

**The Next Decade of Strategic Competition:
How the Pentagon Can Use Special
Operations Forces to Better Compete**





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The next decade of strategic competition: How the Pentagon can use special operations forces to better compete

Introduction

Strategic competition is likely to intensify over the next decade, increasing the demands on the United States to deter and defend against wide-ranging and simultaneous security challenges across multiple domains and regions worldwide. In that timeframe, the Department of Defense (DOD) and the Joint Force should more effectively leverage the competencies of US Special Operations Forces (USSOF) to compete with US strategic adversaries.

Three realities facing the DOD over the next decade lend themselves toward leveraging USSOF more in strategic competition. First, the growing need to counter globally active and increasingly cooperative aggressors, while the broader Joint Force remains focused on the Indo-Pacific and Europe, underscores the value of leveraging USSOF to manage competition in other regions. Second, the desire to avoid war and manage competition below the threshold of conflict aligns with USSOF's expertise in the irregular aspects of competition. Third, unless defense spending and recruitment dramatically increase over the next decade, the Joint Force will likely have to manage more security challenges without a commensurate increase in force size and capabilities, which underscores the need for the DOD to maximize every tool at its disposal, including the use of USSOF to help manage strategic competition.

The US government must harness all instruments of national power, alongside its network of allies and partners, to uphold international security, deter attacks, and counter efforts to undermine US security interests. Achieving this requires effectively integrating and leveraging the distinct roles of the

DOD, interagency partners, the intelligence community (IC), and the Joint Force, including components like USSOF that have not been traditionally prioritized in strategic competition.

For the past two decades, USSOF achieved critical operational successes during the Global War on Terror, primarily through counterterrorism and direct-action missions. However, peer and near-peer competition now demands a broader application of USSOF's twelve core activities,¹ with emphasis on seven: special reconnaissance, foreign internal defense, security force assistance, civil affairs operations, military information support operations, unconventional warfare, and direct action.

Over the next decade, the DOD should emphasize USSOF's return to its roots—the core competencies USSOF conducted and refined during the Cold War. USSOF's unconventional warfare support of resistance groups in Europe; its support of covert intelligence operations in Eastern Europe, Asia, and Latin America; its evacuation missions of civilians in Africa; and its guerrilla and counter guerrilla operations helped combat Soviet influence operations worldwide.² During that era, special operations became one of the US military's key enablers to counter coercion below the threshold of armed conflict, and that is how USSOF should be applied in the next decade to help manage strategic competition.

This report outlines five ways the Department of Defense should use Special Operations Forces over the next decade to support US efforts in strategic competition. USSOF should be leveraged to:

1. Enhance the US government's situational awareness of strategic competition dynamics globally.

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1. The activities are direct action, special reconnaissance, unconventional warfare, foreign internal defense, civil affairs operations, counterterrorism, military information support operations, counterproliferation of weapons of mass destruction, security force assistance, counterinsurgency, hostage rescue and recovery, and foreign humanitarian assistance. See "Core Activities," US Special Operations Command, last accessed July 1, 2024, <https://www.socom.mil/about/core-activities>. The core activities have been evolving. Most recently, the draft of the Fiscal Year 2025 National Defense Authorization Act (NDAA) expands some of the current twelve SOF competencies related to training and supporting foreign security forces. While the FY 2024 NDAA added "disaster risk reduction or response operations" to the core competencies of the US Special Operations Command, the FY 2025 draft amends Section 333 of the US Code Title 10, which gives the Secretary of Defense the authority to build partner capacity, adding "disaster risk reduction and response operations, space domain awareness and space operations, and foreign internal defense operations." See National Defense Authorization Act for Fiscal Year 2024, Public Law 118-31, 118th Congress, Section 1075, (2023), PUBL031.PS; and National Defense Authorization Act for Fiscal Year 2025, 118th Congress, Section 1202, S.4638, (2024).
 2. Clementine G. Starling and Alyxandra Marine, *Stealth, Speed, and Adaptability: The Role of Special Operations Forces in Strategic Competition*, Atlantic Council, March 7, 2024, 10, <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/in-depth-research-reports/report/starling-marine-special-operations-forces-in-strategic-competition/>.

2. Entangle adversaries in competition to prevent escalation.
3. Strengthen allied and partner resilience to support the US strategy of deterrence by denial.
4. Support integration across domains for greater effect at the tactical edge.
5. Contribute to US information and decision advantage³ by leveraging USSOF's role as a technological pathfinder.

This report seeks to clarify USSOF's role in strategic competition over the next decade, address gaps in understanding within the DOD and the broader national security community about USSOF's competencies, and guide future resource and force development decisions. By prioritizing the above five functions, USSOF can bolster the US competitive edge and support the DOD's management of challenges across diverse theaters and domains.

The global environment in the next ten years

Optimal preparation for strategic competition in the next decade requires constant assessment of the threat environment. The People's Republic of China (PRC) and the Russian Federation will likely remain the main competitors of the United States over the next decade, continuing to destabilize the international order while pursuing their objectives through traditional and unconventional means. US competition with China and Russia is and will increasingly be global in nature. Both Beijing and Moscow employ a holistic approach, using their economic influence, diplomacy, information, and military power to establish influence and offset US alliances and advantages worldwide.⁴ How and where the PRC and the Kremlin choose to compete with the United States and its allies and partners globally today is indicative of how these adversaries will conduct competition over the next decade.

Gray zone activities

Over the next decade, the United States will need to address a growing prevalence of Chinese and Russian "gray zone" activities.⁵ While much of the Pentagon and national security community is focused on preparing for potential kinetic conflict with China within the next decade—such as a possible invasion of Taiwan—this mindset has often resulted in deprioritizing USSOF in favor of conventional force priorities. However, US adversaries like China and Russia are likely to intensify their activities in the "gray zone" over the next ten years, leveraging cyber, space, and information operations. These methods allow them to operate covertly; undermine US strengths and interests; and advance their own objectives with minimal cost, footprint, and risk of triggering a full-scale kinetic conflict.

Given this reality, USSOF should be prioritized in the era of strategic competition. Its unique capabilities are specifically suited for gray zone operations, enabling the United States to counter adversaries effectively while avoiding escalation to kinetic warfare—an outcome that would have catastrophic consequences for international security.

China

China is likely to continue to strategically knit together economic and military initiatives to expand its global influence and create economic and political dependencies among other countries to expand its international influence.⁶ This strategy will include increasing overseas basing access to enhance China's global presence across the globe for both peacetime and wartime use.⁷ While the first decade of the Belt and Road Initiative focused primarily on advancing China's economic interests—such as land and maritime infrastructure development—since 2022, the PRC has shifted toward centrally controlled efforts

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3. Decision advantage results when intelligence enables a decision-maker to better understand and address an issue compared to another actor. Achieving decision advantage requires greatly accelerated tasking, collecting, processing, exploiting, and disseminating operationally useful information. Such information provides the decision-maker with the ability to achieve strategic and operational situational understanding in near real time. See Brian R. Price, "Decision Advantage and Initiative: Completing Joint All-Domain Command and Control," *Air and Space Operations Review* 3 (2024): 60-76, https://www.airuniversity.af.edu/Portals/10/ASOR/Journals/Volume-3_Number-1/Price.pdf; and Tom Pfeifer and Jeff Kimmons, *Intelligence Drives the Decision Advantage*, Booz Allen Hamilton, last accessed December 14, 2024, <https://www.boozallen.com/insights/defense/indo-pacific/intelligence-drives-the-decision-advantage.html>.
 4. *2022 National Defense Strategy*, US Department of Defense, 2022, 4, <https://apps.dtic.mil/sti/trecms/pdf/AD1183514.pdf>.
 5. Elizabeth G. Troeder, *A Whole-of-Government Approach to Gray Zone Warfare*, US Army War College, 2019, <https://press.armywarcollege.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1935&context=monographs>.
 6. *Annual Threat Assessment of the US Intelligence Community*, Office of the Director of National Intelligence, February 5, 2024, 8, <https://www.dni.gov/files/ODNI/documents/assessments/ATA-2024-Unclassified-Report.pdf>
 7. Howard Wang and Nathan Beauchamp-Mustafaga, *Not Ready for a Fight: Chinese Military Insecurities for Overseas Bases in Wartime*, RAND Corporation, June 7, 2024, 1.

that prioritize Beijing’s geopolitical objectives over purely economic goals.⁸ Over the next decade, Beijing is likely to take a more overtly confrontational stance toward US interests and the existing international order. This includes activities aimed at exerting greater influence and power over other nations. Covert strategies will also intensify, including disseminating pro-China narratives and discrediting US-led initiatives,⁹ with the goal of expanding Beijing’s influence, undermining democratic values, and weakening the US global standing.

Russia

Despite limited economic resources and its ongoing war in Ukraine, Russia is likely to maintain ambitious global activities as it seeks leverage through economic and military actions far beyond Europe. Russia’s 2023 Foreign Policy Concept outlines that Moscow sees its future global activities in competition with the United States and its allies.¹⁰ Russia will actively work to undermine the rules-based international order and challenge US influence, particularly in regions the United States does not prioritize or where its presence is limited, such as Central Asia, Africa, the Middle East, and Latin America.

The outcome of the war in Ukraine—if and when it ends—will significantly affect Russia’s regional standing in Europe. However, Moscow’s ambitions beyond its borders are unlikely to diminish. Russia will likely continue to undermine the sovereignty of former Soviet states below the threshold of open conflict to bolster its influence in Europe. Its political interference in countries like Moldova, North Macedonia, and Georgia is expected to increase. Additionally, Russia will persist in gray zone activities—such as cyberattacks, space-based operations, and information warfare—to destabilize democracies and promote authoritarianism globally.¹¹ Coercion of the press in these contested areas will also remain a key tool for Moscow to suppress dissent and control narratives.

It will use tactics such as mis- and disinformation campaigns and the deployment of private military companies¹² to fracture alliances critical to US strategic interests and solidify its position on the global stage.¹³

The convergence of US adversaries

Over the next decade, US adversaries are likely to increasingly work together, whether out of pragmatism or genuine mutual interest. An axis or convergence of US adversaries—China, Russia, Iran, and North Korea—has recently emerged and it is likely to strengthen, further complicating the US ability to respond to threats that will be overlapping and increasingly inseparable, as activities in one region will affect others. Russia’s war in Ukraine, coupled with intensifying conflict in the Middle East, has dramatically accelerated the pace of their relations and deepened the extent of their strategic ties, as demonstrated through their cooperation, arms sales, and direct military support. The Kremlin signed a partnership treaty with North Korea, calling for collaboration toward a “just and multipolar new world order,” and an anticipated similar agreement with Iran reflects the growing alignment among these actors. This trend has already been evident through Iran’s and North Korea’s military support for Russia’s war in Ukraine.¹⁴

This “axis of aggressors” will require that the United States not only addresses China, Russia, Iran, North Korea, and other nonstate actors as distinct threats but as overlapping force amplifiers of one another.

Despite differences and tensions within the Beijing-Moscow partnership, PRC President Xi Jinping’s and Russian President Vladimir Putin’s self-proclaimed “no limits” partnership is unlikely to wane over the next decade, as they both seek to gain from working together to undermine US strategic interests. Their growing partnership is “centered on countering Western

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8. The PRC’s Global Security Initiative, the Global Development Initiative, and the Global Civilization Initiative—announced in 2022—each challenge the rules-based international order upheld by the United States and its allies and attempt to present an alternative global order that emphasizes state sovereignty and noninterference, as well as a development model that prioritizes economic security over human rights. See Ruby Osman, “Bye Bye BRI? Why 3 Initiatives Will Shape the Next 10 Years of China’s Global Reach,” *Time*, October 1, 2023, <https://time.com/6319264/china-belt-and-road-ten-years/>.
 9. *Annual Threat Assessment*, 12.
 10. “The Concept of the Foreign Policy of the Russian Federation,” Permanent Mission of the Russian Federation to the European Union, March 31, 2023, <https://russiaeu.ru/en/news/concept-foreign-policy-russian-federation>.
 11. *2022 National Defense Strategy*, 5.
 12. Dominik Presl, *Russia Is Winning the Global Information War*, Royal United Services Institute (RUSI), May 7, 2024, <https://rusi.org/explore-our-research/publications/commentary/russia-winning-global-information-war>; and Brian Katz et al., *Moscow’s Mercenary Wars: The Expansion of Russian Private Military Companies*, Center for Strategic and International Studies, last accessed July 1, 2024, <https://russianpmcs.csis.org/>.
 13. *Annual Threat Assessment*, 17.
 14. Hyung-Jin Kim, “North Korea Ratifies Major Defense Treaty with Russia,” Associated Press, November 11, 2024, <https://abcnews.go.com/International/wireStory/north-korea-ratifies-major-defense-treaty-russia-115757194>; and Emil Avdaliani, “Iran and Russia Seek to Reshape Global Hegemony with New Bilateral Agreement,” *Eurasia Daily Monitor* 21, no. 160 (2024), <https://jamestown.org/program/iran-and-russia-seek-to-reshape-global-hegemony-with-new-bilateral-agreement>.

influence and reinforcing each other in strategic regions,” including in far-flung places like the Arctic.¹⁵ Russian and Chinese joint military activity is likely to increase and deepen their degree of interoperability, as evidenced by an increased tempo since 2021, including a 2024 joint naval exercise in the Arctic, annual patrol missions in the Indo-Pacific region from 2021 to 2023, and 2023 naval drills in the Sea of Japan.¹⁶

The 2022 National Defense Strategy (NDS) Commission Report warned that this convergence of US adversaries “creates a real risk, if not likelihood, that conflict anywhere could become a multi-theater or global war.”¹⁷ This is what the United States must prepare for over the next decade. The United States must account for this escalating threat as it positions its forces and allocates resources in the coming years. Compounding this challenge is the accelerating pace of technological advancements, which are rapidly transforming the character of warfare and require innovative approaches to military planning and execution.¹⁸

Protracted conflict

Future wars are likely to be protracted, reflecting a growing global trend toward longer, more complex, and deeply entrenched conflicts. Recent wars in Iraq, Afghanistan, Syria, and Ukraine demonstrate how modern warfare increasingly extends over years,¹⁹ leading to prolonged instability and often lacking clear resolutions. Should the United States become directly involved in a conflict with a great power, such a war is likely to last more than a few weeks or months. Similarly, if China or Russia were to engage in conflicts in their neighboring areas, such as Taiwan or former Soviet states, those confrontations are also likely to be drawn out rather than decisive. This would necessitate sustained US support over an extended period, adding to the demands on American resources and strategic planning.

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15. Sergey Sukhankin, “Sino-Russian Partnership in the Arctic and the Far East Reflect Joint Security Interests (Part One),” *Eurasia Daily Monitor* 21, no. 168 (2024), <https://jamestown.org/program/sino-russian-partnership-in-the-arctic-and-the-far-east-reflect-joint-security-interests-part-one/>.
 16. Sukhankin, “Sino-Russian Partnership.”
 17. Jane Harman et al., “Report of the Commission on the National Defense Strategy,” RAND, July 2024, vi, <https://www.rand.org/nsrd/projects/NDS-commission.html>.
 18. *Global Trends 2040: A More Contested World*, National Intelligence Council, March 2021, 7, https://www.dni.gov/files/images/globalTrends/GT2040/GlobalTrends_2040_for_web1.pdf.
 19. Harman et al., “Report of the Commission on the National Defense Strategy,” 38.



US Navy SEAL candidates participate in Basic Underwater Demolition/SEAL (BUD/S) training in Coronado, California. (Credit: Defense Visual Information Distribution Service/Petty Officer First Class Abe McNatt)

What this means for the Joint Force

The changing global threat landscape and the evolving nature of warfare will have profound implications for how the Joint Force deters adversaries and conducts operations in future conflicts over the next decade. These changes will necessitate new thinking in the DOD about the Joint Force’s role and its operational concepts.

Future force construct

Regarding the force required to meet those challenges, this paper aligns with the findings of the Report of the Commission on the 2022 National Defense Strategy, which underscores the need for a force construct that is both global in scope and prioritized in focus. Such a construct must efficiently allocate finite resources to address threats of varying severity and priority while accounting for the global reach of US adversaries and their growing cooperation.²⁰

The commission cautions against abrupt and significant reductions in US military presence in regions it is currently present in, warning that these actions often lead to larger, more costly redeployments later. For example, past reductions in Europe and the Middle East have emboldened Russia, Iran,

and terrorist groups, necessitating subsequent force surges to counteract escalating threats.

Our paper highlights the importance of not only maintaining force levels in priority regions like the Indo-Pacific and Europe but also ensuring a sustainable, enduring, and low-footprint US presence in regions less central—yet still vital—to strategic competition and US national interests, such as Latin America and Africa. Strategic competition with the axis of aggressors will place increased demands on the Joint Force to sustain a global presence capable of countering China and Russia’s expansive influence. Moreover, the Joint Force will need to manage competition with other adversaries below the threshold of armed conflict globally, even during potential conflicts in a given theater.

20. Harman et al., “Report of the Commission on the National Defense Strategy,” 38.

The next decade will be characterized by the growing challenge of “simultaneity”—where the Joint Force may need to respond to threats from more than one adversary, likely in different regions across the globe, at the same time. At present, the US military is structured around a one-war force-sizing construct, wherein the armed forces are sized and shaped to effectively fight and defeat a single major adversary in one theater at a time.²¹ This approach assumes the military will face only one large-scale conflict, rather than multiple, concurrent conflicts across different regions. However, the likelihood of future wars spanning multiple theaters, involving multiple adversaries—potentially collaborating—and extending over prolonged periods makes this one-war construct inadequate. To meet these demands, the Joint Force requires a reimagined force-sizing construct for the next decade—one capable of addressing multiple adversaries and operating across several regions simultaneously.

To address this, the National Defense Strategy Commission proposes a multiple theater force construct (MTFC) to size and structure the military to simultaneously defend the homeland, sustain a global posture, and respond to short-duration crises; lead the effort to deter and, if necessary, defeat China in the Western Pacific alongside allies; lead NATO planning and force structure to deter and defeat Russian aggression; and support Middle Eastern partners in defending against Iranian malign activities.²²

The Joint Force should position itself toward an MTFC that balances strategic priorities and resource limitations. This construct does not imply that the United States can simultaneously fight in every theater against every adversary. Achieving such a capability would require significant increases in force size—far beyond current recruitment trends—and wartime-level increases in defense spending, neither of which are feasible in the near term.

Instead, the MTFC must enable the Joint Force to defend the homeland while conducting a major conflict in one theater and simultaneously managing smaller, short-duration crises in other regions. This agility is critical to countering rapidly evolving, multipronged strategies employed by one or more strategic adversaries.

Current resource levels remain insufficient to fully support such a construct. Despite the 2018 National Defense Strategy Commission’s recommendation to increase the defense budget by 3 to 5 percent annually above inflation,²³ these increases have been inconsistent.²⁴ While modest growth in the defense budget is anticipated, constraints are likely to persist over the next five to ten years. Given this reality, the Department of Defense must adopt creative and efficient approaches to force positioning and resource allocation. These approaches must ensure readiness and responsiveness across the full competition continuum—from cooperation and competition below armed conflict to full-scale conflict.²⁵

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21. Hal Brands and Evan Montgomery, “One War Is Not Enough: Strategy and Force Planning for Great-Power Competition,” *Texas National Security Review*, Vol. 3, Issue 2, Spring 2020, 80-92, <http://dx.doi.org/10.26153/tsw/8865>.
 22. Harman et al., “Report of the Commission on the National Defense Strategy,” 39.
 23. Eric Edelman, Gary Roughead, et al., *Providing for the Common Defense: The Assessment and Recommendations of the National Defense Strategy Commission*, xli, <https://www.usip.org/press/2018/11/national-defense-strategy-commission-releases-its-review-2018-national-defense>.
 24. Harman et al., “Report of the Commission on the National Defense Strategy,” 71.
 25. *Competition Continuum*, Joint Doctrine Note 1-19, June 3, 2019, https://irp.fas.org/doddir/dod/jdn1_19.pdf.



US paratroopers assigned to the 4th Battalion, 10th Special Forces Group (Airborne), jump out of a CH-47 Chinook helicopter at Fort Carson, Colorado. (Credit: DVIDS/Specialist Kimberly Gonzalez)

Future warfighting concept

While the National Defense Strategy provides strategic objectives, the Joint Warfighting Concept (JWC) establishes a vision for a future Joint Force intended to guide force design and development.²⁶ The JWC seeks to align the military services on a mutually understood path whose end is “a symphony of capabilities,” combining them into a cohesive Joint Force.²⁷

Achieving this goal rests on seven key tenets,²⁸ most of which can be thought of as nuanced perspectives on the traditional Joint Functions.²⁹ The entire force must be a seamlessly integrated and combined Joint Force, the first tenet. In large part, this is due to greatly expanded maneuver across multiple domains simultaneously packaged into pulsed operations to synchronize effects, the second and third tenets. These operations are supported by global fires, the fourth tenet,

as both kinetic and nonkinetic effects are delivered at much longer ranges than in previous conflicts. Coordinating these complex all- or multi-domain maneuvers and fires demands integrated command across domains and agile control enabling rapid decision-making, the fifth tenet. Making better decisions than adversaries, especially at speed, requires the sixth tenet, information advantage. Finally, none of these ambitious concepts will come to fruition without the ability to sustain the force in a contested environment, leading to the final tenet, resilient logistics.

While the JWC rests on sound logic, in many ways it is an illusory aspiration. Its tenets remain largely unrealized, with each service independently developing its respective components, resulting in a fragmented and disjointed approach. While the JWC provides a solid blueprint for enhancing the Joint Force’s operational effectiveness in the next decade,

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26. Mark A. Milley, “Strategic Inflection Point: The Most Historically Significant and Fundamental Change in the Character of War Is Happening Now—While the Future Is Clouded in Mist and Uncertainty,” *Joint Force Quarterly* 110 (2023): 6–15, <https://ndupress.ndu.edu/Media/News/News-Article-View/Article/3447159/strategic-inflection-point-the-most-historically-significant-and-fundamental-ch/>.
 27. Thomas A. Walsh and Alexandra L. Huber, “A Symphony of Capabilities: How the Joint Warfighting Concept Guides Service Force Design and Development,” *Joint Force Quarterly* 111 (2023): 4–15, https://ndupress.ndu.edu/Portals/68/Documents/jfq/jfq-111/jfq-111_4-15_Walsh-Huber.pdf?ver=TwePyLVymtN8924udhzlxQ%3d%3d.
 28. Milley, “Strategic Inflection Point.”
 29. Joint Functions: command and control, information, intelligence, fires, movement and maneuver, protection, and sustainment. See *Joint Warfighting*, JP 1, US Joint Chiefs of Staff, August 27, 2023, III-24, <https://keystone.ndu.edu/Portals/86/Joint%20Warfighting.pdf>.

implementing it requires commitment from the services and careful shepherding by the Office of the Secretary of Defense and Congress to identify and eliminate “silos of excellence,” curbing uncoordinated efforts, and fostering coordination among the services.

The role of special operations forces

This paper asserts that USSOF is well positioned to play a pivotal role in addressing the complex threat environment and rapidly changing nature of warfare the Joint Force will confront over the next decade. Deliberate and intelligent USSOF force posture and employment can return a disproportionate amount of value relative to the cost for the DOD. USSOF can support the management of competition below the threshold of conflict given its irregular warfare expertise, which blends well with the capabilities of the broader force. With a forward-deployed and agile presence, USSOF can swiftly adapt to emerging crises, supporting the Joint Force to address both traditional and unconventional threats across dispersed and unpredictable theaters. Additionally, USSOF’s ability to maintain interoperability with global allies and partners strengthens its strategic utility. This paper argues that USSOF can excel in five key roles in strategic competition—global situational awareness, managed competition, deterrence, integration, and technological innovation—each of which will be explored in detail in the following sections.

How should the DOD use SOF in the next decade? Five key roles for US Special Operations Forces in strategic competition

1) Prioritize USSOF presence in regions where the rest of the Joint Force is less present to improve the DOD’s situational awareness of global strategic competition

To effectively compete, the DOD needs to have clear and up-to-date situational awareness of its adversaries’ global activities and how local and regional issues play into strategic dynamics. Strategic competition’s global nature—combined with the challenge of identifying the subversive, coercive, and clandestine activities of peer competitors—makes establishing a comprehensive intelligence picture challenging, especially given finite resources. Over the next decade, the DOD should prioritize increased USSOF deployments to regions relevant to strategic competition but under-addressed by the broader Joint Force. Such deployments can enhance the DOD’s situational awareness and improve its capacity to respond to crises in regions where the Joint Force maintains a limited presence.

While traditional elements of the Joint Force are likely to focus on the Indo-Pacific region and Europe, the DOD can mitigate risks and extend its global reach by leveraging USSOF for persistent, low-footprint operations in under-addressed

A group of Green Berets assigned to the 10th Special Forces Group (Airborne) returns to base after completing its first reconnaissance mission during cold weather training in the mountains of Colorado. (Credit: DVIDS/Staff Sergeant Luis Solorio)



regions, such as the Middle East, Central Asia, Africa, Latin America and the Caribbean, and the Arctic. These areas are often exploited by Russia, China, and Iran, where they maintain a presence and engagement to advance their strategic objectives. By maintaining an enduring presence in those regions, USSOF can provide the DOD with cost-effective and low-risk intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance (ISR) capabilities filling critical gaps and enhancing decision-makers' common operating picture of competitors' global activities.³⁰ Two unique SOF attributes position it to play a key role in ensuring the United States remains globally competitive while reinforcing the conventional force's core missions.

Global presence and situational awareness

First, USSOF's extensive global footprint—special operators are present in over eighty-five countries—position it to gather critical information and develop an in-depth understanding of regions often overlooked by the rest of the US government.³¹ This global placement and access enable USSOF to monitor and assess activities that are strategically relevant but under-resourced or under-addressed. The relatively low cost and often clandestine nature of USSOF deployments compared to conventional force deployments gives them a unique value proposition. Special operators can access regions where other interagency (IA) or intelligence community (IC) entities may lack a presence, especially in areas with limited US diplomatic or military infrastructure. Indeed, USSOF is sometimes present where a formal US diplomatic presence is not fully operational.³² In these contexts, USSOF frequently fills critical intelligence gaps and supports broader governmental efforts.³³

Events in far-flung or under-addressed regions of the globe can have a far-reaching and unanticipated impact on strategic competition globally, driving the importance of US government vigilance in the Arctic, Africa, Latin America and the Caribbean, and other regions. USSOF's ability to operate in these areas provides the DOD with critical insights and flexibility. By maintaining persistent deployments in these regions, particularly within the areas of responsibility of US Africa Command (AFRICOM) and Southern Command (SOUTHCOM), USSOF can counter malign activities by adversaries like China, Russia, and Iran, reducing instability and advancing US and allied interests.

The DOD should prioritize USSOF presence in areas where local actors have particularly strong ties to China and Russia or where long-term, transregional competition is likely, rather than focusing on isolated regional dynamics. Concentrating USSOF efforts in these regions allows the broader Joint Force to maintain strategic focus on the Indo-Pacific region and Europe while preventing knowledge gaps or loss of US influence. Additionally, a USSOF presence in such regions can enhance the speed and nuance of US responses to escalation dynamics and support proactive shaping of conditions to protect US interests.

Within existing USSOF authorities, the US government can more effectively leverage special operators already embedded in key regions to advance broader information-gathering objectives with minimal additional effort and potentially substantial gains.³⁴ These operators, in strategically significant areas, can be tasked with additional responsibilities, such as conducting strategic reconnaissance to verify or collect intelligence of operational significance.³⁵ This intelligence-

30. *2022 National Defense Strategy*, 2.

31. Hearing on the Posture of US Special Operations Command and Cyber Command before the Senate Armed Services Committee, 118th Cong. (2024) (General Bryan P. Fenton, commander, US Special Operations Command; and Christopher P. Maier, assistant secretary of defense for special operations and "low-intensity conflict"), 6, <https://www.armed-services.senate.gov/imo/media/doc/20241.pdf>.

32. In May 2018, the administration of former President Donald Trump had appointed seventy-five of 188 ambassadors, while deploying USSOF to 149 countries (in 2016, under the second administration of former President Barack Obama, the number was 138). See Monica Duffy Toft, "The Dangerous Rise of Kinetic Diplomacy," Commentary, *War on the Rocks*, May 14, 2018, <https://warontherocks.com/2018/05/the-dangerous-rise-of-kinetic-diplomacy/>.

33. This should take place in close coordination with these agency partners. "With few exceptions, for both direct action and indirect activities, SOF commanders are required to get the ambassador's concurrence, seek the embassy's clearance for the entry of SOF personnel and then keep the country team briefed on the status of the mission." Steven Kashkett, "Special Operations and Diplomacy: A Unique Nexus," American Foreign Service Association, last accessed November 17, 2024, <https://afsa.org/special-operations-and-diplomacy-unique-nexus>.

34. USSOF authorities are regulated in 10 U.S.C. § 169, "Unified Combatant Command for Special Operations Forces;" in contrast, clandestine authorities reserved for the IC are regulated in 50 U.S.C., <https://uscode.house.gov/browse/prelim@title10/subtitleA/part1/chapter6&edition=prelim>. For more information on the difference, see Michael E. DeVine, "Covert Action and Clandestine Activities of the Intelligence Community: Selected Definitions," Congressional Research Service, November 9, 2022, <https://crsreports.congress.gov/product/pdf/R/R45175/8>.

35. *Special Operations*, JP 3-05, US Joint Chiefs of Staff, July 16, 2014, GL-12, https://irp.fas.org/doddir/dod/jp3_05.pdf.

gathering capability can be further augmented by USSOF's expanding capabilities in the cyber domain, enabling operators to exploit digital devices, track communication networks, and deliver actionable insights that directly support broader DOD and US government intelligence priorities.³⁶

Anticipating early warning signals, interpreting emerging trends, and connecting seemingly unrelated developments

across regions and domains are critical to managing strategic competition effectively. By leveraging USSOF's global placement and access and prioritizing deployments based on their relevance to strategic competition, the DOD can enhance its situational awareness and understanding of the competitive global landscape.



US forces under US Special Operations Command Africa and members of the Ghana Armed Forces practice calling in a close air-support nine-line brief with two US Air Force B-1B Lancer aircraft and simulated 107-millimeter artillery fire as part of Flintlock 24 exercises at Bundase Training Camp, Ghana. (Credit: DVIDS/Technical Sergeant Christopher Dyer)

36. Tim Beery, "Green Berets Use Disruptive Cyber Technology during Swift Response 2024," US Army, August 27, 2024, https://www.army.mil/article/279281/green_berets_use_disruptive_cyber_technology_during_swift_response_2024?ref=news.risky.biz.

Regional expertise and cultural competence

Second, USSOF is specifically trained to adapt to and understand the environments in which it operates. Many special operators, particularly Army Special Operations Forces, possess advanced cultural competence and linguistic skills, enabling them to understand and navigate changes in the social, political, cultural, and demographic dynamics of their deployment regions. Even when deployed outside their areas of expertise, USSOF's specialized training allows rapid acclimatization to new environments.³⁷

USSOF's deep and sustained sociopolitical knowledge significantly enhances the US government's understanding of strategic competition dynamics. To capitalize on this expertise, the DOD should prioritize retaining operators within their regions of specialization, enabling them to complete multiple tours in the same theater rather than rotating. This continuity fosters long-term, multigenerational relationships with local populations, allowing operators to detect and respond effectively to shifts in the sociopolitical landscape.

USSOF's presence reduces risk by providing a broader array of response options. Trusted relationships with local partners facilitate the rapid collection of critical information,³⁸ particularly in regions where unexpected challenges arise—often the most difficult to address in a crisis. USSOF's situational awareness and expertise enable the anticipation and management of unforeseen developments, strengthening the government's ability to navigate uncertainty and respond decisively.

Furthermore, USSOF can deter adversary escalation by signaling US capabilities in a region.³⁹ This presence not only bolsters deterrence but also enhances the government's strategic flexibility and response options in the face of emerging threats.

Enhancing coordination and collaboration

Despite its contributions, USSOF's intelligence-gathering potential remains underutilized due to insufficient synchronization between the DOD, IA, and IC. Currently, the IA/IC and Joint Force miss opportunities to use USSOF's placement and access due to a lack of awareness of its existing operations and capabilities as well as a lack of forethought, synchronization, and collaboration across the IA/IC and DOD.

While USSOF operations are routinely coordinated through the geographic combatant commands (GCCs) and IA/IC, closer collaboration is needed to best optimize activities on the ground to support global campaigning objectives.⁴⁰

To achieve this, the respective combatant commands should integrate SOF and IA/IC partners in their planning from the outset and throughout operations to align shared priorities and sequence actions effectively. Stronger coordination ensures that missions leverage multiple authorities and capabilities, achieving unity of effort and maximum impact while avoiding duplication or counterproductive actions.

Rethinking metrics for success

The intelligence collected by USSOF in strategic competition may yield results that are less immediate or tangible compared to direct action missions.⁴¹ However, these efforts can significantly contribute to the long-term understanding and management of US adversaries. To fully harness this potential, the DOD must adopt new metrics for evaluating the success of USSOF missions. Grading effectiveness and performance is always challenged by leadership's perceptions and biases, and it is especially difficult in the realm of a "squishy" concept like strategic competition.⁴²

These metrics should focus on the sustained value of intelligence activities rather than short-term, quantifiable

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37. Ed Fayette, "Cultural Awareness as a Weapon Leveraging Regional Expertise for Overseas Success," *NCO Journal*, Army University Press, September 5, 2023, <https://www.armyupress.army.mil/Journals/NCO-Journal/Archives/2023/September/Cultural-Awareness-as-a-Weapon/>.
 38. Steve Morningstar, "Starting from Beginning Part 3: Second Largest Language School in DoD Strengthen [sic] Foreign Partnerships," US Army John F. Kennedy Special Warfare Center, April 30, 2024, https://www.army.mil/article/275805/starting_from_beginning_part_3_second_largest_language_school_in_dod_strengthen_foreign_partnerships.
 39. Kevin D. Stringer, "A Gray Zone Option for Integrated Deterrence Special Operations Forces (SOF)," *PRISM*, National Defense University Press, 123, <https://ndupress.ndu.edu/PRISM/>.
 40. The 2022 *US National Defense Strategy* defines campaigning as "the conduct and sequencing of logically-linked military activities to achieve strategy-aligned objectives over time. Campaigning initiatives change the environment to the benefit of the United States and our Allies and partners, while limiting, frustrating, and disrupting competitor activities that seriously impinge on our interests, especially those carried out in the gray zone," 12.
 41. Hal Brand and Tim Nichols, *Special Operations Forces and Great-Power Competition in the 21st Century*, American Enterprise Institute, August 2020, <https://www.aei.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/08/Special-Operations-Forces-and-Great-Power-Competition-in-the-21st-Century.pdf?x85095>.
 42. Ralph E. Strauch, "'Squishy' Problems and Quantitative Methods," *Policy Sciences* 6, no. 2 (1975): 175–184, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/4531598>.

outcomes. Encouraging this shift will require leadership to recognize and reward contributions that enhance strategic competition over time, fostering a culture that values foresight and patience in achieving objectives, allowing the necessary time for an operation to prove effective.⁴³ If special operators are only incentivized and rewarded for delivering fast, visible, and calculable results, then the entire IA/IC misses out on the immense value that sustained SOF ISR efforts can produce.

By leveraging its unique capabilities, USSOF can play a pivotal role in addressing intelligence gaps, countering adversaries, and reinforcing US strategic competition globally. A more deliberate and integrated approach will enable USSOF to deliver maximum impact across the competition continuum, helping to secure US interests in an increasingly complex and contested world.

2) Leverage USSOF to engage adversaries in competition and improve conflict preparedness

The United States aims to prevent conflict with competitors by deterring aggression and keeping adversaries focused on the

competition phase of the “competition continuum,” preventing an escalation to conflict.⁴⁴ To achieve this, policymakers must invest in deterrence tools that create strategic dilemmas, erode adversary confidence, and counter their activities effectively. USSOF is uniquely positioned to support these objectives by engaging adversaries in competition and operationally preparing the environment for potential escalation.

By thwarting, complicating, and distracting adversaries below the threshold of conflict, USSOF can force them to expend resources or divert attention from achieving their goals. Over the next decade, the DOD should leverage USSOF to create dilemmas in areas where competitors seek to make gains. The ultimate goal is to influence adversarial decision-making calculi and keep them entangled in subthreshold activities, particularly in the information environment, including cyberspace, preventing escalation to kinetic conflict.⁴⁵ To achieve this, the DOD should prioritize USSOF’s core competencies in the following areas.



An EC-130J Commando Solo systems operator monitors a broadcast during a mission in support of Operation Inherent Resolve at an undisclosed location in Southwest Asia. (Credit: DVIDS/ Staff Sergeant Michael Battles)

43. Starling and Marine, *Stealth, Speed, and Adaptability*, 25. For an in-depth analysis of measures of effectiveness for USSOF see Linda Robinson, Daniel Egel, Ryan Andrew Brown, “Measuring the Effectiveness of Special Operations,” RAND, November 13, 2019, https://www.rand.org/pubs/research_reports/RR2504.html.

44. *Competition Continuum*, Joint Doctrine Note 1-19.

45. *Joint Planning*, JP 5-0, Joint Chiefs of Staff, December 1, 2020, https://irp.fas.org/doddir/dod/jp5_0.pdf.

Strategic competition and influence operations

First, special operators are masters of the information environment, where competition is exceedingly dynamic. Through operations in the information environment (hereafter influence operations),⁴⁶ USSOF can shape adversarial decision-making and disrupt malign activities. Shaping human perception is critical to succeeding in strategic competition because deterrence is fundamentally a psychosocial phenomenon. Both China and Russia increasingly rely on information warfare to achieve their global aspirations,⁴⁷ unifying offensive and defensive information operations to ensure every military action is coordinated within the broader information environment.⁴⁸ As these operations remain central to their strategic approaches, the United States must continue exposing and countering adversarial activities to proactively shape the information environment in ways favorable to the United States.

To this end, USSOF should expand its influence operations, focusing on adversaries' decision-making and undermining their strategic standing. Military information support operations (MISO), one of USSOF's core activities, offer critical tools for this effort. MISO can influence political, military, economic, social, information, and infrastructure aspects of the operational environment (OE),⁴⁹ targeting foreign populations—adversarial, neutral, and friendly—as well as key individuals.⁵⁰ These operations counter malign activity and disinformation while delivering targeted messages to influence emotions, motives, reasoning, and behavior.⁵¹ Messaging themes might include undermining adversaries' governance and leadership,

reducing external support for their actions, and promoting narratives that foster behavior favorable to the accomplishment of US objectives, among others.⁵²

In strategic competition, MISO can discredit adversary narratives while promoting information about US and allied efforts, weakening competitors' influence, and bolstering local populations' resolve to resist adversary pressure. This is particularly important in countering Russian, Chinese, and Iranian disinformation campaigns, which evolve alongside the rapid development of new media platforms and techniques. The challenge lies in continually devising creative and effective ways to counter these threats, shape narratives, and influence opinions. Success will depend on robust and dynamic metrics for performance and effectiveness. For example, USSOF should evaluate the impact of targeting a single influential individual who amplifies key messages versus engaging a broader audience through numerous social media posts. Metrics like social media engagement alone are insufficient for assessing influence.

USSOF's MISO activities should aim not only to influence populations but also to deter adversaries directly. The DOD must set ambitious goals for USSOF to indirectly and directly influence adversaries' decision-making and disrupt their strategic goals, especially in regions where military operations are feasible or likely.⁵³

Despite the importance of MISO in strategic competition, it lacks the same standing as other SOF activities. The US Army Special Operations Command has struggled to find personnel to fill MISO roles in recent years, leaving critical billets

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46. US Department of Defense, "Strategy for Operations in the Information Environment," July 2023, <https://media.defense.gov/2023/Nov/17/2003342901-1-1/1/2023-DEPARTMENT-OF-DEFENSE-STRATEGY-FOR-OPERATIONS-IN-THE-INFORMATION-ENVIRONMENT.PDF>.
 47. Edmund J. Burke et al., *People's Liberation Army Operational Concepts*, RAND Corporation, 2020, https://www.rand.org/pubs/research_reports/RRA394-1.html; and Patrick Tucker, "African Governments Express Rising Alarm About Russian Disinformation," *Defense One*, accessed June 27, 2024, <https://www.defenseone.com/threats/2024/06/african-governments-express-rising-alarm-about-russian-disinformation/397707>.
 48. B. A. Friedman, "Finding the Right Model: The Joint Force, the People's Liberation Army, and Information Warfare," Air University, April 24, 2023, <https://www.airuniversity.af.edu/JIPA/Display/Article/3371164/finding-the-right-model-the-joint-force-the-peoples-liberation-army-and-informa/>.
 49. *Military Information Support Operations*, JP 3-13.2, US Joint Chiefs of Staff, November 21, 2014, vii, https://www.esd.whs.mil/Portals/54/Documents/FOID/Reading20Room/Joint_Staff/Military_Information_Support_Operations.pdf.
 50. *Military Information Support Operations*, vii.
 51. "Core Activities," US Special Operations Command.
 52. *Army Futures Command Concept for Special Operations 2028*, US Army, 24, <https://api.army.mil/e2/c/downloads/2021/01/05/bdd61c44/20200918-afc-pam-71-20-4-afc-concept-for-special-operations-2028-final.pdf>.
 53. Even when targeting populations, influence operations should always be tailored to a target audience that is as specific as possible to reduce collateral damage. In addition, the DOD should coordinate with the State Department's regional bureaus and local US ambassadors to ensure it does not interfere with other foreign policy initiatives. The operations should also be reviewed by the Central Intelligence Agency to ensure they do not disrupt any of its influence activities. Finally, congressional oversight reporting should include the exact narratives, themes, and products used in these campaigns to ensure they are within the scope of their authorities. MISO efforts must be truthful in nature; if they are not, they are considered military deception, which is more difficult to approve. Therefore, if the information is untrue, then traditional MISO authorities are insufficient due to the associated risk.

vacant—positions that risk being eliminated amid broader cuts within Army Special Operations.⁵⁴ This is problematic because, as the US Special Operations Command’s “SOF Truths” three and four highlight, SOF capabilities cannot be mass-produced or quickly developed during crises; they cannot be built overnight.⁵⁵ Ensuring US success in strategic competition requires sustained investment in information operations, adequate resources, and increased efforts to attract and retain talent for these critical roles. USSOF must better communicate to young service members that careers in information operations are as impactful and valued as direct-action activities.

By prioritizing influence operations and addressing resource and personnel challenges, USSOF can effectively compete in the information environment, counter adversaries’ strategic approaches, and shape outcomes in ways that protect and advance US interests.

Sensitive activities: sabotage, deception, and cyber operations

Second, where necessary, the Joint Force should leverage USSOF’s sensitive activities (SA) tool kit—including military deception, sabotage, and offensive cyber operations—to disrupt, distract, deter, and thwart adversary actions in critical geostrategic areas.⁵⁶ USSOF activities can exploit adversarial vulnerabilities, forcing them to divert resources or reassess strategic objectives. For example, sabotage and deception tactics, such as misleading adversary decision-

makers or disrupting supply lines, communications, and critical infrastructure in contested regions, can impose significant costs and operational challenges.

Maritime sabotage operations, in particular, merit greater emphasis as competition intensifies in the Indo-Pacific and Black Sea regions.⁵⁷ Disrupting adversarial port networks, bases, or maritime infrastructure could delay or degrade their operational capabilities, complicating adversaries’ ability to project power. These activities not only deter adversary aggression but also⁵⁸ reduce their capacity to achieve their strategic goals.

Cyber operations provide another powerful avenue for thwarting adversaries.⁵⁹ USSOF’s ability to operate “in areas normally denied to joint units,”⁶⁰ combined with its physical and virtual presence, make it a critical enabler for the Joint Force in cyberspace. Both cyber and space capabilities often depend on proximity to targets, and USSOF can generate the necessary placement and access close enough to a target to support Cyber Command (CYBERCOM) and Space Command (SPACECOM) operations from home stations.⁶¹ For instance, USSOF can provide detailed intelligence by mapping the location of cameras, network devices, vulnerabilities in power grids, or transportation networks—establishing a clearer picture of the target environment. By integrating sensitive activities with broader Joint Force operations, USSOF can disrupt adversary plans, distract them from their objectives, and deter further aggression, all while imposing strategic dilemmas that advance US interests.

54. Cole Livieratos and Ken Gleiman, “Special Operations Force Structure: Strategic Calculus or Organizational Power?,” Commentary, *War on the Rocks*, February 6, 2024, <https://warontherocks.com/2024/02/special-operations-force-structure-strategic-calculus-or-organizational-power/>.

55. “SOF Truths,” USSOCOM.

56. “Directive Number 5143.01,” DOD, Change 2 version, updated April 6, 2020, 23, <https://www.esd.whs.mil/Portals/54/Documents/DD/issuances/dodd/514301p.pdf>.

57. Alexander Powell, “A Blast from the Past? The Role of Maritime Sabotage in Strategic Competition,” Modern War Institute at West Point, March 2, 2022, <https://mwi.westpoint.edu/a-blast-from-the-past-the-role-of-maritime-sabotage-in-strategic-competition/>; and Seth Cropsey.

58. “Naval Special Warfare Will Have to Fight Differently,” *US Naval Institute Proceedings* 150, no. 2 (2024): 1,452, <https://www.usni.org/magazines/proceedings/2024/february/naval-special-warfare-will-have-fight-differently>.

59. “Strategic Disruption by Special Operations Forces,” Ben Jebb and Nathan Kaczynski, hosts, *Irregular Warfare*, podcast, interview with Christopher P. Maier and Eric Robinson, episode 102, April 4, 2024, <https://irregularwarfare.org/podcasts/strategic-disruption-by-special-operations-forces/>.

60. “Handbook: Special Operations Joint Task Force,” US Army Special Operations Command Capability Developments Integration Directorate, September 27, 2019, <https://www.scribd.com/document/492800403/17979>.

61. “Strategic Disruption by Special Operations Forces,” Maier and Robinson in podcast interview.



Senior Airman Kimberly Nelson, 919th Special Operations Communications Squadron (SOCS) radio frequency technician, and Master Sergeant Cole Watts, 919th SOCS cyber systems operations technician, configure a communications network system at Duke Field, Florida. (Credit: DVIDS/Michelle Gigante)

Unconventional warfare

The Joint Force can increasingly leverage USSOF in unconventional warfare (UW), as strategic competition intensifies. UW—empowering resistance movements or insurgencies to coerce, disrupt, or overthrow adversary governments or occupiers—could prove indispensable in regions where resistance to Russian and Chinese influence is present and necessary.⁶² This approach offers the potential to shape adversaries’ behavior and destabilize their grip on contested areas without direct US engagement, making it a powerful tool in strategic competition.

Historical precedent underscores the efficacy of UW in such contexts. During the Cold War, for example, UW capabilities were instrumental in Tibet, where the Central Intelligence Agency supported resistance fighters who carried out guerrilla operations against Chinese forces in the 1950s and 1960s. These efforts strategically disrupted Chinese control over Tibet, compelling Beijing to divert military resources from its broader strategic priorities and weakening its overall position.⁶³ While

these operations were not conducted by SOF, it illustrates how UW can force adversaries to spread their resources thin and address unanticipated challenges.

In modern contexts, UW remains a compelling option, particularly in areas of strategic significance. For example, current discussions around training Taiwan for a potential UW campaign highlight its relevance in countering a Chinese invasion scenario.⁶⁴ Through such preparations, the United States can bolster Taiwan’s resilience and enhance deterrence against Chinese aggression. Similarly, UW could be employed to empower resistance movements in regions vulnerable to Russian expansionism, adding a layer of complexity to Moscow’s strategic calculus.

By leveraging USSOF’s UW tool kit, the Joint Force can strengthen its ability to counter adversaries indirectly, destabilize their ambitions, and support allies and partners in contested spaces—all while minimizing the risks of direct conflict.

62. “Unconventional Warfare,” Pub. L. 114-92, Sec. 1097 in National Defense Authorization Act (NDAA) for Fiscal Year 2016, <https://www.congress.gov/114/plaws/publ92/PLAW-114publ92.pdf>.

63. Eric Robinson et al., *Strategic Disruption by Special Operations Forces: A Concept for Proactive Campaigning Short of Traditional War*, RAND Corporation, December 5, 2023, 8, https://www.rand.org/pubs/research_reports/RRA1794-1.html.

64. Aidan L. P. Greer and Chris Bassler, “Resist to Deter: Why Taiwan Needs to Focus on Irregular Warfare,” Modern War Institute at West Point, December 19, 2022, <https://mwi.westpoint.edu/resist-to-deter-why-taiwan-needs-to-focus-on-irregular-warfare/>.



Green Berets from the 10th Special Forces Group (Airborne) and Marines from the United States Marine Forces Special Operations Command conduct close-quarters battle drills at Fort Carson, Colorado. (Credit: DVIDS/Specialist Steven Alger)

Operational preparation of the environment

While entangling adversaries in the competition phase is critical, the Joint Force should also capitalize on USSOF's strengths in operational preparation of the environment (OPE) to maintain strategic advantages in areas where the United States may need to operate. OPE encompass three primary components:

1. Orientation activities: Familiarizing operators with the area, developing plans, and building the information and operational (human and physical) infrastructure needed to support future operations.
2. Target development: Acquiring precise, real-time information about targets to facilitate target prosecution.
3. Preliminary engagement: Finding, fixing, tracking, monitoring, or influencing targets before operations commence.⁶⁵

OPE activities conducted in advance of a crisis—including in regions where conflict appears less likely—can optimize the battlespace for US forces and provide critical decision space for the Joint Force should conflict arise. As Major Michael T.

Kenny aptly observes, “in areas of operation where hostilities have commenced, OPE paves the way for successful future combat operations. In regions where hostilities are expected to occur in the future, OPE is more valuable. It is in these future areas of concern that OPE has the potential to produce great benefits.”⁶⁶

By cultivating deep local relationships and a nuanced understanding of operational environments, USSOF ensures that if diplomacy and deterrence fail, foundational groundwork is already in place. These efforts enable the Joint Force to shape more favorable outcomes before any shots are fired. USSOF can provide the Joint Force first-hand assessments of dynamic local conditions; enhanced options for protecting citizens and coordinating emergency responses; and advanced team deployments to establish conditions for large-scale combat operations.

Global instability has surged over the past two decades, driven by factors such as rising authoritarianism, climate-related environmental instability, economic downturns, decline in trust in public institutions, and the proliferation of disinformation

65. Michael T. Kenny, “Leveraging Operational Preparation of the Environment in the GWOT,” School of Advanced Military Studies, United States Army Command and General Staff College, March 2006, 1, <https://apps.dtic.mil/sti/citations/ADA450588>. GWOT stands for the Global War on Terrorism.

66. “Kenny, “Leveraging Operational Preparation of the Environment in the GWOT,” 1.

fueling populist movements. Over the next decade, the security landscape may shift unexpectedly, with seemingly stable areas becoming hostile or crisis-prone. In this context, OPE in areas that appear low-risk today can deliver immense strategic value if instability erupts unexpectedly.

Moreover, OPE in regions of interest to US adversaries can serve as a deterrent in crises. If adversaries perceive that their strategic advantages are eroded through US preparatory activities, they may deem conflict less favorable, potentially deescalating tensions.

To meet these challenges, USSOF should deepen collaboration with IA/IC partners to expand OPE investments in priority regions. Building long-term infrastructure and access in otherwise-denied areas will position both military and civilian entities of the US government to respond effectively when needed. Targeted OPE in future areas of concern, especially where other US forces lack presence, must remain a priority, ensuring the United States can respond to crises swiftly and decisively.

Future investments and strategic positioning

Over the next decade, the DOD should prioritize investments in USSOF capabilities across influence operations, sensitive activities, UW, and OPE. These efforts will help the United States do more to thwart adversarial activities, deter escalation, and entangle adversaries in below-threshold activities, while also positioning the United States to respond in different operational environments should conflict develop.

3) Use USSOF to increase DOD integration with allies and partners and support allied resilience against strategic competitors

Strengthen allied resilience against strategic competitors

A cornerstone of deterrence is fostering strong and resilient allies and partners capable of withstanding attacks and malign influence while seamlessly integrating with US efforts. USSOF can support DOD's deterrence-by-denial strategy by enhancing the resilience of allies and partners. This approach not only reinforces shared resolve but also ensures robust military responses if deterrence fails. For example, strong partners like Taiwan exemplify the deterrence-by-denial model by making adversarial goals, such as invasion, infeasible or unlikely to succeed.

USSOF supports strategic competition and strengthens deterrence by working “by, with, and through” allies and partners—building their capacity, connecting them to the broader Joint Force, and positioning them at the forefront of their own defense.⁶⁷ Key USSOF activities, such as foreign internal defense (FID) and security force assistance, provide tools and training to bolster allies' defensive capabilities. These activities yield more sustainable outcomes by centering ownership of their defense with the partners themselves.⁶⁸

USSOF operates across both primary theaters of strategic competition (Europe and the Indo-Pacific) and peripheral regions (Africa, Central Asia, Latin America, and elsewhere) offering critical training, advising, and assistance to partner forces. For instance, the enduring US-Philippines partnership, rooted in decades of cooperation, highlights USSOF's ability to deepen relationships through consistent engagement. This relationship, which initially focused on counterterrorism, has expanded into broader strategic cooperation, increasing US options in the Indo-Pacific.⁶⁹ Similarly, US and UK security force assistance efforts in Ukraine to strengthen Ukraine's force after Russia's 2014 illegal annexation of Crimea helped to develop the Ukrainian military into the dramatically more capable force seen today. These SOF efforts also include multinational training in resilience and resistance tactics, which have proven crucial in sustaining Ukraine's security.

Preconflict activities like these demonstrate how USSOF enables partners to resist, withstand, and defend against both conventional and unconventional attacks. As China and Russia expand their global influence and employ coercive diplomacy, USSOF's role in fostering allied resilience is becoming increasingly vital. Over the next decade, US decision-makers should identify key regions, such as Latin America, where USSOF could expand capacity-building efforts to counter malign Chinese influence. These activities should also focus on countries that could act as stabilizers or support future US initiatives in strategic theaters.

Expand civil affairs operations

To sustain strong and resilient allies, DOD should prioritize SOF investments in civil affairs operations (CAO), which complement broader civil-military efforts conducted by the Joint Force and interagency partners.⁷⁰ CAO addresses the root causes of instability by strengthening partners' civil institutions and fostering societal resilience against malign influence by supporting functions that are “normally the responsibility of

67. Joseph L. Votel and Eero R. Keravuori, “The By-With-Through Operational Approach,” *Joint Force Quarterly* 89 (2018): 48-55, https://ndupress.ndu.edu/Portals/68/Documents/jfq/jfq-89/jfq-89_40-47_Votel-Keravuori.pdf?ver=2018-04-11-125441-307.

68. Starling and Marine, *Stealth, Speed, and Adaptability*, 14.

69. Hearing (Fenton and Maier), 7.

70. *Civil-Military Operations*, JP 3-57, US Joint Chiefs of Staff, July 9, 2018, 1-16, https://irp.fas.org/doddir/dod/jp3_57.pdf; and Assad A. Raza, “Order from Chaos: Inside U.S. Army Civil Affairs Activities,” *Military Review*, November-December 2019, <https://www.armyupress.army.mil/Journals/Military-Review/English-Edition-Archives/November-December-2019/Raza-Order-from-Chaos/>.



A Green Beret with the 1st Special Forces Group (Airborne) observes as members of the Philippine National Police Maritime Group, 2nd Special Operations Unit and the Philippine Coast Guard Special Operations Force conduct a visit, board, search, and seizure demonstration near Puerto Princesa, Palawan. (Credit: DVIDS/Sergeant Luis Samayoa)

civil governments.⁷¹ Through advising and supporting foreign militaries, institutions, and populations, CAO can play a low-profile yet critical role in thwarting adversarial advances.⁷²

Currently, USSOF's Civil Affairs units are deployed in countries identified as strategic priorities for the United States.⁷³ The DOD should regularly reassess these priority designations to ensure CAO units are positioned to address emerging crises in unexpected regions. Proactively aligning CAO efforts with potential flashpoints would bolster regional stability and preempt adversarial advances by addressing vulnerabilities before they escalate.

USSOF's civil affairs functions are constrained by limited resources and personnel, with only one brigade dedicated to these activities across the entire USSOF structure.⁷⁴ With adequate funding, civil affairs could expand its scope to include

civil-military reconnaissance in politically sensitive areas, bolstering the legitimacy of local authorities in contested regions critical to strategic competition. By enhancing CAO capabilities and increasing personnel, the DOD could improve the United States' ability to stabilize contested areas, strengthen local governance, and build resilience against foreign interference. These low-profile, high-impact efforts not only mitigate the risk of crises but also reduce the likelihood of escalation, making them an invaluable tool in strategic competition.

Unique competencies in building partnerships

USSOF's unmatched cultural and language proficiencies, persistent (rather than episodic) engagement, and authentic and multigenerational relationships with partners are distinctive within the Joint Force enabling USSOF to reap more effective results from its partner engagement.⁷⁵ Special operators often

71. *Special Operations*, JP 3-05.

72. "95th Civil Affairs Brigade (Airborne)," United States Army Special Operations Command, last accessed November 19, 2024, <https://www.soc.mil/95th/95thhomepage.html>.

73. Hearing (Fenton and Maier), 7.

74. Livieratos and Gleiman, "Special Operations Force Structure."



US Air Force Special Tactics operators, assigned to the 352nd Special Operations Wing, prepare to conduct a simulated medevac mission near Constanta, Romania, as part of a larger Special Operations Air-Land Integrations (SOALI) exercise with Romanian and Polish Special Operations Forces (SOF). (Credit: DVIDS/Staff Sergeant Elizabeth Pena)

operate in the same regions for decades, fostering mutual trust, understanding, and shared experience with local counterparts. In regions like the Indo-Pacific, Latin America, Africa, and Europe, USSOF leverages these strengths to advance US interests in highly competitive environments. For example, special operators have supported broader US government efforts by combatting transnational organized crime and Chinese illegal fishing throughout the western hemisphere and Africa—issues of significant concern to local governments and key economic priorities in these regions.⁷⁶ Engaging in

activities like counterterrorism or counternarcotics that may be deemphasized US mission areas, but are priorities for partner countries, helps the United States to maintain a “partner of choice” standing, which can be leveraged for US priorities later on. The US government could leverage USSOF more—building on its relationships and nuanced understandings of what motivates or concerns partners—to provide additional local context, information, or response options to improve IA/IC activity in key regions.

75. Starling and Marine, *Stealth, Speed, and Adaptability*, 15.

76. Hearing (Fenton and Maier), 7.

SOF-to-SOF cooperation

USSOF's SOF-to-SOF cooperation is another critical asset that the DOD can leverage more to build resilient partners. These collaborations include training, exchanging best practices, interoperability exercises, and trust building with allied special operations forces. In 2023 alone, USSOF “executed 168 Joint Combined Exchange Training iterations in 76 countries, training more than 2,000 US SOF personnel alongside more than 7,500 allies and partners.”⁷⁷

To do this, USSOF operates through its seven theater special operations commands (TSOCs), which are integrated into the geographic combatant commands (GCCs).⁷⁸ Examples of TSOC initiatives include:

- Special Operations Command Europe (SOCEUR): Supporting NATO allies and partners in resistance and security force assistance against Russian interference.
- Special Operations Command Central (SOCCENT): Engaging allies in countering Iranian proxies in the Middle East.
- Special Operations Command Korea (SOCKOR): Enhancing South Korea's resilience and resistance capacity.

USSOF's global network also includes the special operations liaison officer (SOLO) program, embedding operators in US embassies to work side-by-side with host nation SOF.⁷⁹ In reverse, the US Special Operations Command Headquarters currently hosts twenty-eight foreign liaison officers.⁸⁰ These programs cultivate enduring trust and interoperability with SOF partners that cannot be quickly replicated in times of crisis.

USSOF's ability to build and sustain resilient allies is a critical advantage in strategic competition. Whether through capacity building, civil affairs, persistent regional engagement, or SOF-to-SOF cooperation, USSOF creates robust networks of like-minded forces capable of generating effects beyond the reach of unilateral US efforts. To maximize these strengths, the DOD should continue to invest in USSOF's relationships, competencies, and programs to ensure allies and partners

are prepared to counter emerging threats and protect shared interests.

4) Leverage SOF to support joint all domain operations and enhance “integration” in integrated deterrence

Strategic competition is inherently multifaceted, requiring the United States to conduct whole-of-government responses across the diplomatic, information, military, economic, financial, and law enforcement (DIMEFIL) elements of national power. The past two national defense strategies have emphasized the need for the United States to operate across the full spectrum of conflict and multiple domains simultaneously,⁸¹ driving the growing need for joint all domain operations (JADO). The military services have started to implement forms of JADO, requiring that thinking and culture be adapted to enable the Joint Force to seamlessly synchronize effects across domains, components, and regions to create complex and simultaneous dilemmas for US adversaries.⁸² This approach places increased demands on the Joint Force for coordination, integration, and execution of combined operations. USSOF's ability to bridge interagency, intelligence, and multinational efforts positions it as a valuable enabler of the integration required to make JADO effective.

USSOF operations often bridge the activities of interagency and intelligence community partners, allied and partner militaries, and the rest of the Joint Force. This positions special operators to play potentially valuable roles as “connective tissue” in joint operations. Special operators gain joint experience that is not always available to other service members. Because special operations inherently involve collaboration across the Joint Force and with various US government agencies, operators develop a deep understanding of joint operations, interagency coordination, and integration with partners during competition and crisis.⁸³ USSOF's joint experience can be leveraged in training, planning, and execution to support joint all-domain operations and enhance operational effectiveness.

77. Hearing (Fenton and Maier), 11–12.

78. Andrew Feickert, “U.S. Special Operations Forces (SOF): Background and Considerations for Congress,” Congressional Research Service, February 9, 2024, <https://sgp.fas.org/crs/natsec/RS21048.pdf>.

79. Erin Dorrance, “Spec Ops Liaison Program Evolves to Further Strengthen Partner Nation Relations,” USSOCOM Office of Communication, May 3, 2022, <https://www.socom.mil/spec-ops-liaison-program-evolves-to-further-strengthen-partner-nation-relations>.

80. Dorrance, “Spec Ops Liaison Program.”

81. “Summary of the 2018 National Defense Strategy of the United States of America: Sharpening the American Military's Competitive Edge,” Office of the Secretary of Defense, 2018, <https://dod.defense.gov/Portals/1/Documents/pubs/2018-National-Defense-Strategy-Summary.pdf>.

82. Kimber Nettis, “Multi-Domain Operations: Bridging the Gaps for Dominance,” US Air Force, Air University, March 16, 2020, <https://www.airuniversity.af.edu/Wild-Blue-Yonder/Article-Display/Article/2109784/multi-domain-operations-bridging-the-gaps-for-dominance/>.

83. Starling and Marine, *Stealth, Speed, and Adaptability*, 6.

In the context of strategic competition, USSOF should see itself—alongside others—as a “connective tissue” between the DOD and the broader IA/IC community, able to act as a force multiplier for integrated deterrence.⁸⁴ USSOF integrates and works well with IA/IC partners—including the Department of State, Department of Justice, Department of Treasury, Department of Homeland Security, the Central Intelligence Agency, the National Security Agency, the US Agency for International Development, and the National Counterterrorism Center—supporting whole-of-government responses to global threats.⁸⁵ On the ground, USSOF strengthens these efforts by using its liaison networks to improve coordination and synchronization with partners. For example, the special operations liaison offer program places special operators in US embassies, not only to strengthen relationships with host nations but also to ensure ongoing collaboration with IA/IC staff, improving synchronization and information sharing.

USSOF’s integration within the GCCs through TSOCs further enables it to support regional and transregional campaigning efforts.⁸⁶ TSOC commanders and staff not only bring critical special operations expertise to GCC plans and operations, but they also strengthen global connectivity. Their ties to the broader special operations network and their informal communication channels across GCC boundaries facilitate improved coordination among agencies and departments, enhancing responses to strategic competition. When joint task forces are established by combatant commanders, special operations forces liaison elements (SOFLEs)—small teams of special operators from several services—deploy alongside conventional force units. They provide many of the same benefits of a TSOC to the joint task force headquarters, fostering “interdependence, integration, and interoperability” between SOF and conventional forces.⁸⁷ These elements are just some of the mechanisms by which USSOF bolsters the

connective tissue of the Joint Force and the IA/IC, enhancing collaboration to support global campaigning.

Over the next decade, USSOF should emphasize its role as a force multiplier for integrated deterrence in regions where it already possesses a presence, strong relationships, and cultural competence. By acting as a connector and enabler, USSOF can facilitate partnerships with allies and partners, provide strategic insights into overlapping regional and transregional dynamics, and improve coordination between local actors and US interagency partners. This connective role can help the United States proactively address emerging challenges, integrate effects across domains and regions, and maintain a competitive advantage in strategic competition.

5) Leverage USSOF as a technological pathfinder to bolster US information and decision superiority

To deter and, if necessary, defeat peer competitors capable of challenging the United States across multiple domains at once, the DOD must establish and maintain information and decision advantage over its adversaries.⁸⁸ USSOF, with its proven ability to rapidly innovate, experiment, and integrate emerging technologies, is uniquely positioned to help the DOD achieve this advantage by acting as a pathfinder for technological solutions that can be scaled across the Joint Force.

Achieving information and decision superiority requires swift identification and adoption of advanced technologies, particularly as China also prioritizes decision advantage, investing heavily in space, cyber, and artificial intelligence (AI) technologies.⁸⁹ The People’s Liberation Army’s recent establishment of an Information Support Force underscores its commitment to “informationized warfare,”⁹⁰ characterized by digital networks that enable modern precision-guided munitions, platforms, cyber operations, and electronic warfare. In conflicts between similarly equipped informationized

84. Hearing (Fenton and Maier), 12.

85. Hearing (Fenton and Maier), 12.

86. Hearing (Fenton and Maier), 13.

87. Danilo Reynoso, “SOFLE Unites BATARG and USSOCOM,” Defense Visual Information Distribution Service, October 4, 2023, <https://www.dvidshub.net/news/458797/sofle-unites-batarg-and-ussocom>.

88. “Summary of the Joint All-Domain Command & Control Strategy,” Department of Defense, 2022, <https://media.defense.gov/2022/Mar/17/2002958406/-1/-1/1/SUMMARY-OF-THE-JOINT-ALL-DOMAIN-COMMAND-AND-CONTROL-STRATEGY.PDF>; and Joseph Clark, “Hicks Announces Delivery of Initial CJADC2 Capability,” US Department of Defense, February 21, 2024, <https://www.defense.gov/News/News-Stories/Article/Article/3683482/hicks-announces-delivery-of-initial-cjadc2-capability/>.

89. Sam Bresnick, *China Bets Big on Military AI*, Center for European Policy Analysis, April 3, 2024, <https://cepa.org/article/china-bets-big-on-military-ai/>; and Wyatt Hoffman and Heeu Millie Kim, *Reducing the Risks of Artificial Intelligence for Military Decision Advantage*, Center for Security and Emerging Technology, March 2023, <https://cset.georgetown.edu/wp-content/uploads/CSET-Reducing-the-Risks-of-Artificial-Intelligence-for-Military-Decision-Advantage.pdf>.

90. Matt Bruzese and Peter W. Singer, “Farewell to China’s Strategic Support Force. Let’s Meet Its Replacements,” *Defense One*, April 28, 2024, <https://www.defenseone.com/ideas/2024/04/farewell-chinas-strategic-support-force-lets-meet-its-replacement/396143/>.

forces, the ability to rapidly acquire, analyze, and disseminate information confers a decisive advantage.⁹¹

To achieve and sustain information and decision advantage, the United States must process vast data flows; integrate information from across government branches, commercial partners, and allies; and make it accessible for swift decision-making. Combined Joint All-Domain Command and Control (CJADC2) is central to current DOD efforts to achieve this.⁹² To advance CJADC2 and accelerate the adoption of emerging technologies, the DOD should leverage USSOF's unique strengths in agile technology development and streamlined acquisition.

USSOF as a driver of innovation and technology integration

USSOF often serves as a leading player in the Joint Force in identifying, testing, and fielding cutting-edge technologies, thereby bolstering the DOD's capacity to achieve information and decision advantage. Born from the necessity for unconventional solutions in broader military operations, USSOF has cultivated a culture of adaptability, innovation, and operational agility.⁹³ This culture enables USSOF to identify and integrate technology solutions faster than other parts of the force, making it a critical asset for the DOD. Its history of issue-driven, rather than mission-specific, directives has fostered a dynamic approach to problem-solving and



US Marine Corps Sergeant Gracelyn Oldham, an unmanned aerial vehicle (UAV) operator with the Battalion Landing Team 1/6, 26th Marine Expeditionary Unit poses for a picture alongside multiple UAV systems while on the flight deck aboard the San Antonio-class amphibious transport dock ship USS Mesa Verde (LPD 19) in the Mediterranean Sea. (Credit: DVIDS/Mass Communication Specialist 1st Class Alex Smedegard)

91. Friedman, "Finding the Right Model;" and Joel Wuthnow, "China's New Info Warriors: The Information Support Force Emerges," Commentary, *War on the Rocks*, June 24, 2024, <https://warontherocks.com/2024/06/chinas-new-info-warriors-the-information-support-force-emerges/>.
92. "CJADC-2: Combined Joint All Domain Command & Control," AFCEA International, Video, <https://www.afcea.org/signal-media/cjadc-2-combined-joint-all-domain-command-control>.
93. Troy J. Sacquety, "The Office of Strategic Services (OSS): A Primer on the Special Operations Branches and Detachments of the Office of Strategic Services," Veritas article [from 3, no. 4 (2007)] via US Army Special Operations Command website, https://arsof-history.org/articles/v3n4_oss_primer_page_1.html; and Benjamin H. Milligan, *By Water Beneath the Walls: The Rise of the Navy SEALs* (Bantam, 2021), Chapters 11 and 12.

technology integration. This environment, paired with unified command structures and acquisition authorities,⁹⁴ allows USSOF to streamline research, development, and deployment processes, bypassing typical bureaucratic barriers. The proximity of USSOF's acquisition entities fosters collaboration and accelerates decision-making, enabling rapid delivery of solutions.⁹⁵

This culture is reinforced by USSOCOM's acquisition authority, which allows it to acquire tools faster than other combatant commands, while focusing on the specific needs of its forces.⁹⁶ Although SOCOM's authority only refers to "special operations-peculiar items," it has allowed USSOF to take full advantage of the defense industrial ecosystem through initiatives like SOFWERX, which facilitates collaboration with nontraditional members of the defense ecosystem to deliver innovative solutions.⁹⁷ USSOF's close user-acquisition ties allow it to act as a small, agile organization capable of customizing and adapting existing technologies. This approach not only accelerates technology adoption within USSOF but also positions it to pioneer solutions that can be scaled across the Joint Force.⁹⁸

Early adoption of data-driven technologies and AI development

USSOF's ability to act as an early adopter of data-driven technologies, like AI and machine learning, benefits the Joint Force by delivering proven solutions and best practices that can be scaled.⁹⁹ For instance, the development and deployment of the mission command system/common operating picture (MSC/

COP) within a year demonstrated USSOF's capacity for rapid technological integration to enhance situational awareness and decision-making.¹⁰⁰ Unlike more narrowly focused service tools, MSC/COP spans across multiple domains, including space and undersea,¹⁰¹ showcasing a model of platform-centric (rather than service-specific) capability development¹⁰² that the entire DOD can emulate. The DOD should leverage USSOF's unique ability to rapidly develop, experiment with, and field cutting-edge technologies, laying the groundwork for scaling these innovations across the Joint Force to strengthen its position in strategic competition.

USSOF has been integral in recent years in leveraging AI, and continued DOD investment in this area will be critical for the broader Joint Force to remain competitive against US adversaries.¹⁰³ The pace of AI development will only accelerate over the next decade, as the United States and China seek to leverage AI for ISR, cyber, and electronic warfare. USSOF has previously shown what it can contribute to the field, and the DOD should encourage continued focus by USSOF in this area to help spur the advancement of AI technologies for the broader force. Project Maven, initially launched by USSOF during operations against violent extremist organizations,¹⁰⁴ has evolved into the DOD's leading AI program for target detection.¹⁰⁵ Building on this foundation, USSOF can further contribute to advancing AI applications for ISR, electronic warfare, and cyber operations. USSOF should continue to assist in finding the best ways for employing AI for decision advantage in the coming decade.

94. USSOF's acquisition executive encompasses research, development, test and evaluations, logistics, and contracting. Traditionally, these functions are separated, complicating the acquisition process by adding red tape.

95. Chris Miller, "Improving Service Acquisition through the Special Ops Lens," *Defense Acquisition Magazine*, September-October 2019, <https://www.dau.edu/library/damag/september-october2019/improving-service-acquisition>; and Moshe Schwartz and Jason A. Purdy, "United States Special Operations Command Acquisition Authorities," Congressional Research Service, updated July 9, 2018, <https://crsreports.congress.gov/product/pdf/R/R45252/4>.

96. Schwartz and Purdy, "United States Special Operations Command Acquisition Authorities."

97. "Industry," SOFWERX, last visited August 19, 2024, <https://sofwerx.org/industry>.

98. Miller, "Improving Service Acquisition."99; and Hearing (Fenton and Maier), 15.

100. Hearing (Fenton and Maier), 16.

101. Robert Ackerman, "SOCOM Technologies Blaze Trails for Others in Defense," AFCEA, May 21, 2022, <https://www.afcea.org/signal-media/cyber-edge/socom-technologies-blaze-trails-others-defense>.

102. Samir Mehta, "Connectivity at the Core: Resilient Communications Are Critical to Realizing JADC2," *Defense One*, April 29, 2024, <https://www.defenseone.com/sponsors/2024/04/connectivity-core-resilient-communications-are-critical-realizing-jadc2/395805/>.

103. Dan Folliard, "DOD Managers Need a New Approach. SOCOM Can Lead the Way," *Defense One*, May 12, 2023, <https://www.defenseone.com/ideas/2023/05/dod-management-needs-overhaul-socom-can-lead-way/386306/>.

104. Kelsey D. Atherton, "Targeting the Future of the DoD's Controversial Project Maven Initiative," C4ISRNET, July 27, 2018, <https://www.c4isrnet.com/it-networks/2018/07/27/targeting-the-future-of-the-dods-controversial-project-maven-initiative/>; and Richard H. Shultz and Richard D. Clarke, "Big Data at War: Special Operations Forces, Project Maven, and Twenty-First-Century Warfare," Modern War Institute at West Point, August 25, 2020, <https://mwi.westpoint.edu/big-data-at-war-special-operations-forces-project-maven-and-twenty-first-century-warfare/>.

105. Courtney Albon, "Palantir Wins Contract to Expand Access to Project Maven AI Tools," C4ISRNET, May 30, 2024, <https://www.c4isrnet.com/artificial-intelligence/2024/05/30/palantir-wins-contract-to-expand-access-to-project-maven-ai-tools/>.



Two combatant craft assault (CCA) vessels assigned to the Special Boat Team 20 perform a high-speed pass alongside the expeditionary sea base USS *Hershel "Woody" Williams* (ESB 4) in the Mediterranean Sea. (Credit: DVIDS/Mass Communication Specialist 2nd Class Eric Coffey)

Preparing USSOF to meet future technological and operational demands

While USSOF should support the Joint Force in quickly developing and deploying relevant technologies, it is essential that USSOF units themselves are prepared to use these technologies effectively in the future. Leveraging new technologies requires units to be adequately composed of operators who possess specialized skill sets, such as expertise in software development and cyber operations. Awareness of this need within SOF leadership is evident,¹⁰⁶ but it must be complemented by policy support and a commitment to operator adaptability. Policymakers and operators alike must recognize and embrace these evolving requirements to ensure continued readiness.

Focusing on emerging domains and capabilities is crucial, but USSOF must also maintain its unique competencies relevant to existing mission sets, including those in areas that may seem less pressing in the short term. These include skills that enable USSOF to operate in niche and challenging environments like littoral, undersea, polar, and subterranean regions, which could

suddenly become critical in confrontations with adversaries like China or Russia.

Additionally, crisis response and countering violent extremism remain essential national priorities and must not be neglected, even with an increased emphasis on peer competitors. USSOF's expertise in counterterrorism and countering violent extremism, alongside its global network of counterterrorism partners,¹⁰⁷ remains a vital component of national security. Finally, USSOF's role in countering weapons of mass destruction (CWMD) must be preserved, as it is a unique competency essential to US security.

It takes years to develop competencies, specialized skills, and strategic access, and these cannot be quickly built overnight. Therefore, a careful balance must be struck between prioritizing emerging threats and maintaining the specialized skills that enable USSOF to address a wide array of challenges. Skills that are highly relevant to one mission set in the moment should not be prioritized at the expense of allowing other critical competencies to atrophy.

106. Lolita Baldor, "US Special Operations Leaders Are Having to Do More with Less and Learning from the War in Ukraine," Associated Press, May 12, 2024, <https://apnews.com/article/army-special-forces-troops-cuts-ukraine-lessons-ac7c41d5d9f299fad96f2c2520c2abf>.

107. Hearing (Fenton and Maier), 12.



Conclusion

This paper has outlined key areas in which the Department of Defense should prioritize US Special Operations Forces over the next decade to support US competition with near-peer adversaries. USSOF offers a range of competencies that enable the United States to maintain a strategic presence and remain competitive in under-addressed regions in a cost-effective way, while allowing the Joint Force to concentrate on core theaters like the Indo-Pacific region and Europe. By leveraging USSOF competencies tailored for below-threshold competition management and utilizing their global deployments, the DOD can enhance competition management worldwide and offset the Joint Force's focus on these primary areas.

This paper argued that USSOF can support the DOD in strategic competition by fulfilling five crucial functions. First, through its unique placement and access and extensive cultural competence, USSOF can improve the DOD's broader situational awareness of strategic competition globally, especially in parts of the globe where other parts of the interagency, intelligence community, and Joint Force are less present or active.

Second, USSOF can help keep US adversaries engaged in competition itself to prevent actors or crises from escalating

from competition to conflict. Through its information and influence operations, sensitive activities, unconventional warfare, and operational preparation of the environment activities, USSOF can complicate and distract US adversaries, thwarting their goals and helping to put the Joint Force in the best possible position should escalation occur.

Third, USSOF can strengthen allied and partner resilience and deter competitors from taking action in or against partner nations by helping to strengthen the resilience of nations that may become involved in key battlegrounds in strategic competition. USSOF's multigenerational relationships and cooperation with allies and partners position it well to conduct foreign internal defense, civil affairs operations, and SOF-to-SOF cooperation that help support the US strategy of deterrence through denial.

Fourth, USSOF can provide additional connective tissue to other parts of the interagency, intelligence community, and with the Joint Force to help improve the integration of US deterrence efforts across the US government. USSOF's collaboration and synchronization efforts with other parts of the US government can help support the "integrated" part of integrated deterrence.

Fifth, and finally, USSOF can support the DOD's ability to take advantage of evolving technological advances over the next



decade, by serving as a pathfinder for and experimenter of new technologies, particularly those which may support DOD's information and decision advantage over its competitors.

Should the DOD support USSOF's focus on these five roles over the next decade, it will gain invaluable contributions to the management of global strategic competition and greater flexibility for the rest of the Joint Force—at a low cost.

Next steps

This paper's exploration of USSOF's core competencies in strategic competition over the next decade is only the starting point for developing a comprehensive roadmap to ensure its readiness for the shifting threat landscape and the evolving nature of strategic competition. At present, there is no detailed analysis of USSOF's current state or how best to advance the primary competencies identified in this report.

Several critical areas require further investigation, as they extend beyond the scope of this analysis. Building on the findings of this report, future research should examine how USSOF organizes, trains, and equips its forces to meet operational demands effectively, as well as how it measures success. It should also assess USSOF's financial environment, identifying budgetary constraints and opportunities for resource optimization. Furthermore, an analysis of strategic

competition's implications for USSOF's global posture and structure is necessary to determine where efforts should be expanded or scaled back.

This will provide a clear roadmap for USSOF and the broader national security community, offering valuable insights into the evolution of warfare. By addressing these critical areas, USSOF will be better positioned to support the US government in meeting the challenges of the next decade while maintaining a decisive strategic advantage in an increasingly competitive global arena.



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