

Statement before the
Subcommittee on Intelligence and Special Operations
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**The Right Force for the Right Mission:
Assessing the Role of Special Operations in Strategic Competition**

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Since 2017, the United States has been undergoing a shift away from counterterrorism and toward great power competition, now often referred to as “strategic competition.” The shift came in response to the greater assertiveness and incremental success of the People’s Republic of China and the Russian Federation in challenging the international norms and order promoted by the United States. How to respond is now the focus of the U.S. national security enterprise, but it is a question compounded by the variegated and global method of attack. Indeed, America’s rivals in this competition are deliberately avoiding U.S. strengths, particularly in the military domain. Instead, they privilege ambiguity and subterfuge, blending statecraft with subversion and war with peace.

Following key roles in fighting al Qaeda and Islamic State, the Special Operations community has a case for relevance also in this new strategic era. Based on its competence with foreign internal defense (FID), Special Operations Forces can assist partners and allies threatened by state-sponsored subversion. Based on its experience with unconventional warfare (UW), it can boost partners’ capability to resist or deter foreign occupation. Its competence with civil affairs and information operations are also valuable for a competition driven by societal penetration and contending narratives. Going further, SOF global engagement and presence help develop the trust and partnerships necessary to mount a common front against revisionist states.

SOF’s role in strategic competition is multifaceted, but it is not unlimited. Strategic competition is primarily a non-military effort, as China and Russia strive to avoid U.S. military strengths and strike instead via societal, political, and economic lines of effort. Response therefore requires a similarly broad and integrated approach, wherein SOF should be allowed to focus on its comparative advantages. This is not only a matter of establishing a more sustainable operational tempo than that seen over the past two decades, but also one of achieving strategic effectiveness against a primarily non-military threat.

The great danger for SOF is that in seeking to prove its relevance within a new strategic era, it is pushed into tasks and activities where other structures should lead. The danger is compounded by the tendency

* *The views presented are those of the author and do not necessarily represent the views of the Department of Defense or its components.*

of political leaders to look to SOF for seemingly low-risk and small-footprint solutions to unorthodox problems. The danger is magnified further by the ongoing effort to redefine “irregular warfare” (SOF’s principal domain) as something far broader than the military activities traditionally associated with the term.¹ Unless the present opportunity to reset and recalibrate is seized, the outcome will likely be a SOF that is handed ever more missions – missions for which it is not ready and for which it cannot prepare without accepting risk elsewhere – all while the broader portfolio of interagency capabilities remains underfunded and underutilized.

Instead, the desired goal would be to design an integrated force wherein each component plays to its strengths. For SOF, this would mean homing in on its core irregular warfare (IW) activities, which – if conducted in concert with other instruments of power – can be highly relevant to this new strategic era. SOF can also play a supporting role in non-military aspects of strategic competition, but it should do so in ways that enhance other players and allow it to focus on what truly makes it special. Through such synergy, nested within a strategic plan, the United States can compete, even prevail.

This vision will require preparation and so three broad recommendations are made:

- 1) Awareness: efforts should be made to maximize irregular warfare education for SOF and for those interagency partners alongside which it will operate.
- 2) Capability: the civilian agencies best placed to counter the non-military lines of effort of our state competitors require broader funding, capacity, and mandates.
- 3) Strategy: an aware and capable joint and interagency force still requires strategic direction to meet specific ends in line with policy. Is it not clear who currently sets this strategy, what we are competing for, and how we define success.

Irregular Warfare and Great Power Competition

In competing with the United States, both Russia and China have designed their strategies to avoid American strengths, particularly within its armed forces, and to target instead societal, information, and economic areas where the U.S. capacity to deter and respond is less advanced. Though anchored in a shared awareness of underlying military realities, the theory of success relies overwhelmingly on achieving incremental gains under the threshold of armed conflict, until new facts have been created and become difficult to reverse.

As part of this indirect attack, China and Russia have sought to soften up, subvert, and ultimately flip the international system in their favor. Individual countries are targeted, with carrots as well as sticks, to build informal blocks of pro-Chinese or pro-Russian support. In tandem, U.S. influence wanes, along with its legitimacy and power. Methods range from the relatively peaceful, such as infrastructural development and charm offensives, to more coercive ones, such as “debt-trap” diplomacy, cyberattacks, or the use of disinformation and political infiltration. Only in a few instances has the strategy relied on military aggression, such as that seen in Georgia and Ukraine.

As the United States observes China and Russia subverting its international leadership, what is SOF’s role in turning the tide? The good news is that many of the skills and capabilities that SOF has developed are relevant also in this new strategic environment. Beyond its well-publicized strikes and sensitive operations, which can impose costs on adversaries, the bulk of SOF’s contribution resides in its

¹ For discussion, see David H. Ucko Ucko and Thomas A. Marks, “Redefining Irregular Warfare: Legitimacy, Coercion, and Power,” *Modern War Institute*, October 18, 2022, <https://mwi.usma.edu/redefining-irregular-warfare-legitimacy-coercion-and-power/>.

specialization in irregular warfare (IW). Though traditionally concerned with non-state threats, and focused therefore on insurgency and counterinsurgency (with counterterrorism an integral component), IW also describes well the playbook used by Russia, China, and others competing with the United States. Doctrine explains how IW “favors indirect warfare and asymmetric warfare approaches” to direct military confrontation and seeks “to erode the adversary’s power, influence, and will.” Furthermore, irregular warfare is fundamentally a “struggle for legitimacy,” which captures the strategic competition at hand: a struggle for the right to lead and to shape new and long-lasting political realities.²

Given this overlap, SOF’s IW expertise can be relevant also in an era of strategic competition – though some aspects need to be tweaked.³ In recent years, for example, SOF has broadened its application of foreign internal defense (FID) and unconventional warfare (UW) – two IW missions and SOF core activities. Whereas FID traditionally meant aiding a friendly government against an insurgency, SOF now looks upon it to boost a country’s “resilience” against foreign-sponsored proxies, modes of disinformation, or political infiltration. In a similar vein, whereas UW traditionally implied sponsoring an insurgency against an illicit or occupying government, SOF now looks upon this work as supporting “resistance” capabilities within states either facing foreign invasion or seeking to deter such a threat.

The work on resilience and resistance gives SOF a major role in strategic competition, given Russia’s targeting of its eastern flank and the possibility of Chinese expansion in the East and South China seas. However, FID and UW, or building resilience and resistance, are highly demanding and difficult tasks, requiring institutional readiness and protracted partnerships. After twenty years of counterterrorism, where SOF engaged heavily with direct action, there is today a need to rebalance in favor of FID and UW and to develop the skills they call for within this new strategic environment.⁴ This will mean an emphasis on language skills, cultural know-how, political awareness, and strategic acumen – and all at scale – with major implications for SOF recruitment and career tracks. The decline of high-tempo counterterrorism operations provides an opportunity for such a shift, but the challenge of reform is significant and the complexity of the task high.⁵

Beyond FID and UW, SOF’s work with IW brings other capabilities that can be relevant to strategic competition. Because IW “favors indirect approaches” (that is, working through partners and proxies), SOF has a strong tradition of engaging with international entities both at the state level and below. Its work in security force assistance also creates bonds of familiarity and trust with those receiving such support. Developing and extending these networks will be invaluable to the United States as it mobilizes fronts against common threats. IW is ultimately a struggle for legitimacy, and so partnerships are key.⁶

² US Department of Defense, “Irregular Warfare: Countering Irregular Threats,” Joint Operating Concept (Arlington, VA, May 17, 2010), 9, https://www.jcs.mil/Portals/36/Documents/Doctrine/concepts/joc_iw_v2.pdf?ver=2017-12-28-162021-510.

³ Kevin Bilms, “What’s in a Name? Reimagining Irregular Warfare Activities for Competition,” *War on the Rocks*, January 15, 2021, <https://warontherocks.com/2021/01/whats-in-a-name-reimagining-irregular-warfare-activities-for-competition/>.

⁴ United States Special Operations Command, “Comprehensive Review,” January 23, 2020, 39, <https://sof.news/pubs/USSOCOM-Comprehensive-Ethics-Review-Report-January-2020.pdf>.

⁵ As former USSOCOM commander ADM Eric Olsen points out, it remains “extremely difficult...to create a SOF operator who knows the people, languages, terrain, climate, politics, and religions of a micro-region without hurting his/her chances for promotion to the top ranks.” ADM Olsen therefore recommends that the USSOCOM commander be granted “the authority to manage selected personnel to very high levels of focused expertise without damaging their careers,” perhaps via “the development of alternative career.” See Eric T. Olsen, “USSOCOM and SOF: War Around the Edges,” *Journal of National Security Law & Policy* 12, no. 71 (October 2021): 78.

⁶ As General Richard D. Clarke, Commander of SOCOM, explains, “USSOCOM maintains a global network of liaison officers and exchange officers with Allied and international SOF. At our headquarters alone, we host exchange officers and foreign liaison officers from 28 Allied and partnered nations, offering an unrivaled ability to provide options to understand and act worldwide.” See “Statement of General Richard D. Clarke, USA, Commander, United States Special Operations Command” (Washington DC, April 5, 2022), 5.

Likewise, IW is about contending narratives, and so SOF's military information support operations (MISO) are relevant, not just in shaping the perception of likely adversaries but also to "expose, counter, and compete with hostile propaganda and disinformation online."⁷ Finally, IW relates intimately to governance, and so there are several ways in which SOF's civil affairs capabilities can help engage with local populations, identify political and societal trends, and represent and promote American interests.

The Limits of SOF in Strategic Competition

SOF clearly has the potential to contribute to the strategic competition currently underway. Seizing this potential requires understanding SOF's role but also its limits. Specifically, as a military force, SOF will always be most relevant where there is an active threat or use of force, hence its natural fit within IW – a "violent struggle for legitimacy." Yet strategic competition is only in part about IW. In most settings, our competitors resort instead to "political warfare," an adjacent but separate term that describes the weaponization of *non-military* means to prevail *without fighting*. As George Kennan put it in his famous cable of 1946, at the dawn of the Cold War, political warfare is "the logical application of Clausewitz's doctrine in *time of peace*."⁸ In practice, political warfare today includes economic pressure, election interference, disinformation, lawfare, intellectual theft, "wolf warrior diplomacy," and political infiltration.

This weaponization of statecraft mounts an analytical and institutional predicament for the American interagency. Despite some progress, it struggles to fully grasp and to adapt in strategically effective ways. Yet while SOF is often viewed as the "problem solver" for tasks that cannot be accomplished by others (indeed, a former SOCOM commander defines a "special operation" as one "for which no other force is organized, trained and equipped to conduct."), it is not clear that it can or should be relied upon to counter this particular challenge.⁹

The first consideration relates to SOF's operational tempo, which was too high during the last two decades and caused morale, ethics, and recruitment standards to slip.¹⁰ Though the withdrawal from Afghanistan has mitigated this problem, a new normal must now be set. Second, the tasks that we expect SOF to master – in particular, FID and UW – are so ambitious that they require sustained institutional focus; a focus that should not be diluted by tasking SOF unnecessarily.¹¹ In other words, "just because special forces can conduct a mission does not mean that they should."¹² Third, though SOF often

⁷ "Posture Statement of General Richard D. Clarke, USA, Commander, United States Special Operations Command" (Washington DC, March 25, 2021), 5.

⁸ George F. Kennan, "The Inauguration of Organized Political Warfare [Redacted Version]," April 30, 1948, 1, Wilson Center Digital Archive, <https://digitalarchive.wilsoncenter.org/document/114320>.

⁹ Eric T. Olsen, in Kyle Atwell and Abigail Gage, "Back to the Future: Resetting Special Operations Forces for Great Power Competition," Irregular Warfare Podcast, accessed July 2, 2021, <https://mwi.usma.edu/back-to-the-future-resetting-special-operations-forces-for-great-power-competition/>.

¹⁰ Andrew Milburn, "How to Fix a Broken Special Operations Culture," *War on the Rocks*, September 13, 2019, <https://warontherocks.com/2019/09/how-to-fix-a-broken-special-operations-culture/>; David Martin, "Navy SEAL Drug Use 'Staggering,' Investigation Finds," *CBS News*, April 11, 2017, <https://www.cbsnews.com/news/navy-seal-drug-use-staggering-investigation-finds/>; David Choi, "After Multiple Deployments, US Special Forces May Have 'Mortgaged the Future,'" *Business Insider*, May 3, 2017, <https://www.businessinsider.com/special-forces-groups-problems-2017-5>.

¹¹ As Schroder argues, "The desire of US policy-makers to steadily decrease the risk profile of US activities overseas has led to a consistent trend of them asking for SOF to solve their most difficult policy problems, but also increasingly to solve their easy ones, too." "The political convenience of special operations forces threatens their readiness for tasks where their skills and capabilities are essential enablers for the joint force."

¹² Jack Watling therefore concludes that "Perhaps the most important prerequisite for special operations forces optimizing for great power competition... is the recognition by policymakers that throwing them into the breach to confront every challenge comes at a cost." See Jack Watling, "Old Habits Die Hard: Special Operations Forces, Twenty Years of

promote their smaller footprint, more efficient use of resources, and quiet and creative ways of solving unorthodox problems, there is nothing inherently “low risk” about deploying military forces of any type; instead, it carries a clear potential for escalation.¹³ Finally, there are other components of the government that have more appropriate authorities and could take on the non-violent lines of effort pursued by our state adversaries.

It may be helpful to consider a few examples for which there is no “SOF easy button.”¹⁴ Corruption and lack of transparency greatly facilitate Chinese efforts at economic and political infiltration, resulting in the subservience of ostensibly sovereign nation-states to Chinese interests. The response to this method relies on strengthening the rule of law and in bolstering the “capacity of independent media, civil society, political parties and private enterprise to force greater transparency.”¹⁵ This effort, so essential to strategic competition, is not a SOF skill. Similarly, Russia seeks to subvert democratic elections, either to discredit the system or to sway outcomes, and there is no clear role for SOF in thwarting this attack. SOF also lacks the authorities to halt shady investment in the United States, or elsewhere, that are likely to affect national security. And what is the likely SOF response to countries and individuals shirking the sanctions meant to curb hostile behavior by adversarial states?

These examples are not meant to belittle SOF’s utility in strategic competition, but to delimit its application. As the United States seeks to engage against the hostile strategies deployed by adversarial states, it must look not just or primarily to SOF, but to the range of agencies and capabilities residing within other instruments of power. For boosting transparency and combating corruption, this may involve working with civil society organizations, USAID, the State Department and Department of Justice. On the protection of U.S. democratic elections, the Foreign Malign Influence Center was activated in September 2022 within the Office of the Director of National Intelligence for precisely this role. Where shady investments are concerned, the interagency Committee on Foreign Investment in the United States (CFIUS) has recently been granted added powers to protect national security.¹⁶ As for sanctions enforcement, the Department of Treasury has its Office of Foreign Assets Control (OFAC). The list goes on – and could be developed further.

These considerations should also inform how SOF engages in IW – or how it seeks to build resilience and resistance capability abroad. Whereas FID and UW are core SOF activities, here too the problem is far more than military and requires broader engagement. FID, to take one example, is described in doctrine as “the participation by *civilian agencies and military forces*” to assist another government in countering its domestic threats, and it is meant to nest within that government’s “internal defense and development plan,” implying interagency-to-interagency engagement throughout. For SOF, the forces it trains must be supported by a capable security sector, girded by sustainable institutions, and operating alongside instruments of state that can take the lead on political, societal, and economic matters.

Counterterrorism, and the New Era of Great Power Competition,” *Modern War Institute*, June 21, 2021, <https://mwi.usma.edu/old-habits-die-hard-special-operations-forces-twenty-years-of-counterterrorism-and-the-new-era-of-great-power-competition/>. See also See also Jack Watling, “Sharpening the Dagger: Optimising Special Forces for Future Conflict,” Whitehall Report (London: RUSI, May 2021), 19.

¹³ This argument runs counter to the popular “value proposition” of SOF as “low risk.” For discussion of SOF and risk, see Russell A. Burgos, “Pushing the Easy Button: Special Operations Forces, International Security, and the Use of Force,” *Special Operations Journal* 4, no. 2 (July 3, 2018): 109–28, <https://doi.org/10.1080/23296151.2018.1522754>.

¹⁴ Brian Dodwell, “A View from the CT Foxhole: Mark Mitchell, Principal Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defense for Special Operations/Low-Intensity Conflict,” *CTC Sentinel*, December 2018, 11.

¹⁵ “Chinese Malign Influence and the Corrosion of Democracy: An Assessment of Chinese Interference in Thirteen Key Countries” (Washington DC: International Republican Institute, 2019), 7–8.

¹⁶ Kevin Granville, “Cfius, Powerful and Unseen, Is a Gatekeeper on Major Deals,” *The New York Times*, March 5, 2018, sec. Business, <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/03/05/business/what-is-cfius.html>.

Producing such synergy is anything but easy. Indeed, the failure to engage comprehensively in this manner has been a major drag on strategic effectiveness in the past.

Similarly, in UW, or in fostering resistance potential to counter or deter foreign aggression, the tasks undertaken by security forces and armed units must be complemented ideally by a whole-of-society effort. As Fiala argues, it may require a Ministry of Justice effort to support national legislature necessary for resistance organizations, a Ministry of Foreign Affairs effort to engage with allies and partners for support and recognition, a Ministry of Communication effort to build a national narrative for mobilization domestically and abroad, a Ministry of Education or of Culture to develop national pride and confidence, and various civil society organizations to support these goals and carry them onward to the populace.¹⁷ The ongoing effort to support Ukraine demonstrates these requirements, as well as the foundational importance of counter-corruption and, more broadly, legitimacy.¹⁸

The reliance on non-military institutions and authorities becomes particularly pressing in settings where the enemy strategy, while nefarious, is non-military in nature. Where domination is achieved indirectly, via political warfare as opposed to irregular warfare, SOF's work on resilience and resistance risks veering into civilian realms where other agencies should have the lead. Some have for example suggested, as SOF priorities, "cognitive access denial" or "financial access denial," to wit resisting propaganda and disrupting "proxy, patronage, or corruption networks."¹⁹ It is unclear whether SOF are adequately educated or trained for these tasks. Even where SOF has some relevant capability – for example its MISO assets – so do other instruments of power, be it within the Department of State, the Agency for Global Media, and within the country teams.²⁰ Meanwhile, SOF are meant to bring something special.

Ways Forward: Integration and Support

The primarily non-military nature of strategic competition does not make SOF irrelevant. It does mean, however, that in defining its role, SOF will need to think of itself, present itself, and be used to empower an interagency solution. SOF's indispensable contribution should be to add that special ingredient that allows a broader response to unfold. This type of role should in theory come naturally to the SOF community, given its emphasis on partnerships, but it rubs up against its desire to carve out unique relevance in a new strategic era and its occasional (and by no means universal) tendency to operate in parallel rather than in support of civilian government agencies.²¹ Ultimately, however, it is an approach

¹⁷ Otto C. Fiala, "Resistance Resurgent: Resurrecting a Method of Irregular Warfare in Great Power Competition," *Special Operations Journal* 7, no. 2 (July 3, 2021): 124, <https://doi.org/10.1080/23296151.2021.1994746>.

¹⁸ On this point, some experts on proxy war decry the "chronic failures" of the United States "to consider ethnography, legitimacy, and long-term effects of proxy sponsorship on regional security and stability." See Claire Graja, "SOF and the Future of Global Competition," CNA Conference Proceedings (Arlington, VA: CNA, May 2019), 5.

¹⁹ Katie Crombe, Steve Ferenzi, and Robert Jones, "Integrating Deterrence across the Gray — Making It More than Words," *Military Times*, December 9, 2021, <https://www.militarytimes.com/opinion/commentary/2021/12/08/integrating-deterrence-across-the-gray-making-it-more-than-words/>. See also Bryan Groves and Steve Ferenzi, "Unconventional Deterrence in Europe: The Role of Army Special Operations in Competition Today," *RealClearDefense*, April 16, 2020, https://www.realcleardefense.com/articles/2020/04/16/unconventional_deterrence_in_europe_the_role_of_army_special_operations_in_competition_today_115207-full.html.

²⁰ For a full accounting of U.S. government assets for countering disinformation, see Jesse S. Curtis, "Springing the 'Tacitus Trap': Countering Chinese State-Sponsored Disinformation," *Small Wars & Insurgencies* 32, no. 2 (February 17, 2021): fig. 3, <https://doi.org/10.1080/09592318.2021.1870429>.

²¹ For discussion of this tendency, in relation to 127e authorities see Nick Turse and Alice Speri, "How the Pentagon Uses a Secretive Program to Wage Proxy Wars," *The Intercept*, July 1, 2022, <https://theintercept.com/2022/07/01/pentagon-127e-proxy-wars/>. For the broader issue of SOF mis- and overuse, see Alice Friend and Shannon Culbertson, "Special Obfuscations: The Strategic Uses of Special Operations Forces," CSIS Briefs (Washington DC: Center for Strategic & International Studies, March 2020).

that would not only boost American competitiveness but also allow SOF to contribute less often but in more impactful ways, thereby sustaining a manageable operational tempo.

There is ample precedent for these types of supportive arrangements. As commander of Special Operations Command Pacific (SOCPAC), Gen. Jonathan B. Braga oversaw an impressive operational effort to counter Chinese malign influence in South-East Asia and Pacific Islands. Through partnerships with Treasury, the FBI, and the Department of Justice at INDOPACOM, a small SOCPAC team was able to recover and analyze evidence relating to Chinese Communist Party (CCP)-linked criminal networks, resulting in the Office of Foreign Assets Control (OFAC) sanctioning Wan Kuok-koi (“Broken Tooth”) and his network under the Global Magnitsky Act.²² The CCP has a track record of using criminal proxies to undermine states in the region. By acting via the intelligence community and its own analysts, SOF empowered the agencies necessary to respond to this non-military approach. In a similar manner, SOCPAC has worked with the Commerce Department’s National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA) to investigate, report on, and check the Chinese fishing companies operating illegally in the South Pacific. Through MISO, SOCPAC was able to broadcast the horrific images that accompany this activity to senior INDOPACOM, Coast Guard, State, and other Washington advisors and decision makers.²³

Unsurprisingly, this need for integration concerns also SOF’s work alongside the general purpose forces. It should be recalled that SOF comprise just 2% of the joint force. While the return on investment is rightly celebrated by many, SOF’s work does not come without cost and, also, has its limits.²⁴ This issue of reach is accentuated by declining resources and the concomitant shift away from counterterrorism and toward great power competition, as both may result in reduced presence in areas far removed from China and Russia (but where both are nonetheless seeking influence and power).²⁵ Thus, U.S. Army’s belated creation of Security Force Assistance Brigades in 2017 is a step in the right direction, allowing – ideally – for a division of labor with SOF that reserves its specialization for when it is truly needed.²⁶ Even in those contexts, of course, focusing just on elite forces is insufficient, and so SOF efforts will need to be nested within a broader engagement.²⁷

²² U.S. Department of the Treasury, “Treasury Sanctions Corrupt Actors in Africa and Asia,” December 9, 2020, <https://home.treasury.gov/news/press-releases/sm1206>. For discussion of how sanctions could more effectively be integrated as a component of deterrence and signaling, see Elizabeth Rosenberg and Jordan Tama, “Strengthening the Economic Arsenal: Bolstering the Deterrent and Signaling Effects of Sanctions” (Washington DC: Center for a New American Security, December 2019).

²³ For context, see Matthew West, “Coast Guard Releases New Plan to Combat Illegal, Unreported, and Unregulated Fishing World,” *U.S. Indo-Pacific Command*, September 18, 2020, <https://www.pacom.mil/Media/News/News-Article-View/Article/2353718/coast-guard-releases-new-plan-to-combat-illegal-unreported-and-unregulated-fish/https%3A%2F%2Fwww.pacom.mil%2FMedia%2FNews%2FNews-Article-View%2FArticle%2F2353718%2Fcoast-guard-releases-new-plan-to-combat-illegal-unreported-and-unregulated-fish%2F>.

²⁴ United States Government Accountability Office, “Special Operations Forces: Better Data Necessary to Improve Oversight and Address Command and Control Challenges,” Report to Congressional Committees (Washington DC, October 2022).

²⁵ In 2021, Gen. Richard Clarke, USSOCOM Commander, testified that “Our deployed forces are down 15% from last year – the lowest since 2001, and in FY21, nearly 40% of our deployed forces will focus on GPC requirements.” “Posture Statement of General Richard D. Clarke, USA, Commander, United States Special Operations Command,” 4.

²⁶ For a revealing glimpse into the tensions within SOF created by the SFAB, see Tim Ball, “Replaced? Security Force Assistance Brigades vs. Special Forces,” *War on the Rocks*, February 23, 2017, <https://warontherocks.com/2017/02/replaced-security-force-assistance-brigades-vs-special-forces/>.

²⁷ Tommy Ross and Philip McDaniel, “Training Law Enforcement in Fragile States: The Case for a New U.S. Approach,” *War on the Rocks*, March 25, 2019, <https://warontherocks.com/2019/03/training-law-enforcement-in-fragile-states-the-case-for-a-new-u-s-approach/>. As Michael Vickers has also argued, “Security forces are part of society... One of my complaints about SOF is that SOF would only want to partner with the commando or counter-terror [CT] units. So, they end up training one incredible CT unit, but you don’t win wars with that.” John Taft, Liz Gorminsky, and Joe Mariani, “Special Operations Forces and Great Power Competition: Talent, Technology, and Organizational Change in the New Threat Environment,” Deloitte Insights (Deloitte Center for Government Insights, 2019), 11.

Detractors to this type of burden-sharing will point out that neither the general purpose forces nor the interagency have the capacity and/or capability to engage effectively with the type of irregular and asymmetric activities undertaken by SOF. This is a fair point but should motivate greater investment in these areas across the U.S. national security enterprise (an enterprise that must now extend far beyond the traditional “security sector”). Not only is burden-sharing and integration a more efficient use of resources, and a necessary source of support for a relatively small special operations force, but it also reflects the fact that IW – and the complexity of strategic competition – cannot be quarantined within the SOF community in the hope of not upsetting programs and priorities elsewhere.²⁸ We all operate in the “human domain” – the one that SOF calls its home – and we best prepare accordingly.

Conclusion and Recommendations

In defining SOF’s contribution to strategic competition, the emphasis must be on delimiting where it can most effectively contribute, identifying what else is needed, and how these various efforts can be strategically integrated in line with policy.

SOF can contribute in unique ways to strategic competition, and yet its role needs to be carefully understood so that it is neither downplayed nor allowed to bleed into areas where other agencies are a more natural fit. Strategic competition is primarily non-military and so SOF cannot and should not be expected to carry the load by itself. Accustomed to having to fight for equities and profile, SOF risks overselling its services and being mis- or overused by policymakers. This will weaken its ability to contribute in the ways only it can.

Indeed, in its core competences, SOF already is expected to master a range of extremely important and equally complex missions – FID and UW in particular. Mastering these missions will require significant reorientation and investment, not least given the erosion of capability during the last two decades of counterterrorism and the reorientation of FID and UW for a new strategic environment. A key priority for SOF going forward will be to ensure that it can institutionalize the capabilities needed to build resilience and resistance against state-sponsored subversion, insurgency, and proxy warfare.

Even in these areas, SOF’s efforts must nest within a broader interagency response to gain strategic meaning. This requires greater interagency coordination and capacity. On the civilian side, it becomes important to raise awareness of the multiple non-military lines of attack that China, Russia, and others are deploying against the United States and the international system it seeks to support. Within the armed forces, the step away from messy counterinsurgencies in Iraq and Afghanistan should not imply abandoning irregular warfare and the associated mindset and activities. To the contrary, relevant strategic education, training, and sensitization is required – plausibly within the context of combined senior-service education – to build interagency capacity and capability for this challenge. The College of International Security Affairs at the National Defense University provides models that could be scaled up for greater effect.²⁹

²⁸ For one proposal, see Phillip Lohaus, “Special Operations Forces in the Gray Zone: An Operational Framework for Using Special Operations Forces in the Space Between War and Peace,” *Special Operations Journal* 2, no. 2 (July 2, 2016): 75–91, <https://doi.org/10.1080/23296151.2016.1239989>.

²⁹ In its MA classes at Fort McNair, under the Regional Defense Fellowship Program, CISA combines senior officials from across the armed services, the intelligence community, the interagency, and partner nations for education in IW and associated strategies. The program is partner-oriented, with 50%+ of students coming from abroad. At the CISA MA program at Fort Bragg, civilian academics teach a curriculum focused on IW to U.S. (mostly ARSOF) officers and NCOs alongside international SOF students and State Department FSOs and Diplomatic Security personnel. Both programs could

Across government, there is also a crucial need for greater integration to allow a comprehensive response to a variegated attack. Cross-functional teams, liaison officers, and other structural ways of cutting across agencies may help bring common awareness of respective strengths and authorities, and thereby enable integration in practice. The newly formed Irregular Warfare Center could play a role in leading this initiative, as it provides a focal point for IW and taps into existing networks devoted to this topic. As of the FY23 defense budget, it was granted authorities to engage and coordinate across the interagency to enhance America's IW capability.³⁰ This type of work could equally benefit America's response to political warfare, which also requires various government agencies to integrate and balance the load depending on the challenge at hand.

Finally, across the board, the United States requires greater strategic clarity and long-term planning for strategic competition, to understand what we are competing for, against, and what success might look like. The ultimate requirement here is for a strategy that proceeds according to a clearly elaborated theory of success rather than simply the means and capabilities at our disposal. It also requires greater familiarity with strategic thinking and planning, specifically to counter the ambiguous and variegated attack presently underway.³¹

be expanded, if resourced appropriately, to encourage more cultural and organizational integration to tackle the challenges posed by strategic competition.

³⁰ "H.R.7776: James M. Inhofe National Defense Authorization Act for Fiscal Year 2023," § House of Representatives (2022), <http://www.congress.gov/>.

³¹ For one methodology, see David H. Ucko and Thomas Marks A., *Crafting Strategy for Irregular Warfare: A Framework for Analysis and Action*, 2nd edition (Washington DC: National Defense University Press, 2022).