



Army Green Berets assigned to 1st Battalion, 10th Special Forces Group, prepare to breach and enter building as part of Close Quarter Battle training in Germany, May 5, 2020 (U.S. Army/Thomas Mort)

Rediscovering the Value of Special Operations

By Isaiah Wilson III

Today, America's special operations forces (SOF) face a moment of strategic inflection and identity reflection at the threshold crossing of two fundamental questions: How has the character of global geopolitical competition changed? What are the implications for the future roles, missions, and force structures (that is, future utility) of SOF for the 2020s through the 2050s? Even as the United States

enters this age, this new era brings new demands of striking a rebalance from its focus for the past two decades on countering terrorism, violent extremist organizations (VEOs), and insurgencies to coping with threats of confrontations between so-called Great Powers. Tomorrow's special operations and SOF must adjust accordingly.

Lessons Gathered but Not Yet Learned?

Amid all the present-day ambiguities and grayness in all things, including security and defense matters, perhaps

the one thing crystal clear is that we must learn lessons from the past and make changes now to best face the future. And from such a "back to our futures" review, one lesson is clear: SOF is, as it has always been, a great value proposition for our country.

As we continue to think about and work through this question of (re)defining SOF's utility in Great Power competition (GPC), we need to go back to fundamentals. The win in this environment of competition is, as it has always been throughout the history of special operations, in "left-of-boom"

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Table. SOF Activities

<p>MISO Military information support operations are planned to convey selected information and indicators to foreign audiences to influence their emotions, motives, objective reasoning, and ultimately the behavior of foreign governments, organizations, groups, and individuals in a manner favorable to the originator's objectives.</p>	<p>UW Unconventional warfare consists of actions to enable a resistance movement or insurgency to coerce, disrupt, or overthrow a government or occupying power.</p>	<p>CAO Civil affairs operations enhance the relationship between military forces and civilian authorities in localities where military forces are present.</p>	<p>SR Special reconnaissance consists of actions conducted in sensitive environments to collect or verify information of strategic or operational significance.</p>
<p>SFA Security force assistance includes activities based on organizing, training, equipping, rebuilding, and advising various components of foreign security forces.</p>	<p>FID Foreign internal defense is comprised of activities that support a host nation's internal defense and development strategy and programs designed to protect against subversion, lawlessness, insurgency, terrorism, and other threats to their internal security, stability, and legitimacy.</p>	<p>HRR Hostage rescue and recovery consist of offensive measures taken to prevent, deter, preempt, and respond to terrorist threats and incidents, including recapture of U.S. facilities, installations, and sensitive material in overseas areas.</p>	<p>CT Counterterrorism includes actions taken directly against terrorist networks and indirectly to influence and render global and regional environments inhospitable to terrorist networks.</p>
<p>C-WMD Counterproliferation of weapons of mass destruction describes activities to support U.S. Government efforts to curtail the conceptualization, development, possession, proliferation, use, and effects of weapons of mass destruction, related expertise, materials, technologies, and means of delivery by state and nonstate actors.</p>	<p>CI Counterinsurgency is the blend of civilian and military efforts designed to end insurgent violence and facilitate a return to peaceful political processes.</p>	<p>DA Direct action includes short-duration strikes and other small-scale offensive actions employing specialized military capabilities to seize, destroy, capture, exploit, recover, or damage designated targets.</p>	<p>FHA Foreign humanitarian assistance is the range of DOD humanitarian activities conducted outside the United States and its territories to relieve or reduce human suffering, disease, hunger, or privation.</p>

operations, activities, and investments. The key is comprehensive integrated deterrence. In other words, the win is achieved through placing the joint, interagency, intergovernmental, multinational force in positional advantage over competitors and adversaries through access, placement, and strategic influence, setting the conditions for the possibilities of winning before—or even without—the fight.

As the United States and the West learned in the 20th century, preventing the Cold War from going hot was an essential element in the theory of victory in the strategic rivalry between totalitarianism and communism on one side and democracy and capitalism on the other. The United States and its allies and partners achieved their geostrategic interests in the Cold War without fighting the Soviet Union directly in open armed conflict, and the same logic can apply in the 21st century.

GPC is the high end of a rising scale of international relations ranging from interactions of cooperation, competition, conflict, and classic war. The potential impact of SOF's utility in an environment of competition will demand, as it always has, anticipating, finding, and creating ways and opportunities that allow the Nation and its allies and partners to do two things simultaneously: lower the amplitude and the temperature of competition and conflict between competitors and deter and prevent a next Great Power war from happening at all.

SOF must compete in the information space and not concede to their adversaries. Today's new compound security normal for SOF will be to operate in remote, denied, and disrupted environments under ubiquitous intelligence surveillance with the threat of targeting by high-end military capabilities, including weapons of mass destruction, where the cyber and electronic warfare domains

are contested and increased scrutiny is routine. We will need to return to the ideas of special operations use and utility that empowers *SOF as Sentinel*, preparing the environment as the frontline ambassadors of the joint force and as the “first three feet” employed in any competition or confrontation zone.

Rediscovering SOF for a New Age: A “Back to the Future” Approach

To understand and appreciate SOF of the future, we must understand SOF then to now. From an organizational perspective, arguably, there have been three previous ages of U.S. special operations, beginning in World War II with the “Wild Bill” Donovan years and the Office of Strategic Services. The 1960s perhaps mark an official beginning of the second age of SOF. President John F. Kennedy was visionary in his efforts during this time to increase the capability

of the Department of Defense pointedly in the conduct of counterinsurgency and unconventional warfare, focused at the time, as President Kennedy stated plainly, “against the struggle against despotic insurgency.”¹ The so-called third age was the period of a global war on terror and finding China and Russia probing the perimeter of their spheres of prior influence and to an extent beyond. Key events marking the transition from this third age to the fourth age can be appreciated in compounding occurrences dating back to “spring movements” as early as 2006. These movements began with the orange and green movements of the Republic of Georgia, Ukraine, and Iran, continued through Arab variations of the same including Egypt (2010 and a second wave in 2013), Syria (2011), and the ongoing Syria-Iraq compound conflict (which began in 2014), just to name a few.

The U.S. and North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) withdrawal from Afghanistan in late summer of 2021 may mark an ending of the third age. However, the fourth age is marked by a clear exploitation of traditional Western institutions and influence, especially at fragile geographic and sectoral nexuses and with the Russians and Chinese openly no longer playing by established rules and norms. One need look no further for examples than China’s island-building activities and Russia’s “little green men” territorial incursions.

SOF’s Enduring Value at the Intersectionality of Threats

The new Interim National Security Strategic Guidance speaks to all these aspects and dynamics of a “compounded security threats” world in terms of an “intersectionality of threats.”² At the heart of such intersectionality lies a new security dilemma—the compound security dilemma—that today, much more than in the past, demands nothing less than a working at the nexuses and between the boundaries and seams of our own created divisions between matters of “defense and security” from the traditional and nontraditional “water’s edge” that separates the foreign from the domestic.

SOF have incredible value in this intersectional space. And they always have. SOF understand gray zones and are making sound adjustments to not only compete but also prevail. As we—in collaboration with the joint force, our interagency partners, and our foreign country allies—look ahead, SOF must once again gain the influence, leverage, and positional advantage (that is, physical, virtual/digital, and cognitive) necessary to compete and protect the Nation’s interests short of armed conflict while also establishing the ability to transition rapidly to combat if, when, and where required, enabling our country and its allies to deliver overmatching decisive combat power. Choosing the right tools at the right time and for the right problem to be solved is the most imperative gray matter requirement for SOF leaders today and for the SOF professionals of tomorrow.

SOF mission sets, in and of themselves, have not significantly changed. However, the environment in which they are conducted has continued to change significantly. This was true for the last 20 years that found special operators missioned more in roles of direct action, crisis response, counterterrorism, and counter-VEO profiles, but not exclusively so. One benefit of 20 years of countering VEOs is the strong ties we have to the interagency community, not to mention allies and partners. This was just as true throughout SOF’s prior 55 years of use and utility dating back to World War II. And this will remain true in future years.

SOF is tailor-made to conduct military information support operations, psychological operations, and influence operations. There will be great need for these capabilities now and in the future. Again, working with and through alliances and partnerships is not just a nice-to-have additive, but rather an essential part of any intended winning solution. Building partner capacity, advising and assisting indigenous resistance forces, and leveraging language and cultural knowledge are longstanding SOF strengths.

Operating with and by proxies and surrogates, through partners, and in the gray zone are just additional longstanding

SOF applied art and strengths. Using commercial-off-the-shelf equipment and being flexible, agile, and on the cutting edge of technology are other classic SOF strengths that will be as vital as we move into the fourth age.

Tech-Enabling Tomorrow’s SOF HE²RO

The compound security character of the global security environment is such that it will demand a future utility of SOF that is equally compounded: a comprehensive combination of all the skills, techniques, and uses of technological and operational methods of all three preceding ages, amplified by 21st-century technological advancements. Nothing less than this comprehensive, joint-combined utility of SOF philosophy, culture, and approach is required for overmatching power in and under fourth-age conditions and in this period of rebalance for assuring an integrated deterrent power capacity for the Nation.

The dynamics of stability and control are changing as emerging technologies such as 5G, artificial intelligence (AI), and the Internet of Things lead to a decentralization of influence and less hierarchical political structures. Rapid advancement and proliferation of these new technologies is also redefining traditional views and norms on such things as what it means to win, what constitutes a crime, and what behavior is acceptable in (post) modern war. SOF leaders must be able to apply AI. Future SOF professionals must be (come) AI-ready leaders.

Special Operations as Part of Integrated Statecraft Solutions

In addition, SOF’s utility must be considered not as transactional but rather transformational. The way we measure the return on investment on SOF must be measured in new ways that fully acculturate the interests and capabilities of allies and partners into our own national use and utility of force strategies and calculations. This is comprehensive joint-combined readiness.

Looking ahead, SOF force structure, capabilities, and design will also likely need to adapt significantly to this new

era. In this fourth age, geography has returned with a vengeance as a governing dynamic of international relations. Also, positional advantage is once again a determinative factor of this new compound security world (dis)order. This speaks to matters of geostrategy and is vital because attaining strategic influence from key geographical areas is an essential element to the disruptors' playbooks, and more pointedly, to China's expansion globally as they seek to couple targeted control and access to key geostrategic locations to outmaneuver and hold at risk U.S. interests regionally and globally.³ And much of China's and Russia's actions are done in a manner that operates outside traditional boundaries set by long-standing international rules and norms.

While the United States cannot and should never envy such subversive approaches that seek to undermine the rules-based international order, much less attempt to replicate them, we can instead orient our efforts on positive aims that reinforce our democratic values and ideas that underpin our conceptions of political sovereignty and territorial integrity, the very cornerstones of the international system we seek to strengthen in our strategic competition with China and Russia as major power-brokering disruptor states along with other malign actors. We do this by helping our allies and partners in their efforts to build national resilience and resistance against predatory, subversive, gray zone threats and by helping to shape mutually beneficial security environments through our foreign assistance and security cooperation programs. As far back as its origins in World War II, support of national resistance and resilience operations has long been a core competency of special operations as well as a cornerstone to SOF's use and utility as an early indication and warning, strong-pointing, and "rheostat" capability for the Nation.

As we know, Russia, China, and Iran are deliberate in the what and the where of their activities, and it is the *where* that makes issues of geostrategy all the more relevant. For example, amplifying

around 2014, Russian operational reach in Crimea, Cyprus, Greece, Egypt, and Syria has been about ensuring that there is a buffer zone (Ukraine) between Russia and NATO, about holding the eastern Mediterranean sea lines of communication at risk, and about restoring Russia's role on the world stage.

When it comes to China's Chinese Communist Party (CCP), its economic activities through the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) are significant indicators of China's global ambitions. China's efforts in Latin America involve gaining influence to place the Panama Canal in a series of overlapping influence levers to salami slice to a new normal of either control or positional denial of U.S. access, basing, and overflight, all while carving away support from Taiwan via BRI financial inducements to fragile democracies in the Western Hemisphere. With regard to Africa, China is outperforming the United States diplomatically and economically. China has more embassies in Africa than the United States, which erodes American influence and the dwindling support for Taiwan from previously friendly African states. China is now Africa's largest trading partner and the largest bilateral lender to many African countries, "creating an asymmetric power dynamic with the potential for dependency."⁴

Chinese strategists think and write using geopolitical terms, dividing the world up into regions or zones, and deploy concepts such as "heartland" and "rimland" in their works with frequent direct referrals to the great geostrategic theorists such as Sir Halford Mackinder and Alfred Thayer Mahan. SOF leaders need to think and act in geopolitical and geostrategic terms as well, particularly if they seek to achieve intellectual overmatch against their CCP and Kremlin counterparts.

We must also recognize that our competitors and adversaries have already redefined the notion of competition, even of warfare itself, and the role of their militaries within it. Loosely referred to as the *X* in special operations, objectives—or rather the specific goal that directs and purposes every military operation—have often been mistakenly considered only in terms of the physical

domain.⁵ The concept of the *X* has now become all-domain, demanding a reframing of the way we fight in the future and a reframing of even what constitutes a fight itself. In the fourth age and under conditions of compound security, special operations professionals must be trans-domain problem-solvers. A geostrategic positional advantage approach also forces a competitor or adversary to focus their resources at what the famed George Kennan called the "strong points."⁶

For this next age, we will need SOF to play point-versus-area defense at or proximate to these geographic, human security, and cognitive strong points. And in so doing, it is important to note that the point of action may be far removed from the point of effect. And in that sense, SOF can indirectly affect behavioral and decisionmaking calculations through actions that may be in other physical and nonphysical (for example, virtual, cognitive, and ideational) domains. This is the exact logic of placing combined joint interagency task forces (CJIATFs) within combined joint special operations task forces placed at or proximate to the geostrategic nexuses.

SOF has employed this logic worldwide and through several evolutions of the find, fix, finish, exploit, analyze, and disseminate actionable-intelligence CJIATF process. For example, in Iraq, SOF Task Force 714 was able to adapt to the mission of finding and dismantling al Qaeda in Iraq through the fusion of interagency, intergovernmental, and allied and foreign country partner collaboration, producing the very sort of big data-supported, intelligence-driven operations throughout and at key critical locations across a vast theater of operations and activities that is intended when we speak of whole-of-government solutions.⁷ It is through such command and control and force-projection platforms—strategically placed, sustainable counterterrorism plus GPC platforms—where use (employment) and utility (service provision) of SOF can and must be combined and integrated and where and how compound threats can be overmatched in cost-effective ways.

Special Forces Soldier assigned to 10th Special Forces Group demonstrates chemical light "buzzsaw" used to signal incoming aircraft at night, May 10, 2021, in North Macedonia, during exercise Trojan Footprint 21 (U.S. Navy/Rob Kunzig)





Two Navy Special Warfare Combatant-Craft Crewmen assigned to Naval Special Warfare engage target during joint live-fire training exercise with Hellenic navy operators from Underwater Demolition Command, in Aegean Sea near Greece, July 16, 2020 (U.S. Army/Aven Santiago)

Another Case in Point: Syria

We need to look no further than SOF's operational placement in and throughout northeast Syria since 2014 and how that presence and those roles have evolved over time for proof of principle of SOF's utility beyond counterterrorism and counter-VEOs, beyond the context of the war on terror, and moreover, as an expression of integrated deterrence in action. What began as an effort to destroy the physical manifestations of the caliphate through direct action, raids, and strikes, many times in concert with state and nonstate actors committed to defeating the so-called Islamic State (IS), quickly became a mission to deter further Russian (and Turkish) territorial provocation, assure new partners (Syrian Kurds), deny freedom of action to Iran and its surrogates and proxies, defend critical resources and infrastructure, deny any resurgence of IS as an existential threat to friendly regional governments, and maintain U.S. access and influence where the East and West truly converge.

The fact that the U.S. Government did this with such minimal investment, while assuming acceptable risk, must be understood and appreciated, even lauded, for what it was: a new paradigm in which the use and utility of SOF goes well beyond its two decades of direct action merely in the *context* of counterterrorism, but instead where direct action and counterterrorism are integral use-of-force activities endemic to, and not separate or separable from, GPC.

In this enlarged context, from use to utility of force, SOF serves as the regulating rheostat for a new geopolitical environment that challenges conventional wisdom but demands new ways of thinking and acting toward an array of threats, state and nonstate, and the underlying conditions that drive them.

Implementing Change: The Future of SOF Professionals

We will maintain the proficiency of special operations forces to focus on crisis response and priority counterterrorism and unconventional warfare missions.

And we will develop capabilities to better compete and deter gray zone actions.

—Interim National Security Strategic Guidance

In today's strategic environment, information technology has significantly enabled action in the cognitive domain. For SOF, the cognitive domain is the primary medium through which we operate. As we transition through an era of attempted strategic control, we will move into an era of strategic influence, the currency of (Great Power) competition. This demands a new SOF H.E².R.O.TM—the highly educated, hyper (tech)-enabled, responsible operator. This comprehensive SOF utility for the future will produce:

- continuous integration of national instruments of power and influence in support of national objectives
- an unprecedented degree of global integration of the all-domain resources available from the combatant commands, Service component commands, and theater special operations commands to generate

- advantage for ourselves and dilemmas for our competitors
- assured access through strategic shaping and support to resistance and resilience strong-pointing of allies and partners
 - critical and creative strategic thinking across the Joint Staff and other joint headquarters and approaches to joint warfighting
 - highly effective coalition, allied, international partner, and U.S. coordination and integration
 - deeper understanding of the implications of disruptive and future technologies for adversaries and ourselves.⁸

At U.S. Special Operations Command (USSOCOM), our Campaign Plan for Global Special Operations is our blueprint. We are focusing in real investment terms on making informational advantage and influence operations, adding both as new tips-of-spears to SOF's quiver of capabilities. USSOCOM's recently created Joint Military Information Support Operations WebOps Center is only one example of the types of new emphases on new operations, activities, and investments reflecting a rediscovery of the full utility of special operations.

The future focus of special operations will be what it has always been: to remain exquisite, proactive, and aimed at solving problems in ways that avoid moral injury to the Nation. This imperative has always found the country's special operators, working with and through allies and partner forces, in the gray zones between competition, conflict, and war. As it has always been, so it shall continue to be. JFQ

geographical factors as they inform, constrain, or affect political and military planning. It is the systematic analysis to develop a sensitive understanding of geographical realities, political forces, historical experience, and the factors that change these to formulate prescriptions on the application of military power to achieve vital objectives. Derived from the Center for Strategic and International Studies' Brzezinski Institute on Geostrategy, available at <<https://www.csis.org/programs/brzezinski-institute-geostrategy>>.

⁴ Landry Signé, "How to Restore U.S. Credibility in Africa," *Foreign Policy*, January 15, 2021, available at <<https://foreignpolicy.com/2021/01/15/united-states-africa-biden-administration-relations-china/>>.

⁵ U.S. Special Operations Command, "SOF 2030," February 7, 2020, 14.

⁶ Giles D. Harlow and George C. Maerz, eds., *Measures Short of War: The George F. Kennan Lectures at the National War College, 1946-47* (Washington, DC: NDU Press, 1991), available at <https://www.files.ethz.ch/isn/139669/1991-05_Measures_Short_War.pdf>.

⁷ Richard H. Schultz 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, available at <<https://mwi.usma.edu/big-data-at-war-special-operations-forces-project-maven-and-twenty-first-century-warfare/>>.

⁸ *Developing Today's Joint Officers for Tomorrow's Ways of War: The Joint Chiefs of Staff Vision and Guidance for Professional Military Education & Talent Management* (Washington, DC: The Joint Staff, May 1, 2020), available at <https://www.jcs.mil/Portals/36/Documents/Doctrine/education/jcs_pme_tm_vision.pdf?ver=2020-05-15-102429-817>.

Notes

¹ United States Special Operations Command, "Guidance on Briefing Notes," available at <<https://slideplayer.com/slide/9402754/>>.

² White House, *Interim National Security Strategic Guidance* (Washington, DC: The White House, March 2021), available at <<https://www.whitehouse.gov/wp-content/uploads/2021/03/NSC-1v2.pdf>>.

³ *Geostrategy* is a subfield of geopolitics, a type of foreign policy guided principally by

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Baltics Left of Bang: The Southern Shore

By Marcel Hadeed, Mariusz Kaminski, Monika Sus, Brett Swaney, and Amelie Theussen



Detering and defending against Russian aggression in the Baltic Sea region prior to open hostilities,

or "left of bang," is a political problem that requires a coordinated regional approach by the Baltic southern shore states—Poland, Germany, and Denmark—in conjunction with their North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) and European Union (EU) allies. Despite common membership in NATO and the EU, the southern shore states hold differing strategic perspectives that reflect the challenges of a coordinated approach. These states should prioritize Baltic maritime security, regional mobility, and unconventional warfare capabilities in coordination with regional allies and partners. They should also leverage or enhance EU capabilities in cyber, information, and strategic communications to better deter and defend against Russian hostile measures.



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