JOINT SPECIAL OPERATIONS UNIVERSITY

2024

Special Operations Research Topics

EDITED BY

Patricia J. Blocksome, PhD

JSOU Report 24-1

Joint Special Operations University

The Joint Special Operations University (JSOU) generates, incubates, and propagates 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 USSOCOM commander on all combined joint Special Operations Forces (SOF) education and leader development matters as well as the educational and leader development component of the Command. **The JSOU 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. **The JSOU Vision** is to be USSOCOM's "Think-Do Tank" center of special operations thinking. We pursue this mission and vision through our best-practice teaching and learning; research and analysis (R&A); and engagement and service outreach operations, activities, and initiatives. We achieve these outcomes-based goals by providing specialized, joint professional military education; developing SOF-specific and unique undergraduate, graduate, and post-graduate-level equivalent curriculum; and fostering special operations-focused R&A and outreach in support of USSOCOM objectives and U.S. national and global strategic goals. JSOU's R&A efforts are guided and informed by U.S. national security, defense, and military strategies as well as the **USSOCOM Mission** to develop and employ fully capable SOF to conduct global special operations and activities as part of the Joint Force to support persistent, networked, and distributed global combatant commands operations and campaigns against state and non-state actors to protect and advance U.S. policies and objectives.

On the cover: The front cover represents the concepts of "People, Win, Transform." Source: Defense Visual Information Distribution Service.

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Special Operations Research Topics 2024

Edited by
PATRICIA J. BLOCKSOME, PHD

JOINT SPECIAL OPERATIONS UNIVERSITY
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Foreword

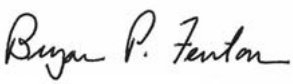
Special Operations Forces (SOF) are a national advantage in this decisive decade, as they have been since their formation. They provide creative, tailorable, and asymmetric options for our Nation. They also support broader efforts to deter aggression by strategic competitors, counter acute forms of coercion, and tackle shared challenges alongside our allies and partners.

As your command team at U.S. Special Operations Command, we ensure SOF are well-prepared for current and future challenges through three priorities: People, Win, and Transform. Our first priority —People— acknowledges our force's competitive and comparative advantage. As our first SOF truth states, "Humans are more important than hardware." Our People are the reason we Win and how we Transform. Unlocking the talents of those within our Special Operations community and those committed individuals in academia remains critical to succeeding for the Nation now and in the years to come.

Research is central to advancing these priorities. Through research, we benefit from the insights of those within and beyond our Special Operations community. Research enables us to better understand the issues facing our world and explore what changes must be made across domains and capabilities to adapt for the future. Writing allows us to communicate these insights throughout our formation. We challenge all those across our Special Operations enterprise to seek opportunities to research and write about topics that can further hone our force and capabilities.

Our teammates developed the research topics in this handbook as they came from relevant areas where your insight is needed. We encourage Special Operations enterprise personnel to consider these topics as starting points for their academic inquiries. Together, we will ensure our force remains the world's finest SOF and poised to meet the challenges of this decisive era.

SHANE W. SHORTER
Command Sergeant Major, U.S. Army
Command Senior Enlisted Leader



BRYAN P. FENTON
General, U.S. Army
Commander

Introduction

The world is constantly changing, and as it does, so do the requirements for the current and future missions of the special operations enterprise (SOE). This *Special Operations Research Topics 2024* handbook is the 16th edition and is published by Joint Special Operations University (JSOU), a component of U.S. Special Operations Command (USSOCOM). As with previous editions, the objective is to provide a list of salient topics, grouped by theme, as a starting point for those interested in undertaking research that is timely, relevant, and of immediate value to the SOE.

The questions included in this handbook were developed with input from both academic and operational organizations and provide a broad array of current priority topics for the SOE. The questions posed are not intended to constrain, but rather to give insight into areas of current particular interest. Researchers are encouraged to draw inspiration from these topics to develop their own research questions that may merge, synthesize, or extend beyond those presented here.

The development of this handbook was aided by the engagement of participants from across the SOE, as well as the larger Department of Defense (DOD) and U.S. government interagency participants who generated research questions through workshops hosted by JSOU; their assistance is greatly appreciated. Particular gratitude and recognition are due to those who helped to iteratively organize and refine the topics for this book: David Oakley, Jeffrey Rogg, Rob Burrell, Pat Stevens, Juan Garcia, Clarissa Stugard, Beth Guidry, Kari Thyne, Ross Main, John Poucher, Andrew Crabb, Rick Milligan, Tom Searle, Christiane Thompson, Mark Grzegorzewski, and John Collison.

The 2024 list of special operations research topics is organized following two principles. First, the top-level categories follow the USSOCOM enterprise priorities laid out by the command team of

General Bryan Fenton and Command Sergeant Major Shane Shorter, who have identified three priorities: People, Win, and Transform.[1]

For the subcategories nested underneath each top-level category, the organizing principle draws from two sources. The first source comes from JSOU's five areas of special research emphasis: Support to Resistance and Resilience; Information Advantage and Strategic Influence; Strategic Intelligence and Emerging Technology; Leadership, Decision-Making, and the SOF Professional Ethic; and Design-Based Integrative Campaigning and Statecraft. In addition to these five research emphasis areas, two additional categories were added to focus on organizational and geographic issues: Special Operations Enterprise and SOF Components, and Regional and Transregional Issues and Theater Special Operations Commands (TSOCs). Thus, the 2024 list of research topics is organized into three categories, each with seven subcategories, for a total of 21 topic areas.

The aim of the questions presented here is to spark research that will enable the SOE to be more capable and effective as it seeks to address the challenges the world provides.

Patricia J. Blocksome, PhD
Associate Professor, Special Operations Research
Center for Engagement and Research
Joint Special Operations University
MacDill Air Force Base, Florida

Publishing on the Topics

Participants from across the SOE came together to identify and develop the topics you will read in this *Special Operations Research Topics 2024* handbook as those of critical and current interest to the Special Operations Joint Force. Should you choose to research one of these topics, your writing will be of interest to others across the enterprise. To help others find what you have written, JSOU Press provides several publishing options.

If you are interested in publishing your research, JSOU Press is actively seeking submissions related to the topics in this handbook. You are encouraged to submit your completed work to press@jsou.edu. For priority consideration, ensure your submission addresses one of these research topics. For more information about the publishing process, visit www.jsou.edu/press/publishwithJSOU.

Your research matters. Let us help share what you have written.

Chapter 1. People

As General Fenton and Command Sergeant Major Shorter note, the SOF Truth, "'Humans are more important than hardware,' speaks to our center of gravity and our #1 enterprise priority—our 'People.' Our Force and families are USSOCOM's competitive and comparative advantage. Our People are the reason we 'win.' In support of current and future mission successes, we will recruit, assess, select, educate, train, diversify, equip, and transform our innovative and groundbreaking team."[2]

In addition to Special Operations Forces (SOF) themselves, this category also includes the populations with whom SOF interacts, including our valued allies and partners and those who live in areas affected by SOF operations, activities, and investments (OAIs). The "People" research category encompasses enquiry as to who we are as SOF, who SOF works with, our relationships, and the ways in which we interact.

1A. SUPPORT TO RESISTANCE AND RESILIENCE

Understanding the Will to Resist

Support to Resistance and Resilience (SRR) is focused on people—both for the populations who are building resilience and resistance skills, and on the SOF professionals who advise and assist those populations. Understanding, defining, and measuring the will to resist is a complex topic. What is the relationship between the people and their will to resist? What is SOF's role in shaping the will to resist? Is there a difference between will to win and will to fight? Should capturing a willingness to resist be focused on the group or individual level? How can you measure a given group or individual's will to resist, especially when that will is likely to vary over time? If we

can better measure will to resist, might that inform where the next resistance movement will be likely to occur?

Recruitment, Training, and Education

While resistance and resilience tend to be discussed in terms of the people resisting, or the state or population within which resilience is being built, this topic calls for a shift in focus toward the forces offering support for resistance and/or resilience. Those forces might be U.S. conventional/traditional, SOF, or partner forces. It is widely understood that a diversity of disciplinary backgrounds and experience are relevant to the area of resistance and resilience. How can the United States government (USG) ensure those diverse perspectives are captured in recruitment, training, and education efforts? What impact might a resilience and resistance focus have on recruiting efforts? How can the DOD ensure that those recruited to the Joint Force understand the nature of activities associated with resistance and resilience and the differences with more kinetic-oriented, conventional military activities? What is the existing state of education and training efforts on resistance and resilience, and where are there gaps or untapped potential? How do we instill a counterintelligence mindset in a populace to deny foreign intelligence entity collection and exploitation, especially since intelligence operations can either advance or undermine resistance and resilience?

Within the USG, to what degree is there a common understanding of the nature of support to resistance and resilience, and what education and training might be necessary internally to develop or augment that understanding across not just the services, but the wider interagency? How can we mesh training and education in this area to optimize outcomes? Which organizations should take the lead facilitating that training and education, and why? Is there value in a special-skill identifier for resilience and resistance expertise? Are there generalizable principles, or best practices, in education for resilience and resistance which partners can agree upon? What doctrinal efforts can build upon

the Resistance Operating Concept for common practices? What is SOF's role in a civil defense campaign?

Coordination and Collaboration

The genesis of the great power competition has created an operational environment that demands a greater collaboration/synthesis between SOF and the interagency (including the U.S. Department of State, U.S. Agency for International Development [USAID], allies, and partners) to enable future SRR. Should the current SOF Liaison Network include specific training for SRR activities? How can the SOF Liaison Network to the interagency be more integrated and responsive to the collective threat across geographic commands and Theater Special Operations Commands (TSOCs)? Is the current global SOF network optimal and organized to support future SRR? What is the most appropriate global SOF network configuration to support SRR from an allied/U.S. Department of State perspective? What lessons can be drawn from the global war on terror about allied approaches that can be repurposed for SRR? Should the relationship with allies and partners be coordinated or institutionally integrated?

Sustainability of the Force

During the past two decades, SOF have conducted innumerable counterterrorism and direct-action activities around the world in places like Syria, Iraq, and Afghanistan. The taxing operational tempo and unforgiving dwell time of operational units resulted in former USSOCOM Commander Admiral William McRaven standing up the Preservation of the Force and Family (POTFF) initiative to ensure readiness, longevity, and performance of SOF and to strengthen family readiness. How effectively has POTFF addressed the needs of special operations personnel during the long wars?

Has the new challenge of strategic competition changed how USSOCOM should approach sustainability of the force? What are the greatest challenges today for retention of quality people and the approach required to maintain their efforts? Does support to resilience and resistance undertakings pose unique challenges for

sustaining special operations personnel both today and tomorrow? What is the optimal balance for dwell time in support to SRR? Does SRR pose distinctive ethical dilemmas for personnel that need to be addressed? How does the SOE secure its own resilience against external forces and factors?

What is the long-term impact of the current defense drawdowns on the future SRR force structure? Are conventional forces prepared and integrated into organizational design for SRR? Should SRR comprise a U.S. Army Special Operations approach, or should it include the other special operations service components? What does the SRR organizational structure look like at the tactical, operational, and strategic level? Which metrics should be utilized to analyze SRR force structure?

1B. INFORMATION ADVANTAGE AND STRATEGIC INFLUENCE

Cultural Understanding in Deterrence and Compellence

A prerequisite to deterrence and compellence is crafting your message so that it will be understood by your target audience. This requires effective cross-cultural communication and a deep understanding of the target audience's sociocultural worldview. How can the SOE develop the level of knowledge and proficiency necessary to understand sociocultural worldviews in depth? How do we ensure we have the cultural expertise for strategic influence? How do we understand target population motivations? How can you best measure SOF's cross-cultural understanding engagement abilities? What motivations of the adversary can best be targeted for deterrence and/or compellence? How can SOF bring in allies and partners to better understand a target audience? How can the SOE better integrate with others to develop a clear vision for the desired ends of deterrence and compellence?

How do SOF achieve proficiency in both language and cultural awareness, and which is more important? How can USSOCOM better

educate SOF commanders, staff, and operators to utilize social media to influence targeted populations?

Artificial Intelligence/Machine Learning in Misinformation and Disinformation

Advances in artificial intelligence (AI) and machine learning (ML), to include the widespread promulgation of easily accessible large language models (LLM), appear to be ushering in a new era of misinformation and disinformation. What impact will AI/ML have on the speed at which misinformation and disinformation can be created and spread? What AI/ML-enabled capabilities can promote resistance to disinformation? How can we counter adversarial messaging that utilizes LLM?

What are the training and education requirements for the use of AI/ML within SOF? How can SOF practitioners leverage AI/ML and other new technology at the individual and small-unit levels? Does the rise of AI/ML affect the skillsets needed at both individual and organizational levels to conduct the Information joint function? Within the SOE and SOF, how do you develop resiliency to misinformation and disinformation? How can SOF capabilities such as psychological operations best utilize AI/ML and LLMs? How can we use commercial off-the-shelf technology to promote resiliency to misinformation and disinformation both with U.S. SOF and our partners and allies?

1C. STRATEGIC INTELLIGENCE AND EMERGING TECHNOLOGY

Intelligence in Strategic Competition

Since the Office of Strategic Services in WWII, intelligence and SOF have had a closely linked history. How have the last two decades shaped the way the SOF intelligence practitioner thinks about intelligence? Within strategic competition, are there new intelligence challenges that SOF is unaccustomed to? If so, how should SOF prepare for those new challenges? Who is the SOF intelligence practitioner needed for strategic competition? How do you cultivate strategic

foresight in the SOF practitioner to have the acuity, awareness, and intuition to provide strategic intelligence? How do you distinguish between business-focused and national security-focused adversarial intelligence collection? With the rise of strategic competition, do SOF need to be more counterintelligence focused? Alternatively, does the culture of secrecy surrounding intelligence and SOF hamper SOF practitioners in providing strategic intelligence estimates?

Human/Technology Interface

The human/technology interface encompasses the ways in which humans engage with and utilize technology to enhance their capabilities, perform tasks more efficiently, and achieve desired outcomes. The interface can range from simple physical interactions, such as pressing buttons or using touch screens, to more complex interactions involving augmented reality, AI, and wearable devices. How can a human/technology interface enhance the span of control a person has over the technology they use? What role does trust play in the successful adoption and integration of technology into human activities? When should we trust AI, and when should we not? What potential risks or challenges are associated with increasing reliance on technology in human decision-making processes? Can we ensure people have appropriate control and autonomy in their interactions with technology to maintain trust and mitigate potential negative consequences?

What are the implications of ever more tightly interwoven connections between SOF operators and technology? Are humans always more important than hardware, or, at some point, does technology become more critical? Is it possible that the line between humans and technology becomes blurred via human-machine symbiosis, and if so, what are the potential effects on the development and utilization of SOF?

Technological Undermatch

The 'American way of war' is typically used to describe the United States' use of exquisite technology combined with limited numbers of highly trained personnel to fight its conflicts, rather than relying,

as other countries sometimes do, on relatively low-technology capabilities wielded by large masses of personnel. Does this cultural bias lead SOF into over-relying on technology? What are the advantages and disadvantages of small-quantity, highly trained, and technologically sophisticated SOF? Does technology encourage and enable micromanagement?

As we move into an era of strategic competition, there is risk in assuming that SOF will always have the technological advantage vis-à-vis an adversary. How can SOF be effective in a conflict environment in which the adversary has the technological advantage? Do SOF have other competitive advantages that could make up for technological undermatch? How can SOF best manage the virtual and/or physical signature of personnel, platforms, organizations, operations, facilities, and data when facing an adversary with comparable or better technological capabilities?

1D. LEADERSHIP, DECISION-MAKING, AND THE SOF PROFESSIONAL ETHIC

Ethical Performance and Moral Injury

The SOE and SOF hold themselves to a high standard of ethical performance. This is important not only to preserve the trust of the nation, but also to protect the force from moral injuries. How can SOF leadership best identify, address, and learn from ethical lapses? Are there metrics that can be collected to measure ethical performance? In what ways can ethical behavior be inculcated within the SOE and SOF? Are there ethical concepts that are not adequately taught to SOF? What is the relationship between ethics training, ethical performance, and the mitigation of moral injury? How can SOF ethics education be used to mitigate post-combat trauma?

SOF Educational Foci

Formal education programs for SOF practitioners are available at several different military educational institutions. There are service-specific schools as well as joint educational opportunities. Is current education and training adequate to prepare for strategic

competition? Is the content, type, and timing of education appropriate to meet the requirements of SOF? What does 'SOF-peculiar education' encompass? Should there be a SOF intake course before component training? What are the critical skills for a joint SOF officer? How do the educational touchpoints for SOF officers and noncommissioned officers (NCOs) support or affect their careers? How can the SOE best develop and nurture creative thinkers within a hierarchical/rules-based organization? How do we educate SOF professionals about evolving national strategies, policies, and mandates and the impacts these changes have on SOF operations?

JSOU is unique among military educational institutions, as it is the only one that reports directly to USSOCOM. Where should JSOU's focus be? Should JSOU be educating SOF practitioners and SOE personnel, nurturing critical and creative thinking, or developing SOF advocates? Should JSOU become a service-like school?

Generational Differences

Distinct characteristics, values, beliefs, attitudes, and behaviors are often associated with individuals from different generations. These differences arise from societal, cultural, technological, and economic factors that shape people's experiences as they grow and develop. Generational differences may impact how SOF lead, follow, recruit, retain, and train. How do different generations approach leadership roles within organizations? What are the preferred leadership styles among different generations? How do different generations perceive and respond to authority figures? How do different generations approach following instructions and adhering to guidelines? What are the preferred methods of recruitment among different generations? How do different generations prioritize and evaluate job opportunities during the recruitment process? How do different generations approach training and professional development within their careers? What are the preferred learning methods for different generations when it comes to training? How do different generations perceive mentorship and seek mentorship opportunities? What are

the attitudes of different generations toward cross-generational collaboration and knowledge sharing?

1E. DESIGN-BASED INTEGRATIVE CAMPAIGNING AND STATECRAFT

Wargaming for Competitive Statecraft

The terms *wargaming*, *simulations*, and *practica* can all be used to describe similar operational exercises that are focused on providing decision support to various courses of action. Each term is used by a different audience: military (wargaming), interagency (simulation), and academe (practica). Should SOF reconsider their terminology and definition of this type of activity to more broadly encompass the OAIs involved in competitive statecraft? How can the SOE integrate their activities in this area with interagency, academe, and other partners who may not have the same culture of wargaming?

SOF's Integrative Role in Coalition Operations

USSOCOM maintains ties to allied and partner SOF, but does that SOF partner network require transformation and adjustment for better effectiveness in strategic competition? What specific roles should SOF prioritize developing within the current strategic environment with respect to strategic competition and integrated deterrence? SOF have a unique capacity to build relationships with allies and partners. How can SOF best leverage those partnerships? What can SOF do to enable a coalition fight, and how can they communicate that with conventional forces? How can SOF better collaborate with the Joint Force in areas such as helping to build resistance and resilience in the host nation, preparing an environment for potential future conflict, and integrating a host nation into coalition operations?

Nuclear Issues in Strategic Competition

The rise of strategic competition as the defining feature of the contemporary strategic environment has renewed the discussion of the threats posed by nuclear states. China, Russia, and North Korea

are all nuclear powers, and Iran has aspirations in this area. Yet each of these states poses different nuclear weapons risks. Within its counter-weapons of mass destruction mandate, how can SOF best understand and prepare against the most likely and most dangerous threats emanating from these disparate states? What could appropriate responses look like against a wide variety of nuclear threats?

1F. SPECIAL OPERATIONS ENTERPRISE AND SOF COMPONENTS

SOF Talent Management

While talent management remains an enduring priority for SOF, the contemporary environment offers unique issues that the SOE must address. The end of the long wars in Afghanistan and Iraq and the rise of strategic competition mean that SOF may need to reprioritize its missions and capabilities. Are there operational and organizational paradigms that need to be reconsidered to better develop SOF for the challenges of the future operating environment? Who is the current SOF practitioner and how did that practitioner evolve? What are the key attributes of the future SOF professional, and do they differ from the key attributes from historical SOF professionals? If SOF must operate within an environment of strategic competition, how can they be encouraged to cultivate 'strategic interest' or 'strategic empathy' in the world early in their career progression? How does the DOD culture and system affect the individual and the individual's ability to operate in the strategic environment? What enhancements in competency, cognition, performance, and total health could enable SOF to better navigate the changing human and technology landscapes within the current operational environment?

SOF Cognition

Cognition is "the states and processes involved in knowing, which in their completeness include perception and judgment. Cognition includes all conscious and unconscious processes by which knowledge is accumulated, such as perceiving, recognizing,

conceiving, and reasoning."[3] How can the SOE and SOF identify and address aspects of cognition that affect both their personnel and their organization?

At the individual level, how can we measure and build SOF resilience? Can we better understand the mental processes that lead to post-traumatic stress and suicidality as well as post-traumatic growth? Might research into cognition provide insights for POTFF programs?

At the organizational level, how do we support cognitive decision-making on teams and across the SOE? What role does cognition play in terms of the assessment of risk? How can the SOE work to encourage and incorporate divergent and creative thinking within SOF? What might the benefits be of incorporating creative problem-solving? What are the risks of such encouragement, and how can those risks be mitigated?

SOF Specialties

Within SOE personnel, there are a multitude of diverse sociocultural and geographic backgrounds, experiences, and knowledge. Individuals with these perspectives can provide the SOE with insights into specific regions, cultures, and social groups. How can USSOCOM better track and manage SOF professionals' talent to fully harness specific specialties—to include unique cultural experience, technical knowledge, language capability, and cross-cultural understanding—for cross-enterprise use in taskings, assignment selection, and career progress/mentorship? Additionally, how can the SOE best incorporate other perspectives it has access to, such as other U.S. uniformed services, USG agencies, allies and partners, and non-governmental organizations?

Once these perspectives are captured, they should then be implemented within operations to make the SOE and SOF more effective in carrying out their missions. By utilizing these perspectives, how can SOF better work to understand, assess, and build relationships with marginalized groups? How can the SOE utilize such marginalized groups to help inform irregular warfare, unconventional warfare, and other SOF functions and operations?

1G. REGIONAL AND TRANSREGIONAL ISSUES AND THEATER SPECIAL OPERATION COMMANDS

SOF Repetitive Assignments

While the service personnel commands may view repetitive assignments in the same combatant command area of responsibility (AOR) negatively as they are not broadening, geographic combatant commands and TSOCs may view such repetitive assignments in the same combatant command AOR as beneficial due to increased experience within the operational environment. How can these opposing views be reconciled to achieve the objectives of the services, the combatant commands, and the personal goals of service members? What changes to the personnel system of each service would do the most to improve SOF relations with partners in each combatant command AOR?

Preparation for Theater Special Operation Command Assignments

The TSOCs are a critical part of the SOE, yet personnel assigned to TSOC staff may have little SOF and/or joint staff experience. What training and education would do the most to prepare newly assigned personnel to succeed in each TSOC? What is the priority of this training in relation to all other requirements for SOF? Who should provide that education and training (e.g., services, JSOU, combatant commands), and what combination of virtual and in-residence education and training would be most effective? How can that training and education flex to respond to different levels of prior SOF and TSOC experience?

Chapter 2. Win

General Fenton and Command Sergeant Major Shorter point out that, as the nation's SOF, the expectation is that "We will 'Win' —every time, every place, in any environment. The 'SOF Way' is unconventional, irregular, asymmetric, asynchronous, and done alongside the U.S. Government interagency, as well as with Allies/ Partners. SOF will 'win' in all directed mission areas."[4]

However, what winning looks like varies based on the competition or conflict in which SOF is engaged. There may be environments or situations in which a win or a loss can happen without open conflict. Within strategic competition, gains may be small, incremental, and hard to quantify. Research in this area looks at the various types of 'winning' and how it is affected by the context in which a 'win' is sought.

2A. SUPPORT TO RESISTANCE AND RESILIENCE

Support to Resistance and Resilience Approaches to Preventing or Deterring Aggression

SRR approaches typically rely on human networks and organizations to afford an asymmetric advantage against opponents. Understanding the human terrain comprises the essential component in understanding operational environments in which SRR takes place. The ability to understand and shape the environment in times of competition and deterrence short of armed conflict reduces risk to force, allows for efficient use of scarce resources, and facilitates both influence and information advantage. Can human-centric strategies (like the Resistance Operating Concept or 'total defense') effectively deter or prevent aggression? How do we assess SRR within steady-state environments? What metrics can be applied to SRR to achieve strategic-operational effects and prevent or deter aggression? How can SOF measure resilience? Should we focus on a resilient state,

a resilient population, or a resilient infrastructure? How can we build resilience to/for compound security issues?

How can we best carry out assessment, analysis, and planning to support national resilience and resistance? What lessons can SOF draw from the long wars in Afghanistan and Iraq to better understand how non-state actors can both participate in, and counter, resistance, and resilience campaigns? How can we better understand the civil–military interconnections, legal issues, and overt/covert operational balances? When should SOF take the lead in SRR, and when should it provide support to other government agencies? Should social network analysis include a component of SRR approaches? How can exercises and trainings help with preparation of the environment for SRR efforts?

Strategic Patience and Campaigning

SRR poses particular challenges in the context of metrics of 'winning' or 'losing' in strategic competition. How do you win an ongoing competition? Winning might look like sustaining the status quo or gaining amorphous, incremental 'wins' in terms of resilience, influence, or trust, but the desirability of clearly identifiable quick wins and avoiding any perceived loss are powerful motivators for short-term thinking. How can SOF inculcate a culture that recognizes incremental progress and encourages consideration of metrics of success beyond one operation cycle or stint in a leadership role?

Are strategic competition and SRR necessarily a zero-sum game where there are winners and losers? What role can and should 'strategic patience' play in SRR? Are there historical examples that might help our understanding of competition and SRR over the longer term? Would a campaigning perspective on resistance and resilience aid in longer-term thinking? How can SOF ensure that realistic timelines for success are shared with partners and allies? Are there examples of benchmarks for resistance and resilience that might serve to increase understanding of SRR? How might those benchmarks be developed and reassessed over time via a campaign? The Russian war in Ukraine has shown external support takes time.

How did Ukraine build that support and sustain it over time? What lessons for winning and losing (in the context of SRR) might be derived from the Ukrainian experience for the United States, its allies, partners, and adversaries?

Measuring Resilience and Resistance

Resilience and resistance comprise psychological, physical, human, and material approaches to competition, deterrence, and irregular warfare. Such methods can include the transformation of infrastructure to support irregular activities, the hardening of or redundancy of institutions, and preparation of populations for conflict. For military planners struggling for numerical data to evaluate, the quantifiable effectiveness of asymmetric approaches to conflict can prove challenging. What are the measures of effectiveness and measures of performance for SRR in an irregular or conventional threat? One method of evaluating a region or country is through analyses of political, military, economic, social, information, infrastructure, physical environment, and time (PMESII-PT) metrics. Can PMESII-PT or other doctrinal analytical tools usefully measure the capabilities of a resistance movement or the resilience of a nation state? Are there lessons from the application of these analytical tools to counterinsurgency that could be applied to SRR?

2B. INFORMATION ADVANTAGE AND STRATEGIC INFLUENCE

Operationalizing Strategic Influence and Information

The term ‘strategic influence’ is utilized to describe how SOF can project soft power around the globe. How can we measure strategic influence? Who are we seeking to influence? What are we seeking to achieve with influence? Influence to do what, and for what ends? What does strategic influence imply in terms of military strategy? How do measures of strategic influence inform operational design? What does success in achieving a strategic influence end state look like, and how can it be measured? How can SOF set objectives for

influence, and how can SOF's objectives be nested within larger USG strategic influence initiatives?

Information has a critical role to play within strategic competition. Words are powerful, and our messages affect both our friends and our adversaries. What is the relationship between information and influence? If information is a form of power, what does that imply for the strategic pursuit of influence? How can SOF achieve information advantage throughout the competition continuum? How can SOF better understand, apply, and integrate information across operations to achieve strategic influence objectives? How can information strategies be tailored to address mission-specific needs? What is the balance between attributable and nonattributable operations, and which would provide the highest probability of success while minimizing political and operational risk? How can SOF address risk aversion to information activities?

What are the best methods/practices to assess the effects of operations in the information environment? How do we measure and assess results from information operations and campaigns, and how do we communicate these results to stakeholders/authorities? What types of organizational structures and resourcing would best set the conditions to integrate information and influence efforts across SOF; the Services; and joint, interagency, intergovernmental, multinational, and commercial (JIIM-C) partners? Are there capability gaps across doctrine, organization, training, materiel, leadership and education, personnel, facilities, and policy (DOTMLPF-P) that need to be addressed? How can SOF work with centers such as the Global Engagement Center, Joint Military Information Support Operations Web Operations Center, and the NATO's Strategic Communications Center of Excellence to enhance strategic influence operations?

A component of strategic influence is credibility. How can SOF build and maintain persistent and meaningful relationships with relevant partners and allies? How can USSOCOM minimize the disconnect between rhetoric and reality? What are the implications of a words and deeds mismatch? How can SOF contribute to building

USG credibility? How do you achieve balance between accountability and 'speed of need' when seeking influence? In addition to efforts to build strategic influence, how can SOF counter adversarial strategic influence efforts?

2C. STRATEGIC INTELLIGENCE AND EMERGING TECHNOLOGY

Intelligence in Strategic Competition

Intelligence for competition may require different priorities and objectives than intelligence for conflict. Within the strategic competition realm, are there organizational and cultural changes in USSOCOM and SOF intelligence necessary to be more effective? What might history teach us in terms of how the relationship between the intelligence community and SOF could evolve? How might that relationship evolve for strategic competition? How can SOF support national collection priorities that are necessary for providing policymakers with a competitive advantage? Does SOF's relationship with the intelligence community need to evolve for strategic competition? What counterintelligence measures do SOF need to take to protect themselves from competitors looking to undermine SOF advantages? How do SOF transition from being supported by intelligence to supporting intelligence?

Predictive Analytics

The analysis of large datasets can provide new insights into relationships between variables and potentially enable better predictions of the likelihood of processes and events. Areas of interest to the SOE for these data-driven analytics could include selection, training, scenario development, and contingency planning. How can SOF use tools like predictive analytics and ML to capture important trends and prepare for the future? What new or emerging technology in the field of predictive analytics could help SOF better accomplish its missions in the future? What SOF OAIs are best suited for this type of data-driven analysis? How can SOF incorporate LLMs

and user-interface friendly systems like ChatGPT into its operations? What are the risks and benefits of doing so?

2D. LEADERSHIP, DECISION-MAKING, AND THE SOF PROFESSIONAL ETHIC

Winning with Partner Nations

SOF are often in the role of being the primary U.S. face to partner nations. Professional ethics matter in the effort to build trust with these nations. How do ethical conduct and adherence to high moral standards contribute to the credibility and trustworthiness of SOF missions in unconventional warfare, irregular warfare, and asymmetric fights? What lessons can SOF leverage from elements within the community to develop stronger relationships with allies, partners, and populations? How can empathy and cultural awareness enhance the effectiveness of SOF leaders in engaging with local populations and partner forces? What best practices have emerged that SOF can document and teach? What strategies and practices can SOF leaders employ to build and maintain high-performing teams in challenging environments?

How can SOF identify and prioritize areas where U.S. strategic goals align with those of other nations, fostering mutually beneficial partnerships? How can SOF maintain these relationships over time, particularly when budget constraints exist? What are the potential benefits, challenges, and strategies involved in aligning U.S. goals with the strategic goals of other nations in specific regions or issue areas?

Developing and Modeling Strategic Patience

It is sometimes more prudent to exercise patience and pursue a long-term strategy instead of rushing into immediate action or resorting to aggressive measures. Strategic patience can also involve a willingness to wait for favorable circumstances or changes in the geopolitical landscape before taking decisive action. The underlying idea is that a country can achieve better outcomes by exercising patience, avoiding unnecessary risks, and creating conditions that favor long-term stability and progress. How can ongoing SOF

training and development programs reinforce an understanding and application of strategic patience? Are there case studies where the application of strategic patience by SOF has yielded significant results or helped to achieve broader national outcomes? Can these case studies provide insight into how strategic patience was successfully implemented by SOF? What historical or cultural factors have influenced the understanding of strategic patience across countries, and how does this shape each country's approach to the use of SOF?

2E. DESIGN-BASED INTEGRATIVE CAMPAIGNING AND STATECRAFT

Irregular and Unconventional Warfare Campaigning

The SOE has renewed its focus on irregular and unconventional warfare. How can SOF better understand, articulate, and operationalize irregular and unconventional warfare campaigns? What is the relationship between irregular warfare, unconventional warfare, foreign internal defense, security force assistance, and security cooperation? How can SOF and conventional forces best work together in these areas? Are there gaps in our knowledge of how to carry out irregular and unconventional warfare campaigning? Does current SOF training and education about these types of warfare need to be updated? Have new technologies like satellite and internet communication and inexpensive, highly capable weapons, such as remotely piloted vehicles, caused changes in the ways in which irregular and unconventional warfare can be carried out, or do operational and strategic concepts remain the same? Can SOF's recent experiences with counter-violent extremist organizations (CVEO) operations provide ideas for how to disrupt adversarial actors?

Within irregular warfare, what is a 'win'? Is 'win' the right framing term? What conditions will aid/impede winning? Is it possible to win without fighting? What is the SOF role within irregular warfare? How does that role vary based on geography, adversary, level of conflict, and other variables? Within an environment of strategic competition,

how can SOF identify, train, and coordinate networks to deny, degrade, and influence adversary irregular warfare efforts?

Historically, when has unconventional warfare been effective in coercing, disrupting, and overthrowing regimes? How does unconventional warfare campaigning interact, or conflict, with concepts of strategic competition and strategic patience? Does the time required for a successful unconventional warfare campaign hinder its ability to be coordinated with conventional warfare campaigns? If so, how can this be mitigated?

Security cooperation, to include security assistance and foreign internal defense, has a role to play within both irregular and unconventional warfare. What is SOF's role in security cooperation, and how can SOF best integrate or coordinate with conventional forces engaged in security cooperation in the same theater? Are there changes required to security cooperation authorities and practices for SOF? What are ways in which adversaries have, or might seek to, hinder security cooperation efforts?

Forecasting Unintended Consequences

Given the current focus on strategic competition and competitive statecraft, SOF's operations around the globe have an important role to play. However, activities in one country or on one continent may have far-reaching effects in neighboring countries or across the globe. The scale of potential effects provides both opportunities and risks. How can SOF better understand the unintended consequences of its activities around the globe? What are the risks for escalation? Can cross-regional planning be used to help mitigate risks? How can the SOE better communicate with policymakers to address issues of strategic risk and risk aversion? How can risk be characterized in terms of probability, assessment, measurement, identification, and mitigation?

Integrated Deterrence

Integrated deterrence is the alignment of the DOD's "policies, investments, and activities to sustain and strengthen deterrence—tailored to specific competitors and coordinated to maximum effect

inside and outside the Department," in order to address competitors' "holistic strategies that employ varied forms of coercion, malign behavior, and aggression to achieve their objectives and weaken the foundation of a stable and open international system."[5] Are there operational, fiscal, and legal authorities and permissions which need to be changed or created in order for SOF to be effective in integrated deterrence?

Within the DOD, what is SOF's role for global and theater-integrated deterrence, campaigning, and engagement? How can SOF best contribute to whole-of-government integrated deterrence efforts? How can integrated deterrence operations be tailored to different states and regions? Are there specific allies and partners in each region that should be the focus of integrated deterrence efforts? How can SOF prioritize which states to focus on within a regional integrated deterrence campaign? Might long-term irregular warfare campaigning contribute to integrated deterrence and optimize allied and partner participation as part of global collective security?

Where does nuclear deterrence fit into integrated deterrence, and what is SOF's role in nuclear deterrence? How do SOF communicate U.S. counter weapons of mass destruction (CWMD) policy, and how can the CWMD mission fit into SOF's overall strategy with partners, allies, and neutrals?

2F. SPECIAL OPERATIONS ENTERPRISE AND SOF COMPONENTS

Organizing for Irregular Warfare

Does the SOE require organizational changes to better carry out irregular warfare campaigns and operations? Are purpose-built SOF organizations and capabilities needed to successfully wage irregular warfare campaigns against adversaries? If most irregular warfare problems have at least some transregional element, and TSOCs have a regional focus, should the structure and focus of TSOCs be examined? Is there a need for additional TSOCs under U.S. Space Command or U.S. Cyber Command? Would it be helpful to create

a transregionally focused irregular warfare headquarters? What would be the advantages and disadvantages to any restructuring of USSOCOM organizations? How do allies, partners, and adversaries conceptualize and organize for irregular warfare, and are there elements from other operations that USSOCOM could incorporate to be more effective?

SOF's Relationship with Space and Cyber

What is the role of special operations in the cyber and space domains, to include the electromagnetic spectrum? How can SOF best work with space and cyber forces and capabilities within the DOD? What cyber and space capabilities are best suited for collaboration with SOF? What would supported and supporting relationships look like? Within SOF, is there a need to redefine what an 'operator' is in terms of space or cyber talent? How might SOF build relationships with patriotic civilian talent?

How can the SOE determine the degree of vulnerability of deployed SOF elements to adversary electromagnetic spectrum, space, and cyberspace threats? How can adversary electromagnetic spectrum, space, and cyberspace threat activity against deployed SOF be best illuminated?

2G. REGIONAL AND TRANSREGIONAL ISSUES AND THEATER SPECIAL OPERATIONS COMMANDS

Political Limitations on Operations

The war in Ukraine has highlighted the continued relevance of strategic deep attacks by SOF such as the attempts to degrade and/or destroy the Kerch bridge. However, both Ukraine and its partners have been under severe political pressure to minimize these attacks for fear of provoking a Russian response. These political restraints limit the options for SOF planners, but similar constraints will likely be present in the future both in Europe and elsewhere. How can SOF incorporate and mitigate political considerations in planning deep area operations? How can the United States and its allies and

partners increase the political restraints facing adversaries when they consider carrying out deep area operations?

Another example of the utilization of political limitations is the use of narratives—true, false, or a mixture of both—to discredit ongoing military operations. In each combatant command AOR, adversaries are using U.S. actions since the end of the Cold War (e.g., NATO enlargement, civil wars in the Balkans, Arab Spring, Color Revolutions, Afghanistan and Iraq, sanctions on Iran and Venezuela) to portray the United States as a destabilizing, imperialist, and militarily aggressive power that cannot be trusted and must be opposed. States that believe these narratives are likely to push back diplomatically against U.S. foreign policy and military initiatives in their country. In this way, narratives shape political limitations, which then, in turn, may have effects down to the tactical level (such as discontinuing joint combined exchange training or other small-scale SOF engagements). How can these narratives be countered, and how can counter-narratives be attuned to address historical memories and cultural expectations of specific states?

Assessing Civilian Vulnerabilities in Conflict

How can SOF prepare for conflicts where the objectives may include hostile actions intended to disrupt civilian supplies of food and energy locally, regionally, and globally? How should the protection of resources and their associated infrastructure be assessed and prioritized? What can SOF do to prevent or mitigate the weaponization of refugees? Can the provision of energy, food, and water resources to denied areas provide a useful means of developing influence or resilience within a population? How can SOF, in conjunction with conventional forces, mitigate their own requirements to ensure that they are not a further drain on resources in deployed area?

Chapter 3. Transform

General Fenton and Command Sergeant Major Shorter state that "USSOCOM will trail-blaze, and lead, for DOD and the Nation. As stewards of precious resources, we will meet current and future challenges via optimizing, modernizing, innovating, inventing, and transforming our people, organizations, and technology."[6]

This concept of "Transform" draws upon the previous discussions of "People" and "Win." Who do SOF need to become, individually and organizationally, to provide the most effective force for the Nation? Informed by the types of contestations in which they may be involved, what capabilities, technologies, and concepts should SOF pursue to ensure effectiveness in future operational environments? What DOTMLPF-P decisions/actions are necessary to transform?

3A. SUPPORT TO RESISTANCE AND RESILIENCE

Technological Support to Resilience or Resistance

Technology is already playing an increasing role in multiple aspects of the security environment and will undoubtedly continue to do so in our ability to identify the need for, assess the potential for, and support resilience and resistance. How might the innovative use of new and emerging technologies enable SOF efforts to support resilience and resistance in developed, underdeveloped, fragile, and/or at-risk countries and regions? What might be some of the roles of AI/ML in assessing, building, enabling, and supporting SRR in deterrence, competition, or armed conflict? In contrast, does the integration of 'low-tech' solutions to SSR provide any advantage in the future operating environment, and if so, where, and how? How might an infusion of standard technologies across select allies and partners support global fusion in the application of SRR against global and transregional threats? How does the level of

technological development, and technological saturation within a society, contribute to, detract from, or otherwise impact the potential and challenges to SRR? How might technologies enable the assessment of a group, population, or country's will to resist? How might the democratization of technology within a society, and its potential adversary, enable SRR across the spectrum of subversion, coercion, and aggression? What does the role of the protection of technological advantage play in enabling SRR?

Resiliency Approaches Through Women, Peace, and Security

The role of women in both resilience and resistance is a neglected area of study that is rich in potential for transforming understanding of the human role in SRR. The UN's Women, Peace, and Security (WPS) initiative focuses on including the role of gender in conflict prevention, management, and resolution, and specifically emphasizes the value of women's contributions to conflict transformation. WPS has neglected the role women can and do play in resistance and resilience, however, with Ukraine offering an immediate contemporary example. While women tend to be assumed to play a role in conflict resolution, focusing on that aspect diminishes the role women have played in fostering societal resilience and violent and non-violent resistance movements. Historically, what role have women played in SRR in diverse geographic cases? In what ways, if any, do women play a distinct role from men in SRR? From a resilience perspective, what role have women played across the competition continuum in building resilience? How could SOF include women, peace, and security insights into its planning and operational efforts for SRR?

3B. INFORMATION ADVANTAGE AND STRATEGIC INFLUENCE

The Future of Information and Influence

There are many ways in which current technologies shape the ways that people receive information. The ability to create realistic, believable information, events, documents, pictures, and video based

on a computer prompt makes it increasingly difficult to distinguish between fact and fiction. The combination of virtual reality and augmented reality offers the ability to virtually see, 'be with,' and respond in real time to another person anywhere in the world. What are the second and third-order effects of such technologies on information operations and strategic influence campaigns? If distinguishing the truth becomes increasingly difficult, will there be a corresponding reaction in which groups or individuals care less about the 'truth' or simply distrust everything not seen to occur with their own eyes? What are the implications of such distrust? Will societies become less vulnerable to disinformation, but also less receptive to strategic messaging? How might virtual interactive experiences be utilized to develop strategic influence? Training and education with partners and allies can provide a form of relationship building that may lead to strategic influence. Does virtual training and education build the same relationships, and have the same strategic effects, as in-person interactions?

3C. STRATEGIC INTELLIGENCE AND EMERGING TECHNOLOGY

Black Swan Capabilities

Historically, technological innovations drive changes to the ways in which conflicts are fought. However, it is not always easy to see which technologies will drive such changes, or the ways that such technologies will be incorporated and deployed by militaries. New technologies in a variety of areas offer both promise and peril and demand our attention as they provide the potential for black swan (improbable, high-impact) or gray rhino (probable, high-impact, but neglected) events.[7] How can the SOE best identify emerging technologies? Do SOF have strategic blind spots when it comes to emerging technologies—is it focused in certain areas but not in others? How can the SOE assess or forecast the impact of emerging technologies? How can SOF experiment and incorporate emerging disruptive technologies within current fiscal constraints?

How can the SOE best share new knowledge of military applications of emerging technologies across its organizations? Is there a need for new statutory and other relevant authorities for public–private sector cooperation to provide SOF access to the latest innovations? How can SOF leverage and explore new technologies while limiting their exposure to the risks that accompany these technologies? What are the emerging technologies, such as AI/ML, neuromorphic and biotechnologies, and new power sources, which could affect SOF capabilities, both positively and negatively? Are there risks associated with reliance on and expectations of technology?

Interrelationship Between Intelligence and Technology

Intelligence has a role to play in the identification of emerging technologies and assessment of how they may be used by adversaries. Within the SOE, how can collaboration be encouraged between the intelligence practitioners and the technological specialists? How can SOF best couple bottom-up-driven intelligence and technology solutions with top-down-driven research and acquisition programs? While the technologies are different, the problems of collaboration between two different communities during historical periods of technological disruption may offer ideas to inform current efforts in these areas. Can SOF use case studies of the past emergence of disruptive technologies to transform for the future? How can SOF intelligence exploit technology while maintaining a healthy skepticism of its promises?

3D. LEADERSHIP, DECISION-MAKING, AND THE SOF PROFESSIONAL ETHIC

Legal, Moral, and Ethical Considerations of New Technologies

What are the core legal, moral, and ethical principles that transcend technology? How can the SOE best prepare for the legal, moral, and ethical challenges inherent in new technologies? How can SOF develop personnel who understand the legal, moral, and ethical implications of new technologies? Legally, what authorities

are needed to incorporate new technologies? What is the obligation to inform the SOF user of potential long-term impacts before use? Morally, are there any potential impacts of novel technologies on human rights, privacy, diversity, or environmental sustainability? What ethical dilemmas might be caused by a specific technology, and how can those dilemmas be resolved? How can a technology's potential moral hazards and moral injuries be avoided or mitigated?

Technological Impacts on Ethical Autonomy

The integration of wearable, edible, or injectable technology for SOF can potentially raise concerns about the loss of autonomy in making ethical decisions. Wearable devices, such as smartwatches or fitness trackers, can collect vast amounts of personal data about our behaviors, activities, and health. The risk lies in the potential misuse or exploitation of this data, which could erode personal privacy and autonomy. Could external entities and malicious actors with access to such data manipulate individual choices or influence decision-making through targeted persuasive techniques? Edible technology refers to ingestible devices or substances, such as smart pills or edible sensors. While these technologies can provide valuable health monitoring or targeted drug delivery, there is a risk of overreliance and loss of agency. Can people become too dependent on such technologies for managing their health or decision-making processes? Could they inadvertently surrender their autonomy to technology or entities controlling it? Injectables include implanting devices or substances into the body, such as microchips or smart implants. These can offer benefits, such as enhanced cognitive capabilities or medical monitoring. Risks include potential unauthorized access to implanted devices, data breaches, or manipulation of bodily functions or behaviors. Such vulnerabilities may compromise personal autonomy and privacy. What are the potential risks or challenges the SOE should consider regarding the loss of SOF ethical autonomy when using wearable technology, edibles, or injectables? What measures can be taken to ensure individuals maintain their autonomy and ethical decision-making capabilities while using such technologies?

3E. DESIGN-BASED INTEGRATIVE CAMPAIGNING AND STATECRAFT

Novel Operational Environments

Based on trends in the geostrategic environment, advances in technologies that allow SOF greater maneuver and capabilities in extreme environments, and the evolving role of the DOD as part of national security, what might SOF's new roles and missions be, as part of the Joint Force, in novel operational environments? Such environments could include: the polar regions and approaches; areas of extreme heat and humidity too severe for normal human tolerance; the open ocean, to include all layers of the pelagic zone, the seabed, and resource exploitation platforms; and outer space, to include cislunar and lunar orbits. What might operations in these extreme environments look like? And what capabilities would be needed to sustain operations there?

Low-Probability, High-Consequence Events

Typical U.S. military methodologies for quantifying and categorizing risk are not well-suited for some outlier risks. For example, the very low probability, but very high consequence, of a deliberate nuclear attack is a different type of risk compared to a violent extremist organization's attack. Other examples of low-probability, high-consequence events include the assassination of a world leader or the destruction of a physical item with great cultural significance, such as an irreplaceable religious artefact. How might risk methodologies, decision-making, and resource allocation be characterized to best plan for low-probability, high-consequence events? In addition to characterizing such events, how can the SOE and SOF prepare for the follow-on effects of such an event? What does a campaign of de-escalation look like following an event that could be considered an existential threat?

SOF in a Technological World

As technology expands in both sophistication and reach, the SOE must adapt to keep up with, and take advantage of, technologies.

What are the risks and opportunities of these technologies, and what are the limitations or thresholds associated with new capabilities? How can the trustworthiness of such technologies be determined?

Within personnel, will computer-to-brain interfaces enhance SOF performance? Will AI/ML and LLMs change USSOCOM processes and operations? What are the legal and ethical standards for the use of such technology? Will remotely piloted and/or autonomous systems change expeditionary logistics, maneuver, and disbursement of resources and sustainment in a contested environment? How might quantum computing affect offensive and defensive cyber operations? How can SOF exploit existing infrastructure to cover their electronic tracks, and how might adversaries use technology to track SOF? Does the spread of technology correspond with an increasing difficulty for covert or clandestine operations?

3F. SPECIAL OPERATIONS ENTERPRISE AND SOF COMPONENTS

Space Operations Forces

Should the SOE and U.S. Space Force explore options for employing a military force that can support diplomacy, information operations, and U.S. and allied partner economic interests on the moon and celestial bodies as a way to deter adversaries? If so, what would their core activities and mission sets be? Would such a force be ground-based, or would there be requirements to deploy into cislunar and lunar space? Does this future threat call for the development of SOF personnel who can operate in the austere and mentally taxing environment of space? Could SOF personnel from the different components be trained to perform core activities in the space domain? Could these SOF personnel form the beginnings of a U.S. Space Force SOF?

SOF Components and Joint Special Operations Command

How might the SOF service components (Air Force Special Operations Command, Marine Special Operations Command, U.S. Army Special Operations Command, Naval Special Warfare

Command) and Joint Special Operations Command best optimize themselves for strategic competition and integrated deterrence mission sets? Is there a need for new Joint Force training and exercises to determine or develop best practices for the integration of SOF and SOF enablers across services to best support mission requirements? What are the mission-critical capabilities for strategic competition and integrated deterrence within each SOF service component? Given each SOF service component's unique capabilities, how might they best utilize new technologies? Do any of these capabilities require adjustments for optimal effectiveness in the current strategic environment? Are there requirements for new SOF capabilities that do not currently exist? If so, which SOF service component is best suited to meet each new requirement, and why?

3G. REGIONAL AND TRANSREGIONAL ISSUES AND THEATER SPECIAL OPERATIONS COMMANDS

Special Operations Command Africa

Operations in this AOR often face challenges with economy-of-force missions across a large continent. How can SOF best work with other USG agencies, as well as allies and partners, to fulfill their missions? In what ways can SOF help extend legitimate government control into areas where governance is contested? How can SOF maintain a U.S. presence across Africa, especially in countries where adversaries seek to gain power and influence? What is SOF's role in resistance and resilience in Africa, and what challenges specific to the continent does it face? How can SOF best respond to climatological changes that drive economic, social, demographic, and cultural crises?

Special Operations Command Central

In what ways might the regional balance of power shift within this AOR? Diplomatically, are there ways to better understand the relationship between, and potential dynamics of, alliances and partnerships in the region between both states and non-state actors? How can SOF better understand what might cause shifts in the

constellation of power? How might economic developments affect the fortunes, and potential for conflict, of regional actors? What might global shifts in energy generation towards renewable sources, and the rise and fall of 'peak oil,' lead to? How might petrostates respond to a sustained decrease in demand for oil and natural gas? Alternatively, as sea lanes open in the Arctic circle, what does this mean for current global shipping routes that pass through the Middle East? How might changes in shipping routes and follow-on economic effects affect the risk-reward calculus for violent extremist organizations?

Special Operations Command Europe

The conflict in Ukraine will end at some point, and when it does, changes to the Ukrainian military are likely to result. Are there lessons that can be drawn from history about what the transition from wartime to peacetime SOF looks like, especially in a smaller state that may need to dramatically reduce the size of its military? What capabilities are most critical to maintain? Should there be a larger role for reserve forces? How does Ukraine's potential accession to NATO affect the role(s) that Ukrainian SOF will play? In what ways can U.S. SOF, in conjunction with allies and partners, support Ukrainian SOF through organizational and individual transitions to peacetime?

Special Operations Command North

How can SOF best prepare for future operations in the Arctic? What does the enlargement of NATO to include Finland and Sweden mean for the region? What are the interoperability requirements between SOF and conventional forces operating in the region, such as Coast Guard icebreakers and Navy submarines? Are there new capabilities or technologies that are required for operations in this environment? What can U.S. SOF learn from allies and partners that routinely operate in the Arctic? How might SOF best work with the USG interagency, as well as allies and partners, to understand and partner with Arctic peoples?

Special Operations Command Pacific and Special Operations Command Korea

Rising sea levels will, over the next decades, be the source of a variety of economic and social issues across the Indo-Pacific Command, which may drive conflicts in the region. These issues include natural disasters and extreme weather events that damage agriculture and trade, affect refugee flows, create challenges to port infrastructure, and impact changes to navigable waterways and sea routes. How can SOF better understand and adapt to this potentially destabilizing environment, and how can they best support allied and partner nations facing these issues?

Special Operations Command South

Within a global strategic competition, how can SOF compete for influence in South and Central America? How can this command best assess the quality and nature of allied and partner relationships in the region, and, in particular, what are indicators or warnings that U.S. strategic influence might be challenged or losing ground to an adversary? If we have lost ground, what are the best options for rebuilding influence? How can we prevent or minimize adversarial entrenchment? What are the biggest threats emanating from adversarial influence in the region? Can SOF mitigate the effects of adversarial influence without directly competing against adversaries?

A Note on Previous Years' Topics Lists

Initially published in 2008, the *Special Operations Research Topics* handbook is updated annually to provide insight into the most current critical issues for consideration. However, some topics are enduring, and different aspects of the same topic may be identified in different editions of the handbook. Previous years' research topics lists provide a repository of issues that may continue to have research relevance—especially the prior year's list. All previous editions of this publication are available digitally at www.jsou.edu/press/publications. ♠

Acronyms

AI – Artificial intelligence

AOR – Area of responsibility

CWMD – Counter weapons of mass destruction

CVEO – Counter-violent extremist organizations

DOD – U.S. Department of Defense

DOTMLPF-P – doctrine, organization, training, materiel, leadership and education, personnel, facilities, and policy

JIIM-C – Joint, interagency, intergovernmental, multinational, and commercial

JSOU – Joint Special Operations University

LLM – Large language model

ML – Machine learning

NCO – Noncommissioned officer

OAI – operations, activities, and investments

POTFF – Preservation of the Force and Family

PMESII-PT – Political, military, economic, social, information, infrastructure, physical environment, and time

SOE – Special operations enterprise

SOF – Special Operations Forces

SRR – Support to resistance and resilience

TSOC – Theater Special Operations Command

USAID – United States Agency for International Development

USG – United States Government

USSOCOM – United States Special Operations Command

WPS – women, peace, and security

Notes

[1] Fenton, Bryan and Shane Shorter. "Memorandum for United States Special Operations Command (USSOCOM) Personnel." U.S. Special Operations Command, Office of the Commander. 30 November 2022.

[2] Fenton and Shorter, 2022.

[3] "Cognition." Encyclopedia Britannica. <https://www.britannica.com/topic/cognition-thought-process> Accessed 31 July 2023.

[4] Fenton and Shorter, 2022.

[5] "2022 National Defense Strategy of the United States of America." United States Department of Defense.

[6] Fenton and Shorter, 2022.

[7] For more on black swans, see: Taleb, Nassim Nicholas, The Black Swan: The Impact of the Highly Improbable. 2nd Ed. New York: Random House Trade Paperbacks, 2010. For gray rhinos, see: Wucker, Michele, *The Gray Rhino: How to Recognize and Act on the Obvious Dangers We Ignore*. New York: St. Martin's Press, 2016.

As special operations adapt and evolve to meet new challenges, SOF need to prepare themselves and be employed in new and unique ways. The questions posed in the *Special Operations Research Topics 2024* booklet address many of these complex challenges and invite research into the intersection of human history and emergent technology. The nearly 40 research topics, each including several sub-questions, range from compound security threats in the Sahel to the Russian and Chinese ways of irregular warfare in an effort to facilitate research and writing across professional military education, academia, and the joint force.

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