



U.S. Army 10th Special Forces Group (Airborne) Soldier checks map of training area during long-range snowmobile movement drill for Northern Griffin 2018 in Rovaniemi, Finland, March 12, 2018 (U.S. Army/Kent Redmond)

U.S. Special Operations Command's Future, by Design

By Charles N. Black, Richard D. Newton, Mary Ann Nobles, and David Charles Ellis

As U.S. Special Operations Command (USSOCOM) celebrates its 30th anniversary, it faces a future characterized by increasingly complex, dynamic, and ill-defined security challenges. And since the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, USSOCOM has been at war for half of its existence. During this period,

USSOCOM has rapidly evolved into a global enterprise with broad joint warfighting, interagency, and international partnering responsibilities.¹ To better address the highly complex challenges of modern conflicts, USSOCOM developed the USSOCOM Design Way (SDW), an approach to problem-solving

that encourages creativity, critical thinking, and innovation.

As the command has matured, a number of contradictions have emerged. First, although USSOCOM has Service-like responsibilities, with a mandate to man, train, and equip the Nation's special operations forces (SOF), it "owns" no forces. Because SOF are under combatant command of USSOCOM, with operational control exercised through the USSOCOM Service component commands, the headquarters sets policies and standards

Charles N. Black is a Managing Partner at Xundis Global and Adjunct Professor at Joint Special Operations University (JSOU). Richard D. Newton, Ph.D., is a Course Director at JSOU. Mary Ann Nobles is a Sociocultural Analyst at Ellis Analytics, Inc. David Charles Ellis is a Resident Senior Fellow at JSOU.

for its Service components to achieve, yet these components are still subordinate to their parent Services. Second, when USSOCOM was given authorities to assume warfighting responsibilities in 2005, it was limited to “synchronizing” activities with the geographic combatant commands (GCC) charged with integrating SOF into the joint activities ongoing or planned within their areas of responsibility.² Third, many of the missions assigned to USSOCOM were of a combined, joint, and interagency nature, with authorities and permissions distributed across multiple commands and agencies. Against this backdrop, USSOCOM and SOF relied on joint and Service planning methods such as the Joint Planning Process (JPP) and Military Decision Making Process (MDMP) to plan its assigned operations and missions.

While JPP and MDMP are excellent processes for what are primarily warfighting functions, their limitations as planning tools for comprehensive operations were exposed during more than a decade of complex operations requiring whole-of-government approaches. By 2015, then-USSOCOM Commander General Joseph Votel recognized the need for a problem-solving process that better addressed persistent, seemingly intractable problems. Thus, he inaugurated the USSOCOM Design Way.³

To restore SOF’s tradition of unconventionality, General Votel judged that overcoming complex problems required reinvigorating the creativity and innovation that had gone dormant across the SOF enterprise.⁴ Eighteen months after the command launched the SDW project, the USSOCOM Chief of Staff, Major General J. Marcus Hicks, noted that

USSOCOM has embraced design-thinking and it has improved the way we deal with complex and ill-defined challenges. The more we learn to use design-thinking and become comfortable with its collaborative approach, the more it will improve our critical thinking, creativity, and innovation, thereby helping the command overcome many of the bureaucratic obstacles that every large organization faces.⁵

Based on USSOCOM’s experience, this article suggests that SDW offers an approach beneficial to other joint, interagency, or multinational organizations for confronting and addressing a wide range of complex challenges. SDW goes beyond operations planning and has proved useful in confronting the complexities of resourcing, strategy, policy and acquisitions, as well as informing, and leading, joint planning and programming. This article first explains why USSOCOM required a design-thinking solution. It next describes SDW while distinguishing it from operational design as described in Joint Publication 5-0, *Joint Planning*. The article then offers practical examples of how SDW has been applied to current challenges at USSOCOM. It concludes with a prediction of how the SDW might evolve to potentially benefit the broader joint force and interagency community in deriving truly comprehensive approaches to the challenges that bedevil the Nation.

A Unique Command in a Structured World

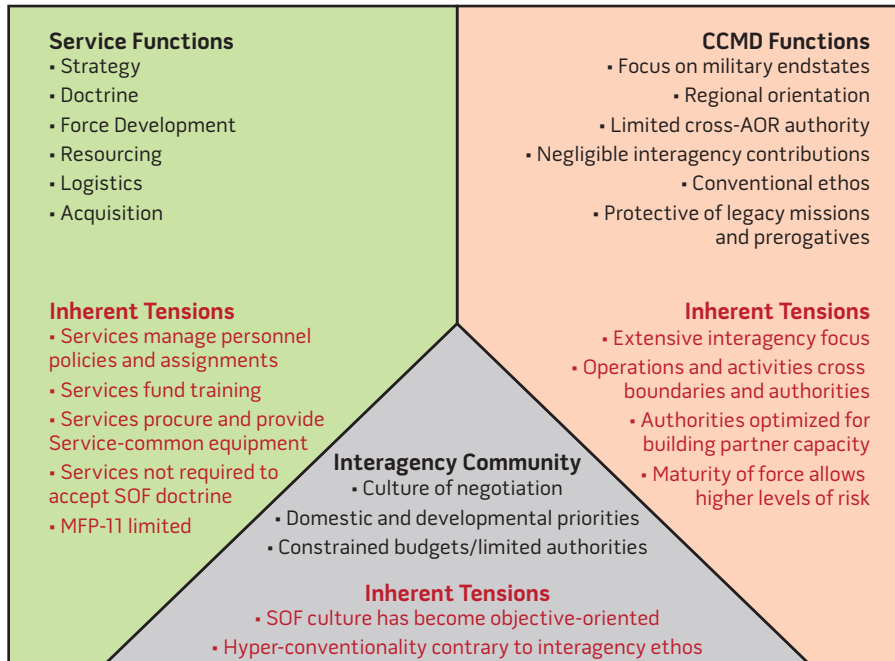
For operationally oriented activities, joint and Service planning processes provide structured, repeatable, understandable, and scalable methodologies for accomplishing complicated tasks. It is important to note that while doctrinal planning processes recognize the need for a comprehensive approach in order to fully understand the complexity of modern warfare, in practice most planners ignore doctrinal recommendations to spend time gaining a deep understanding of the nature of the question they are being asked to answer. They usually jump right into determining how to achieve the proffered endstate. While doctrinal planning processes recommend that commanders develop a comprehensive understanding of the environment before planners begin framing the problem, practice has repeatedly defied doctrine. Reality has shown that military planners typically, and intentionally, forgo the inclusion of interagency and multinational partners and are often frustrated when a consensus-based campaign plan is required.⁶

What the USSOCOM design-thinking team discovered was the confusion inherent in joint doctrine; first directing a comprehensive and inclusive approach to operational design, but then focusing squarely on a military endstate. In another place, joint doctrine highlights the essential nature of gaining an understanding of the environment and defining the problem before planning, but at the same time dives right into determining centers of gravity, critical factors, termination criteria, and so forth, that are the essential outcomes of mission analysis. The formulaic structure of JP 5-0 unnecessarily crushes the creativity and innovation that operational design was intended to restore.

Between 2001 and 2015, USSOCOM was cushioned by an extraordinary infusion of resources at the headquarters and across the enterprise.⁷ Incongruities or gaps in processes were compensated for by extra people and ad hoc solutions. Authors of the USSCOM white paper noted, “In many cases, conventional planning, programming, budgeting, and procurement processes [were] outpaced by special operators adapting and improvising to address the dynamic and complex situations they [were] facing.”⁸ The focus across the SOF enterprise was on maintaining high levels of direct action proficiency, what some have called “hyper-conventionality,” and ensuring the force was adequately trained and equipped for this narrowly focused mission. The observation was that SOF and USSOCOM had lost the spirit of creativity and innovation that had made them “special” in the past.⁹ SDW offered an approach that encouraged creativity, critical reflection, and innovation beyond operational planning in order to address the huge array of complex challenges facing a globally oriented combatant command in the unique position of also fulfilling many of the responsibilities traditionally reserved for the Services.

In the process of determining an approach that would restore creativity and critical thinking to USSOCOM’s planning and resourcing challenges, the SDW designers rediscovered the inherent challenges facing USSOCOM as a functional combatant command with global

Figure 1. USSOCOM's Challenges



responsibilities, but one that remains a hybrid creation exercising some of the responsibilities and authorities of a Service and operating in an environment where negotiation and diplomacy are usually more important than warfighting skills. Because of this unique predicament, USSOCOM wrestled with complex social problems for which JPP and MDMP were inappropriate tools.

Figure 1 details the unique tensions USSOCOM faces given its hybrid nature. As a Service-like entity, it sets the requirements for SOF but relies on its Service components for personnel, common equipment, and the majority of training. Each Service sets its own internal career paths for its personnel, which often supersede SOF-specific personnel requirements. As a combatant command, USSOCOM can only synchronize its forces' activities. The global combatant commands actually control the commitment of SOF through their regionally aligned theater special operations commands (TSOC). Transregional issues, for which USSOCOM is ideally suited due to its global mission, inevitably become regional problems because the GCCs retain operational control of forces, which requires exhaustive coordination

efforts. As a member of the interagency community, USSOCOM often serves as an integrating element with national agencies, sometimes in the lead, but most often in support. Differences among interagency member resourcing, missions, and priorities contribute to extraordinary complexity in achieving unity of effort since all participants essentially volunteer to work together.

From the organizational culture perspective, the SDW team realized that over the course of almost 15 years of constant conflict, the command's focus was leaning heavily toward the tactical realm. More importantly, though, the staff of officers and middle management at the headquarters, components, and TSOCs, only a few of whom come from the core SOF military occupational skill sets, seemed to become mired in a bureaucracy of support that morphed into an end unto itself. The SDW team offered the USSOCOM Design Way to help the SOF enterprise regain the ethos that had made it so successful during the first half of the command's existence.

SDW Characteristics

The USSOCOM Design Way is a practical solution for synthesizing a variety

of perspectives across U.S. joint and interagency capabilities.¹⁰ At its core, the SDW focuses participants' efforts on broadening their perspectives and engaging in deliberate research and reflection. Consequently, subtle but critical differences exist between more doctrinal design processes promulgated by the Joint Staff and Services. Doctrine-based planning begins with the commander issuing an operational approach in the form of initial planning guidance—the starting point for achieving an endstate.¹¹ Doctrinal processes permit creativity and innovation in terms of how the variety of actors *converge* to achieve the designated military endstate. However, it is the commander's understanding of the environment that guides staff convergence.¹² The potential for conceptual group-think relative to complex problems elevates under these circumstances since leaders typically have little to no time to devote to deliberate thinking in the modern military context.¹³

In contrast, the SDW recognizes that complex problems require a learning process through which commanders are educated along with their staffs by way of an iterative process of discovery. Design-thinking in this way forms a complementary bond with traditional planning methods by first informing commander's guidance.¹⁴ Obviously, time available for learning plays a crucial role in the degree of appreciation staffs may accomplish, but even limited design efforts can appreciably improve approaches to complex problems.

The USSOCOM Design Way is comprised of three elements: Appreciate the Context, Define the Problem, and Develop an Approach (see figure 2). Moreover, SDW intentionally adopts a systemic—different from a systematic—view of complex problems. In so doing, SDW recognizes that bureaucratic, organizational, and population-centric activities operate in a world of open systems, not closed ones.¹⁵ This is a crucial distinction because current military planning constructs are based on the theory that military endstates may be achieved through rigorous application of

engineering principles, identifying all relevant variables, controlling the variables through proven practices and limiting uncontrollable variables, and then repeating those practices through doctrinally approved processes, like JPP and MDMP. While such practice is certainly possible for complicated problems, when factoring in the human elements that characterize modern military operations, doctrinal planning processes tend to break down, often with dire consequences.¹⁶

Appreciate the Context is, therefore, the most important part of SDW, as it empowers commanders and staffs to explore complex problems from a multitude of perspectives, both internal and, critically, external to the organization. SDW specifically seeks out *divergent* perspectives to better anticipate how organizational, social, cultural, and political interests might respond to the range of potential actions being contemplated. Design-thinking acknowledges the difficulty of overcoming organizational and personal cognitive blinders without meaningful deliberation among advocates of differing perspectives.¹⁷ As a conceptual process, SDW encourages a culture of innovation by “exploring all facets of a situation in order to discover hidden potentialities and overlooked opportunities.”¹⁸

Using an open systems approach, the SDW rejects the notion of endstates because when dealing with complex situations, there is no end to human interaction. At best, there will be a range of future beginnings, which attitudinally indicates a need for constant engagement, reflection, and updated appreciations of how a system continues to evolve in response to the actions being taken (figure 3). Social interactions are not linear and rarely quantifiable in an engineering sense. Planning processes that presume the mathematical repeatability of social systems are subject to significant risk.¹⁹ The task from a design-thinking perspective is for the commander and staff to determine a range of acceptable futures and navigate the evolving and emerging conditions as best as possible. Interestingly, Lieutenant General James Dubik, USA (Ret.), uses the term

acceptable, durable political arrangement with his students at Georgetown University when discussing the frustrating (at least for military planners) inconclusive nature of public diplomacy—an overwhelmingly sociological, and thus complex context.

With an open systems perspective, then, the focus of critical observation and reflection should be on why trends are moving in a particular direction and how actions might be adjusted in order to change the trending direction of the system or achieve different potential outcomes. The Appreciate the Context phase explores the mental models driving human systems and investigates how changes in structures might affect the patterns and trends that define the character of organizations, societies, and cultural groupings.²⁰

The early explorers’ search for the Northwest Passage might be used as a metaphor to explain design-thinking. Their desired future was a shorter, faster sea route around North America. The problem was that no human knew where or if such a passage existed. So as early as 1497, the approach was for explorers to sail west from Europe to probe and research different paths. Each expedition (inquiry) was influenced by known and unknown factors, few of which were controllable, yet these factors shaped the next iteration of the approach (iterations of research, discovery, and reflection). It has only been since 2009 that we now enjoy a true Northwest Passage—but it has taken climatic changes in the region, something certainly not foreseen 600 years ago, to enable the emergence of an ice-free Northwest Passage connecting the Atlantic and Pacific oceans across the top of North America, at least for a few weeks each year (figure 4).

Determining the range of desired futures, that is, recognizing that the future is an aspiration and a direction rather than a military endstate in the doctrinal sense, enables the commander and staff to discover obstacles and opportunities in the trends, structures, and mental models that define the environment. These obstacles and opportunities translate into the gaps in policy, capabilities, resources,

Figure 2. Elements of USSOCOM Design-Thinking

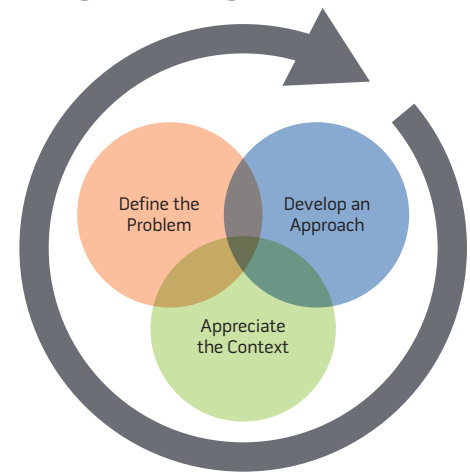
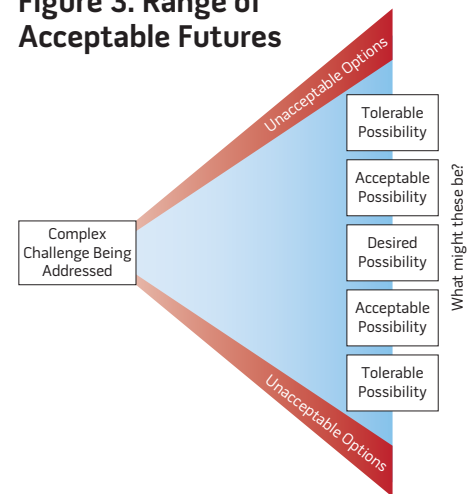


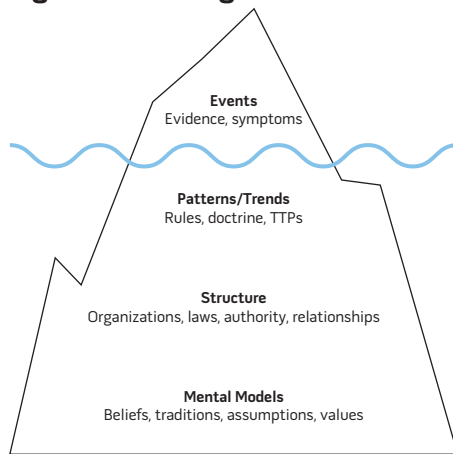
Figure 3. Range of Acceptable Futures



partners, access, placement, and/or knowledge that might prevent changes in negative trends or imperil positive ones.²¹ Once the desired future is determined and the obstacles and opportunities identified, a commander and staff are then able to Define the Problem. This statement captures the commander’s revised, comprehensive understanding of the complex problem the staff is being asked to address. The result is a significantly higher likelihood of the staff solving the “correct” problem.

With an initial appreciation of the context in hand and the problem appropriately identified, the commander

Figure 4. Iceberg Model



and staff are now able to Develop an Approach that will become the commander's guidance to the staff. Depending on the situation, the approach may take the format of doctrinal commander's planning guidance (purpose, endstate, operational risk, etc.), an abridged commander's estimate, commander's vision, commander's intent, or a simple narrative. The key element is that the document, in whatever form it takes, is the *commander's* articulation of the approach the staff should take.²² For complex challenges, it is nearly always helpful to include both a visualization and a narrative statement to explain how to move the system from the current state toward the range of acceptable futures.

Applying the USSOCOM Design Way to joint and interagency problem sets seems a natural evolution. Since the SDW emphasizes appreciation as the most important step, participants in a design inquiry are afforded ample time to contribute their personal and organizational appreciations of the topic at hand.²³ It is essential to note that design-thinking does not distribute research roles according to directorate or organizational competency, such as the J2 owning intelligence research and only the J4 researching logistics concerns. Instead, SDW advocates for team-based research and learning, thereby overcoming the issue of functional stovepipes.²⁴ Through collaboration, the probability for developing a common perspective improves, but this does not relieve

executive-level stakeholders from participating in the process and providing their interpretations of higher headquarters' requirements, and the political and strategic situation tempered by the benefits of the commander's experience and education.

SDW in Action

The impact of SDW is not theoretical. It has been applied at USSOCOM headquarters with excellent effect. In the past year, design facilitators from the Joint Special Operations University (JSOU) have facilitated design inquiries with the USSOCOM J4, J5, and J6, and supported North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) Allies as well. Demand for SDW courses provided by JSOU has doubled based on staff-level interest, interest from the Services, the TSOCs, other combatant commands, and other governmental agencies. Perhaps more telling, though, is the growth in demand being placed on JSOU to facilitate additional design inquiries as these practical applications of SDW demonstrate tangible success. Some examples of the impact SDW has had on current complex problems follow.

Colonel Steve Allen, USSOCOM Director of Logistics, concluded,

*Design-thinking allowed the SOCOM J4 a holistic perspective on how our logistics enterprise supports the SOCOM commander's priorities. The opportunity to bring together a diverse group of logisticians from across the global logistics enterprise enabled divergent thinking, which ultimately has informed new ideas on global sustainment and logistics in support of future SOF operations.*²⁵

In December 2015, the J4 was confronted with preparing for the annual enterprise-wide logistics conference that usually concluded with executive sessions and decisions to address major problems. The first challenge was how to appreciate the multitude of problems the directorate faced.

From 2001–2014, SOF transformed from a force designed for short duration, surgical strike missions, and small,

discreet teams building partner capacities with minimal U.S. support to a global network of geographically dispersed forces engaged in long-duration operations. From the earliest days of the command, SOF logistics capabilities were built to sustain episodic small-scale and low "footprint" operations, actions, and activities. For larger operations, SOF has relied heavily on the Services to provide most logistics and base operating support, especially after the opening days of an operation. This construct worked well prior to the terrorist attacks of 2001 because SOF were able to leverage mature theaters and operate alongside robust conventional forces and capable strategic partners in what was a relatively resource rich and often low threat environment. This reality has now changed with reductions in conventional force structure and the requirement for SOF to support themselves globally in what are usually immature theaters—little to no U.S. presence, infrastructure, or support, for example, Africa, Southeast Asia, Central and South America.²⁶ All of these factors compounded the J4's challenges to effective sustainment and logistics support to special operations.

To further complicate the problem, the USSOCOM logistics enterprise is comprised of the four Service components and the TSOCs and is tied into each of the GCCs and their respective executive agents—for example, the Navy is the executive agent for U.S. Pacific Command, the Army for U.S. European Command, and the Air Force for U.S. Northern Command (USNORTHCOM).

This global enterprise represents more a confederation of separate commands with different missions, unique challenges, and dependent requirements than an integrated logistics chain. Many members also share challenges centered on supporting a large global SOF footprint across geographic boundaries. As the focal point for SOF logistics and sustainment, the J4 directorate has wide-ranging responsibilities associated with USSOCOM's train, organize, and equip mission as well as the exercise of combatant command over TSOCs. As



Estonian and U.S. special operations forces consolidate after fast rope training from U.S. Air Force CV-22 Osprey, assigned to 352nd Special Operations Wing, near Amari, Estonia, December 12, 2017 (U.S. Army/Matt Britton)

such, the J4 must successfully navigate a web of policy, organizational command and control, and fiscal and legal restraints and constraints to meet its many responsibilities.

The realities of the strategic environment demanded that SOF logisticians refine, terminate, or transform how they thought about challenges and how the joint global logistics enterprise applied the principles of logistics in support of military strategy. Even in historically mature theaters like U.S. Central Command, force management level constraints result in fewer logisticians deployed in support of operations. Moreover, the joint, inter-agency, intergovernmental, multinational, and commercial community operates in a global environment where access, basing, and overflight authorities have significantly reduced logistics lines of support. Finally, there are instances when authorities, processes, and systems cannot move

at the “speed of operations,” which ultimately increases operational risk to SOF.

Given the realities of the current system, there was general consensus in 2015 among senior staff and key representatives from the SOF logistics enterprise that there was a range of perennial and emergent issues that directly affected the deployed force and needed attention. It was concluded that standard thinking and approaches to these challenges would likely produce yet another series of temporary fixes and perpetuate current negative trends. To that end, the J4 requested a design inquiry with the goal of achieving an innovative approach to its perennial problems.

The USSOCOM Design Way was introduced to the participants at the J4’s 2016 annual conference, highlighting the core difference from traditional planning. Initially, there was much skepticism among the attendees, with many

voicing a strong desire to jump straight into problem solutions using the same well-meaning, but often unsuccessful, methods of the past. The nearly 100 participants were divided into several diverse teams representing the SOF logistics enterprise. The goal was to overcome any potential for institutional loyalty or group-think and work toward a common perspective. The facilitators led the groups using a range of divergent thinking methods to develop a shared “Appreciate the Context” (current system). This endeavor evoked emotion, highlighted organizational and personal blinders, and sometimes illuminated dogmatic thought. In the end the groups evolved, self-organized, and, with consistent coaching, began to see things anew. The range of desired futures developed by the groups were characterized by recognition that the future of SOF required a robust global

Complicated vs. Complex

The character of conflict has evolved, at least since the end of the Cold War, from complicated to complex. This shift has presented challenges to leaders and planners steeped in traditional, apolitical, and military-centric problem-solving.

Complicated challenges are predictable and repeatable; thus, planning and desired endstates are often based on repeating previous successes. Checklists, battle books, and standard operating procedures ensure successful processes are recorded and repeated.

Complex problems, however, are defined by human interactions, relationships, emotions, and dynamic connections. They cannot be solved through quantitative or predictive processes. Traditional problem-solving techniques come wanting when dealing with problems in the inherently complex human domain.

Complex human-centric systems change based on influencing actions. They learn and adapt where complicated systems do not, making it nearly impossible to apply the objective or quantitative solutions found in structured processes.

Design-thinking offers a way to overcome traditional problem-solving and deal with the challenges of modern conflict in the human domain.

logistics system, fully integrated with joint, interagency, international, and commercial logistics networks.

A second iteration of the J4 design inquiry focused on refining the previous “Appreciate the Context,” exploring the range of desired futures, and identifying problems that prevented transformation. After a week of rigorous collaboration and divergent thinking, the talented group of experienced logisticians reached the preliminary desired future and problem statement. These logisticians’ desired future was one where USSOCOM possessed the authorities, permissions, and funding to fully leverage the global logistics network in support of SOF.

The group spent considerable time assessing the underlying obstacles and realized that the preliminary problem was broad, with both internal and external variables. Accordingly, SOF logistics were

not appropriately organized, manned, or arrayed for critical integration during planning and operations at the strategic, operational, or tactical levels. The logistics infrastructure and processes had not kept pace with the expansion of SOF after 2001. Furthermore, the ability to influence military and civilian talent management was constrained by inflexible manpower systems managed by the Services, which did not value logisticians’ service with SOF. The result was a constant pool of new Service logisticians having to learn the skills needed to support a command that was neither a Service nor tied to any one theater-level executive agent. The outcome of J4’s design inquiry led to changes in organizational perceptions and priorities and provided the foundation for transformation to align resources to support emergent and future SOF operations in new and innovative ways.

There are numerous classified examples of SDW in action during the past 18 months, although a second unclassified example relates to Special Operations Command–Northern Command (SOCNORTH). SOCNORTH is unique in that its mission is heavily oriented to the interagency arena because its area of responsibility is the U.S. homeland. The command was at its 3-year milestone in its growth and development from a directorate within the USNORTHCOM J3 to a distinct special operations component and subunified command.²⁷

In the closing weeks of September 2016, a team of senior planners, with support from JSOU design-thinking facilitators, embarked on a reflective reframing of SOCNORTH’s existing campaign support plan to the combatant command’s theater campaign plan. The goal was to evaluate and question how the command saw itself, its role, and its mission, as well as questioning how SOCNORTH should organize itself to provide the most value to USNORTHCOM. After much debate, discussion, and learning a new desired future and approach emerged.

SOCNORTH’s design inquiry resulted in a fundamentally new perspective that reoriented the commander’s vision.

Much like USSOCOM, SOCNORTH recognized its unique position among TSOCs in that the authorities and permissions to act rest primarily with its interagency partners. SOCNORTH changed its perspective and came to view its value in terms of becoming a key supporting player instead of the star quarterback on the USNORTHCOM team. This transformed mindset guided and informed the command’s planning efforts and set the initial framework for SOCNORTH’s “cooperative action” among interagency and partner nations.²⁸

A third example demonstrating the practical success of SDW is a design inquiry for the Romanian chief of the general staff (CGS) to consider the transformation of Romanian SOF. From August 2016 to May 2017, USSOCOM design-thinking facilitators helped Romania develop a solution to transform their national SOF and create a joint command to lead and manage Romanian SOF from its different services. This distinction is important because of previous missteps in other nations that blindly mirrored the U.S. special operations structure without fully considering differences in missions, regional versus global responsibilities, resourcing, authorities, and national characters. The challenge was complex, characterized by longstanding organizational and cultural traditions; the anxiety of likely personnel, training, and resourcing turbulence; and conflicting polycentric security priorities (national, bilateral, NATO, and the European Union).

Over 9 months, the Romanians used the SDW to conduct seven 1- to 2-week iterations of reflection, research, and critique. In between each group session team members had specific exploration assignments that were then shared when the group got back together. Among the unexpected discoveries during appreciation was the team identifying the key stakeholders in the Romanian security structure. This led the team to intentionally engage these individuals, thus averting any potential institutional, and perhaps personal, apprehensions. The participants’ iterative research contributions helped broaden and deepen the design-thinking

team's knowledge and appreciation of Romania's political, geographic, organizational, and security context—very much a comprehensive approach.

During each iteration of the design inquiry, as the participants sought understanding, they created new questions, as research often does, that when also researched ended up leading to a deeper appreciation of Romania's aspirations and challenges. At the CGS's insistence, the design-thinking team broke out of its comfort zone to develop a *joint* and a *Romanian* appreciation. The fruit of their efforts led to an approach that will not only transform Romanian SOF into a fully joint and strategic-level command prepared to deal with emerging hybrid threats, but also provide the headquarters functions of strategic direction, standardization and interoperability among assigned and supporting forces, doctrine development, resourcing, and budgeting. SDW encouraged and enabled the Romanian team to critically examine themselves and their familiar frames, be creative in their appreciation of acceptable future states, and offer Romania innovative options to address their unique circumstances.

Possible Futures

Many experienced military personnel note the rapid rise and demise of previous attempts at process improvement. Design-thinking, when considered from this perspective, could become just another management fad. While certainly a possibility, there is an important factor working in SDW's favor. The demand for the USSOCOM Design Way stems from its appeal to the commander down to the action officer. In other words, the SDW shows early signs of affecting the bureaucracy's organizational culture by demonstrating tangible improvements to how the command thinks about and addresses complex problems.

With a wide range of special operations missions requiring joint, international, and interagency coordination and collaboration, USSOCOM has an interest in proliferating the USSOCOM Design Way. It is already demonstrating

positive results across the SOF enterprise and offers a simple and low-cost solution for overcoming seemingly intractable organizational complexity. By investing in common appreciations with joint, international, and interagency partners, the SOF enterprise can significantly amplify its impact against what promises to be a truly complex set of uncertain and ill-defined challenges in the coming decades. JFQ

Notes

¹ U.S. Government Accountability Office (GAO), *Special Operations Forces: Opportunities Exist to Improve Transparency of Funding and Assess Potential to Lessen Some Deployments*, GAO-15-571 (Washington, DC: GAO, July 16, 2015), 8–9, 11–12, available at <www.gao.gov/products/GAO-15-571>. The U.S. Special Operations Command (USSOCOM) bureaucracy experienced a 117 percent increase in personnel from 2004–2014, while special operations forces (SOF) increased by 47 percent from 2001–2014.

² *United States Special Operations Command History*, 6th ed. (MacDill Air Force Base, FL: USSOCOM, March 31, 2008), 15–16.

³ Charles N. Black et al., “Design Thinking for the SOF Enterprise,” USSOCOM White Paper, 2016.

⁴ *Ibid.*, Commander's Foreword.

⁵ Major General J. Marcus Hicks, USAF, USSOCOM Chief of Staff, e-mail to authors, February 2, 2017.

⁶ Joint Publication (JP) 5-0, *Joint Planning* (Washington, DC: The Joint Staff, June 16, 2017), III-4.

⁷ GAO.

⁸ Black et al., 1.

⁹ *Ibid.*, Commander's Foreword.

¹⁰ The USSOCOM Design Way is a process developed principally for military application but is demonstrating utility in other areas of the public and private sectors. Other processes of design exist for the private sector, most notably exemplified by the Stanford D.School program, Stanford University, available at <<https://dschool.stanford.edu>>; and the Darden School of Business program, University of Virginia, available at <www.darden.virginia.edu>.

¹¹ JP 5-0, xxv.

¹² JP 5-0, III-4. Paragraph E notes the importance of embracing the contributions of interagency and multinational partners in order to build a “coherent operational approach.” But in practice, military planners, even at USSOCOM with its mandate to include interagency and international partners, typically seize on the next sentence, “The commander must decide how and when to include other partners” as offering the rationale for excluding

the contributions of outsiders until after the plan is complete.

¹³ *Ibid.*, III-4.

¹⁴ Black et al., 4.

¹⁵ In social sciences, open systems allow interactions between the internal functions of a system and the external environment. This enables a system to learn, adapt, and address opportunities and obstacles it may encounter. Closed systems, such as how military planners plan, on the other hand, are isolated from their environment and thus are unable (or unwilling) to learn and adapt when faced with operational, organizational, or cognitive challenges.

¹⁶ Horst Rittel and Melvin M. Webber, “Dilemmas in a General Theory of Planning,” *Policy Sciences* 4 (1973), 155–169.

¹⁷ The concept of “Four Ways of Seeing” has been used to aid designers and planners to recognize their own biases. The shortcoming, though, is that unless others are involved in the analysis, the effort becomes an exercise of seeing all perspectives through a single lens.

¹⁸ Black et al., 3.

¹⁹ Rittel and Webber, 156–157.

²⁰ Black et al., 3–4.

²¹ *Ibid.*

²² *Ibid.*, 4.

²³ *Ibid.*, 2–3.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 4.

²⁵ Colonel Steve Allen, USA, interview with authors, October 11, 2016.

²⁶ The October 2017 ambush that resulted in the death of four U.S. Soldiers in Niger highlights the challenge of supporting small teams of SOF in remote and austere locations. *Time* magazine reported there were no U.S. military aircraft available to provide support before, during, or after the attack. W.J. Hennigan, “The New American Way of War,” *Time*, November 30, 2017, available at <<http://time.com/5042700/inside-new-american-way-of-war/?xid=homepage&pcd=hp-magmod>>.

²⁷ Brigadier General Christopher M. Burns, USA, Special Operations Command–North, Command Vision, November 2016, available at <www.socom.mil/Pages/socnorth.aspx>.

²⁸ *Ibid.*