



**Statement before the  
House Committee on Armed Services,  
Subcommittee on Intelligence and Special Operations**

***“The Role of Special Operations in Great  
Power Competition”***

A Testimony by:

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Thank you Chairman Bergman, Ranking Member Gallego, and distinguished Members of the Subcommittee on Intelligence and Special Operations for the opportunity to testify on “The Role of Special Operations in Great Power Competition.”

As I will outline in this testimony, U.S. Special Operations Forces (SOF) need to play an increasingly important role in competition with such countries as China, Russia, and Iran—particularly in the area of *irregular warfare*. Irregular warfare includes activities below the threshold of conventional (or regular) warfare—such as information operations, espionage, cyber operations, support to state and non-state partners, and economic coercion—designed to weaken adversaries as part of balance-of-power competition. The leading role of SOF in irregular warfare makes it important to ensure that SOF have a sufficient quality of personnel, mission readiness and resilience, a modernized force, and close relationships with interagency entities and foreign allies and partners.

My remarks are divided into four sections. The first section discusses global competition. The second focuses on irregular warfare. The third section highlights the role of SOF in irregular warfare. The fourth outlines implications for Congress.

### I. Growing Competition

Competition between the United States and such countries as China, Russia, and Iran is likely overdetermined for several reasons, with significant repercussions for SOF.

First, these authoritarian regimes have political systems that are dramatically different from the United States and its democratic allies and partners. Take China, which is undemocratic and eschews a free press. In October 2022, Xi Jinping secured a historic third term as China’s leader, cementing his position as the most powerful leader since Mao Zedong.<sup>1</sup> There were no democratic elections. The Chinese government has also violently cracked down on democratic movements in the country, including in Hong Kong, and suppressed information through a “Great Firewall.” China’s digital firewall has banned over 18,000 websites that the government assessed had content unfavorable to China.<sup>2</sup>

Vladimir Putin has used the war in Ukraine to further crack down on political dissent. Iran also continues to repress its population, which has triggered numerous protests over the past several years. More broadly, there has been a decline in democracy across the globe with 16 straight years of a decrease in freedom, according to the non-partisan Freedom House.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Xi Jinping, *Hold High the Great Banner of Socialism with Chinese Characteristics and Strive in Unity to Build a Modern Socialist Country in All Respects: Report to the 20th National Congress of the Communist Party of China*, October 16, 2022, <https://news.cgtn.com/news/files/Full-text-of-the-report-to-the-20th-National-Congress-of-the-Communist-Party-of-China.pdf>.

<sup>2</sup> On the Chinese practice of blocking internet sites and digital platforms see Peter C. Oleson, “Chinese Offensive Intelligence Operations,” *The Intelligencer: Journal of U.S. Intelligence Studies*, Vol. 26, No. 1, Fall 2020, pp. 9-17.

<sup>3</sup> Freedom House, *Freedom in the World 2022: The Global Expansion of Authoritarian Rule* (Washington, DC: Freedom House), [https://freedomhouse.org/sites/default/files/2022-02/FIW\\_2022\\_PDF\\_Booklet\\_Digital\\_Final\\_Web.pdf](https://freedomhouse.org/sites/default/files/2022-02/FIW_2022_PDF_Booklet_Digital_Final_Web.pdf).

Second, the United States—along with its democratic allies and partners—have increasingly divergent economic systems from these regimes. Western countries remain committed to free market capitalism. But their competitors have increasingly rolled back free market policies. In a series of crackdowns against capitalism, for example, the Chinese Communist Party has placed strict controls on booming sectors, such as technology, real estate, and food delivery; large private companies; and wealthy individuals. In 2021 and 2022, for example, Chinese regulators scuttled Ant Group’s listing, fined Alibaba Group, blocked a Tencent-backed merger, and opened a stifling cybersecurity review into Didi Global just days after the ride-hailing firm went public in New York.<sup>4</sup> In addition, there is a close relationship between the PRC and Chinese companies, in which espionage is utilized to advance Chinese commercial and defense competitiveness.<sup>5</sup>

Third, these countries are challenging a Western-led international system that has been committed since World War II to free market international economic institutions, bilateral and regional security organizations, and democratic political norms.

## II. Irregular Warfare

Despite this reality of competition, irregular warfare will likely be a major—if not *the* major—type of struggle between the United States and its competitors. Irregular warfare involves activities short of conventional and nuclear warfare that are designed to expand a country’s influence and legitimacy, as well as weaken its adversaries.<sup>6</sup> Irregular warfare includes numerous tools of statecraft that governments can use to shift the balance of power in their favor: information operations, cyber operations, support to state and non-state partners, covert action, espionage, and economic coercion.<sup>7</sup> Other government officials and scholars have used different terms—such as political warfare, hybrid warfare, gray zone activity, asymmetric conflict, and the indirect approach—to capture some or all of these activities.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Jing Yang, Keith Zhai, and Quentin Webb, “China’s Corporate Crackdown is Just Getting Started,” *Wall Street Journal*, August 5, 2021, [https://www.wsj.com/articles/china-corporate-crackdown-tech-markets-investors-11628182971?mod=article\\_inline](https://www.wsj.com/articles/china-corporate-crackdown-tech-markets-investors-11628182971?mod=article_inline).

<sup>5</sup> Ken McCallum and Christopher Wray, “Joint Address by MI5 and FBI Heads,” London, July 6, 2022, <https://www.mi5.gov.uk/news/speech-by-mi5-and-fbi>.

<sup>6</sup> The U.S. government’s formal definition of irregular warfare can be found in *Summary of the Irregular Warfare Annex to the National Defense Strategy* (Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Defense, 2020). Also see, for example, Charles T. Cleveland, *The American Way of Irregular Warfare: An Analytical Memoir* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND, 2020); David H. Ucko and Thomas A. Marks, *Crafting Strategy for Irregular Warfare: A Framework for Analysis and Action* (Washington, DC: National Defense University Press, July 2020).

<sup>7</sup> See, for example, the “toolkit” highlighted in Kathleen H. Hicks, et. al., *By Other Means, Part I: Campaigning in the Gray Zone* (Washington, DC: Center for Strategic and International Studies, 2019). Also see Robinson, *Modern Political Warfare*.

<sup>8</sup> See, for example, Hal Brands, *The Twilight Struggle: What the Cold War Teaches Us about Great-Power Rivalry Today* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2022); Tim Weiner, *The Folly and the Glory: America, Russia, and Political Warfare 1945-2020* (New York: Henry Holt, 2020); Thomas Rid, *Active Measures: The Secret History of Disinformation and Political Warfare* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2020); Linda Robinson, et al., *Modern Political Warfare: Current Practices and Possible Responses* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND 2018); Frank G. Hoffman, “Examining Complex Forms of Conflict: Gray Zone and Hybrid Challenges,” *Prism*, Vol. 7, No. 4, 2018, pp. 31-47; George F. Kennan, “Organizing Political Warfare,” April 30, 1948, History and Public Policy Program Digital

Some might object to the term “warfare” to describe non-violent activities, such as economic coercion and information operations. But that is not how the U.S.’s competitors see it. China has used terms like “three warfares” (or *san zhong zhanfa*), which involves public opinion, legal warfare, and psychological operations—none of which include the direct use of violence. Iran has utilized such terms as “soft war” (or *jang-e narm*) to describe such activities as propaganda and information operations.

Why will irregular warfare likely be the preeminent mode of conflict and competition? The answer lies in the existence of nuclear weapons, which will likely have a dampening effect on the probability of conventional—and nuclear—war between nuclear-armed powers.<sup>9</sup> Because of the destructive power of nuclear weapons, no nuclear states have engaged in conventional war with each other. There have been several close calls, such as the 1962 Cuban missile crisis and the 1999 crisis in Kargil between India and Pakistan. But conventional war between nuclear powers is risky.

The same logic holds between the United States, China, and Russia. The results of numerous wargames and analyses involving the United States and China, for example, highlight the costs and risks of conventional war.<sup>10</sup> According to one analysis, a U.S. war with China could reduce China’s gross domestic product (GDP) by between 25 and 35 percent and the U.S.’s GDP by between 5 and 10 percent.<sup>11</sup> Both the United States and China would also likely suffer huge numbers of military and civilian deaths and risk large-scale destruction of their military forces. If war expanded to include their allies—as it did during World War I, World War II, and the Korean War—economic and casualty figures could skyrocket even further. Escalation to nuclear war would significantly raise the military, economic, and environmental costs. While a war between the United States and China over Taiwan is not impossible, its destructiveness has made—and will likely continue to make—Beijing and Washington cautious.

Instead, the United States and its main competitors—especially China, Russia, and Iran—are likely to engage in irregular warfare as the daily method of competition. These authoritarian regimes have utilized numerous state and non-state organizations as surrogates against the United States and its allies and partners. Examples of key agencies include:

- **China:** Parts of the People’s Liberation Army (PLA), Ministry of State Security (MSS), Ministry of Public Security (MPS), Ministry of Industry and Information Technology (MIIT), United Front Work Department (UFWD), Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA), and other state and non-state organizations such as hackers.

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Archive; Hal Brands and Toshi Yoshihara, “How to Wage Political Warfare,” *National Interest*, December 16, 2018.

<sup>9</sup> Kenneth N. Waltz, “More May Be Better,” in Scott D. Sagan and Kenneth N. Waltz, *The Spread of Nuclear Weapons: A Debate* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1995), pp. 1-45.

<sup>10</sup> See, for example, David C. Gompert, Astrid Stuth Cevallos, and Cristina L. Garafola, *War with China: Thinking Through the Unthinkable* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND, 2016); David Ochmanek, et al., *U.S. Military Capabilities and Forces for a Dangerous World: Rethinking the U.S. Approach to Force Planning* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND, 2017), pp. 14-19; John Gordon IV, et al., *Army Fires Capabilities for 2025 and Beyond* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND, 2019), pp. 58-67.

<sup>11</sup> Gompert, Cevallos, and Garafola, *War with China*, p. xiv.

- **Russia:** Parts of the Main Directorate of the General Staff of the Armed Forces of the Russian Federation (GRU), Foreign Intelligence Service (SVR), Federal Security Service (FSB), Russian SOF (such as Spetsnaz), and other state and non-state entities such as the Wagner Group.
- **Iran:** The Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps-Quds Force (IRGC-QF), parts of the Ministry of Intelligence (MOIS), and a range of entities linked to the IRGC-QF in Lebanon (such as Lebanese Hezbollah), Iraq (such as the Popular Mobilization Forces), Syria (such as Shia militias), Yemen (such as Ansar Allah, or the Houthi movement), and other countries.

The People's Republic of China (PRC) has engaged in an aggressive irregular campaign designed to expand Chinese power and influence in the Indo-Pacific and the world more broadly. As Xi Jinping outlined, China must “adopt an asymmetrical strategy of catching up and overtaking” the United States and the West.<sup>12</sup> Chinese actions have included offensive cyber operations, information and disinformation campaigns, economic coercion (including through the Belt and Road Initiative and Digital Silk Road), and espionage against U.S. and other Western government agencies and corporations.

Russia has meddled in U.S. elections, waged a disinformation campaign against the United States on digital platforms, conducted an offensive cyber campaign against U.S. and Western government agencies and companies, and conducted a range of other activities such as assassinations and sabotage. Finally, Iran has waged an aggressive irregular campaign against the United States and its allies and partners across the Middle East using a range of partner forces. As the U.S. intelligence community concluded, “Iran’s hybrid approach to warfare—using both conventional and unconventional capabilities—will pose a threat to U.S. interests in the region for the foreseeable future. The IRGC-QF and its proxies will remain central to Iran’s military power.”<sup>13</sup>

### III. SOF and Irregular Warfare

SOF need to play a major role in countering these countries, including through such core activities as:

- *Foreign internal defense*, which involves efforts to build the capacity of foreign governments. This can include training and equipping partners in Europe that border Russia (such as Finland, Latvia, Lithuania, Estonia, and Poland) and the Indo-Pacific that face a possible Chinese invasion (such as Taiwan). SOF are an essential part of foreign internal defense. These activities can also include broader efforts to conduct security force assistance.

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<sup>12</sup> 习近平 [Xi Jinping], 习近平关于总体国家安全观论述摘编 [Excerpts from Xi Jinping’s Discussion on Overall National Security] (Beijing: Central Party Literature Publishing House, 2018).

<sup>13</sup> Office of the Director of National Intelligence, *Annual Threat Assessment of the U.S. Intelligence Community* (McLean, VA: Office of the Director of National Intelligence, 2022), <https://www.dni.gov/files/ODNI/documents/assessments/ATA-2022-Unclassified-Report.pdf>.

- *Unconventional warfare*, which includes operations to advise, assist, and accompany non-state partners resisting a hostile actor by operating with or through an underground, auxiliary, and guerrilla force.
- *Information operations*—or Military Information Support Operations (MISO)—which involves activities to influence foreign audiences.

There are other critical SOF activities, such as special reconnaissance, civil affairs operations, direct action, counterterrorism, counter-proliferation of weapons of mass destruction, counterinsurgency, and hostage rescue and recovery. Yet such activities as foreign internal defense, unconventional warfare, and information operations are core activities for irregular warfare.

Despite the irregular threat from China, Russia, and Iran, SOF face several major hurdles today. First, the United States—including the Department of Defense—is still too heavily weighted toward preparing for conventional war. Most of the wargames conducted by the Department of Defense and outside entities cover conventional war, including with China over Taiwan. U.S. planning scenarios, or operations plans (OPLANs), are also heavily geared toward conventional war. Long-term U.S. Department of Defense research and development, budget planning, training, and force structure are likewise concentrated on conventional war. Professional military education at such locations as the U.S. Army War College, United States Army Command and General Staff College, and National Defense University is heavily biased toward conventional war. To be clear, it is important for the United States to build conventional and nuclear capabilities to deter and—if deterrence fails—fight. Nevertheless, they can't come at the expense of being adequately prepared to conduct irregular warfare.

Second, far too many individuals—including within the Department of Defense—focus on the direct action capabilities of SOF, but not such activities as foreign internal defense and unconventional warfare that are at the heart of irregular warfare. The activities of the U.S. Army's 10<sup>th</sup> Special Forces Group, for example, were critical in building the capacity of Ukrainian military forces before and after the Russian invasion.

#### **IV. Implications for Congress**

SOF are critical to U.S. national security. They have played—and will continue to play—an important role in countering terrorist groups and responding to weapons of mass destruction incidents. But they will be increasingly important in competition with such countries as China, Russia, and Iran—especially in irregular warfare. The future impact of SOF will depend on the quality of SOF personnel (including their commitment to high ethical standards, leadership, and accountability), mission readiness and resilience (including the preservation of the force and family), modernization of the force, and relationship with other Department of Defense entities, the U.S. interagency, and foreign allies and partners.

Congress has an important budgetary and oversight role with SOF. The rest of this section focuses on four areas: Section 1202, a review of irregular warfare, Section 333, and information operations.

**Section 1202:** Section 1202 of the National Defense Authorization Act for Fiscal Year 2018 allows the Secretary of Defense to spend money annually to “provide support to foreign forces, irregular forces, groups, or individuals” that conduct irregular warfare activities.<sup>14</sup> This funding is critical to help SOF conduct irregular warfare. As Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff Mark Milley noted, Section 1202 “is a highly useful tool for enabling irregular warfare operations in support of the NDS’s emphasis on expanding the competitive space to deter and defeat coercion and aggression by revisionist powers and rogue regimes.”<sup>15</sup> Congress should consider extending and expanding funding for Section 1202 activities, building on the program’s success in Europe, the Indo-Pacific, Middle East, and other regions. Indeed, Section 1202 should be increased to facilitate efforts by SOF to conduct irregular warfare against China, Russia, and Iran—as well as their state and non-state surrogates.<sup>16</sup>

**Review of Irregular Warfare:** Congress should consider directing the Department of Defense to conduct an irregular warfare posture review, including an analysis and assessment of DoD’s organizational design for irregular warfare and the identification of any capability, resourcing, or authority gaps that could inhibit the Department of Defense’s ability to effectively conduct and synchronize irregular warfare activities around the globe. The study could focus on:

- Roles and responsibilities for the planning and conduct of irregular warfare across the Department of Defense, including whether current structures are effectively supporting an integrated and appropriately resourced approach to irregular warfare.
- Existing policy guidance and authorities, including whether they provide sufficient clarity and agility for the Department of Defense to conduct irregular warfare.
- U.S. support to partner nations’ irregular warfare activities, including whether it is properly resourced and coordinated.

**Section 333:** Congress should direct the Department of Defense to report on how it prioritizes Section 333 “Authority to Build Capacity” funding, with specific focus on shortfalls and support to irregular warfare, as well as needs for authority modifications.<sup>17</sup> Section 333 of Title 10 of the U.S. Code (10 U.S.C. §333) gives the U.S. Secretary of Defense the authority to conduct or support programs to provide training and equipment to the national security forces of foreign countries.<sup>18</sup> The U.S. Department of Defense received roughly \$1.4 billion annually through Section 333, allocated across the geographic commands. But very little of this funding supports irregular warfare. Based on the U.S.’s main effort to compete with China—as well as such countries as Russia and Iran—this low prioritization on irregular warfare needs to change. Congress can help.

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<sup>14</sup> On Section 1202 see, for example, National Defense Authorization Act for Fiscal Year 2018, Pub. L. No. 115-91, § 1202 (2017).

<sup>15</sup> Testimony by Mark A. Milley, Before the Senate Armed Services Committee, July 2019, p. 68, [https://climateandsecurity.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/07/milley\\_apqs\\_07-11-19.pdf](https://climateandsecurity.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/07/milley_apqs_07-11-19.pdf).

<sup>16</sup> See, for example, Christopher B. Rich, Jr., Charles B. Johnson, and Paul T. Shirk, “By, With, and Through: Section 1202 and the Future of Unconventional Warfare,” *Journal of National Security Law and Policy*, 2022, Vol. 12, No. 3, pp. 537-582.

<sup>17</sup> Title 10 U.S.C., Ch. 16, §333 [from Sec. 1241, NDAA, FY2017, P.L.114-328].

<sup>18</sup> See, for example, Kimberly Jackson, *Authorities and Permissions to Conduct Army Special Operations Activities Abroad* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND, 2022).

**Information Operations:** The Department of Defense should increase its use of Military Information Support Operations (MISO) for Joint Force Commanders to achieve favorable outcomes in select foreign audiences, in coordination with interagency partners. As highlighted recently in Ukraine, state and non-state actors use information operations to compete for influence over target audiences in the political, military, economic, social, information, and infrastructure realms. China, Russia, and Iran are all involved in extensive information, disinformation, and misinformation campaigns against the United States and its allies and partners.

Thank you again for the opportunity to testify. As I have argued in this testimony, irregular warfare will likely be a major form of both competition and warfare between the United States and its main adversaries—such as China, Russia, and Iran. SOF are a critical component of irregular warfare. But the United States still has a long way to go in building a sufficiently-funded, organized, and coordinated irregular warfare campaign that includes SOF and other interagency organizations—such as the U.S. State Department, Treasury Department, and intelligence community—and foreign allies and partners.