillery Battalion to be converted to a Ranger battalion. The men of the battalion were asked to volunteer to undergo rigorous training in amphibious operations, patrolling, small-unit tactics, and speed marches. Those who chose not to volunteer were reassigned to other units. On 26 September 1944, upon completion of the training program, the unit was officially redesignated as the 6th Ranger Battalion.²⁷

Elite Raiding Forces in Europe

The Anglo-American Allies also found a need for elite, light infantry-raiding forces, or shock troops—Britain’s Commandos, the U.S. Army’s Rangers, and the U.S.-Canadian First Special Service Force—to spearhead invasion forces and conduct other special missions in Europe. General Marshall initially saw the Rangers as a means for select personnel to gain badly needed

General Marshall initially saw the Rangers as a means for select personnel to gain badly needed combat experience early in the war, after which they could return to their conventional infantry units and share that experience.

combat experience early in the war, after which they could return to their conventional infantry units and share that experience. The 1st Ranger Battalion, under Colonel William O. Darby, was created in June 1942, and an additional four battalions were formed in Europe during the war, operating in North Africa, Italy, and France. As already mentioned, the 6th Ranger Battalion was formed and operated in the South Pacific. The Canadian-American First Special Service Force, unofficially known as the Devil’s Brigade, was established and trained at Fort William Henry Harrison, Montana, and operated in the Aleutians, Italy, and southern France.

Air Special Operations in Europe and the Mediterranean

All SOE and OSS missions in support of resistance movements in the occupied countries of Europe and the Mediterranean, of course, would not have been possible without dedicated contingents of specially modified aircraft and the specially trained crews to man them. These special air operations units inserted operatives into occupied France and elsewhere, either by parachute drop or by air landing. They also kept special operators in the field sustained by airdropping supplies as well as arms and equipment for the resistance. As early as October 1943, the special flight section of the Twelfth Air Force’s 5th Bombardment Wing operated in North Africa as one such unit. The section later became the 885th Bombardment Squadron (Special) based in Brindisi, Italy. As the 885th, the unit flew operations in support of Allied SF conducting UW with resistance forces in Yugoslavia.

The largest such unit was the 801st Bombardment Group, repurposed early in the war from anti-submarine duty to special air operations in Europe. Equipped with specially modified B-24 Liberator bombers, the group

operated from Harrington Air Base in England and came to be known as the Carpetbaggers. The Allied special air operations crews also succeeded in recovering hundreds of downed Allied aircrews.²⁸

Unconventional Warfare in China and Southeast Asia

In China, Lieutenant General Albert C. Wedemeyer, who had replaced General Stillwell, was able to make progress in equipping and training the Chinese Army with increased American logistical support. At a meeting in January 1945, Generalissimo Chiang Kai-shek, General Wedemeyer, and General Donovan agreed on a plan for creating a force of Chinese commandos. Such a force, trained and equipped by the OSS and augmented with veteran American officers and NCOs, would be much more effective, they believed, than regular Chinese Army units. The plan called for OSS to provide the American personnel and the Chinese Army to provide sufficient personnel to form 20 commandos, each containing up to 200 men.²⁹ Only a fraction of those, however, were prepared in time to see action before war's end.

OSS also fielded special operations teams for UW operations in China. Major Paul Cyr, an OSS officer who had completed two missions with a Jedburgh team in France, transferred to the OSS detachment in China at the end of the European campaign. There, Cyr led a team of OSS men and Chinese guerrillas on a bridge demolition mission, targeting a mile-long railway bridge over the Yellow River near the ancient city of Kaifeng. The strategic value of the bridge was evident by the loss of 2,000 Japanese soldiers aboard the troop train that was crossing the bridge at the time it was blown on 9 August 1945, the very same day the American Air Force dropped an atomic bomb on the Japanese city of Nagasaki. The train and its cargo of enemy troops dropped into the Yellow River as two full spans of the bridge collapsed.³⁰

By early 1945, General Wedemeyer was planning offensive operations against Japanese forces along the coast of China, and he became concerned about the prospect of Japanese forces in Vietnam driving northward to interfere with such operations. He signaled Washington that he wished OSS to commence UW operations in Indochina, working with the anti-Japanese resistance group most capable of interdicting such a drive toward China.³¹ Resistance in Indochina included both native Vietnamese groups and French groups formed after the Japanese takeover of the area from the former Vichy

French government. Since an earlier policy by President Roosevelt prohibited U.S. forces from aiding France or Britain in any way in regaining their colonies, French resistance groups operating in Indochina were barred from consideration. This left only Vietnamese groups, and the most effective was a group called the Viet Minh, led by Ho Chi Minh, who quickly agreed to support the American effort. An OSS lieutenant met with Ho Chi Minh in Tonkin in May 1945. With contact established, the OSS command in China dispatched a team under Major Allison Thomas to carry out the mission. Ho Chi Minh and his military leader, Vo Nguyen Giap, provided 200 of their most able fighters to be armed and trained by the OSS team, which supplied the guerrillas with rifles, machine guns, grenades, and mortars.³² Operations with the Viet Minh guerrillas were only getting underway by the time the Japanese surrendered in September 1945. The OSS also began parachuting agents into Laos in 1945 to organize and arm Lao guerrillas and assist them in their fight against the Japanese occupiers.³³

One of America's final and most unusual and successful UW operations took place in Thailand and was conducted for almost entirely political reasons. When the U.S. Government learned of British plans to occupy Thailand at war's end and incorporate the state into the British Empire, the Department of State requested that OSS take action to prevent such an outcome and preserve the country's sovereignty. While U.S. diplomats viewed Thailand as an "opening wedge for post-war American economic and political influence in Southeast Asia,"³⁴ British officials saw the nation's post-war independence as "a challenge to the colonial system in Asia."³⁵ At a time when Thailand was occupied by a dozen Japanese divisions and no Allied conventional units were present, OSS operatives infiltrated the country along with a cadre of OSS-trained Thai resistance members who had been students in the U.S. at the outbreak of war. There, they supported the Free Thai movement, led by Prince Regent Pridi Phanomyong. In Bangkok, Pridi housed the sub-rosa OSS headquarters in the elaborate Suan Kulap Palace, next door to his own, informing the Japanese that the building was occupied by the Thai Criminal Investigation Division. The headquarters staff, which included former Jedburgh operators from Europe, grew to 30 Americans by the time the war ended, with six powerful radio transmitters that were seldom off the air, all in the middle of a city occupied by 7,000 Japanese soldiers.³⁶ The JCS approved the commencement of large-scale air drops of arms and supplies in June 1945, and 74 tons had been delivered to OSS teams at six different

locations by early July.³⁷ By late August, eight OSS training centers were in operation at locations throughout Thailand.³⁸

Meanwhile, SOE had begun its own UW operation in Thailand, and before long, the two operations were being carried out “almost disastrously at odds with one another.”³⁹ OSS representatives, wary of British intentions, declared in a meeting with SOE Force 136 on 4 June 1945 that a combined U.S.-British operation was out of the question.⁴⁰ While the OSS trained as many as 8,000 resistance fighters, it was estimated that some 60 percent of the Thai army was prepared to join the resistance if and when it began armed operations against the Japanese occupiers.⁴¹ The war would end before such hostilities began. The British abandoned their plans to gain political control over post-war Thailand, and at a dinner in Bangkok on Christmas Eve 1945, the young King, Prince Regent Pridi, and others thanked American officers for helping Thailand maintain its independence.⁴² In recognition of the OSS accomplishment, President Eisenhower appointed General Donovan U.S. Ambassador to Thailand in 1953. As one benefit of the influence gained by the successful operation, U.S. forces were allowed to establish several large bases throughout Thailand during the Vietnam War.

During the final weeks of the war, as Japanese units in the field slowly began capitulating when informed that their government had surrendered, OSS teams were formed to carry out humanitarian missions in Japanese-held territory to locate and recover Allied prisoners captured during the war. A dozen such “mercy missions” were carried out in China, Korea, Laos, and Vietnam during the final weeks of August 1945.⁴³

The Doolittle Raid of April 1942

Mention should be made of one operation that is not often included in accounts of World War II special operations since it did not result in a standing organization. In the months immediately following the disastrous Japanese attack at Pearl Harbor, President Franklin D. Roosevelt sought a way to revive the spirit of the American people and the morale of U.S. forces. Blending Army and Navy resources and accepting a high degree of risk, Army Air Force leaders assembled a hybrid, specially recruited and trained force of land-based medium bombers and crews to launch a long-range strike on the Japanese homeland from the deck of an aircraft carrier. The operation was carried out on 18 April 1942. Although damage to the Japanese war machine was minimal, the innovative application of joint striking power provided a

Not often viewed as such, the action clearly fit the description of a special operation.

psychological blow to Japan, a lift in confidence to the U.S. military, and the president's desired boost in spirit to the American people. Not often viewed as such, the action clearly fit the description of a special operation.

The Early Cold War Years

By executive order, President Harry S. Truman dissolved OSS effective 1 October 1945, with all special operations and intelligence functions of the organization transferred to the War Department on that date.⁴⁴ Within the War Department, they were established as a continuing entity designated as the U.S. Army Strategic Services Unit.⁴⁵ The Navy demobilized most UDTs, leaving two on each coast.⁴⁶ All U.S. Army Air Force special air operations units were disbanded at the end of World War II,⁴⁷ and the Army deactivated all of its Ranger battalions at the close of the war.

The National Security Council (NSC) was established under the provisions of the National Security Act of 1947 to assist and advise the president on domestic, foreign, and military policies relating to national security and to formalize and facilitate foreign and defense policy coordination among federal departments and agencies. The legislation also provided for the establishment of the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA); the National Military Establishment with Departments of the Army, Navy, and Air Force; and the position of Secretary of Defense. The National Military Establishment would later be renamed the Department of Defense (DOD).⁴⁸

Following the creation of the U.S. Air Force, *ad hoc* air SOF were reactivated to support U.S. COIN operations in the Philippines. During the late 1940s, these units conducted air foreign internal defense (FID) and psychological operations (PSYOP) to contribute to the 1954 defeat of communist "Huk" insurgents in the Philippines.

The U.S. Armed Forces found the need to regenerate Army, Navy, and Air Force SOF in support of United Nations Command operations during the Korean War from 1950 to 1953. The critical need for Navy UDTs quickly became apparent, and three teams deployed to Korea to carry out demolition of railroad tunnels and bridges along the Korean coastlines. On 15 September 1950, two UDTs cleared paths for U.S. amphibious landings at Inchon, Korea. A month later, UDTs were supporting mine-clearing operations, with frogmen finding and marking mines that were then cleared by minesweepers.

UDTs also conducted beach and river reconnaissance and inserted Korean guerrillas behind enemy lines from the sea.⁴⁹

With no other standing, active SOF other than the Navy's UDTs when war began in Korea in June 1950, the U.S. had to resort once again to an array of *ad hoc* solutions. The Army established Airborne Ranger companies, all of which were deactivated before the end of the war, as well as a succession of provisional units engaged in UW operations. The Air Force activated three wings of a new organization—the Air Resupply and Communication Service—during the war to support UW operations. The 581st Air Resupply and Communication Wing was the only one of the three to see action in Korea, and when hostilities ended, the Air Force deactivated all air resupply and communication units.⁵⁰ Finally, the CIA operated a unit known as the Joint Advisory Commission, Korea for the conduct of covert UW operations in North Korea, maritime raids along the North Korean coast, and effecting the escape and evasion of downed Air Force pilots and crews.

But the need for standing SOF units slowly began to gain traction to address critical early Cold War mission requirements during the 1950s. In 1951, Army Brigadier General Robert McClure began campaigning for a permanent Army PSYOP and UW capability, and the Psychological Warfare Division of the Army General School was established at Fort Riley, Kansas.

Actually, others had already proposed a permanent U.S. UW capability. Just after the end of the war in Europe, Jedburgh and Norwegian OG veteran Major William E. Colby, who nearly twenty years later would become director of the CIA, wrote a memorandum to the chief of the Special Operations Branch at OSS headquarters in Washington, D.C., proposing future units organized for effective UW operations based on his own experience.⁵¹ Going even further, Franklin A. Lindsay, a veteran of OSS UW operations with the resistance in Yugoslavia, wrote a concept paper in 1947 proposing the establishment of a permanent "Guerrilla Corps" directly under the Secretary of Defense.⁵²

In response to the Soviet threat at the dawn of the Cold War, planners within the Department of the Army were studying operational concepts for defending Western Europe against attack by the Warsaw Pact nations, particularly the Soviet Union. As part of this effort, they debated the value of UW, including its use in enabling resistance groups in Soviet-occupied Eastern European countries to carry out sabotage of bridges and other transportation infrastructure to delay the movement of enemy divisions toward

Western Europe. Many saw the value in such operations. What was needed was an Army unit capable of working with such irregulars on the ground—organizing, arming, training, advising, and if necessary, leading them in high-risk activities far behind enemy lines. It would, in other words, involve the same kind of functions performed by the OSS during World War II.

Early in 1951, a UW working group that eventually included General McClure, Jedburgh veteran Colonel Aaron Bank, former Philippines resistance leaders Colonel Russell Volckmann and Colonel Wendell Fertig, and Merrill's Marauders veteran Colonel Melvin Blair began work on a concept within the Department of the Army's Office of the Chief of Psychological Warfare in the Pentagon. The main difficulty was in determining the type of unit to perform such a role. Ranger and Airborne reconnaissance units were briefly considered, but the decision was finally made to create a totally new kind of unit devoted almost entirely to UW. The emerging SF concept, then, focused primarily on the European Theater, emphasizing the need for a force to organize guerrilla warfare in Central and Eastern Europe in the event of war. With this setting in mind, the concept developers adopted the European OSS model for UW in the theater.⁵³

In March 1952, Army Chief of Staff General J. Lawton Collins approved the establishment of a Psychological Warfare Center at Fort Bragg, formed by moving the Psychological Warfare Division from Fort Riley to Fort Bragg. In June, the Army activated the 10th Special Forces Group (Airborne) at Fort Bragg, with Colonel Bank in command, to prepare for and conduct UW. In June 1953, workers in Soviet-occupied East Berlin revolted but were violently suppressed by Red Army forces. As a result, the JCS decided that SF needed to be forward based in West Germany. In September of that year, the 10th Special Forces Group was divided, with one part maintaining the designation of the 10th Group and relocating to Bad Tölz, West Germany, while the other portion remained at Fort Bragg and formed the core of the newly activated 77th Special Forces Group (Airborne).

In December 1956, the Army's Psychological Warfare Center at Fort Bragg was enlarged and renamed the Special Warfare Center. In June of the following year, a third group, the 1st Special Forces Group (Airborne), was activated in Okinawa. In June 1960, the 77th Special Forces Group was redesignated the 7th Special Forces Group, regionally oriented on South and Central America, and in September of that year, the 1st Special Forces Regiment was established as the parent regiment for all U.S. Army SF groups.

The U.S. Air Force activated a new unit in 1953 to perform missions similar to those of the pathfinder detachments that jumped behind enemy lines in advance of main parachute assault forces during World War II. The pathfinders provided updated weather information and emplaced visual guidance aids to guide in the aircraft during major airborne operations. The Air Force Pathfinders, who became known as Combat Control Teams, provided air navigational aids and air traffic control. Other Air Force special tactics units were also formed, including Air Force Pararescuemen, to conduct personnel recovery operations and special operations weather teams to provide weather information in support of global special operations, especially in hostile or denied territory.⁵⁴ Other active duty and Reserve elements of the Air Force flew missions in support of covert CIA operations in Tibet, Iran, Eastern Europe, French Indochina, and Cuba during the 1950s. Special operations became a mission of the Air National Guard in the late 1950s, but during the early 1960s, the Air Commandos were reactivated at Hurlburt Field, Florida. The modern Air Commandos later operated in Southeast Asia.⁵⁵

Meanwhile, Army Special Operations Forces (ARSOF) began deploying personnel to the Republic of Vietnam from Okinawa in 1956, with the first SF soldier killed there in October of that year. Unrest began in the Congo as it gained independence on 30 June 1960, and various factions began competing to assume power. When Belgium withdrew its troops from the country, teams from the 10th Special Forces Group in Germany conducted an operation to evacuate missionaries and other personnel from the country. Finally, during the waning days of the Eisenhower administration, as the CIA began developing plans for a rebel invasion force to be landed in Cuba, the president approved a CIA request for three dozen SF personnel to train the rebel brigade at a secret base in Guatemala.⁵⁶ Army and Air Force SOF soon began arriving in Laos to conduct FID in support of the Royal Lao Army and to begin training a secret guerrilla force among the ethnic Hmong population.⁵⁷

The First Age of SOF had served as a “proof of concept” phase as the Services slowly came to realize that there was a valid requirement for standing, permanent SOF organizations. Just as the period between the world wars of the first half of the twentieth century saw the

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development and promotion of airpower theory, the post-World War II years witnessed an advancement in special warfare theory, although among a very limited interest group. Next would come a critically important growth stage in which SOF benefited immensely from political interest and advocacy at the highest level to enjoy a period of ascendancy. SOF leaders recognized and took advantage of an opportunity to allow SOF to not only rise from obscurity within the military but to take a leading role in the Nation's protracted Vietnam challenge.

The Second Age of SOF: Promotion and Expansion

On 6 January 1961, at a time when small nations around the world were breaking free from European colonialism, Soviet premier Nikita Khrushchev gave a speech in Moscow declaring that the USSR would support "wars of national liberation" around the world. The speech alarmed President John F. Kennedy, who was sworn in as the 35th president of the U.S. just two weeks later. Already aware that he was inheriting foreign affairs crises in Laos, Vietnam, the Congo, and Cuba from the previous administration, President Kennedy saw a growing need for a more vigorous special warfare capacity within the U.S. Armed Forces. Based on the Soviet stance, he especially sought to build a more robust COIN capability. One of his first actions was to establish a Special Group (COIN) within the NSC, and on 23 February, he met with the JCS, where he stressed his belief that the Armed Services needed to greatly improve their capabilities in guerrilla and counter-guerrilla operations.

The new president read everything he could find on the subject of guerrilla warfare, including Cuban revolutionary Che Guevara's newly published book on the subject. Publishers of the *Marine Corps Gazette* devoted their entire January 1962 issue to the topic of guerrilla warfare, and President Kennedy read it from cover to cover, as he informed the editor. One article he particularly liked was written by Roger Hilsman, a man the president had recently appointed to head the Bureau of Intelligence and Research at the Department of State.

Hilsman, a West Point graduate with a Yale PhD, had served as a platoon leader in the famed Merrill's Marauders in Burma during World War II. He was wounded in an engagement in which his company took an extremely high number of casualties. After hospitalization, he returned to Burma, this

time to join OSS Detachment 101 in its UW campaign, leading an indigenous guerrilla battalion that he later described as “one Englishman, three Americans, about one hundred and fifty Chinese, another one hundred and fifty Karens, a couple of dozen Kachins and Shans, one Bengali, two Sikhs, and now about one hundred ethnic Burmese in Japanese uniforms.”⁵⁸ President Kennedy spoke with Hilsman at length about his *Marine Corps Gazette* article, questioning him on every aspect of his guerrilla warfare experience. Hilsman informed the president that special warfare of the type that he experienced in Burma was today the mission of U.S. Army SF.⁵⁹ The president made time to review existing SF doctrinal publications and equipment and directed improvements in both.⁶⁰

President Kennedy had also undoubtedly heard first-hand accounts of World War II guerrilla warfare from longtime friend Stewart Alsop, then one of Washington’s top newspaper columnists and political analysts. During the war, Alsop had served in OSS as the American member of a multinational Jedburgh team supporting the French Resistance. The president’s deputy national security advisor, economist and historian Walt W. Rostow, was also an OSS veteran, having served in an economic warfare capacity in London during the war. Rostow urged the president to increase the number of SF advisers sent to Vietnam by the Eisenhower administration from 685 to more than 1,000.⁶¹

Counterinsurgency and Vietnam

The Kennedy Administration worked to develop an integrated COIN campaign for Vietnam, complete with political, economic, and informational dimensions. To help establish the secure environment required for such a campaign to succeed, William Colby recounted that the president envisioned a limited military intervention in the form of a COIN training and advisory mission led by units such as the Army’s SF.⁶² He pushed for a vast increase and improvement in COIN training and education throughout the Armed Services, fully aware of the radical nature of this shift from the conventional warfare mindset the Services had become comfortable with. When addressing the 1962 graduating class at West Point, the president described the requirement for “a whole new kind of strategy, a wholly different kind of military training.”⁶³ The president’s ambitions, however, were not met with enthusiasm by the Services. General Maxwell Taylor, chairman of the JCS

from 1962 to 1964, later reflected that the Service chiefs went along with it, but that their hearts were not in it.⁶⁴

The U.S. Army had actually begun establishing a limited COIN capability several years earlier, with current efforts under the direction of Chief of Staff General George Decker. Perhaps in anticipation of the incoming president's interest in COIN, the Army established a Special Warfare Directorate within the Office of the Deputy Chief of Staff for Operations in January 1961. One of the directorate's functions was to oversee the development and implementation of COIN instruction at the Army's Special Warfare Center at Fort Bragg, North Carolina. The commander of the Special Warfare Center, Colonel (soon to be Brigadier General) William P. Yarborough, would play a leading role in promoting President Kennedy's COIN policy. Roger Hilsman had known General Yarborough since they served together in London during the early 1950s. In 1962, Hilsman recommended that Yarborough be appointed the next commander of U.S. Forces in Vietnam because of his strong background in special warfare, but the Pentagon recommended instead the conventionally minded General Paul D. Harkins. Despite General Harkins's lack of any COIN experience, President Kennedy approved his appointment, fearing that reaching down in the ranks to a brigadier general would only antagonize the Army brass.⁶⁵ The president did, however, take action to ensure that General Yarborough's command of the Special Warfare Center was extended.

General Yarborough was a close personal friend and West Point classmate of President Kennedy's senior military aide, Army Major General Chester "Ted" Clifton. Clifton had been recommended for the job by the president's brother, Bobby Kennedy, and a close friendship soon developed between the president and the general. According to Kennedy press secretary Pierre Salinger, General Clifton had more influence with President Kennedy than any other military aide because he was with the president every day, traveling with him and providing him with military intelligence briefings daily.⁶⁶

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The friendship between General Clifton and General Yarborough proved instrumental in the president's efforts to raise the status of the then-obscure SF. Discussions between the two generals included talk of the unit's desire to gain authorization to wear the

green beret that many SF operators were wearing unofficially when away from the flagpole.⁶⁷ When the Department of the Army received word that President Kennedy wanted all SF members to wear green berets during his upcoming visit to Fort Bragg, the Army hastily issued a change to a regulation in effect at the time that banned any special headgear for elite units. The president visited Fort Bragg on 12 October 1961, during which time the Special Warfare Center staged an elaborate special warfare capability demonstration featuring SF, PSYOP, and civil affairs (CA) personnel.⁶⁸

President Kennedy and General Decker oversaw an astonishing expansion of SF. In 1961 alone, the first year of his presidency, U.S. Army SF grew from 1,500 men to 9,000.⁶⁹ In March 1961, the 11th and 12th Special Forces Groups were constituted in the U.S. Army Reserve. The Army also activated the 5th Special Forces Group at Fort Bragg on 21 September 1961, bringing to four the number of active groups. According to one historian, the Special Warfare School implemented changes in SF training that resulted in a drop in the washout rate from almost 90 percent to around 70 percent. As a result, the school began producing many more Green Berets at a time when there was an ever-increasing demand for them.⁷⁰ In 1963, three more active duty groups were formed—the 8th Special Forces Group on 1 April, the 6th Special Forces Group on 1 May, and the 3rd Special Forces Group on 5 December.⁷¹

The president also mandated an expansion of the curriculum at the Special Warfare Center, directing that courses be opened to students from partner foreign nations. He also directed a change in the Center's manning document, raising the rank of the commandant from colonel (6th officer paygrade, or O-6) to brigadier general (7th officer paygrade, or O-7) to accommodate the continued service of the newly promoted Brigadier General Yarborough in that position.⁷² The Center also began attracting several high-profile guest speakers, including Indochina expert Dr. Bernard Fall and Deputy National Security Adviser Walt Rostow, who visited on 28 June 1961.⁷³

The Navy, too, had begun consideration of ways to improve and expand its special warfare capabilities even before President Kennedy's election. Chief of Naval Operations (CNO) Admiral Arleigh Burke strongly believed that UW was an appropriate mission for the Navy, and he advocated upgrading the current UDTs to add training in such areas as survival and escape and evasion. He further suggested that there was also a need within the Navy for a small group of young officers trained in guerrilla warfare by the Army's SF. On 11 July 1960, he directed his deputy, Admiral Wallace Beakley, to

complete a study on how the Navy might develop a UW capability similar to that of SF. A UW working group, later renamed the Unconventional Activities Committee, was formed within the Navy staff to carry out the study.

In early May 1961, Admiral Burke also issued a directive calling for increased training in guerrilla warfare throughout the Navy. In its final report, the committee recommended the establishment of two new special warfare units to be known as SEAL units, the name being an acronym for Sea, Air, Land—the three operating environments for the teams. Because Admiral Burke's successor as CNO, Admiral George Anderson, Jr., was not a fan of UW, the SEALs' priority mission focus would be on sabotage, demolition, and other clandestine activities. Admiral Anderson signed a document activating SEAL Teams One and Two, one for each coast, on 1 January 1962. Both teams were formed with UDT personnel. Team One was established at NAB Coronado in California, while Team Two stood up at NAB Little Creek in Virginia. President Kennedy, a special operator himself as a patrol torpedo, or PT boat, commander in World War II, also maintained interest in development of the SEALs. The final directive issued for SEAL operations in Vietnam, in addition to the DA roles, included the training of indigenous personnel. One of the original team commanders traveled to Fort Bragg to meet with SF friends he had known from underwater operations training at Key West, Florida. There, he was provided with the Army's UW doctrine manuals.⁷⁴ The first Navy SEALs arrived in Vietnam to begin advisory operations in March 1962. In February 1966, a SEAL detachment deployed to Vietnam for the purpose of conducting DA operations. Eventually, eight SEAL platoons served in the country on a continuing basis.⁷⁵

Naval special warfare (NSW) in Vietnam also saw the development of small craft reminiscent of the PT boats that operated in both the Pacific and European theaters during World War II. These included the Patrol Boat Fast for coastal patrol and interdiction operations and a robust riverine warfare capability. UDTs supported amphibious ready groups, operating with river patrol boats. UDT personnel also served as advisors to their South Vietnamese counterparts.

Also responding to President Kennedy's call for an increase in America's COIN capacity, Air Force Chief of Staff General Curtis E. LeMay directed the establishment of the 4400th Combat Crew Training Squadron (CCTS) at Hurlburt Field, Florida, in April 1961. As with SF, the CCTS rapidly expanded once operations in Vietnam began, growing to a group by March 1962 and a

month later becoming part of a new Special Air Warfare Center (SAWC) at Eglin Air Force Base in Florida. Responsible for COIN training and operations, the unit soon earned the nickname “Jungle Jim” while conducting operations in Latin America, Africa, the Middle East, and Southeast Asia. Under the code name “Farm Gate,” the 4400th CCTS began flying combat missions in South Vietnam in November 1961.

In 1964, there were two further developments in the expanding air SOF capability. The World War II-era Air Commandos were reestablished for operations in Laos, providing air COIN support to the Royal Lao Army, and in Vietnam, the first fixed-wing gunships, AC-47s, entered service. Air Force Special Operations Forces (AFSOF), committed to the war in Vietnam, had grown to 10,000 airmen and 550 aircraft in 19 squadrons by 1966.⁷⁶

SOF also emerged as pioneers in interagency cooperation, as they collaborated with entities such as the CIA. In November 1961, early SF medical support missions to Vietnam grew into the

highly successful CIA-SF-run Civilian Irregular Defense Group (CIDG) program. Eventually, the program ran some 80 CIDG camps totaling more than 30,000 irregular soldiers. Additionally, SF carried out long-range reconnaissance, reaction force, and DA

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operations with nearly 6,000 indigenous troops as part of projects Delta, Sigma, and Omega. Including their advisory support to regional and popular forces, soldiers of the 5th Special Forces Group, numbering fewer than 3,000 men, trained, advised, and in some cases led a total of roughly 60,000 armed irregulars during the war, providing a force multiplication factor of 20-to-1.⁷⁷

From November 1962 through 1963, SOF experienced mixed results from a DOD initiative known as Operation SWITCHBACK. President Kennedy had grown mistrustful of the CIA as a result of the April 1961 Bay of Pigs failure in Cuba. By late 1962, he had grown impatient with the Agency’s lack of progress in carrying out UW operations that he had directed in North Vietnam. The president decided to shift responsibility for some major CIA projects in Vietnam to the DOD. This included not only the North Vietnam UW operation but the CIDG project, as well.

To orchestrate the UW mission, the DOD established a classified joint command, innocuously called the Military Assistance Command, Vietnam, Studies and Observation Group (SOG), in April 1964. Under Operation

PLAN 34A, SOF implemented four distinct missions. The first involved a continuation of the CIA's established efforts to insert, by sea or by parachute, South Vietnamese agents into North Vietnam to covertly build intelligence-gathering networks and organize resistance. The second mission, a somewhat successful PSYOP, involved the fabrication of a fictitious home-grown resistance movement within North Vietnam. Third was operations aimed at maritime interdiction along the coast in the north, while the fourth studies and observation group mission—the one that was to prove most successful—involved cross-border special reconnaissance (SR) operations into Laos.⁷⁸ SOG's politically and militarily high-risk, cross-border reconnaissance operations provided valuable intelligence while also providing opportunities to direct air strikes against the Ho Chi Minh trail by which the North infiltrated troops and supplies into South Vietnam.

On 25 June 1963, the day before his famous *Ich bin ein Berliner* speech in Berlin, President Kennedy visited Fliegerhorst Kaserne in Hanau, West Germany, where he inspected troops and observed several static displays by U.S. military units stationed in the country. At one point, he saw a display by the 10th Special Forces Group and observed Green Berets demonstrating the use of some of their communications equipment. Back at the White House in July, the president commented in a memorandum to Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara, "I was tremendously impressed with the Special Forces Unit in West Germany."⁷⁹

SF established "resident" detachments during the late 1950s and 1960s, such as Special Forces Detachment-Korea, the Taiwan Resident Detachment, and Detachment "A" in West Berlin. A somewhat larger presence, the 46th Special Forces Company served for several years in Thailand.

To operationalize President Kennedy's COIN strategy, the Army established four regional Special Action Forces (SAF), each task-organized around an SF group with attached CA, engineer, medical, military intelligence, and Army Security Agency detachments. Additional attachments as needed might include aviation, intelligence, PSYOP, military police, signal, and electronic warfare elements. Primarily engaged in civic action work, all operations were coordinated with U.S. embassies in the region to ensure that activities complemented interagency development programs. The SAFs also managed security assistance training teams, as well as preparing, deploying, and evaluating training and assistance teams throughout their region. These organizations included SAF Latin America, formed in 1963 around the 8th

Special Forces Group based in Panama, and SAF Asia, built around the 1st Special Forces Group in 1964 and based in Okinawa. The remaining two—SAF Middle East, formed on the 3rd Special Forces Group, and SAF Africa, based on the 6th Special Forces Group—were stationed at Fort Bragg. All SAFs were dissolved by 1970, when the approaching end of U.S. involvement in Vietnam resulted in the cutting of assistance programs and the reduction of U.S. diplomatic missions. On average, SOF conducted 70 mobile training team (MTT) missions to third-world countries per year from 1963 to 1970.⁸⁰

In the spring of 1970, intelligence reports indicated that American POWs were being held in a small prison camp at Son Tay in North Vietnam. At the Pentagon, Brigadier General Donald D. Blackburn, a veteran of the World War II UW campaign in the Philippines, conceived a plan for a raid on the camp to rescue the prisoners. In November of that year, Joint Contingency Task Force Ivory Coast was activated under the command of General Blackburn, and the raid was carried out by U.S. Army and Air Force SOF on 20–21 November 1970. The otherwise well-conducted raid failed, however, to achieve its objective because the prisoners had been moved earlier due to threatened flooding of a nearby river.⁸¹

In action elsewhere, Army SF training teams conducted FID and COIN operations during the 1960s in Bolivia, Venezuela, Guatemala, Colombia, and the Dominican Republic. In 1968, Bolivian rangers trained by U.S. Army SF tracked down and captured Cuban revolutionary Che Guevara.

The Post-Vietnam Years

The post-Vietnam 1970s proved to be lean years for SOF, with all Service components experiencing budget cuts and personnel shortages as the DOD attempted to put the Vietnam experience behind it. Between 1969 and 1975, funding for U.S. Army SF was cut by 90 percent and the Force was reduced almost out of existence.⁸² The Army deactivated the 3rd Special Forces Group in 1969, the 6th Special Forces Group in 1971, the 8th Special Forces Group in 1972, and the 1st Special Forces Group in 1974. The 7th Special Forces Group narrowly missed being the next in line for deactivation.

Even ARSOF doctrine and terminology changed during the Southeast Asian conflict. Entering the 1960s, the term for the secondary mission of SF was “counterinsurgency,” but that changed when General Harold K. Johnson became chief of staff in 1964. General Johnson coined the term “stability operations” for the third principal mission for the Army, following the

missions of waging general and limited warfare. He preferred the term over “counterinsurgency,” which he viewed as a component of stability operations.⁸³ The term “counterinsurgency” was thus stricken from Army doctrine, and as a consequence, the SF doctrinal mission set became UW, stability operations, and DA.⁸⁴

The Air Force’s SAWC was redesignated the U.S. Air Force Special Operations Force in the summer of 1968, and in June 1974, it was renamed yet again, becoming the 834th Tactical Composite Wing (TCW). Thirteen months later came a final redesignation as the 834th TCW became the 1st Special Operations Wing (SOW).

By the late 1970s, terrorism was increasingly becoming an area of interest to SOF as a growing number of commercial airliner hijackings resulted in hostage situations. SOF sought to learn from two highly successful foreign hostage rescue operations: one conducted by Israel Defense Force commandos to free 102 hostages from Air France Flight 139 at the Entebbe Airport in Uganda on 4 July 1976 and another carried out by West German GSG-9 (*Grenzschutzgruppe 9 der Bundespolizei*, which means Border Protection Group 9) commandos at Mogadishu, Somalia, on 18 October 1977 to free 86 hostages of Lufthansa Flight 181. Efforts to establish a U.S. CT and hostage rescue capability began in November 1977 when the U.S. Army 5th Special Forces Group organized a force known as “Blue Light” that served as an interim capability until a permanent special mission unit was activated the following year.

On 4 November 1979, Iranian radicals stormed the U.S. Embassy in Tehran, taking 52 Americans hostage. An attempted rescue of the hostages by a special operations task force on 24 April 1980—Operation EAGLE CLAW—ended in disaster at a refueling site in the Iranian desert known as Desert One. As described in an edition of the USSOCOM publication, *History*, “this event culminated a period of SOF decline in the 1970s.”⁸⁵

While the Second Age of SOF was marked by an impressive growth in capacity with all Services increasing the number of special operations units and the overall strength of the Force, the next age would witness historic organizational changes and an increase in SOF’s inventory of capabilities, missions, and core tasks. This would result in an extraordinary expansion in the strategic utility of SOF and in their recognition as America’s force of choice.

The Third Age of SOF: Regeneration and Validation

The 1960s were a time of growth for SOF, with all Services expanding their special operations capacity, refining tactics and techniques, and broadening their scope of COIN and associated capabilities. During the 1970s, much of the growth dissipated as budgets were cut and downsizing hit the Force following the Vietnam War. The decade culminated with a tragic failure that proved in the long term to be beneficial for SOF. With the 1980s began a period of regeneration of the SOF enterprise and advances in organization and equipment, improvements in personnel assessment and selection, and an ever-growing base of experience that would contribute to SOF's validation in the eyes of senior civilian and military leaders within the DOD. The broad range of capabilities mastered by SOF during the Third Age expands the vision for the versatile force required to meet the challenges of the Fourth Age.

The failed April 1980 Iranian hostage rescue mission proved to be the catalyst for change that initiated the Third Age of SOF. In May 1980, the JCS commissioned a Special Operations Review Group to examine all aspects of the mission, focusing particularly on the planning, organization, coordination, direction, and control of the operation to determine what factors led to the failure. The review group, chaired by Admiral James L. Holloway III and commonly referred to as the Holloway Commission, included six general and flag officers from all Services who had extensive military experience, especially in covert and special operations. Three of the members were on active duty, and three were retired. The Holloway Commission's final report to the JCS described 23 issues that were examined in detail and provided two recommendations. First, it called for the establishment of a Counterterrorism Joint Task Force (CTJTF) to function as a field agency of the JCS with permanently assigned staff personnel and forces. Second, it recommended that the JCS consider establishing a special operations advisory panel composed of carefully selected senior officers with backgrounds in special operations.⁸⁶

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The CTJTF called for in the commission's report was established in December 1980. Throughout the SOF community, further reviews were

conducted of special operations doctrine, organization, training, equipment, and personnel, and work began in documenting requirements for change. This marked the commencement of a period of rebirth and reorganization, a renewal of interest in and professionalization of America's SOF.

Organizational Change

From an organizational, readiness, and force-development perspective, the 1980s saw a progression of changes aimed at reorganizing and professionalizing SOF. In December 1982, the Air Force transferred responsibility for special operations and all SOF units from Tactical Air Command to Military Airlift Command (MAC), who in turn activated a new command, the 23rd Air Force at Scott Air Force Base, Illinois, with a mission that included oversight of all Air Force special operations worldwide.

On 1 October 1982, the John F. Kennedy Center for Military Assistance at Fort Bragg, North Carolina, the Army's senior SOF headquarters, was rechristened the 1st Special Operations Command (1st SOCOM). At the direction of Army Chief of Staff General Edward C. "Shy" Meyer, all ARSOF—SF, Rangers, PSYOP, CA, and special operations aviation—were consolidated under the new command. The following year, the schoolhouse side of the command, the United States Army Institute for Military Assistance, was redesignated the United States Army John F. Kennedy Special Warfare Center and School (USAJFKSWCS), becoming a special activity under the Army's Training and Doctrine Command (TRADOC).

NSW developments included the redesignation of all UDTs to SEAL teams or swimmer delivery vehicle teams, later renamed SEAL delivery vehicle teams, on 1 May 1983.

In October 1983, critical shortcomings in joint SOF interoperability and command and control surfaced during Operation URGENT FURY in Grenada, while the misuse of SOF by conventional commanders during the operation contributed to SOF casualties. These developments further focused the spotlight on joint SOF capability flaws.⁸⁷ On 1 January 1984, the DOD established the Joint Special Operations Agency, a Pentagon staff element that proved to be a largely cosmetic change that accomplished little in the way of improving SOF readiness.

Meanwhile, other actions were underway in Washington that would result in even larger and more significant change. SOF supporters in the DOD, such as Principal Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defense for International Affairs

Noel Koch, grew frustrated at the Department's lack of initiative in addressing SOF's shortcomings. The matter soon became the focus of congressional interest. By 1983, many members of Congress were debating the need for military reform, including in the field of special operations. In June of that year, the Senate Armed Services Committee (SASC) staff, led by James R. Locher III, initiated a comprehensive study of DOD organizational issues and potential solutions. The study found the Pentagon to be excessively focused on the threat of war with the Soviet Union, while responding with ineffective *ad hoc* approaches to the more predominant low-intensity warfare challenges in the developing world.

While Congress moved forward with the Goldwater-Nichols Defense Reorganization Act in 1986 despite intense opposition from the DOD, SASC Chairman Barry Goldwater asked Mr. Locher to lead a staff group devoted to addressing the issue of special operations and low-intensity conflict (SO/LIC) reform. This team worked closely with two senators—William Cohen (R-Maine) and Sam Nunn (D-Georgia)—interested in strengthening SO/LIC capabilities. The efforts of this group resulted in a bill (S. 2453) “to enhance the ability of the United States to combat terrorism and other forms of unconventional warfare.” The bill, co-sponsored by Senators Cohen and Nunn and introduced by Cohen on 15 May 1986, featured four major components: the establishment of an office devoted to SO/LIC within the Office of the Secretary of Defense, the creation of a unified command for SOF, the establishment of a board for low-intensity conflict within the NSC, and a Sense of Congress resolution calling for the appointment of a deputy assistant to the president for national security affairs for low-intensity conflict.⁸⁸

Also advocating steps to improve SOF readiness and command and control was Representative Dan Daniel (D-Virginia), who introduced House of Representatives Bill 5109 (H.R. 5109) on 26 June 1986. This bill called for the establishment of a national special operations agency within the DOD that would “have unified responsibility for all special operations forces and activities within the Department.”⁸⁹ Meanwhile, the Pentagon offered a counterproposal that recommended the creation of Special Operations Forces Command, a three-star command. This fell short of the reforms contemplated by Congress.

Hearings on the two bills were held during the summer of 1986, and a Senate and House compromise resulted in a reform bill calling for a four-star unified command for SOF over the objections of the Pentagon. The bill

also called for the creation of an Assistant Secretary of Defense for Special Operations and Low-Intensity Conflict (ASD-SO/LIC), a coordinating board within the NSC, and a new major force program (MFP-11) devoted to SOF. The final bill, attached as a rider to the 1987 Defense Authorization Act, came to be popularly known as the Cohen-Nunn Amendment. Mr. Locher, the principal drafter of the legislation, served as the first permanent ASD-SO/LIC from October 1989 through June 1993. President Ronald Reagan signed the bill into law in October 1986.

Immediate benefits of the legislation to SOF were unity of command, much improved interservice cooperation and interoperability, and control of their own resources.

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President Reagan approved the establishment of USSOCOM on 13 April 1987, with billets and facilities provided by the deactivation of the United States Readiness Command at MacDill Air Force Base, Florida. The DOD activated USSOCOM on 16 April with

General James Lindsay as commander. The Joint Special Operations Command was assigned to USSOCOM on 14 August 1987 and was later designated a subunified command.

With the establishment of USSOCOM, the Navy activated Naval Special Warfare Command at NAB Coronado in San Diego, California, on 16 April 1987 and assigned it as the Navy component of the new USSOCOM.

Four months later, the 23rd Air Force relocated from Scott Air Force Base to Hurlburt Field, Florida. MAC Commander in Chief General Duane H. Cassidy divested the Command of all non-special operations units in August 1989, and the 23rd Air Force became the Air Force component of USSOCOM. The following May, Air Force Chief of Staff General Larry D. Welch redesignated the 23rd Air Force as Air Force Special Operations Command.

In 1988, Army Chief of Staff General Carl E. Vuono approved the creation of an Army major command for ARSOF. The United States Army Special Operations Command (USASOC) was provisionally established at Fort Bragg on 1 December 1988 and was formally activated a year later. The new command became the senior headquarters for all active duty and Reserve soldiers formerly assigned to 1st SOCOM, thus becoming the Army component of USSOCOM. Some of the earlier expansion of SOF that was lost in

the immediate post-Vietnam years was recovered, with the reactivation of the 3rd Special Forces Group on 20 June 1990, bringing the number of active SF groups to five. The USAJFKSWCS implemented a new SF assessment and selection program during the summer of 1988, and in 1990, USAJFKSWCS was transferred from TRADOC to USASOC.

Other actions taken by the Army centered on expanding and professionalizing the Force. The 1st Special Forces Group was reactivated in Okinawa in 1984. On 1 October of that year, SF was established as a separate career field for NCOs, and in 1985, the SF warrant officer career path was established. Finally, on 9 April 1987, the Army established a new SF career branch for officers.

The final service component of USSOCOM—United States Marine Forces Special Operations Command—was established in February 2006 with headquarters at Camp Lejeune, North Carolina.

The Employment of Third-Age SOF

This Third Age can be seen as progressing through three separate and distinctive periods. First, throughout the 1980s, the final decade of the Cold War, SOF were mostly employed in traditional, doctrinal special operations missions—UW, DA, SR, FID, PSYOP, CA, and CT—with some 500 deployments to 59 countries in just the last three years of the decade. In 1989 alone, SOF carried out 40 MTT deployments to 20 countries and another 66 bilateral training events.⁹⁰ During this same time, SOF carried out humanitarian assistance operations in Africa, the Caribbean, and Latin America.⁹¹

The second period of the Third Age saw SOF employed in more nontraditional ways following the First Gulf War—Operations DESERT SHIELD and DESERT STORM conducted in late 1990 and early 1991 to liberate Kuwait from Iraqi occupation. More than 9,000 SOF participated in these operations, executing a wide range of traditional wartime special operations missions and adding coalition support operations.⁹² In the latter, SF teams lived, trained, and fought with Middle Eastern coalition partners, providing a critical component in successful coalition forces command and control.⁹³ Combat search and rescue (CSAR) was a task that SOF performed effectively during the war. Of four coalition pilots shot down and rescued during the conflict, SOF rescued three, and the fourth was recovered by Kuwaiti resistance forces.⁹⁴

According to joint doctrine published in 1992, there were five principal SOF missions—UW, DA, SR, FID, and CA. By 1998, this had been increased to nine with the addition of CT, PSYOP, information operations (IO), and counterproliferation of WMD. Throughout the post-Gulf War 1990s, SOF were used predominantly in nontraditional ways, engaged almost exclusively in operations described in joint doctrine at the time as “collateral activities,” defined as “missions other than those for which the forces are principally organized, trained, and equipped.”⁹⁵ These were operations that were not viewed as primary doctrinal special operations missions but were tasks that SOF were well prepared to perform because of their inherent capabilities—security assistance; humanitarian assistance including civil assistance, foreign disaster relief, and humanitarian demining operations; antiterrorism and other security activities; counterdrug operations; personnel recovery such as CSAR operations; and special activities. SOF also contributed to several noncombatant evacuation operations (NEOs), peace and stability operations, support to anti-smuggling maritime interdiction operations, and protection of neutral oil tankers and merchant ships transiting the Persian Gulf.⁹⁶ Joint doctrine at the time referred to all of these activities as operations other than war.⁹⁷

Finally, a third period followed the terrorist strikes in the U.S. on 9/11. This period included two highly successful UW operations followed by protracted CT and COIN campaigns in Afghanistan, Iraq, the Philippines, and Syria. The unmatched professionalism, adaptability, and utility of SOF through a progression of very successful operations during this period resulted in increased confidence among Joint Force leaders in the dependability and competence of SOF.

Other Operations

SOF became deeply engaged in an anti-communist special warfare campaign in Central America throughout the 1980s that featured highly successful FID operations in both El Salvador and Honduras and a successful coercive UW operation against the Sandinista government of Nicaragua that ultimately resulted in the regime’s loss in a national election to a U.S.-backed candidate in 1991. These operations are highlighted in a vignette that is included in chapter 3 of this monograph. During this same period, Army SF teams carried out a long-term program to upgrade the competence of the Colombian

military in its COIN campaign against the Marxist Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia's insurgency and associated drug cartels.

In December 1989 and January 1990, SOF played important roles in Operation JUST CAUSE, the invasion of Panama to capture the Panamanian president, dictator Manuel Noriega, who was wanted in the U.S. on racketeering and drug trafficking charges, which enabled the establishment of a democratic government. SOF's contribution began early, as special operations elements provided the intelligence needed to neutralize 27 critical targets in the opening phase of Operation JUST CAUSE. During the operation, more than 4,000 SOF personnel of all Services performed a wide variety of missions—SR, DA, PSYOP, CA, stability operations, and IO—with distinction.⁹⁸ Navy SEALs successfully executed a night swim to disable Panamanian patrol boats and conducted an over-the-beach assault to secure Paitillá Airfield. Army Rangers conducted night parachute assaults culminating in the seizure of Torrijos International Airport/Tocumen Air Base and Rio Hato Airfield, while SF secured the Pacora River Bridge and established surveillance on Panamanian Defense Force installations. The U.S. unilateral operation culminated with the removal of Noriega to a prison in the U.S. aboard a 1st SOW Combat Talon aircraft.

The Berlin Wall fell during large-scale protest demonstrations in November 1989. The dissolution of the Soviet Union on 26 December 1991 is often cited as the end of the Cold War. Behind that story are many cases, some of which researchers have yet to explore because of long overdue declassification efforts, where SOF made significant contributions to that victory.

One new form of collateral activity was humanitarian demining operations, made necessary by the thousands of civilian casualties from unexploded munitions in areas that had been the scene of intense warfare for an extended period of time. From 1988 to 1991, SOF conducted demining operations by training Afghan soldiers in Pakistan during Operation SAFE PASSAGE. In 1993, SOF supported UN demining operations in Cambodia and conducted similar operations in 19 countries in Latin America, Asia, and Africa during 2001.

Other foreign humanitarian assistance operations resulted from ethnic conflict. Shortly after the Gulf War in April 1991, more than 2,000 SOF personnel from Germany deployed to Turkey to support humanitarian operations during Operation PROVIDE COMFORT, providing care and protection to Kurdish refugees from northern Iraq subjected to attack by

Iraqi forces.⁹⁹ This operation, which continued through 1996, also included CSAR support provided by Air Force and Army SOF during no-fly zone Operations NORTHERN WATCH and SOUTHERN WATCH over portions of Iraq. Failing state conditions led to SOF humanitarian relief actions in Somalia from 1992 to 1995 as part of Operations PROVIDE RELIEF and RESTORE HOPE. In Operations PROVIDE PROMISE and DENY FLIGHT in 1992, SOF supported humanitarian relief and no-fly zone security operations in the Balkans.

Natural disasters led to humanitarian assistance operations, as well. The devastation in Central America caused by Hurricane Mitch in 1998 led to a large-scale U.S. military relief operation, with SOF taking part in operations in Honduras during October and November of that year. SOF conducted such operations in support of flood relief efforts in Vietnam in November 1999, in Venezuela a month later, and in Mozambique the following year. In February and March 2000, SOF carried out humanitarian assistance in the Philippines in the wake of a volcanic eruption.

SOF also became deeply involved in stability operations, beginning in Panama under Operation PROMOTE LIBERTY immediately following the conclusion of Operation JUST CAUSE on 16 January 1990. SOF supported stability operations in Somalia from 1992 to 1994. The U.S. intervention in Haiti during 1994 and 1995 to restore the Aristide government following a coup primarily involved stability operations, but SOF also conducted SR, PSYOP, civil affairs operations (CAO), and humanitarian relief operations.

NEOs during the decade required close planning and coordination with several U.S. embassy country teams in Africa. SOF supported NEOs in Sierra Leone in April 1992 and May–June 1997, Albania in March and September 1996, Liberia in April 1996 and again in September 1998, and the Congo in June 1997.

Counterdrug operations occupied SOF throughout the 1990s, as they carried out 233 counterdrug training missions in the United States Southern Command (USSOUTHCOM) and United States Pacific Command regions between 1992 and 1998. SOF fought an engagement with bandits during a counterdrug training mission in Ecuador in May 1999 and conducted a successful recovery operation while conducting counterdrug operations in Colombia in July 1999. SOF supported a U.S.-Colombia initiative known as Plan Colombia from 1999 to 2001 by training Colombian military and paramilitary forces in counterdrug-trafficking and COIN operations.

Peace operations often involved SOF during the decade, with one mission escalating to an armed engagement. SOF deployed to Somalia in June 1993 in support of United Nations Operation in Somalia II, the second phase of a post-civil war UN peacekeeping intervention to provide a secure environment for humanitarian assistance operations. SOF became heavily involved in an escalation in violence in October 1993 that came to be known as the Battle of Mogadishu, resulting in the combat deaths of 19 American soldiers. SOF supported the African Crisis Response Initiative during 1995 and 1996, and from 1995 to 2004, SOF contributed to peace enforcement operations in the Balkan states of Bosnia and Herzegovina and Kosovo by carrying out personnel recovery; coalition liaison support; CAO; PSYOP; close air support; visit, board, search, and seizure operations; and humanitarian operations. In 1999, SOF supported a NATO operation to force the withdrawal of Serbian forces from Kosovo and protect ethnic Kosovar Albanians. In 2000 and 2001, SOF trained peacekeeping forces in the African states of Sierra Leone, Ghana, and Senegal.

The number of SOF deployed from home station increased steadily throughout the 1990s, rising by 253 percent between 1993 and 1999. SOF deployed to 142 countries in 1996 alone, including 204 joint combined exchange training (JCET) events, 120 counter-drug operations, and a dozen demining training missions. By the period from 1998 through 2001, SOF were deploying to an average of 150 countries per year.

The number of SOF deployed from home station increased steadily throughout the 1990s, rising by 253 percent between 1993 and 1999.

In 2001, SOF carried out humanitarian demining activities in 19 countries throughout Asia, Africa, and Latin America.¹⁰⁰ As the number of highly successful SOF deployments steadily increased during the decade, senior DOD leaders, both civilian and military, grew to depend on the reliability and professionalism of SOF. This validation of SOF capabilities would only be strengthened over the first two decades of the twenty-first century.

The Global War on Terrorism

The terrorist attacks in New York City and Washington, D.C., on 9/11 marked the beginning of two decades of the war on terrorism, where SOF contributed greatly to CT and COIN campaigns in several countries. In October of that year, elements of the 5th Special Forces Group, operating under the control

of Task Force Dagger, collaborated with CIA operatives in a highly successful UW operation in Afghanistan to open Operation ENDURING FREEDOM (OEF). Air Force special tactics personnel contributed their skills in helping to guide airstrikes launched from U.S. aircraft carriers in the Arabian Sea and heavy bomber strikes. Organized opposition by the Taliban regime collapsed on 5 December, just 49 days after the first SOF elements arrived. The UW campaign concluded with the formation of a new Afghan government and the establishment of Combined Joint Special Operations Task Force-Afghanistan. OEF in Afghanistan continued through the end of 2014 with SOF of all Services actively engaged in a range of CT and COIN operations that included supporting Afghan security forces, searching for and killing or capturing high-value targets, and implementing the innovative Afghan local police and village stability operations initiatives. NSW forces were active in Afghanistan throughout OEF, conducting more than 75 SR and DA operations. In all, SOF conducted a wide range of UW, SR, DA, COIN, CT, FID, PSYOP, and CA operations in support of the coalition campaign in OEF-Afghanistan.

Concurrent with the operations in Afghanistan was OEF-Philippines, where rotating teams from the 1st Special Forces Group, operating under Joint Special Operations Task Force-Philippines, supported the Philippine government in its fight against Islamic insurgents. SOF executed FID, PSYOP, civil-military operations, and IO during OEF-Philippines from January 2002 through September 2015.

As early as July 2002, pilot teams from the 10th Special Forces Group and CIA operatives infiltrated northern Iraq to link up with Kurdish Peshmerga irregular forces in preparation for the 19 March 2003 U.S. invasion of Iraq in Operation IRAQI FREEDOM (OIF). In a highly successful UW operation, SOF supported some 50,000 Peshmerga fighters in fixing 13 Iraqi divisions in place along a 350-kilometer front north of Baghdad, preventing them from engaging invading U.S. conventional forces in southern Iraq.¹⁰¹ SOF continued rotating forces throughout OIF, training and rebuilding Iraqi army and police forces and carrying out operations against high-value targets. In addition to Army, Air Force, and Marine SOF, OIF witnessed the largest number of SEALs and special warfare combatant craft employed in NSW history.

In addition to OEF-Afghanistan and OEF-Philippines, similar OEF operations were carried out simultaneously in the Horn of Africa and the trans-Saharan area. Throughout this same period, SOF participated in humanitarian

relief operations in Thailand, Indonesia, Haiti, and Japan, as well as emergency rescue and humanitarian assistance operations in Louisiana and Mississippi in the wake of Hurricane Katrina. Train, advise, and assist FID operations continued in Iraq (Operation NEW DAWN), Syria (Operation INHERENT RESOLVE), and in Afghanistan until the U.S. withdrawal in August 2021.

Syria

“For proof of SOF’s utility beyond CT, counter-VEO, and the context of the global war on terrorism, one need look no further than to SOF’s operational placement in and throughout northeast Syria since 2014 and how their presence and roles have evolved over time. What began as an effort to destroy the physical manifestations of the Caliphate through direct action (DA)—raids and strikes, often in concert with state and non-state actors committed to defeating ISIS [the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria]—quickly became a mission to deter further Russian (and Turkish) territorial provocation, assure new partners (Syrian Kurds), deny freedom of action to Iran and its surrogates and proxies, defend critical resources and infrastructure, deny any resurgence of ISIS as an existential threat to friendly regional governments, and maintain U.S. access and influence where the East and West truly converge.

The fact that the U.S. government did this with such minimal investment, while assuming acceptable risk, must be understood and appreciated for what it was: a new paradigm in which the utility of SOF goes well beyond its two decades of DA merely in the context of CT, where DA and CT are integral use-of-force activities endemic to, and not separate nor separable from, great power competition. In this enlarged context, from ‘use’ to ‘utility’ of force, SOF serves as the “rheostat” for a new geopolitical environment that challenges conventional wisdom but demands new ways of thinking and acting to an array of threats, both state and non-state, and the underlying conditions that drive them.”¹⁰²

The Fourth Age of SOF: Rebalancing and Renewal

The Third Age drew to a close with thousands of SOF operators deployed to dozens of countries around the world, but it was a force optimized for the high-intensity CT and COIN fight. The Fourth Age will challenge SOF to rebalance their force organization and capabilities to adjust to the realities of today's geopolitical landscape, calling for a regeneration and modernization of skill sets that have atrophied over the past 20 years. This includes critical core SOF competencies in “irregular warfare, foreign partner capacity building, clandestine activities, and information operations” that USSOCOM Commander General Richard D. Clarke considers to be “as relevant today as they were at the onset of the Cold War.”¹⁰³ Such competencies will have to be not only recovered but innovatively upgraded to meet today's technology and security environment.

Chapter 2 describes the compound security nature of today's global security environment. It is an environment whose uncertainty, risks, and challenges demand a utility of SOF that is equally compounded—that is, a comprehensive combination of all the skills, techniques, and methods that have served SOF so well through all three preceding ages, amplified by twenty-first century technological advancements. Nothing less than this comprehensive, joint combined utility of SOF philosophy, culture, and approach is required to produce overmatching power in and under Fourth Age conditions—a “trans-everything” view of and approach to SOF.¹⁰⁴

Chapter 2. A Compound Security Dilemma

This chapter provides a description of the security challenges facing SOF as they prepare to support the U.S. Government's pursuit of influence and strategic advantage around the world. It describes how Russia and China launched aggressive efforts to expand their territories or areas of influence while the U.S. remained focused on the CT and COIN campaigns in Afghanistan, Iraq, Syria, North Africa, and the Philippines through the opening two decades of the twenty-first century. Sections within the chapter provide brief overviews of how America's major rivals in global competition are much more highly capable, militarily and technologically, than the adversaries the U.S. has gone toe-to-toe with for the past two decades. Moreover, increasing aggression on the part of America's competitors, coupled with a decreasing effectiveness of economic or political sanctions, may result in an increase in foreign policy options that involve SOF.

In a commentary published in 2020, Dr. Isaiah Wilson III and Dr. Scott A. Smitson described a compound security dilemma confronting geopolitical competitors where previously separate or loosely related policy issues—domestic and international—are now exceedingly interrelated and interdependent, feeding off one another and influencing strategic planning.¹⁰⁵ Threats from aggressor states are compounded by the presence of other causes of unrest and instability. Jolts or course corrections on one issue have a rippling effect on several other issues. Sectarian conflict or competition for energy and other resources, for example, can affect foreign policy, alliances, migration, health concerns, and economic stability—all of which impact U.S. national security interests. Election interference by outsiders generates mistrust and retaliatory actions between nation-states, while simultaneously fueling domestic political discord, distrust of government, and skepticism about democratic convictions and procedures. Miscalculations on the part of the U.S. Government or one of its challengers can have wide-ranging, unfortunate repercussions.

A report released by the Office of the Director of National Intelligence (ODNI) in April 2021 described the threat to global stability posed by climate change and increasing environmental degradation, transregional trends that

are likely to threaten infrastructure, as well as health and the availability of food and water in the developing world. Indirect effects could include “risks to the economy, heightened political volatility, human displacement, and new venues for geopolitical competition.”¹⁰⁶ Environmental perils, like more traditional security concerns such as subversive or armed aggression, are major drivers of instability and disruptive change. This is only compounded by widespread societal disruption caused by the coronavirus pandemic. Populations displeased with their own government’s responsiveness and preparedness for dealing with such public health crises create legitimacy apprehension within insecure regimes.

A growing concern is the way in which authoritarian states have applied hybrid warfare strategies to disrupt or discredit Western alliances and undermine U.S. influence in their regions in ways that fall short of direct armed confrontation. America’s major competitors maintain illiberal, authoritarian governing systems led by self-serving despots who take every opportunity to exploit instability and otherwise work to weaken other nation-states and break down the Western liberal order. Subversive efforts proclaiming democracy fatigue highlight and exploit economic imbalances and wealth inequality, contribute to an erosion in the commitment to electoral politics and civil liberties, and amplify an overall decline in self-determination.

Both Russia and China have allegedly carried out extensive and potentially damaging cyberattacks on the U.S., demonstrating the effectiveness and potentially crippling nature of this clandestine and covert method of attack. In December 2020, Russia was suspected in an apparent intelligence-gathering breach that used a networking software update to hack around 100 U.S. businesses and 9 government agencies. More recently, China is believed to be behind an attack that affected tens of thousands of U.S. businesses, schools, and government offices.

Rising China

There is widespread agreement today with regard to the serious nature of the threat to U.S. interests posed by the People’s Republic of China (PRC), and more specifically by the Chinese Communist Party (CCP). In December 2020, U.S. Director of National Intelligence (DNI) John Ratcliffe characterized the PRC as “the greatest threat to America today, and the greatest threat to democracy and freedom world-wide since World War II.”¹⁰⁷ A report

released by the ODNI in April 2021 reiterates that China is America's number one threat. This ominous assessment amplifies the threat described in the U.S. national security strategy and NDS. Moreover, this judgment has been echoed by both former Secretary of State Mike Pompeo and current Secretary of State Antony J. Blinken. The Office of the Secretary of Defense, in its *Annual Report to Congress* in 2020, found that the CCP "has a strategic end state that it is working toward, which if achieved and its accompanying military modernization left unaddressed, will have serious implications for U.S. national interests and the security of the international rules-based order."¹⁰⁸

Beijing has vastly expanded the size and capability of the People's Liberation Army and its nuclear arsenal and has engaged in predatory practices to spread its military access, as well as its state-driven economic model. China now has the world's largest navy, the world's largest standing ground force, and the region's largest and world's third-largest air force.¹⁰⁹ Its military modernization and its economic growth benefit greatly from the piracy of innovative U.S. research and development programs and easy access to America's universities. Estimates of U.S. intellectual property theft for which the PRC is responsible range from \$500 billion to \$600 billion annually and total nearly \$6 trillion over the past decade.¹¹⁰ In point of fact, in its quest to avenge the "century of humiliation," an increasingly assertive China's ultimate goal is not simply unrivaled regional hegemony as the dominant power in East Asia but global preeminence in political, military, and economic terms.¹¹¹

China's capabilities in the realm of highly sophisticated cyberattacks are believed to have been demonstrated in a major summer 2020 power outage in Mumbai, India, that shut down the stock market as well as the city's trains and forced hospitals to switch to emergency generators. The attack on India's power grid was reportedly a warning shot linked to a skirmish between Chinese and Indian troops in a disputed border area four months earlier.¹¹²

China is a rising power with expansionist aspirations and an intention to reorder the Indo-Pacific region in its favor, displacing U.S. presence and influence in that part of the world. To accomplish this, it has become increasingly aggressive, expanding its power and reach with little regard for the sovereignty of other states in the region. In one recent move to counter U.S. influence in the region, China shaped a regional free trade agreement—the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership—with 14 other countries that include the 10 member nations of the Association of Southeast Asian

Nations (ASEAN), as well as U.S. allies Australia, New Zealand, Japan, and South Korea. India is not included, having pulled out of the negotiations five months earlier. To many, the pact was symbolic of Beijing's growing image of economic dominance in the region. This came less than four years after the U.S. withdrawal from the broader Trans-Pacific Partnership, in which the U.S. had taken a leading role to counterbalance China's growing influence.¹¹³ In January 2021, China overtook the U.S. as the world's leading foreign direct investment destination.¹¹⁴

Beijing's assertive actions aimed at gaining supremacy and control of much of the East and South China Seas are well known. It has militarized parts of the South China Sea, with the construction of airfields on artificially created islands in waters long claimed by its neighbors, intimidating others in the region with the implied threat of military action. Its navy, coast guard, and fishing fleets aggressively lay claim to sea areas historically considered territorial waters by Japan, the Philippines, Vietnam, Malaysia, and Taiwan. The CCP refutes and ignores a July 2016 ruling by a UN tribunal at The Hague that found China's territorial claims in the South China Sea to have no legal basis.

Beijing's well-known Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), a program promoting infrastructure investment across Asia and beyond, has been described as "the ultimate instrument of economic statecraft or, more accurately, economic blackmail."¹¹⁵ Countries in need of low-interest financing for infrastructure projects fall victim to an extortionate debt-trap scheme, sometimes result-

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ing in China's assumption of control of deep-water ports or other facilities in key locations. The government of India has warned South Asian states of the serious nature of the threat posed by the BRI, as China uses it as a means of gaining control of strategic choke points in the region. As such, the Council on Foreign Relations and

others have speculated that the BRI could be a "Trojan horse" designed to accommodate military expansion and a "beneath-the-radar" military presence.¹¹⁶

China's disruptive actions and extralegal territorial claims in the South China Sea endanger the free flow of vessels through a key trade route.

Furthermore, its ongoing efforts to establish deep-water ports along the Indian Ocean coast are a source of concern. While these ports will facilitate legitimate foreign trade via shipping lanes whose commercial importance dates to the first millennium BCE, their use by the People's Liberation Army Navy (PLAN) renders China potentially capable of threatening sea communications between the Indian and Pacific Oceans during a time of conflict. Control of the Straits of Malacca, Sunda, and Lombok on Indonesia's periphery, for example, could allow the PLAN to interfere with U.S. Forces transiting the Indian Ocean from Europe or the Middle East in the event of a major conflict. The PLAN carried out a five-day exercise in Indonesia's Lombok Strait in early 2014, and in February 2018, a fleet of 11 Chinese warships maneuvered through the East Indian Ocean during an exercise. In 2020, the PLAN reportedly deployed 12 unmanned underwater vehicles in the Indian Ocean.¹¹⁷

On the island of Sri Lanka, a country near these strategically important shipping lanes, China is preparing to build a city of its own not far from the center of Sri Lanka's capital, Colombo. The 13-billion-dollar construction project will result in Port City, a Chinese enclave occupying 660 acres of land and the future home of a billion-dollar international financial center.¹¹⁸ Other Chinese projects on the island include roads, apartment blocks, and a power plant. Between 2005 and 2015, in a further display of Beijing's strong-arm diplomacy, China built a port at the island's city of Hambantota on land leased by Beijing as part of a deal to lower the island country's debt burden. Colombo's prime minister had arranged several infrastructure development loans from China, including funding for a port at Hambantota that studies had shown was infeasible and unneeded. When a new administration took office after the 2015 elections, it inherited a crumbling economy that made payment of even the interest charges on the loan impossible. Pressured by Beijing to make a deal, the Colombo government relinquished sovereignty in exchange for debt relief, handing over the Hambantota port—a facility rarely used for commercial purposes—and 15,000 acres of land to China for 99 years.¹¹⁹

In Burma, China is paying for the construction of a deep-water port at the terminus of a planned oil and gas pipeline from Yunnan to the Bay of Bengal. Beijing's interest in developing the port and a secure route connecting it to the southern landlocked province of Yunnan has as much to do with strategic positioning as it does with commercial advantages. It involves maritime

access to the Bay of Bengal and the Indian Ocean, as well as proximity to neighboring India, a geostrategic rival. Such access would greatly benefit the landlocked southwestern area of China, opening it to maritime trade. But increasing Chinese access to the Indian Ocean also solidifies Beijing's status as a two-ocean power. The PLAN made its first South Asian port call by a nuclear-powered attack submarine in Karachi, Pakistan, in March 2016. Port calls by Chinese submarines were made in Seppangar, Malaysia, as well as Karachi in January 2017.¹²⁰

Beijing has further strengthened its presence off the coast of Southeast Asia and its ability to influence traffic through the Malacca Strait by signing a long-term agreement with Cambodia to make exclusive use of part of Cambodia's Ream Naval Base on the Gulf of Thailand. The PLAN will be able to station personnel at the base, berth warships, and store munitions.¹²¹ Beijing also seeks access to the Arabian Sea through its \$60 billion China-Pakistan Economic Corridor designed to connect China to Pakistan's Gwadar Port.¹²²

Beijing is even adapting the incremental aggression strategy that it has employed in the South China Sea to land territory claimed by its neighbors, with at least two bordering countries falling victim of these territorial grabs. In October 2020, China completed construction of a complete village in the remote mountainous border area of Bhutan and the Tibet region of China. Some two dozen newly built homes were quickly occupied by approximately 100 Chinese citizens, who proceeded to raise the national flag of China, even though the ground on which the village sits is more than a mile inside territory that has long been considered by the government of Bhutan as its sovereign territory. This took place in the same year that Chinese forces boldly crossed the border into India, claiming the territory as Chinese, and setting off a skirmish that resulted in the deaths of at least 21 Indian soldiers and an unknown number of Chinese troops.¹²³

Beijing does not hesitate to flex its military muscle by threatening armed reprisals to diplomatic actions by its neighbors that it views with disfavor. When India was negotiating a trade pact with Taiwan in the fall of 2020, China responded with veiled threats about supporting secessionist insurgents of the United Liberation Front of Assam and other groups threatening the stability of northeastern India. If China actually carried through on such a threat, it would represent a resumption of arms and training support to the rebels provided by Beijing prior to the death of Mao Zedong in 1976.¹²⁴

Members of China's 52 ethnic minorities are coerced and sometimes terrorized into submission and forced assimilation into the Han culture, as the state continues to intensify its policies of ethnic and religious oppression. On 19 January 2021, the U.S. State Department declared that the Chinese government is conducting a campaign of genocide and crimes against humanity against the Muslim Uighur population in the northwestern province of Xinjiang.¹²⁵

The Beijing government has been increasingly hostile toward Christians within China. Cognizant of the role played by the church in the anti-communist revolutions in Eastern Europe at the close of the Cold War and the more recent influence of the church in the unrest in Hong Kong, Beijing views the church as an unwelcome symbol of outside influence and as a potential source of domestic dissidence. A country estimated to have some 3 million Christians at the close of the Cultural Revolution (1966–1976) is now home to more than 100 million Protestants and 10–12 million Catholics, most of whom are well-educated, urban, and globally connected. Although the government puts the number of Protestants at 38 million, the Council on Foreign Relations, citing a 2018 study by the Purdue Center on Religion and Chinese Society, estimates the number of Chinese Protestants to be between 93 and 115 million. The CCP, by comparison, has an estimated membership of around 90 million. The growth in Chinese Christianity has come largely since 2010, and some projections indicate that China could have the world's largest Christian population by 2030.¹²⁶

Beijing seeks to capitalize on its economic good fortune by promoting its state-centric economic model and authoritarian governance approach to developing countries. The CCP provides tutelage to foreign politicians aimed at demonstrating how prosperous authoritarian countries can be, that democracy is not needed for a state to become rich. The Party's International Liaison Department works to gain the support of foreign political parties by organizing training programs aimed at showing the governments of developing countries how effective and successful centralized leadership can be. In 2020, according to one report, "such classes have been attended by officials from ruling parties in Angola, Congo-Brazzaville, Ghana, Mozambique, Panama, and Venezuela."¹²⁷ Political leaders in Kenya demonstrated the effectiveness of this proselytization when they declared that the CCP offers a good example to follow. Even Western democracies are affected, write Hamilton and Ohlberg, by Beijing's strategy of propaganda, coercion,

and intimidation. “Even for those who do not feel the heavy hand of the CCP directly,” they observe, “the world is changing, as Beijing’s authoritarian norms are exported around the globe.”¹²⁸ The Party works tirelessly to transform the international order to its benefit by any means short of armed conflict. “Rather than challenging from the outside,” Hamilton and Ohlberg continue, “it has been eroding resistance to it from within, by winning supporters, silencing critics, and subverting institutions. For the CCP, the Cold War never ended.”¹²⁹

The CCP also engages in invasive and contentious information warfare against the U.S. and other Western powers. China has mastered the practice of exploiting the openness of democracies, using Western social media platforms, for example, to spread misinformation while at the same time blocking the use of those same platforms in China. Over recent years, Beijing has also carried out an ambitious influence campaign targeting dozens of members of U.S. Congress, as well as congressional aides.¹³⁰ Beijing’s IO, business practices, and intelligence activities in the U.S. and other democratic countries encourage the corruption of business, financial, and government elites.

In the pursuit of its ambition to be viewed as an equal in world affairs, China has become an aggressive regional hegemon, displaying scant regard for the sovereignty of its neighbors, as it seeks to intimidate them into bending to its will and striving to spread its authoritarian political system. The CCP has built an impressive surveillance ability and aggressively gathers and exploits data on a massive scale to silence opposition and repress any dissenting voice within its population. In short, China continues to grow as a menace to its own people and as a threat to U.S. security interests. In the opinion of U.S. DNI John Ratcliffe, “This generation will be judged by its response to China’s effort to reshape the world in its own image and replace America as the dominant superpower.”¹³¹

Revanchist Russia

Following a visit to Moscow in early 2021, European Union Foreign Policy Chief Josep Borrell wrote that “Russia is progressively disconnecting itself from Europe and looking at democratic values as an existential threat.”¹³² Under President Vladimir V. Putin, Russia is an aggressive revanchist state seeking to restore its regional sphere of influence and its great power status,

employing methods that have brought some to characterize it as “an insidious hybrid threat.”¹³³ Russia violates the sovereign territory of its neighbors, engages in intrusive and destructive cyberwarfare on a vast scale, and undermines Western democracy by spreading disinformation via social media. Moscow employs subversive means to weaken the credibility of transatlantic unity and America’s commitment to its allies. Overreach in Russian ambition or a miscalculation in its military capabilities or political and economic influence can severely impact Eurasian stability and increase the risk of conflict.

China’s is not the only navy guilty of trespassing in the territorial waters of other nations. In August 2020, U.S. fishing vessels trolling for cod well within the U.S.-exclusive economic zone off Alaska’s coast were confronted and threatened by Russian warships. In an incident that was just the latest of several encounters in the North Pacific, the U.S. vessels were ordered by the Russians to vacate the area. When the Americans radioed the U.S. Coast Guard for advice, they were told to comply with the Russian demands. Officials in Washington later determined that a Russian submarine, part of a fleet of 50 warships taking part in an exercise, launched a cruise missile from the area that same day.¹³⁴

Russia’s cyberwarfare capabilities have advanced to astonishing levels. In the devastating December 2020 cyberattack, Russian hackers breached thousands of U.S. Government and commercial systems in a cyber operation that exploited computer infrastructure located entirely in the U.S. and may have been underway since at least October 2019. Even more

Russia’s cyberwarfare capabilities have advanced to astonishing levels.

troubling is the fact that the penetration went undetected by U.S. Government cyberdefenses, who only learned of it from the public, California-based cybersecurity company FireEye. Believed to have been largely a cyberespionage operation almost certainly conducted by Russian intelligence, it is unknown yet whether any malware was introduced.¹³⁵

President Putin has maintained his grip on power by prevailing in Moscow’s Chechen conflicts, raising the standard of living for many citizens, using any means necessary to eliminate all political opposition, and by reviving the prestige of the security services and increasing their funding. He could remain in power as long as he is able to instill in others the perception that life in Russia is better under his leadership and that it will remain so.

There are indications, however, that he is weaker now politically than ever before, as approval ratings for his United Russia party have dipped to 27 percent and the regime grows increasingly repressive against opponents and protesters.¹³⁶ As with authoritarian regimes throughout history, an overarching and perpetual objective is simply remaining in power.

Rogue Regimes and Non-State Actors

Rogue states such as Iran and North Korea continue to complicate the security picture. Iran's destabilizing sponsorship of terrorism and its pursuit of nuclear weapons and the means to deliver them further compounds the challenges to global security. North Korea's accelerating efforts to improve its cyber, nuclear, and ballistic missile programs pose a constant menace to the international community. The continuing threat and destabilizing influence of terrorist organizations and other radical networks, drug and human traffickers, transnational criminal organizations, cyberhackers, and other non-state threats add to the disruptive effects of aggressor state actions.

Peripheral Compounding Factors

As already described, threats such as interstate and intrastate political violence are compounded by environmental, geographic, and pandemic concerns, all of which serve as venues for subversive influence operations by America's competitors. Other underlying conditions and disrupting factors, such as competition for increasingly scarce high-value resources, fuel instability and contribute to political, economic, and social discord. Resulting effects can include demographic shifts and permutations, as well as global economic market disruptions. Added to these are growing irregular threats such as unconstrained cyber and information warfare. Greater access to information around the world contributes to the diffusion of state power, which presents both threats and opportunities for the West. Countries such as Venezuela and Cuba "cling to anachronistic leftist authoritarian models that continue to fail their people."¹³⁷ Such conditions spawn latent indigent insurgent energy capable of challenging authoritarian governments seen as illegitimate as populations demand relief from poverty, an end to corruption, greater government accountability, and increased opportunity and self-determination.

Compound Security and the “Intersectionality of Threats”¹³⁸

Today’s tumultuous global security environment is one that can perhaps be best characterized, in summary, as converging, transregional, compound security dilemmas,¹³⁹ a growing pathological weakening of nation-states, and as some now argue, even worse, a weakening of the Western liberal international system itself, which is premised on the primacy of the nation-state. The rise (perhaps return) of great power competition only further compounds these developments. This convergence of compounded security threats is presenting unique challenges and opportunities at very particular and historically important key border and regional geostrategic nexus locations.

Reconsidering the use, utility, and even the identity of SOF—past, present, and most importantly, for the future—it is important to appreciate the major disruptive change that has occurred in the global security environment. This is one of the most complex and dangerous periods in the Nation’s history. What makes it so uniquely dangerous is the nature of the threats; they have all compounded largely because of the underconsideration and underaddressing of root causes and underlying conditions (“currents”).

As Wilson and Smitson describe,

Many contemporary threats have become compounded largely because their root causes and underlying conditions (or currents) have been allowed to persist unaddressed or under addressed [see Figure 1]. These causes and conditions include economic imbalances; sectarian conflict; massive and sudden demographic shifts due to regional conflict, climate change, and insecurity; loss of trust in governing institutions; and border concerns inextricably tied to identity. The repercussions of these compound threats follow a multiplicative—or exponentially contagious—progression as opposed to an additive, linearly sequential one typical of traditional threats. Hence these repercussions dramatically alter the risk calculus, risk reward, and benefits-to-costs factors so critical to strategy planning and policy decision-making. The combination—or more accurately compounding—of global dynamics such as wealth disparities, widening wealth and inequality gaps, instabilities and unpredictabilities in the global economic market, and global climate change (to varying degrees, artifacts of globalization) have resulted in what strategic

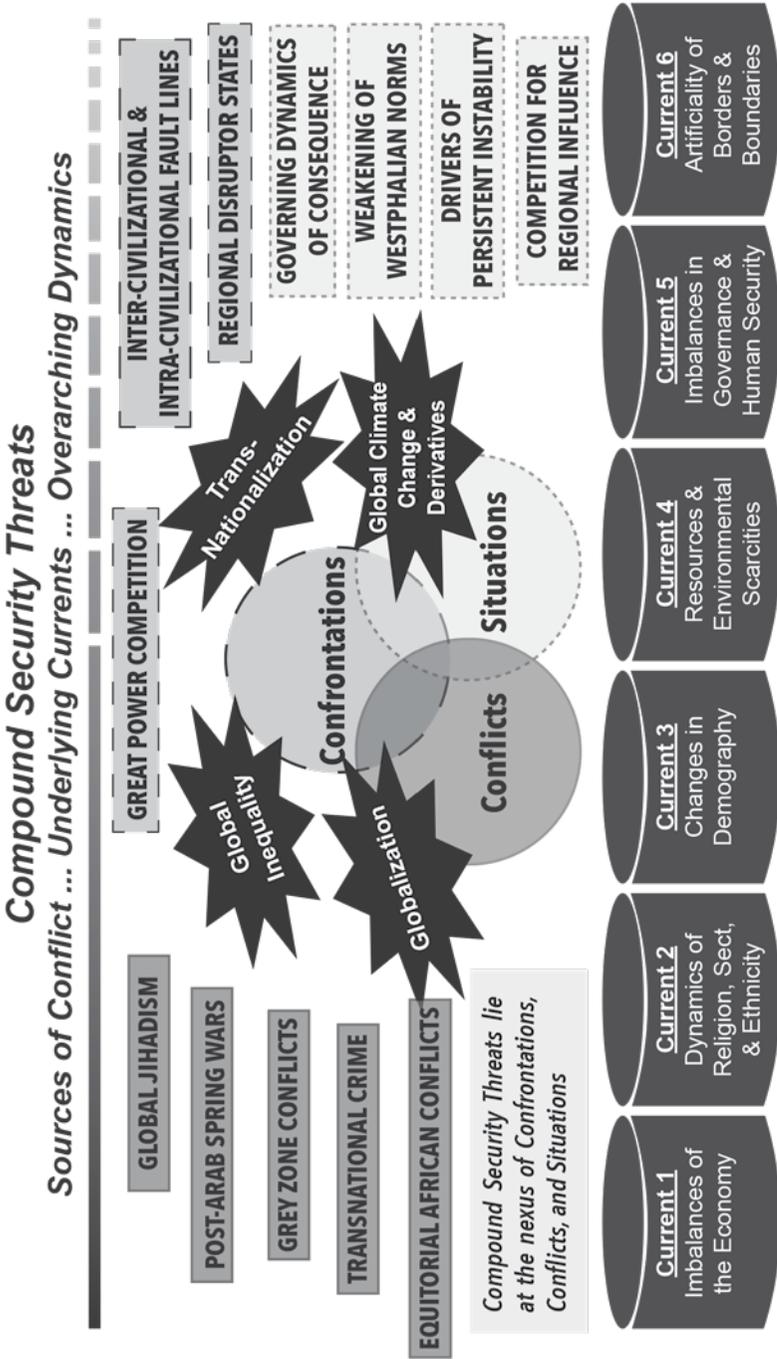


Figure 1. The currents of compound security threats. Source: Dr. Isaiah Wilson III

forecasters have described as an environment of “constant tension between greater interdependence and intensifying competition” for increasingly scarce material and high-value resources.¹⁴⁰ In combination, these environmental dynamics are the first, most fundamental, and consequential of the major drivers of disruptive change shaping today’s global security environment and place new stresses on the long-standing liberal international system. Behavioral changes in international relations caused by these changes reflect an ongoing shift from a balance-of-power model of geopolitical competition to one of instability and unpredictability. In essence, this shift marks a return to pre-World War I geo-mercantilism with “beggar-thy-neighbor” behaviors that foster go-it-alone and do-it-your-own-way approaches to solving security dilemmas.^{141 142}

This “beggar-thy-neighbor” mercantilist and predatorily competitive environment also results in a growing tendency for coalition member states to drift toward “self-help” solutions to their own individual security dilemmas, and in so doing, to worsen tendencies to fail to see and approach what are collective security problems as such and to address them in collective ways. This competitive environment makes forming and norming—holding together capable and willing coalitions for collective security and defense—all the more difficult while also making the formation of such coalitions all the more essential. This is the paradox of compound security.

Compound threats demand nothing less than compound solutions to achieve lasting and durable compound wins. Undoubtedly, SOF will once again play an essential role in the integrating of the varied types and forms (qualities and quantities) of governmental and non-governmental force toward the fashioning of JIIM-C integrative statecraft solutions—all on behalf of producing for the Nation (and the wider community of nations) integrated deterrence options.

Chapter 3. The Utility of Fourth-Age SOF in Compound Security

As mentioned in the introduction to this monograph, Fourth-Age SOF will be better balanced and capable of serving U.S. national interests in at least five ways:

1. Serving as strategic shapers by performing a global special warfare function that provides the Joint Force geostrategic positional and informational advantage over competitors and adversaries
2. Accommodating a strategy of campaigning for influence by serving as an exceptional and versatile agent of influence
3. Contributing in unique ways to a strategy of integrated deterrence
4. Improving America's ability to pursue the fight against extremists, as well as proliferators and potential users of WMD
5. Preparing for a traditional warfare special operations role or extraordinary crisis-response contingencies

SOF in a Global Special Warfare Role

Serving as America's sentinels while deployed around the world, SOF can perform an indications and warning function in support of national security decision-making, but they can fulfill an even more active global special warfare role, serving as strategic shapers by gaining the Joint Force geostrategic positional advantage (physical and cognitive) over competitors and adversaries through access, placement, and influence—engaging with partners in ways that set the conditions for a “win” before or in the absence of armed conflict. While carrying out a wide variety of operations in support of allies and partner nations (e.g., participating in multinational exercises, establishing and nurturing military-to-military contacts, and providing training assistance), forward-deployed SOF can help to detect, monitor, and report on the covert and overt gray-zone activities of adversaries, illuminating their actions to better inform geographic combatant commands, country teams and ambassadors, JIIM-C partners, and national decision makers. This

early warning function helps to eliminate strategic blind spots and improve situational understanding—avoiding surprise, reducing response time, creating course-of-action consideration and decision space, and minimizing unnecessary or counterproductive diversion of assets. Enhanced situational awareness enables geographic combatant commanders to defuse potential crises or to act on opportunities to advance U.S. interests. At the very least, the forward presence of SOF serves to visibly demonstrate U.S. commitment with an element of regional engagement professionals providing a tangible symbol of that commitment.

To succeed in campaigning for influence, the U.S. must strengthen its influence and position around the world while eroding that of its adversaries, imposing costs on aggressive behavior, neutralizing the benefits of predatory economic practices, and deterring aggression. To complement achievements in the political, economic, informational, and conventional military realms, USSOCOM provides an increasingly lethal, rapidly adapting, and constantly innovating special operations capacity. America's SOF will maintain a robust DA or strike capability, a force unmatched in their ability to combat terrorism and the proliferation and use of WMD. They are a force equally capable of effecting high-threat rescue or recovery operations or supporting strategic sabotage efforts or sensitive activities. But USSOCOM will also see a rebalancing of SOF competencies to better enable the Force to be an agent of influence or coercion, while simultaneously representing an economy-of-force crisis containment means capable of resolving crises at a level where minimal resources are required.

China employs predatory economic practices—the use of compelling inducements and exorbitant penalties—to extort the economies of states within the Indo-Pacific arena and even outside the region, coercing vulnerable governments to bend to its agenda. China has earned a reputation as a predatory lender because of its practice of entrapping poorer and weaker states who default on loan repayment. Developing countries desperate for funding for infrastructure projects find easy loans from the Chinese government difficult to resist. When the recipient government defaults on repayment of the loan, Chinese companies take control of the infrastructure project.

Beijing has signaled its intent to increase its overseas military presence to protect its expanding development and security interests resulting from the BRI introduced by President Xi Jinping in 2013, fully recognizing that this

might provoke pushback from affected states. Indeed, some states have awakened to the fact that China's actions force them into relinquishing a degree of sovereignty. Helping these vulnerable states protect their sovereignty and their populations from such coercion and intimidation, not to mention outright armed aggression, is a task tailor-made for SOF. Special operators become agents of influence by helping people and governments solve their problems. Accordingly, SOF must provide a discreet and sophisticated special warfare competence to fortify the efforts of friendly governments to protect their sovereignty and populations from aggression or coercion, to include externally sourced subversive influence. SOF should build and maintain an unmatched capacity for FID and security cooperation engagements, while conventional forces carry out general security force assistance (SFA) operations. This could involve the development of host-nation (HN) SOF, especially in high-risk environments and in situations demanding language expertise and a culturally sophisticated approach. Because of political sensitivities, these operations might, at times, need to be carried out with discretion and minimal visibility.

Helping these vulnerable states protect their sovereignty and their populations from such coercion and intimidation, not to mention outright armed aggression, is a task tailor-made for SOF.

But SOF must be equally capable of taking actions to enhance the defense, resilience, and resistance posture of friendly governments facing disproportionate external security threats. They should be adept at developing proxies capable of destabilizing adversary forces occupying territory gained through expansionist aggression but also capable of influencing hostile regime security forces in times of social turmoil, encouraging them to break with a regime that abuses its own population. SOF's proven and unparalleled UW expertise will not only accommodate the advantageous readiness of indigenous resistance capabilities but will yield an unconventional deterrence value as well.

If competition with China were to escalate to warfare, it would, as one foreign policy analyst has argued, "almost certainly be an irregular war."¹⁴³ Any further escalation could begin within the two newest warfighting domains of space and cyberspace, while nuclear deterrence could work to limit large-scale conventional force engagement. It is doubtful that such a conflict would

conform to the linear shape-fight-stabilize-withdraw campaign construct envisioned during the war on terrorism.

SOF as an Agent of Influence

America is in competition with great power rivals for influence with weaker states, but whereas the U.S. seeks a network of mutually beneficial partner relationships, China seems more intent on building a colonial-like network of dependency relationships. French President Emmanuel Macron, in 2018, surmised that the BRI could make “vassal states” of China’s partners.¹⁴⁴ Campaigning for influence benefits from an expansion and strengthening of cooperation, alliance, and partnership networks. SOF can contribute to making the U.S. a preferred partner to countries around the world and especially to those threatened by authoritarian aggressor neighbor states. Influence is the key to becoming a favored partner, and influence is the currency of special warfare—UW, FID, military information support operations (MISO), and CAO. Working in support of interagency country teams at U.S. embassies under Chief of Mission authority, SOF gain persuasive influence with friendly governments and populations alike by helping them solve their problems, just as they have done throughout their history. Conversely, SOF can serve to influence adversaries by acting as an agent of coercion, just as they often did during the Cold War.

Central America Irregular Warfare Campaign: SOF Campaigning for Influence During the Cold War

Coming at a time when America’s Cold War grand strategy sought the containment of Soviet-backed communist expansion around the world, U.S. operations in Central America during the 1980s—with SOF playing a leading role—accomplished just that on the North American continent, some 1,500 miles from the American homeland. This case presents an interconnected IW campaign that addressed simultaneous communist-backed insurgencies in three countries—Nicaragua, El Salvador, and Honduras—and resulted in two highly successful FID operations and a successful UW operation conducted for coercive purposes.

In July 1979, the leftist Sandinista National Liberation Front (FSLN) insurgency succeeded in overthrowing Nicaraguan dictator Anastasio Somoza Debayle. Initially promising democratic reforms and free elections to the Organization of American States and to the people of Nicaragua, the Sandinista regime soon proclaimed its solidarity with Cuba and the Soviet Union. Those countries responded with thousands of advisors and tons of military equipment—to include tanks and helicopters—to build up an armed force twice the size of that of any of Nicaragua's neighbors.

Some disillusioned FSLN fighters and former members of the Nicaraguan National Guard began a loosely organized resistance movement against the Sandinista government. Meanwhile, the Sandinistas began arms shipments to an emerging leftist insurgency in neighboring El Salvador. Insurgency against the corrupt and abusive government of El Salvador had been brewing for years and was spurred to open armed revolt in 1980, encouraged by the success of the Sandinistas in Nicaragua. Diverse leftist movements in the country united to become the Farabundo Marti National Liberation Front (FMLN), and fighting escalated in 1981 with the support provided from Nicaragua.

The administration of President Jimmy Carter, and particularly the JCS, viewed such Soviet encroachment in Central America so close to the U.S. homeland with alarm, although there was at the time a strong post-Vietnam aversion to large-scale military involvement in third-world conflicts. President Carter authorized the commencement of covert action against the new Marxist government of Nicaragua in 1980 to stem Soviet and Cuban influence throughout Latin America and to interdict Sandinista arms shipments to the communist rebels in neighboring El Salvador. The president also authorized training assistance to the Nicaraguan resistance force.

With the massive Nicaraguan arms buildup threatening neighboring countries, the U.S. conducted large military exercises in 1981 and 1983, at the request of the president of Honduras, as a show of force to deter aggression. Meanwhile, the Nicaraguan Resistance, soon to be known as the Contras, grew and began operating from camps along Nicaragua's border with Honduras in the north and on the border with Costa Rica in the south.

The overriding purpose behind U.S. support to the Contras was always primarily one of coercion. President Ronald Reagan, having taken office in January 1981, authorized the CIA to begin conducting covert paramilitary operations in Nicaragua in March of that year. The primary objective was to pressure the Sandinistas to halt weapons deliveries to El Salvador by escalating the political and economic costs to Managua. U.S. officials also saw support to the resistance as a way of keeping pressure on the Sandinistas to come to the bargaining table, where the U.S. and Nicaragua's neighbors hoped to persuade them to democratize their country and to stop exporting communism.

Delivery of arms and training by the CIA began in early 1982, and shortly thereafter, the Contras began combat operations within Nicaragua. Continued congressional funding for operations in support of the Contras, however, was intermittent throughout the decade. By January 1986, the Nicaraguan Resistance had grown to a strength of 18,000, and the Reagan administration believed that, with adequate funding, it could grow to as many as 35,000 fighters. The Contras were, by this time, conducting combat operations deep inside Nicaragua. But the Sandinistas, too, were expanding their capabilities with newly organized COIN battalions equipped with sophisticated Soviet-bloc weapons and MI-8 helicopters piloted by Cubans.

General John R. Galvin, commander of USSOUTHCOM, called for comprehensive support for the Contras while testifying before the SASC in March 1986. He explained that the resistance fighters needed improved tactics and logistics operations, arguing that training provided by military professionals would help the Contras improve much more rapidly. The White House approved a plan for training by U.S. Army SF, viewing it as a counterbalance to training provided to the Sandinista army by an estimated 3,500 Cuban and Soviet military advisors. The SF training program became an administration priority, although U.S. soldiers would be barred from accompanying the rebels on operations inside Nicaragua. Congress appropriated \$100 million for the SF program in 1986, and the training, which included civic action instruction, was provided by members of the U.S. Army's 7th Special Forces Group.¹⁴⁵

Facing growing pressure from the Contras, the Sandinistas agreed to a peace plan in August 1987. In exchange for an end to U.S. support

for the Contras, Managua committed to participating in peace talks, agreed to cut ties to the Soviets and cease support to the FMLN, and even vowed to hold free elections. The Sandinistas and Ortega were soundly defeated in the heavily monitored national election in February 1990, and the new president, U.S.-backed Violetta Chamorro, assumed office in April. In accordance with the election agreement, the Contras were then demobilized.

In El Salvador in 1980–1981, morale within the El Salvadoran Armed Forces (ESAF) was low as it was proving itself incapable of dealing with the rapidly growing FMLN insurgency, which eventually fielded as many as 12,000 fighters.¹⁴⁶ COIN training was nonexistent, and they were badly in need of resources. Also plaguing the ESAF was its record of flagrant human rights abuses. Beginning in 1981, the U.S. provided training assistance with the goal of improving the ESAF's fighting capability, while contributing to the preservation of the regime of Salvadoran President José Napoléon Duarte. U.S. Army SF sent MTTs for up to six months at a time, and by 1984, the poorly trained Salvadoran force of 9,000 had grown to a 54,000-man force trained in COIN operations.

From the beginning, U.S. Forces in El Salvador operated under a congressionally mandated cap of 55 personnel in the country at any one time. Also, U.S. personnel were prohibited from accompanying ESAF units on combat missions. By 1984, a need was seen for greater continuity in the training and advisory presence, so the Pentagon began deploying operational planning and assistance training teams (OPATTs), with a small team of officers and NCOs permanently assigned on one-year tours attached to each ESAF brigade. One OPATT was manned by U.S. Marines; the other five were composed primarily of Army SF. In addition to improving the operational capability of Salvadoran units, OPATT personnel also provided training in human rights protection and monitored human rights practices. Often, rather than teaching through formal blocks of instruction, trainers found the most influential approach was to demonstrate human rights in an operational context. Prior to the arrival of U.S. trainers, for example, the ESAF was known for never taking prisoners. SOF trainers got the attention of Salvadoran officers and soldiers by pointing out to



Figure 2. A map showing the Central America irregular warfare campaign. Source: Will Irwin

them that gaining immediately actionable intelligence through the humanitarian interrogation of prisoners produced much better results.

In addition to training and advisory operations within El Salvador, selected ESAF units were sent for training at a regional U.S. training center in neighboring Honduras, while some 500 ESAF officers rotated to the U.S. for training.

Due largely to the U.S. FID effort, the Salvadoran regime was preserved long enough for the government and the insurgents to reach a negotiated settlement in 1991, demonstrating how effective a relatively small but persistent SOF engagement could be in securing core U.S. interests. During the negotiations, FMLN commander Joaquin Villalobos disclosed that once there was a significant reduction in human rights abuses, they knew they had lost the war because they began to lose the support of the people. “Putting American advisers in the brigades was the most damaging thing that happened to [the FMLN] during the war.”¹⁴⁷ Villalobos even asked that the OPATT trainers remain with the brigades during demobilization because of their favorable impact on the ESAF.¹⁴⁸

Concurrent with all of this was a light-footprint U.S. presence in Honduras. There, SF began by training Honduran Army forces to improve their ability to repel cross-border incursions by Nicaraguan Army forces that included Soviet-supplied tanks and helicopters flown by Cuban pilots. Meanwhile, U.S. engineers engaged in road-building projects, and medical teams provided care to Hondurans living in remote, rural locations. All U.S. military operations in the country were run by a small joint task force—JTF-Bravo, centrally located at Soto Cano airbase.

U.S. and Honduran security forces then detected the activities of nascent insurgencies led by Cuba-trained cadres as communist backers sought to destabilize and gain control of all three countries.¹⁴⁹ With the discovery of latent or incipient-stage Cuban-backed insurgent groups in Honduras, the U.S. Government began an FID program with SF “A” detachments spread throughout the country. These operations—augmented by MISO, civic action, and medical assistance to rural communities—continued throughout the decade. With U.S. intelligence and military assistance, all insurgent groups were defeated in their early stages.

One subtle and often overlooked lesson from the Central America IW experience is that a compromise solution, reached through a negotiated settlement as was the case in both El Salvador and Nicaragua, often provides the best result. In the case of El Salvador, FMLN insurgents based their movement on some legitimate grievances against an abusive government that was prone to human rights violations. Rather than an all-out victory by either the ESAF or the communist insurgents, the people were best served by democratic reforms emerging from the negotiated settlement, largely as a result of SOF influence. Likewise, a clear victory by the Contras in Nicaragua may have resulted in a government that was no improvement over the communist Sandinista regime. The people benefited most by the free elections resulting from the negotiated settlement.

Today, many countries in the Indo-Pacific area of responsibility are growing uneasy with China’s military growth and aggressive behavior, and they want some reassurance that the U.S. shares their concerns. Because many of them depend heavily on Beijing for trade or share a border with China, they

might desire a quiet U.S. presence or discreetly conducted training assistance due to “political sensitivities, concerns about legitimacy and sovereignty, as well as their own internal strategic calculations.”¹⁵⁰ Security cooperation activities, such as peer-to-peer JCET engagements or FID operations in support of partner states experiencing some level of internal instability, might require a minimal-footprint, low-visibility approach with little exposure to populations or adversary presence, thus being more politically acceptable and contributing to force protection by avoiding becoming easy targets for attacks or propaganda.

Competition for influence in the twenty-first century differs in many ways from influence activities during the Cold War years, but in one respect, it is reminiscent of the immediate post-Vietnam War period. At that time, the American public and Congress were war weary; they wanted to avoid getting the country involved in another large-scale, protracted, and costly war. Because both Congress and the Executive Branch sought to avoid any overseas intervention that could result in leading the Nation down the slippery slope to another large war, on those occasions when decision makers did find intervention necessary, they were driven to small-footprint IW approaches. As shown in chapter 1, this remained the predominant form of engagement by U.S. Forces up to the time of the Gulf War in 1990–1991.

The U.S. now begins a period of competition following the longest period of sustained armed conflict in its history. With the nature of current threats to America’s security, the U.S. Armed Forces must prepare for conventional war, regardless of its likelihood, because the cost of failure would be too high. But large-scale conflict between major powers today risks escalation to a nuclear exchange, which no one wants. The U.S., therefore, may once again be in a position where decision makers see small-scale IW engagements, which often yield better results than large, long-term force deployments, to be the preferred option when some form of intervention is needed.

IW engagements are favored when the commitment of conventional forces is deemed inappropriate or infeasible. This was true, for example, with the U.S. decision to engage the Soviets through a proxy war in Afghanistan during the 1980s, covertly providing support to the Mujahadin resistance following the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan. The U.S. Government felt justified in this because it had been the victim of a costly Soviet proxy war in Vietnam. It also viewed support to the Mujahadin, correctly as it turned out, as a means of making the armed aggression against Afghanistan prohibitively

expensive for the Soviet Union. Engagement with conventional forces would have been politically inappropriate because of the high risks involved and would probably not have been feasible at the time due to the geography of the region and limited access.

While many in the U.S. Government choose to focus on planning and preparing for conventional and nuclear war, America's adversaries are even now targeting the U.S. by irregular means such as massive cyberattacks and support of domestic political discord, all below the threshold of armed conflict.

Combatting terrorism remains a priority focus for USSOCOM, but SOF must also play an increasingly important role in supporting competition and influence activities. This, after nearly two decades primarily devoted to combating VEOs, will require SOF to hone other IW skills and capabilities for application in strengthening a network of allies and partners. As emphasized in the 2020 *Irregular Warfare Annex to the National Defense Strategy*, rather than abandoning key IW competencies with the shift in DOD priority to strategic competition, the Services, and particularly SOF, need to sharpen these competencies and upgrade them for the challenges posed by state-on-state gray-zone conflict.¹⁵¹

Today, China not only commits or threatens aggression against its neighbors but uses coercive statecraft and predatory economic practices against BRI-recipient countries in Asia and Africa in a way that, in the judgment of one analyst, sometimes does the CCP more harm than good.¹⁵² Through the BRI, the CCP not only provides much needed infrastructure development assistance but also expands its control and influence over recipient states. But it does so at the risk of strategic overreach. Many of these countries are awakening to the fact that such transactions amount to relinquishing a degree of sovereignty to Beijing, and over time, some will likely choose to start pushing back. SOF, in their strategic screening role, are capable of scouting out these gray-zone weak points for possible exploitation. Beijing's overreach is even causing domestic backlash in some BRI-recipient countries. Political candidates in Malaysia, for example, recently ran for office and won on campaigns featuring anti-BRI platforms,¹⁵³ and some Central Asian countries have seen anti-BRI protests. Such protests demonstrate popular resentment against Chinese overreach, but they sometimes also reflect internal unhappiness with a government seen as relinquishing sovereignty to Beijing.¹⁵⁴

The U.S. continues to have close security relationships with several key countries throughout the world, and SOF contribute to expanding U.S. cooperation and partnership networks through various forms of military-to-military engagement. Important competition hinge areas will be the Baltics and Eastern Europe with regard to Russia and East and Southeast Asia for China. Special Operations Command Europe (SOCEUR) has worked with the governments of the Baltic republics to bolster their resilience and encourage a spirited national resistance potential as described in the *Resistance Operating Concept*, published by JSOU Press in 2020.¹⁵⁵ Although originally based on SOCEUR's work with the Baltic governments, the concept applies equally well to other Eastern European states vulnerable to Russian aggression as well as to Southeast Asian nations bordering China.

Southeast Asia, where countries already view themselves as being caught somewhat in the middle, being pulled in varying degrees toward one great power or the other,¹⁵⁶ is critical terrain in America's competition with China. Because the region is of tremendous strategic importance to China—providing access to trade routes and to Indian Ocean port facilities—Beijing is working to win over the ASEAN states. Cambodia appears to be already committed as a Chinese client-state, offering up the use of a strategically located naval base to the PLAN. Next door, in landlocked Laos, the giant neighbor to the north is viewed unfavorably by many, although the country is heavily indebted to China, and the two countries have strong political and economic ties. China is Burma's most powerful ally and protector in the UN Security Council, but the two countries have historically distrusted each other. Burma suspects that Beijing strives to dominate its weaker neighbor, and overreach on the part of China could generate considerable popular backlash.¹⁵⁷ In fact, anti-China sentiment and distrust are common throughout Southeast Asia, where governments refrain from openly criticizing Beijing for fear of economic retaliation, but as one report recently observed, “they are also wary of being too accommodating, for fear of their own citizens.”¹⁵⁸

Thailand and the Philippines were key allies of the U.S. throughout the Cold War, but relations with both countries have been strained. Thailand's military-controlled government has been drifting toward closer defense ties with Beijing, where it garners support for its authoritarian rule. Strengthening relations with Bangkok should be critically important to the U.S. because of the access that Thailand, and specifically Utapao Air Base, provides to the region. In the Philippines, President Rodrigo Duterte courted Beijing for a

time and vowed to terminate the Visiting Forces Agreement with the U.S., a key facilitating agreement for the U.S.-Philippines Mutual Defense Treaty that has been in place since 1951. President Duterte, however, reversed his position in July 2021 after increasing Philippine confrontations with Chinese ships in the South China Sea.

One Southeast Asian country that is of particular interest as a potential partner for the U.S. is Vietnam. The communist government in Hanoi has good reason to view closer relations with Washington favorably, as Vietnam and the U.S. have a shared threat perception of China. Beijing's claim to most of the South China Sea puts Vietnam's offshore oil and gas projects at risk, as China's coast guard and maritime militia interfere with Vietnam's access to natural resources and fishing rights within the latter's exclusive economic zone. These actions generated a tense, three-month maritime standoff between the two countries in 2019. Popular backlash to Chinese aggression has been strong in Vietnam, with anti-China protest demonstrations, sometimes of a violent nature, flaring up often. Vietnam has been supportive of the U.S.-Australia-India-Japan partnership, known as the Quad, more so than any other country in Southeast Asia.¹⁵⁹ The U.S. also pursues closer ties with Singapore based on shared security interests.

With regard to South Asia, current strategic guidance specifically speaks of deepening the U.S. partnership with India, which signed a defense and security cooperation pact, the Basic Exchange and Cooperation Agreement, with the U.S. on 27 October 2020.¹⁶⁰

The U.S. can attract partners in these regions and elsewhere throughout Asia, Africa, and Latin America through activities such as SFA, which involve the development and improvement of the capability and capacity of foreign security forces and their sustaining institutions. Because this can involve improving partner nation forces' abilities to defend against external threats, U.S. conventional forces can play an important role.

FID, on the other hand, helps the HN deal with internal threats—insurgency, lawlessness, and drug trafficking, for example. Conventional security force assistance brigades (SFABs) can fulfill some general conventional force FID missions, but those FID missions requiring support to HN SOF or that require language and cultural expertise should be carried out by SOF. This is especially true when the HN government, for political reasons, desires that such support be provided discreetly. General Richard D. Clarke, USSOCOM commander, in describing when SOF are the FID force

of choice over SFABs, has stated that “SOF should be in places where it is a light footprint, it is politically sensitive, with a small team that is training other special operations forces primarily.”¹⁶¹ SOF should become masters at providing such low-visibility FID, security cooperation, and other military-to-military engagement.

The benefits accruing from U.S. participation in these programs, just as with providing support to national resilience and resistance, are many. In addition to strengthening partnerships, these engagements reduce strategic blind spots by providing early warning and advancing situational understanding, provide legitimate access and placement, and can make simultaneous preparation of the environment activities possible. Repetitive security cooperation and FID activities in a particular country offer oppor-

SOF should become masters at providing such low-visibility FID, security cooperation, and other military-to-military engagement.

tunities for SOF to gain area familiarity and practice language skills. But these engagements are not limited to ARSOF. Marine SOF and NSW Forces can conduct similar operations with HN maritime forces, especially in

countries such as Thailand, Vietnam, Malaysia, Singapore, and the Philippines. AFSOF can be equally effective with aviation FID.

UW is a bedrock SOF skill that must not be allowed to lose its luster; rather, it must be modernized to be most effective in today’s faster, digitized world. In recent years, many world leaders have come to believe that autocracy is the wave of the future, but that notion is increasingly being met with resistance just as it has throughout history. It is impossible to predict when SOF will again be called upon to support a resistance movement, and because of that, UW readiness is of paramount importance.

Evidence of the growing scorn people have for autocracy can be seen in every corner of the globe. In early July 2021, thousands of pro-democracy activists in President Miguel Díaz-Canel’s Cuba began staging protests in more than 30 cities across the island nation. What began as protests against food and medicine shortages grew into loud demands for freedom. When the government in Havana shut down much of the internet, especially restricting social media and other messaging or chat platforms, Cubans took to using Psiphon, a censorship circumvention tool, to regain access to websites and email.¹⁶² People gathered in the streets and marched in the face of severe repression; thousands were beaten and arrested by security forces. Cuba has

a state security structure that has been in place for more than 60 years and is considered to be even more sophisticated than the Soviet's ever was. It is constructed of concentric layers of deeply embedded spies and informants, regime-controlled activists, rapid-response brigades, and finally, highly trained and well-compensated police, military, and paramilitary forces. The ratio of security forces to common citizens is reportedly even higher than it was with East Germany's infamous Stasi during the Cold War.¹⁶³ Yet, in July 2021, the fear factor was perhaps beginning to give way.

On 1 February 2021, a military coup led by Senior General Min Aung Hlaing overthrew the democratically elected government of Burma. Almost immediately, a nationwide civil disobedience movement resulted in hundreds of thousands of physicians, city utility workers, garbage collectors, and others walking off the job and refusing to return. A government expert estimated that three-quarters of the nation's civil servants joined the work stoppage.¹⁶⁴ When the streets filled in the evenings with demonstrators banging pots and pans, the government cut internet service. The military regime then began a brutal crackdown on the protesters—killing 912 people and detaining thousands more by mid-July—even though the protests had been largely nonviolent.¹⁶⁵ Ousted members of the country's legislative body organized the Committee to Represent Pyidaungsu Hluttaw (parliament), which amounted to a nascent resistance movement. The committee published a new interim constitution in early April to replace the 2008 constitution that had been written by the military. It then established a parallel, or shadow, government called the National Unity Government (NUG), which would represent the ousted democratically elected leaders. Former members of the government who now lead the NUG remain in hiding or live in exile. In the northern reaches of the country, along the border with China, the Kachin Independence Army, an ethnic armed organization, has expressed solidarity with the anti-junta movement. Another ethnic armed group, the Karen National Liberation Army (KNLA), along the border with Thailand, is offering protection and training to those fleeing the government crackdown. The military began an offensive against the KNLA, which responded by attacking government outposts in their area. While most armed groups in the country support the anti-junta movement, they hesitate to endorse the NUG. As of May 2021, the NUG was forming a "people's defense force" composed of armed fighters newly trained by the KNLA along with some defectors from the army.¹⁶⁶

A further development triggered by the anti-coup movement in Burma is the creation of a collective, online, pro-democracy movement called the #MilkTeaAlliance. While authoritarian governments in the region rely increasingly on digital repression with ubiquitous closed-circuit television camera coverage and facial recognition technology, protesters are turning to digital resistance methods. The digital #MilkTeaAlliance movement, in which protesters in Hong Kong, Taiwan, and Thailand have thrown their support behind the movement in Burma, uses virtual private networks to access the internet. The digital movement intends to attract attention and sympathy from the international community in its efforts to defy authoritarian governments.¹⁶⁷

Iran, too, has witnessed broad-based public dissension over the past decade, with a population hungry for change and better leadership capable of rising to oppose the regime at any time. While large protests in the past, such as the Green Movement of 2009, were largely formed by university students and members of the middle class, the “Bloody November” protests of 2019–2020, triggered by massive fuel price increases, were staged by the working class and the poor. The Green Movement, which has gone underground, lacked effective organization and leadership; today, there is a lack of any coherent resistance movement at all in a very restive population. “The Iranian people,” in the view of experts Eric Edelman and Ray Takeyh, “want an accountable government and do not share their leaders’ animus toward the West.”¹⁶⁸

“More than 40 percent of China’s territory—Inner Mongolia, Tibet, Xinjiang,” writes Yale history professor Odd Arne Westad, “was originally populated by people who do not see themselves as Chinese.”¹⁶⁹ Much of their homelands, however, are slowly being taken over by Han Chinese, the nation’s ethnic majority, and their cultures are being destroyed by the regime’s campaign of forced assimilation that places severe restrictions on religion, language, and education.

But China’s ethnic minorities—less than 10 percent of the population—pose no existential threat to the regime. Beijing’s greatest potential internal threat could come from its middle class, which has thus far shown support for the regime, comfortable with Xi’s brash and assertive diplomacy while enjoying a steadily rising standard of living. This popular support could be jeopardized by a lengthy economic slowdown. “A prolonged period of mediocre economic performance,” in the opinion of Minxin Pei, “could severely

reduce the level of popular support for the CCP, as ordinary Chinese grapple with rising unemployment and an inadequate social safety net” for a rapidly aging population.¹⁷⁰ Pei continues:

In such an adverse economic environment, signs of social unrest, such as riots, mass protests, and strikes, will become more common. The deepest threat to the regime’s stability will come from the Chinese middle class. Well-educated and ambitious college graduates will find it difficult to obtain desirable jobs in the coming years because of China’s anemic economic performance. As their standard of living stalls, middle-class Chinese may turn against the party.¹⁷¹

A prolonged economic slowdown would also have negative repercussions for the regime’s patronage network and increase tensions in China’s restless peripheral territories. As with any autocracy, the regime in Beijing may be more brittle than it appears, and a crisis could bring serious disruption.

The flight of elites is another phenomenon that has been a political embarrassment for Beijing in the past decade. Writing in 2014, Elizabeth Economy explained:

Even within China’s political and economic upper class, many have expressed concern over Xi’s political tightening and are seeking a foothold overseas. According to the China-based Hurun Report, 85 percent of those with assets of more than \$1 million want their children to be educated abroad, and more than 65 percent of Chinese citizens with assets of \$1.6 million or more have emigrated or plan to do so.¹⁷²

In June 2021, Columbia University political science professor, Andrew Nathan, expressed the opinion that, “A generational shift is under way in China, with traditional values giving way to more liberal attitudes, and it does not favor the long-term prospects of the CCP.”¹⁷³

Finally, Russia has seen sizeable protests in support of jailed opposition leader Aleksei A. Navalny, although the regime’s strong internal security mechanism has thus far succeeded in suppressing any organized resistance. But President Vladimir Putin fears what all dictators fear—the day when their lies and brutality no longer generate sufficient fear in the population. President Putin’s government remained popular so long as oil prices soared, the standard of living for most people rose, and Russians admired

the brashness of his forced annexation of Crimea. But as Russia's economy shows signs of floundering, more of its citizens could begin to question why they have had to steadily relinquish freedoms under the current regime. As with dictatorships everywhere, the more repressive the regime becomes, the more brittle it becomes. Change can come with startling abruptness.

All of this distributed, dissident energy should remind SOF leaders that revolution in one country often triggers similar uprisings elsewhere, just as happened when the communist governments

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fell in half a dozen East European countries during the revolutions of 1989. The 1986 People Power Revolution in the Philippines prefaced the Color Revolutions in Yugoslavia, Georgia, Ukraine, Lebanon, and Kyrgyzstan from 2000 to 2005, and Tunisia's nonviolent revolution in 2011 prompted the Arab Spring wave of rebellion. Such events come with alarming sudden-

ness and the U.S. Government might find reason to provide some level of support to any movement it deems could impact American interests. SOF must be ready to respond.

SOF's Unique Contribution to Integrated Deterrence

SOF can contribute to a strategy of integrated deterrence in ways that are as varied as they are unique to the Force. An integrated deterrence strategy requires a synthesis of the diplomatic, informational, military, and economic elements of national power; synchronization of the efforts of JIIM-C partners; a coordinated mix of nuclear, conventional, and special operations capabilities; and the support and active participation of a network of partner and allied nations. A characteristic of modern SOF is that they routinely engage in all of these realms, thus making them a powerful, tailorable, and effective component of integrated deterrence. SOF represent a measured deterrent option that mixes a proven and world-renowned capability with a less provocative means.

Deterrence is achieved by decisively influencing an adversary's decision-making calculus by credibly threatening the denial of benefits or gains sought by aggression or the imposition of costs judged to be too painful to incur or so severe as to outweigh any perceived benefits. Alternatively,

deterrence might be achieved by encouraging restraint by convincing an actor that restraint will result in an acceptable outcome.¹⁷⁴ SOF provide a highly respected response force because of their global presence and rapid response capability, reducing the dependence on extensive forward-basing and expanding joint and multinational capabilities. Deterrent effects derive from an array of potential kinetic and non-kinetic employment options that are known and respected worldwide.

Building a robust UW capability can accomplish more than just imposing costs on aggression; it can also contribute to integrated deterrence. Authoritarian regimes, whose paramount concern is remaining in power, rely on controlling their populations through intimidation or other means. Large-scale protests reveal their tenuous hold on power, and extravagantly brutal suppression only makes the regime more brittle and exposes it to international censure. Autocracies see their greatest threat to be internal, not external. Rod Paschall, writing in 1990, believed that “Moscow’s fear of armed, internal revolt may be as high or higher than its fear of nuclear war.”¹⁷⁵ Although the Soviet Union and its Cold War setting are gone, authoritarianism in Russia and distrust of the West remain. Authoritarian leaders, as USSOCOM strategist Bob Jones has pointed out, “Fear the revolutionary energy of their own populations far more than they fear the combined power of external parties.”¹⁷⁶ This can be leveraged in a way that U.S. UW and influence operations expertise can have a deterrent and coercive effect. Through what Jones terms unconventional deterrence, an established UW competency can serve to implant the threat of internal instability within the minds of paranoid autocrats. Political leaders in today’s authoritarian regimes know only too well what Seth Jones recently observed, that “the Cold War ended not because NATO countries invaded Poland, East Germany, and other Warsaw Pact countries, but because their populations rose up against tyranny.”¹⁷⁷

All four of the competitor nations described in current national security guidance documents are authoritarian states ruled by brittle regimes susceptible to the credible threat of internal unrest fomented or supported by external sources. “Unconventional warfare,” as described by Bob Jones, “is any activity intended to leverage the insurgent energy resident within a population governed by another in order to advance one’s own interests.”¹⁷⁸ Unconventional deterrence, according to Jones, offers advantages over conventional or nuclear deterrence. Rather than pitting strength against strength

as in more traditional forms of deterrence, unconventional deterrence counters an inherent weakness (the brittle nature of an authoritarian regime) with the proven strength inherent in America's UW capability. The U.S. Government's historic inclination to employ this capability only strengthens that deterrent value. Another advantage of unconventional deterrence is that, unlike more traditional forms of deterrence, it not only discourages bad behavior on the part of U.S. challengers, but it actually encourages positive behavior in that it can result in authoritarian regimes taking action in the form of improving governance to reduce their vulnerability.¹⁷⁹

Countering Extremists and Weapons of Mass Destruction Proliferators

During two decades of combatting VEOs in Afghanistan, Iraq, Syria, and elsewhere, SOF have demonstrated time and again an unmatched CT capability and a readiness to effectively engage proliferators and users of WMD.

To continue their lead in the counter-VEO fight, SOF must maintain and even further enhance their CT capability and competency. In carrying out such operations—often in remote areas, under spartan conditions, and in the face of formidable odds—SOF will continue to realize the benefits of functioning as a learning organization and will build on this approach through improvements in methods and procedures as well as continuing investment in advanced technologies. USSOCOM should continue pursuing extensions of authorities that enable small-footprint SOF elements to leverage the skills

To continue their lead in the counter-VEO fight, SOF must maintain and even further enhance their CT capability and competency.

and attributes resident in indigenous regular and irregular forces, to build partner capacity, and to support foreign forces and groups in IW operations.

Preparing for War or Crisis-response Contingencies

While strengthening U.S. national defense through a mastery of IW, SOF will also continue to prepare to provide traditional SOF support to conventional warfighting campaigns and to respond rapidly and effectively in extraordinary contingency situations.

USSOCOM and the theater special operations commands must maintain readiness for traditional warfare roles that encompass the full range of SOF

core tasks and should especially prepare for extraordinary crisis-response contingencies such as hostage rescue or the recovery of sensitive material. This entails the regeneration and upgrade of SOF competence in legacy DA capabilities such as the conduct of strategic raids or sabotage and the employment of precision capabilities anywhere in the world, regardless of conditions, unilaterally or with state or non-state partners.

In the event of a collapse of the government of North Korea, for example, China would likely face a migration crisis, while the U.S. might focus on securing North Korea's WMD and ballistic missile launch facilities. The likelihood of a great power confrontation in such a scenario would be significant. Moreover, escalation in such circumstances would generate complex NEOs, some of which would be on a large scale with lingering instability effects.

SOF in a Strategic Screening Role

America's competitors and potential adversaries work through an array of agent networks and proxy forces on nearly every continent to disrupt or endanger U.S. interests. With SOF's extended presence and regional engagement activities around the world, the Force is in a position to serve in a strategic screening role. Serving as America's sentinels around the world, SOF can perform an indications-and-warning function in support of national security decision-making, but they can fulfill an even more active role as global scouts, gaining the Joint Force geostrategic positional advantage (physical and cognitive) over competitors and adversaries through access, placement, and influence—engaging with partners in ways that set the conditions for a win before or in the absence of armed conflict. While carrying out a wide variety of operations in support of allies and partner nations, SOF can help to detect, monitor, and report on the covert and overt gray-zone activities of adversaries, illuminating their actions to better inform geographic combatant commands, country teams, JIIM-C partners, and national decision makers. This early warning function helps to eliminate strategic blind spots and improve situational understanding, reducing response time and creating course-of-action consideration and decision space. In helping to prevent conflict through high-payoff gray-zone engagements and contributing to integrated deterrence, SOF function somewhat in the manner of a rheostat by flattening the escalation curve and extending periods of relative peace through indirect, limited, and low-intensity approaches.

In addition to having combat troop presence in areas such as Ukraine's Donbass region, Syria, Libya, Moldova, and Armenia, Russia maintains a small cruise missile-equipped fleet of submarines and frigates in the Mediterranean and plans to open a naval base in Sudan. But equally important is the network of disavowed contract forces that Russia employs in several regions.

Russia wields disruptive influence around the world through private military companies (PMCs)—typically uniformed contract mercenaries who function as an effective, low-cost, foreign policy tool while providing the Kremlin the benefit of plausible deniability. PMCs are used to help build partner capacity, secure economic interests, and perform other tasks at the direction and with the support of Russian security agencies. Operating in only 4 countries in 2015, they expanded their presence to 27 countries by 2021 and are currently active in Europe, Asia, the Middle East, Africa, and Latin America. Some of their most notable operations have been carried out in Syria, Ukraine, Libya, Venezuela, and various African locales. The best known of these companies—ChVK Wagner, or the Wagner Group—is led by a close confidant of Russian President Vladimir Putin and engages in intelligence collection and analysis, protective services, training assistance, propaganda and other IO, and even combat operations.¹⁸⁰ The Wagner Group's presence in Libya alone is estimated to vary at times between 300 and several thousand personnel. PMCs also prop up dictators such as Venezuela's President Nicolás Maduro, provide protection to Russian business interests, and reportedly engage in cyberoperations. As a force whose links to the Kremlin can plausibly be denied, they are, in the words of one analyst, “the perfect instrument for a declining superpower eager to assert itself without taking too many risks.”¹⁸¹ Along with the deployment of conventional armed forces, SOF, and intelligence personnel beyond Russia's borders, Moscow benefits from PMC employment by expanding Russian influence, strengthening diplomatic relationships and commercial interests, securing access to strategic resources, and interjecting itself in conflict-resolution talks. Some analysts have suggested that it also serves to directly challenge the West, and particularly the U.S., while avoiding direct military confrontation, and to assuage Russia's humiliation over its Cold War defeat.

SOF can play an important role in undermining the effectiveness of these gray-zone activities of U.S. competitors by helping to heighten public awareness and by providing a better alternative to developing countries. The

suboptimal and embarrassing performance of some PMCs, for example, and the long-term costs to countries where they operate should be emphasized to vulnerable governments. Raising public awareness of PMC operations can increase pressure on Russia in other ways, such as revealing data on PMC casualties, which are routinely concealed from public disclosure in Russia. Atrocities against civilians, such as those attributed to PMCs operating in Syria, should not escape attention and publication.

Russian denial and deception operations will not be the sole focus of SOF's global scouts. China is expanding its global reach and influence through BRI engagements and the employment of conventional military forces and militia-like fishing fleets. Similarly, Iran operates through a network of agents and proxy forces, such as Hezbollah, that are active in the Middle East and East Asia, South Asia, Europe, Latin America, and Africa. SOF's Fourth-Age strategic screening force can help in monitoring and reporting on these activities as well—exposing clandestine or covert activities, revealing intentions cloaked in ambiguity and deception, disrupting adversary assaults on U.S. or partner nation interests, and degrading or neutralizing their ability to carry out such activities. SOF are also capable of influencing and enabling friendly states to develop similar defensive capabilities. They are equally capable of responding with punitive options when so directed.

SOF's Potential In Responses To Global Rule-Breaking (Illegal, Unreported, and Unregulated Fishing)

“SOF is uniquely capable of coordinating JIIM-C responses in sub-sovereign operations, countering global rule-breaking behaviors by revisionist powers.

Backed by its Navy and Maritime Militia, the CCP's high seas fishing fleets are harvesting and depleting sensitive fish stocks in the exclusive economic zones of developing countries across the Global South. While countries might individually resent this intrusion, they are unable to resist without an external “anchor power” providing support. With IUUF [illegal, unreported, and unregulated fishing] constituting a policing and regulatory issue, not a primarily military one, SOF can readily support JIIM-C partners to achieve a strategic information effect. That is, its global reach, comfort with interagency

and partner operations, and innate information and influence capabilities make SOF perfectly suited for using tactical support to achieve a strategic political effect.

The CCP's ability to engage in IUUF relies on subsidies, foreign finance capital, and a profit motive. If the adversary is acting in the gray zone through ambiguous financial and commercial means, then engaging in sub-sovereign operations becomes a necessary response. Sub-sovereign operations exploit the CCP's dependence on foreign capital, markets, insurance products, and logistics to create vulnerabilities in the competition space. The framework for sub-sovereign operations places strategic communication at the center of the concept by ensuring the wide dissemination of malign behavior to relevant populations worldwide for strategic political effect while undermining the adversary's strength through diminishing its physical capability.

For this vignette, the JIIM-C approach manifests integrated and rapidly formed tactical teams with global reach that exploit emergent and anticipated IUUF opportunities for strategic competition. The sustaining JIIM-C team is comprised of U.S. Coast Guard, Customs and Border Protection, National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, and SOF, as well as allies, nongovernmental organizations, and the commercial sector. Tactical teams would be dynamic by design, built upon shared awareness, interoperability, and trust relationships. SOF expands the team's capacity to plan, train, support boarding, logistics, and surveillance. There are also land-based teams focused on the effected fishery communities employing a full range of JIIM-C partners.¹⁸²

Monitoring and reporting on adversary activities to inform U.S. strategy is only part of the strategic screening role; equally important is the ability of SOF leadership to recognize opportunities and make timely recommendations on how to exploit them. The versatility and capability of SOF will enable them to respond to short-notice contingencies ranging from personnel or sensitive material recovery to NEO or other crisis-response commitments. SOF participation in activities such as disaster relief can aid immensely in building a level of trust and cooperation with potential partner nations.

Conclusion

As SOF contribute to DOD efforts to protect U.S. interests in competition below the threshold of war, they benefit from eight decades of evolutionary growth and preparation. From their beginnings as impromptu forces in a high-intensity global conflict during World War II, they progressed to permanent status in the postwar years, grew in size and capability during the Cold War decades, and matured through a prolonged IW experience until entering today's challenging environment.

SOF will play a key role in campaigning efforts designed to strengthen U.S. influence and position around the world while eroding that of America's adversaries—generating friction, introducing complexity and uncertainty for competitor decision makers, and imposing costs on their malign behavior, whether brutally oppressing their own populations or committing aggression or coercion against their neighbors. This campaigning for influence will be carried out in a geopolitical setting best described as a compound security dilemma featuring global unrest and a weakening of the rules-based international order. Rival states compete for influence and advantage in a continually changing strategic landscape, a world marked by instability and intimidation, global health crises, the impact of climate change, and the widespread dispersion of rapidly advancing technologies.

To complement the efforts of their JIIM-C partners, SOF must provide an increasingly lethal, rapidly adapting, and constantly innovating special operations enterprise. While maintaining an unmatched counter-VEO supremacy, a force equally capable of effecting high-threat rescue or recovery operations, SOF will build upon their legacy competence as an agent of influence by helping partners solve their problems and creating conditions and opportunities for change.

Institutionalizing SOF Innovation

The OSS succeeded as an organization that institutionalized innovation, with members displaying a penchant and talent for creativity at a level that probably can't be taught. Because the OSS was developed from scratch and had no comparable antecedent organization, planners and operators were unencumbered by existing special operations doctrine or military dogma.

Starting with a blank slate, planners and operators alike were forced into a mode of innovation. Resourcefulness and imagination became decisive factors in building units of action to accomplish missions and tasks that were alien to the Armed Forces at that time. Creativity was the order of the day. Viable tactics, techniques, and procedures evolved quickly, adapting to local circumstances and operating environments and benefitting from lessons learned through early failure. Rapid concept development and experimentation determined what worked and what didn't. Warfighter demands did not allow for this to be a time-consuming process.

Creativity held forth in all aspects of OSS operations—recruiting, training, equipping, operating, communicating, and supplying. Ingenuity was particularly evident in the recruiting function. OSS Director William Donovan, seeing the ethnic diversity of America's population as a national strength, used culturally targeted recruiting to fill the ranks of the OGs. But he went even further, employing other unorthodox talent acquisition methods. A remote UW operational requirement arose early in the war, one that called for quickly recruiting and organizing a guerrilla force from Arabic-speaking Moroccan tribes in support of the planned Allied invasion of North Africa. The mission was particularly sensitive in that it involved intelligence gathering, sabotage, and the recruitment and preparation of a UW guerrilla force in Vichy-French North Africa at a time when the U.S. still maintained diplomatic relations with the collaborationist government of Vichy France. The operation therefore called for a light-footprint, low-visibility approach. OSS planners worked out a concept that could be carried out by a force of only ten Americans working undercover out of the U.S. legation in Tangier.

General Donovan dispatched Colonel William O. Eddy, U.S. Marine Corps Reserve, to Tangier in early January 1942 to work out arrangements with Robert D. Murphy of the State Department. But the mission also depended greatly on regional expertise, cultural awareness, and language ability, and time constraints precluded a lengthy training and education solution. To find the right man for the job, Donovan turned to academia, recruiting Dr. Carlton S. Coon, a distinguished Harvard anthropology professor and author of the textbook *Principles of Anthropology*. Coon, a specialist on the tribes of North Africa, was an Arabic speaker and had traveled throughout northwest Africa for his anthropological studies between 1924 and 1939. He personally knew many of the tribal leaders in the area, particularly among the native Riffian population.

Upon joining the OSS in the spring of 1942, Dr. Coon was assigned to the Special Operations Branch and was immediately sent through a UW course of instruction, including training in communications, the use of weapons and explosives, and the fundamentals of guerrilla warfare. He was joined by a few other OSS operatives, including former Boston insurance executive Gordon Browne and U.S. Army Major Jerry Sage, who would later be immortalized when his name was added to that of a small town in North Carolina in the title of the culminating exercise for U.S. Army SF training—Robin-Sage.

Colonel Eddy later estimated that Dr. Coon and his team eventually recruited, armed, trained, and controlled some 10,000 Riffian irregulars. Although the guerrilla force did successfully carry out limited sabotage operations and perform intelligence collection functions, its primary mission of disrupting German operations through the conduct of guerrilla warfare was never tested.

The OSS also exercised an enlightened acceptance of women into the ranks, employing several in morale operations (PSYOP) and similar functions, in addition to administrative roles. In one respect, though, the OSS was slow to follow the lead of its British counterpart, SOE—the employment of women in a covert, UW operative role in denied territory. As explained in chapter 1, the employment by the Allies of uniformed SF such as the OGs, Jedburghs, and SAS teams in clandestine UW operations in France was preceded by three years of covert operations carried out by men and women—civilian and military—in civilian clothing and undercover as French citizens. The OSS recruited only men for this work, but the SOE found advantage in recruiting women as well. Initially, women were often found to be better at wireless telegraphy and were thus trained and used as radio operators. But with most fit men of military age in France having been shipped off to POW camps in Germany or sent there as part of German labor drafts, male SOE operatives sometimes found it difficult to move about the country without attracting attention. Women did not have this problem and therefore proved to have much greater mobility.

Taking advantage of this, SOE began employing women operatives as messengers or couriers for the male sabotage circuit organizers. A few women proved themselves to be very competent in the covert UW role and were re-tasked to organize their own circuits. One woman who the Germans came to regard as one of the Allies' most effective and dangerous operatives

was Virginia Hall, a French-speaking American citizen serving as a news correspondent in Paris at the time of her recruitment by SOE early in the war. After her first successful mission in occupied France for SOE, General Donovan arranged her transfer to the OSS, for whom she then re-entered France on a second mission. On this mission, she organized an effective sabotage and guerrilla warfare network, assisted by Jedburgh teams deployed after D-Day. Upon the liberation of France, Hall was awarded the U.S. Army's Distinguished Service Cross, the only female civilian ever to receive the decoration. SOF would be wise to follow the advice of SF and CIA veteran Mike Vickers: "For much of the mission, you're crazy not to use women. You're crazy not to use all the capabilities of our diverse population."¹⁸³ USSOCOM's commander, General Richard D. Clarke, considers the improvement of diversity and inclusion in SOF to be "an operational imperative."¹⁸⁴

Task Force 714:
SOF Innovation in Iraq and Project Maven

When SOF were faced with the job of finding and dismantling the cellular network of the al-Qaeda in Iraq (AQI) insurgency during Operation IRAQI FREEDOM, they found themselves unprepared for the monumental task. Task Force 714 relied on innovative methods to accomplish the mission, successfully disrupting and dismantling the insurgency's mid-level leadership network. The solution combined organizational transformation with groundbreaking, front-line inter-agency collaboration, resulting in an intelligence-driven task force that embraced cutting-edge software applications and benefitted from the timely exploitation of big data through the use of state-of-the-art data integration tools.

Challenged to even keep pace with AQI's operational tempo in the beginning, the unit, in the words of its commander, then Major General Stanley McChrystal, found itself "losing to an enemy that ... we should have dominated."¹⁸⁵ To meet the operational demand, Task Force 714 had to adapt to the threat and reinvent itself over the next two years. By August 2004, the unit was executing 18 raids across the country, but this proved to be far from what was required against a rapidly growing insurgency. By August 2006, the task force had turned

the corner, carrying out some 300 raids against AQI that month alone. Mid-level AQI leaders were being killed or captured at an increasing rate, resulting in the disruption and dismantling of vast insurgent networks. By 2009, according to General McChrystal, Task Force 714 had “clawed the guts out of AQI.”

The changes that proved to be so effective began when the task force’s intelligence chief told General McChrystal that the unit needed to transform itself into an intelligence-driven organization, with intelligence operations accounting for 80 percent of their activity. Going a step further, the task force adopted the joint interagency task force model, bringing in members of the intelligence community to work side-by-side with unit planners and operators. This required diligent work to overcome the deeply rooted biases and culture of secrecy embedded within the intelligence agencies.

Interagency cooperation improved as the task force proved itself to be not only a consumer but also a provider of intelligence. With 300 raids being conducted each month, operations began producing massive amounts of captured documents, hard drives and thumb drives, cell phones, and other material. Combined with a rapidly growing amount of imagery collected by unmanned aerial vehicles (UAVs), all of this intelligence greatly enhanced the unit’s interrogation of captured insurgents. When detainees gained the impression that task force interrogators already knew more about the insurgent organization and operations than they did, they began to talk much more freely.

While the vastly growing amount of collected intelligence was critical to driving the task force’s operations and targeting cycle, it quickly became an unmanageable big data problem. Analysts had to turn to state-of-the-art data integration applications and automated tools. Multi-source data fusion and analysis-enabled intelligence analysts identified targets of interest and monitored their activities, thus learning more about the insurgent network.

Task Force 714 adopted a new targeting cycle—find, fix, finish, exploit, analyze, disseminate—to gain the maximum benefit from the operations-intelligence collaboration. As SOF-led U.S. CT operations expanded to other areas throughout the Middle East and Africa, the dependence on persistent surveillance by UAVs increased exponentially. Demands grew even more with the emergence of ISIS. An array

of various UAV-mounted sensors was producing massive, unmanageable amounts of imagery and other geospatial data. The processing, exploitation, and dissemination (PED) requirement eventually necessitated a revolutionary, automated solution that employed artificial intelligence (AI) and machine learning (ML) technologies capable of computer vision, image recognition, and scene understanding.

The algorithmic warfare cross-functional team of the DOD was established in May 2017 to execute Project Maven, with the objective of automating PED of full-motion video in support of operations to defeat ISIS. SOF embraced and supported Project Maven, with project specialists being assigned to their units. SOF's willingness to adapt and innovate proved decisive in their ability to accomplish a mission for which they had not initially been prepared.¹⁸⁶

Fourth-Age SOF will likewise prepare for influence campaigning and contributing to integrated deterrence by modernizing special operations capabilities, innovating to craft new methods and technologies, and enhancing skills and methods that have stood the test of time with advanced technology applications and performance marked by sophistication and discretion. Innovation need not be limited to the CT and COIN mission set illustrated in the vignette above. SOF must reinvest in legacy special warfare capabilities to ultimately reach a level of mastery equal to that exhibited in CT. This is especially true in innovative, light-footprint operations, where creativity pays huge dividends, ensuring that combatant commanders, country teams, and national decision makers can continue to leverage SOF's extraordinary skills and capabilities and benefit from their special relationships.

SOF should consider, for example, a reimagining of the UW mission, allowing them to evolve to better fit today's geopolitical realities and faster, digitized world. Perhaps SOF can be more effective in the political and irregular warfare likely to result from an escalation of tension between competitor powers by preparing for a "blended" special warfare mission, providing support to resilience building that, in the event of overt aggression, can morph into support to resistance and UW. This would provide a capability tailor made for implementing the *Resistance Operating Concept* and would follow the guidance in the *Irregular Warfare Annex to the National Defense Strategy* that calls for "proactive, dynamic, and unorthodox approaches to

IW.¹⁸⁷ Hybrid threats such as those posed by today's major aggressor powers require a hybrid SOF solution.

SOF should monitor developments in Burma, where civil resistance protesters, frustrated at their lack of progress and suffering increasing repression at the hands of the military junta, are partnering with ethnic armed groups such as the KNLA in their campaign against the authoritarian military regime. This could represent a trend toward coalitions of civil resistance and armed resistance movements working toward a common goal.

How might reimagined FID approaches incorporate countersubversion aspects? The DOD dictionary defines subversion as “actions designed to undermine the military, economic, psychological, or political strength or morale of a governing authority.”¹⁸⁸ It can entail the infiltration of agents or ideas aimed at influencing the attitudes, beliefs, and actions of a target audience, optimally resulting in decisions or actions by the leaders of a target population that are inimical to its own interests or that instigate transfers of allegiance. Since subversive activities represent a strategic capability that is often not of a violent nature, they are not addressed by the countering-violent extremism planning model. A countersubversion approach could employ intelligence, counterintelligence, and FID methods to help partner nations develop subversion countermeasures—actions taken to anticipate, detect, and defeat foreign-instigated subversion before it erupts into foreign-supported insurgency. Such a sophisticated, countersubversion FID approach would largely be an education process at the outset.

As described earlier in this monograph, China intends to increase its overseas military presence to protect its expanding development and security interests resulting from the BRI, even though this could provoke pushback from affected states. Helping these weaker states defend their sovereignty and safeguard their populations from coercion and intimidation, not to mention outright armed aggression, is a task well-suited to SOF, who are prepared to execute a discreet and sophisticated special warfare competence.

As the 2016 *Special Operations Forces Operating Concept* suggested, SOF will become increasingly agile, flexible, and effective by blending forces and capabilities from across the SOF enterprise, task organizing—including joint integration at the tactical level, if necessary—in ways that produce the optimal force for a particular mission.¹⁸⁹ This could even include the blending of national mission force and theater SOF as needed.

Finally, how can SOF better adapt emerging technologies “to empower hyper-enabled operators and teams?”¹⁹⁰ For the conduct of special warfare, even remotely, with populations who are hindered by state-administered internet firewalls, this could entail more effective censorship-circumvention tools. Circumventing advanced anti-access/area denial (A2/AD) systems is an even greater challenge, where state-of-the-art technology might enable small, dispersed, highly mobile units with an extremely low electromagnetic signature. While AI and ML technologies will become increasingly capable and ubiquitous, SOF will also benefit from augmented reality and holographic computer technologies, robotics and autonomous systems, human-machine interface, cybernetics, regenerative medicine, advanced biomedical technology and human performance enhancement, solar power collectors, quantum communication, and electromagnetic pulse-hardened equipment, while other developments might be effective at countering thermal imaging and sophisticated electronic detection.¹⁹¹ The recent accomplishments of private spacefaring companies Virgin Galactic and Blue Origin, launching rocket planes that accelerated to three times the speed of sound, skirting the edge of space before returning to earth, should stir the imagination of those seeking methods for circumventing A2/AD challenges to infiltrate denied territory.

USSOCOM will continue the fight against VEOs and WMD proliferators and users, while concurrently engineering the necessary force balancing to allow SOF to execute other critical competition roles and ensuring readiness for possible future armed conflict.

SOF Employment of Artificial Intelligence

“SOF has JIIM-C relationships, global data gathering capacity, and a responsive acquisition process that allow it to rapidly employ cutting-edge technologies to advance U.S. interests.

The United States Special Operations Command, in conjunction with the Joint Artificial Intelligence Center (JAIC), has effectively employed artificial intelligence (AI) technologies on the battlefield. Some examples include utilizing machine vision (MV) to distinguish people and objects in drone videos, a wide-area surveillance sensor system, and predictive maintenance applications. Using an effort that combined both machine learning (ML) and deep learning (DL),

the drone program was able to flag images by category for human review. These objects were classified using SOF data gathered from forward deployed locations. Although the technology was initially only employed in certain areas of responsibility, it has now expanded across the geographic combatant commands.

Additionally, SOF has employed AI in support of predictive maintenance, partnering with the JAIC and Carnegie Mellon University. SOF aviators from the 160th Special Operations Aviation Regiment now conduct maintenance based on need rather than fixed time intervals, informed by a combination of historical data and aircraft sensors collecting component data. This creates significant efficiencies, as aircraft spend more time on the flight line and less time in maintenance hangars.”¹⁹²

Lessons Gathered but not yet Learned?

Amid all the present-day ambiguities and “grayness” in all things, including security and defense matters, perhaps the one thing crystal clear is that the U.S. must learn lessons from the past and make changes now to best face the future.

As the U.S. continues to think about and work through this question of (re)defining SOF’s utility in great power competition, its needs to go back to first-level principles. The “win” in this environment of competition is, as it has always been throughout the history of special operations, in “left-of-boom” operations, activities, and investments. It’s all about comprehensive (integrated) deterrence. In other words, the win is achieved through placing the Joint Force in positional advantage over competitors and adversaries through access, placement, and strategic influence, setting the conditions for the possibilities of winning before, or even without, the fight.

As the U.S. and the West learned in the twentieth century, preventing the Cold War from going hot was an essential element in the theory of victory in the strategic rivalry between totalitarianism and communism on one side and democracy and capitalism on the other. The U.S. and its allies and partners achieved their geostrategic interests in the Cold War without fighting the Soviet Union directly in open armed conflict, and the same logic can apply in the twenty-first century.

The potential impact of SOF's utility in strategic competition will demand, as it always has, anticipating, finding, and creating ways and opportunities that allow the U.S. and its allies and partners to do two things simultaneously: 1) bend the escalation curve of competition and conflict downwards (i.e., lowering the amplitude of contestations of force and power) and 2) extend the spaces in between lost moments of relative peace and the next great power war, or more importantly, deterring and preventing the next great power war from happening at all.

Today's new compound security normal for SOF will be to operate in remote, denied, and disrupted environments under ubiquitous intelligence surveillance with the threat of targeting by high-end military capabilities, including WMD, where the cyber and electronic warfare domains are contested and increased scrutiny is routine.

The Fourth Age of SOF will demand a return to the paradigm that empowers "SOF as sentinel," preparing the environment as the front-line ambassadors of the Joint Force and as the "first three feet" employed in any competition or confrontation zone. And if done so in proper ways and for proper reason, SOF as a front-line, vanguard indication and warning system will enable conditions that prevent the need for a "last three feet" use of force.

JSOU's Learning Pathways Initiative

In concluding this monograph, it is important to highlight steps being taken by JSOU to help prepare Fourth-Age SOF for the challenges associated with performing their mission in this new age. JSOU's mission is to prepare SOF professionals to address strategic and operational challenges, arming them with the ability to think through problems with knowledge, insight, and foresight. As USSOCOM's command educational activity, JSOU has built five mutually reinforcing learning pathways (and at the heart of these, integrated programs of study) designed to illuminate and advance learning in five identified Joint SOF common core knowledge competency arenas. These learning pathways provide a doorway to achieving a comprehensive understanding of the changing character of geopolitical competition, integrated deterrence, and the compound security conflict environment. JSOU's learning pathways aim to improve SOF leaders' and operators' understanding of Fourth-Age SOF and their strategic role in compound security.

The Joint SOF Support to Strategic-Operational Influence and Information Advantage pathway integrates the changes to Joint Publication 1, *Doctrine for the Armed Forces of the United States*, that established information as the seventh joint function.¹⁹³ This pathway will help to ensure that SOF professionals are fully capable of the management and application of information and its deliberate integration with other joint functions to influence relevant actor perceptions, behavior, action or inaction, and human and automated decision-making.

The Joint SOF Support to Strategic-Operational Intelligence and Emergent Technology Futures pathway recognizes that, while the U.S. remains the international pacesetter in developing advanced technologies and integrating them into military operations, strategic competitors such as China and Russia are making strides to erode the competitive advantage the U.S. has long enjoyed. The purpose of this pathway is to link emerging technology with strategic and operational intelligence, meaning, how they interrelate and impact one another and impact SOF leader-operator decision-making and risk management within the scope of SOF's global mission set.

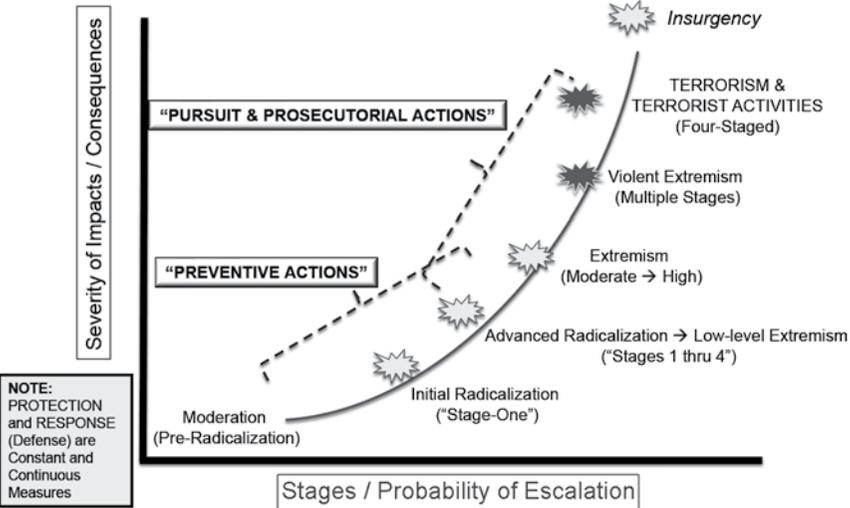
The Joint SOF Leadership, Decision-Making, and Joint SOF Professional Ethic pathways seek to improve SOF's understanding of leadership and ethical decision making in the context of unfamiliar and highly complex combat environments involving indigenous and irregular paramilitary partner forces who often lack any formal military training. This pathway provides the necessary leadership and ethical decision-making education for preparing SOF leaders at all levels to thrive in highly complex partner force leadership environments.

The Joint SOF Support to Irregular Warfare and National Resilience and Resistance pathway addresses aggression by U.S. strategic competitors with expansionist aspirations who threaten or attack and occupy the sovereign territory of U.S. partners, where SOF might be called upon to strengthen partner resilience and enable the development and execution of effective resistance. This pathway challenges learners to explore bold and innovative approaches to UW, improving existing capabilities or benefitting from new approaches and emerging technologies, and prepares SOF professionals to convincingly advocate a UW course of action to senior leaders and decision makers when such opportunities arise.

Finally, the Joint SOF Support in Compound Security Competition pathway focuses on applications of design-based, integrative statecraft approaches

Mitigating the RISKS of Violent Extremism and Terrorism, "Comprehensively"

A "continuum" of growing, worsening threats ... Demands an overmatching full-spectrum of capable, graduated solutions—preparedness is key!



SOF in 'Gray Zone' Competition The "Win" is in 'Left-of-Boom' Operations, Activities, & Investments

All past "returns" to Great Power Competition have found a renewed and amplified incidence of so-called 'small wars' and irregular war-fare. - Dr. Jake Shapiro, Princeton University

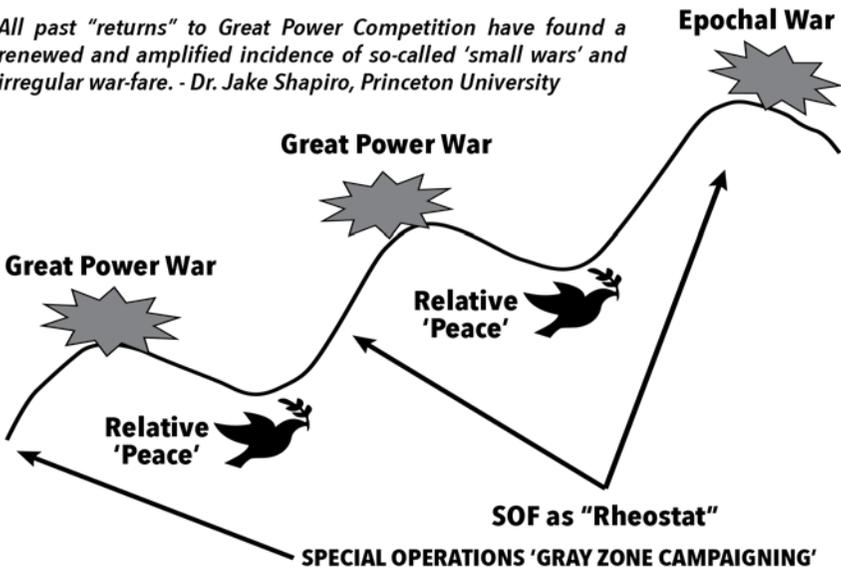


Figure 3. A diagram showing the enduring utility of SOF in compound strategic competition. Source: Dr. Isaiah Wilson III

to gain better understanding of, and designing and testing practical solutions to, today's intersectionality of compound security threats. As part of the development of this learning pathway, JSOU will address SOF support to the 2019 Arctic Strategy.¹⁹⁴ As an emerging space where strategic competition, compound security threats, and irregular or asymmetric warfare converge, the Arctic is a region where U.S. supremacy could be challenged by adversaries through complicated and complex physical, economic, and social means.

These JSOU learning pathways are directly linked to and support SOF core competencies. They are realized via a series of programs (or vignettes) selected to meet combatant command client priorities while supporting research and analysis, curriculum improvement, tangible products, and enhanced partnerships across the JIIM-C enterprise. Learners who journey along these pathways will serve as enterprise future experts and thought leaders whose knowledge competencies will benefit current and future JIIM-C cross-functional efforts across the spectrum of cooperation, competition, conflict, and war.

The introduction of this monograph described a “back to the future” refit of U.S. special operations and SOF, recapturing needed aspects of the past to be blended with the best of current and emerging technologies and operational concepts. With this refit in mind, Dr. Wilson offers points for further investigation and debate on Fourth-Age SOF force design and development, as well as SOF use and utility. What, for example, are the functional imperatives for Fourth-Age special operations and SOF? What are the defined jurisdictions of Fourth-Age special operations and SOF use and utility? What is the unique body of expert knowledge defining the Fourth Age of special operations and SOF? What is the required professional culture, ethic, and ethos for the Fourth Age?

Further scholarly effort should ultimately help determine how the character of global geopolitical competition is changing and what impact and implications these changes will have for SOF. In following consequence, what kind of special operations and SOF does the Nation need and demand for the coming decades?

Lastly, might SOF be too hidebound to its Service SOF component, separate identity-defining core tasks as an end-all? Are these core tasks too habituated and unquestionable? If so, this would be a tragic flaw if the demands of the Fourth Age require different use and utilities (singularly and in different combinations) of the classic 12 core tasks, or moreover, if those new demands

completely transcend the classic 12. Said differently, the 12 classic core tasks, while still necessary, may well be insufficient.

As a final thought, in order to achieve the breadth of capability and capacity required for special operations in a compound security environment, the authors propose that JIIM-C integration may be the new defining functional imperative for special operations and SOF use and utility in the Fourth Age. A balanced SOF, equally effective in countering extremists and contributing to campaigning for influence and integrated deterrence, must be prepared to function as part of a combined and joint force when possible or as a unilateral force when necessary.↑

Acronyms

A2/AD	anti-access/area denial
AFSOF	Air Force Special Operations Forces
AGFRTS	Air and Ground Forces Resources Technical Staff
AI	artificial intelligence
ARSOF	Army Special Operations Forces
ASD-SO/LIC	Assistant Secretary of Defense for Special Operations and Low-Intensity Conflict
ASEAN	Association of Southeast Asian Nations
AQI	al-Qaeda in Iraq
BRI	Belt and Road Initiative
CA	civil affairs
CAO	civil affairs operations
CBI	China-Burma-India
CCP	Chinese Communist Party
CCTS	Combat Crew Training Squadron
CIA	Central Intelligence Agency
CIDG	Civilian Irregular Defense Group
CNO	Chief of Naval Operations
COIN	counterinsurgency
CSAR	combat search and rescue
CT	counterterrorism
CTJTF	Counterterrorism Joint Task Force
DA	direct action

DNI	Director of National Intelligence
DOD	Department of Defense
ESAF	El Salvadoran Armed Forces
FID	foreign internal defense
FMLN	Farabundo Marti National Liberation Front
FSLN	Sandinista National Liberation Front
HN	host nation
IO	information operations
ISAF	International Security Assistance Force
ISIS	Islamic State of Iraq and Syria
IUUF	illegal, unreported, and unregulated fishing
IW	irregular warfare
JAIC	Joint Artificial Intelligence Center
JCET	joint combined exchange training
JCS	Joint Chiefs of Staff
JIIM-C	joint, interagency, intergovernmental, multinational, and commercial
JSOU	Joint Special Operations University
KNLA	Karen National Liberation Army
MAC	Military Airlift Command
ML	machine learning
MISO	military information support operations
MTT	mobile training team
MU	Maritime Unit
NAB	Naval Amphibious Base

NCDU	Naval Combat Demolition Unit
NCO	noncommissioned officer
NDS	national defense strategy
NEO	noncombatant evacuation operation
NSC	National Security Council
NSW	naval special warfare
NUG	National Unity Government
ODNI	Office of the Director of National Intelligence
OEF	Operation ENDURING FREEDOM
OG	operational group
OIF	Operation IRAQI FREEDOM
OPATT	operational planning and assistance training teams
OSS	Office of Strategic Services
PED	processing, exploitation, and dissemination
PLAN	People's Liberation Army Navy
PMC	private military company
POW	prisoner of war
PRC	People's Republic of China
PSYOP	psychological operations
PT	patrol torpedo
SAF	Special Action Forces
SASC	Senate Armed Services Committee
SAWC	Special Air Warfare Center
SF	Special Forces

SFA	security force assistance
SFAB	security force assistance brigade
SIS	Secret Intelligence Service
SO/LIC	special operations and low-intensity conflict
SOCEUR	Special Operations Command Europe
SOE	Special Operations Executive
SOF	Special Operations Forces
SOG	Studies and Observation Group
SOW	Special Operations Wing
SR	special reconnaissance
SWPA	Southwest Pacific Area
TCW	Tactical Composite Wing
TRADOC	Training and Doctrine Command
UAV	unmanned aerial vehicle
UDT	Underwater Demolition Team
USAJFKSWCS	United States Army John F. Kennedy Special Warfare Center and School
USASOC	United States Army Special Operations Command
USCENTCOM	United States Central Command
USSOCOM	United States Special Operations Command
USSOUTHCOM	United States Southern Command
UW	unconventional warfare
VEO	violent extremist organization
WMD	weapons of mass destruction

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