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## U.S. Special Operations Forces in a Period of Transition

by

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**On the cover:** A futuristic soldier stands in a combat zone. Blended image used by permission of Newscom.

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An active member of the State Bar of California, the Florida Bar, and the U.S. District Court for the Northern District of California, he was a research assistant to the Honorable Frank Newman, Associate Justice of the California Supreme Court, and served on the editorial board of the *California Lawyer*. A U.S. Department of State diplomat/scholar, he was dean/director of the InterAmerican Center at Miami Dade College, as well as special assistant to the chancellor, chairman of Latin American Studies, and Legal Studies program coordinator at the City College of San Francisco. His articles, commentary, and op-eds have appeared in the *New York Times*, *San Jose Mercury News*, *Washington Times*, *Marin Independent Journal*, *Hispanic Magazine Online*, *FrontPage* magazine, and elsewhere. For more than two decades, he provided political analysis and news commentary in Spanish for Univisión and guest appeared on nationally broadcast radio, PBS, NBC News, CBS, and other media outlets.

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# U.S. SPECIAL OPERATIONS FORCES IN A PERIOD OF TRANSITION

The dissolution of the Soviet Union, after the Cold War ended in 1989, left the United States as the sole superpower. In a prescient article, renowned offensive realist John J. Mearsheimer explained, “Why we will soon miss the Cold War.” He believed that ending the bipolarity that sustained the long peace between 1945 and 1990 would revive the multipolar system that generates one conflict after another due to power imbalances.<sup>1</sup> Yet, by 1999, former Secretary of Defense William Perry and Ashton Carter (later to become Secretary of Defense) asserted: “Today we are at a unique point in the history of American security. The United States faces no direct threats to its national survival and it is the dominant military force in the world.”<sup>2</sup> That unipolar moment, however, was full of global uncertainty and persistent conflict, it did not last long, and has been replaced by a multipolar system in which the United States is the preponderant, but not the dominant, world power. A report by a commission of distinguished bipartisan experts described the country’s foreign policy at the beginning of the 21st century as being adrift, incoherent, and confused. It also forewarned that:

Fitful engagement actually invites the emergence of new threats, from nuclear weapons-usable material unaccounted for in Russia and assertive Chinese risk-taking, to the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction (WMD) and the unexpectedly rapid emergence of ballistic missile threats.<sup>3</sup>

The hopeful mood for a Pax Americana faded with the terrorist attacks on 9/11 and the Afghanistan and Iraq wars that followed, compounded in 2008 by the deepest global economic crisis since the Great Depression. Russia’s President Vladimir Putin, addressing the Russian Federal Assembly on 25 April 2005, memorably lamented that: “Above all, we should acknowledge that the collapse of the Soviet Union was a major geopolitical disaster of the century.”<sup>4</sup>

Until recently, the integrity and survival of the post–World War II, rules-based liberal international order favorable to U.S. interests that lifted billions out of poverty, spread democracy, and kept the peace has been less threatened by interstate wars than by civil wars and violent conflicts involving subnational, transnational, and non-state actors capable or willing to challenge

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<sup>1</sup> John J. Mearsheimer, “Why We Will Soon Miss the Cold War,” *The Atlantic* 266, No. 2 (August 1990): 35–50.

<sup>2</sup> Ashton B. Carter and William J. Perry, *Preventive Defense: A New Security Strategy for America* (Washington, D.C.: Brookings Institution Press, 1999).

<sup>3</sup> Robert Ellsworth, Andrew Goodpaster, and Rita Hauser, Co-Chairs, *America’s National Interests: A Report from The Commission on America’s National Interests* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University, July 2000).

<sup>4</sup> President Vladimir Putin, Annual Address to the Russian Federal Assembly (presented at The Kremlin, Moscow, 15 April 2005), accessed 17 April 2016, [http://www.globalsecurity.org/military/library/report/2005/putin-federalassembly\\_2005.htm](http://www.globalsecurity.org/military/library/report/2005/putin-federalassembly_2005.htm).

the authority of sovereign nation-states. Some have referred to it as a borderless world.<sup>5</sup> This security threat environment was described in the 2011 U.S. national military strategy (NMS) that focused on the disruptive role of non-state actors ranging from Hezbollah, al-Qaeda, and now the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant, to the Mexican drug cartels.<sup>6</sup> Agile, well-financed, flexible, and adaptive, these violent extremist organizations (VEOs) are converging to advance their respective goals as they leave in their wake failing or failed states, humanitarian crises, and ungoverned spaces.<sup>7</sup>

Mearsheimer's forebodings are now confirmed by a resurgent Russia fighting hybrid wars,



Two rigid-hull inflatable boat crews from the guided-missile cruiser USS Mobile Bay practice interception maneuvers in the South China Sea. Source: U.S. Navy photo by Petty Officer 2nd Class Ryan J. Batchelder

like the aggression against Ukraine to annex Crimea in violation of international law, and a rising communist China's financing an acceleration of military modernization while aggressively claiming contested lands in the East and South China Seas, building and fortifying artificial islands, and deploying missile batteries on Woody Island in the South China Sea.<sup>8</sup> Meanwhile, despite the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action, Iran remains the leading state sponsor of terrorism, violates human rights and

supports Syria's Bashar al-Assad, displays its ballistic missile program by shooting missiles near U.S. naval forces in the Persian Gulf, and tests long-range missiles capable of delivering the nuclear weapons it seeks to obtain.<sup>9</sup>

Former chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, General Martin Dempsey, highlighted the dynamic changes in the strategic security environment in the foreword to the 2015 NMS: "We now face multiple, simultaneous security challenges from traditional state actors and transregional

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<sup>5</sup> See Antonia Chayes, *Borderless Wars: Civil Military Disorder and Legal Uncertainty* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2015).

<sup>6</sup> Joint Chiefs of Staff, *The National Military Strategy of the United States, 2011: Redefining America's Military Leadership* (Washington, D.C.: Department of Defense, 8 February 2011).

<sup>7</sup> *Convergence: Illicit Networks and National Security in the Age of Globalization*, edited by Michael Miklaucic and Jacqueline Brewer (Washington, D.C.: National Defense University Press, 2013).

<sup>8</sup> Stephen D. Krasner, "China Ascendant?" *Defining Ideas*, Hoover Institution (22 July 2014), <http://www.hoover.org/research/china-ascendent>.

<sup>9</sup> Reuel Marc Gerecht, "Done Deal? Barack Obama's Disastrous Iran Legacy," *The Weekly Standard* 21, No. 35 (23 May 2016).

networks of sub-state groups....”<sup>10</sup> During testimony before the Senate Armed Services Committee, Director of National Intelligence James Clapper echoed Putin’s lament by responding that the “change in the bipolar system that did provide a certain stability in the world” has created the “most diverse array of challenges and threats that I can recall.”<sup>11</sup> He then listed a “Litany of Doom” with threats ranging from Russia, China, Iran, North Korea, and Islamist extremists to homegrown terrorists, climate change, cybersecurity, oil prices, and refugees.<sup>12</sup> The threat array is so broad that in the absence of an effective grand strategy some are predicting that the “new international order will be marked by the ascendancy of illiberal states and value systems, and a diminishment of American influence.”<sup>13</sup>

### **The Problem: Threats to U.S. Vital Interests**

The first responsibility of the U.S. government is national security so the initial problem to address is, as noted by the Commission on America’s National Interests in 2000, that the United States needs a foreign policy grounded in its national interests. More specifically, the government needs to prioritize its global engagement and explain persuasively how and why American citizens should support expenditures of American treasure and blood. For that purpose, and to guide a newly-elected president, the Commission established a hierarchy of vital, extremely important, important, and less important or secondary American national interests.<sup>14</sup>

It is a long list, but the U.S. is a global power with global interests and, as Hooker notes, our “vital or core interests remain remarkably consistent: the defense of American territory and that of our allies, protecting American citizens at home and abroad, supporting and defending our constitutional values and forms of government, and promoting and securing the U.S. economy and standard of living.”<sup>15</sup> Threats against these interests, for example, include the use of WMDs against the homeland, as in the 9/11 attacks; economic disruptions, like a major cyberattack against our electric grids; potential hostile peer competitors, like Russia and China, or aspiring regional hegemon, like Iran, that threaten our allies.<sup>16</sup>

Significantly, Greg Treverton, who became chair of the National Intelligence Council (NIC)—the intelligence community’s (IC) center for long-term strategic analysis—in 2014, has also addressed the challenges for the IC:

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<sup>10</sup> Joint Chiefs of Staff, *The National Military Strategy of the United States, 2015: The United States Military’s Contribution to National Security* (Washington, D.C. June 2015), accessed 22 May 2016, [http://www.jcs.mil/Portals/36/Documents/Publications/2015\\_National\\_Military\\_Strategy.pdf](http://www.jcs.mil/Portals/36/Documents/Publications/2015_National_Military_Strategy.pdf).

<sup>11</sup> Director of National Intelligence James R. Clapper, “Worldwide Threat Assessment of the U.S. Intelligence Community” (testimony before the U.S. Senate Armed Services Committee in Washington, D.C., 9 February 2016).

<sup>12</sup> Ibid.

<sup>13</sup> Michael J. Boyle, “The Coming Illiberal Order,” *Survival*, 58, No. 2 (April–May 2016): 35–66.

<sup>14</sup> Ellsworth, Goodpaster, and Hauser, *America’s National Interests*.

<sup>15</sup> R.D. Hooker, Jr., *The Grand Strategy of the United States*, (Washington, D.C.: National Defense University Press, October 2014), 14.

<sup>16</sup> The Heritage Foundation, “Threats to U.S. Vital Interests” in *2016 Index of U.S. Military Strength* (Washington, D.C.: The Heritage Foundation 2016), available at: <http://index.heritage.org/military/2016/assessments/threats/>.

During the Cold War, U.S. intelligence was concerned primarily with states; non-state actors like terrorists were secondary. Now the priorities are reversed. And the challenge is enormous. States had an address, and they were hierarchical and bureaucratic. They thus came with some ‘story.’ Terrorists do not. States were ‘over there,’ but terrorists are there and here. They thus put pressure on intelligence at home, not just abroad. They also force intelligence and law enforcement—the CIA and the FBI—to work together in new ways, and if those 700,000 police officers in the United States are to be the eyes and ears in the fight against terror, new means of sharing not just information but also analysis across the federal system are imperative.<sup>17</sup>

NIC’s threat assessments, however, recognize the dynamic reemergence of great power rivalries between the U.S. and China and Russia, U.S. changing demographics, and economic inequality and climate change as greater long-term concerns than terrorism. In a public forum, Treverton noted that the challenges posed by nuclear powers China and Russia are more threatening than terrorism because a relatively low number of American citizens have died at the hands of terrorists. In a continuum of threats, ranging from purposive threats like terrorism to threats without a threatener, like a pandemic, the latter might be the sole existential threat to our way of life.<sup>18</sup> Yet, in a recent “call to action” to get us out of complacency, the author raised the specter of strategic terrorism. He warned about purposive threat situations where “we now have to worry that private parties might have access to weapons that are as destructive as—or possibly more destructive than—those held by any nation state. A handful of people, perhaps even a single individual, could have the ability to kill millions or even billions.”<sup>19</sup> What is to be done?

## **The Offset Strategies**

Since the end of World War II, three ‘offset’ strategies have been pursued by the U.S. in order to protect our vital national security interests. An offset strategy is one that seeks to maintain a strategic advantage over our main adversaries. It allows us to project power globally as we continue to protect the homeland, our allies, and our friends. In particular, the offset strategies have been adopted to maintain our military superiority during periods of time when security challenges were increasing as our defense spending was declining and the economy was in a weakened state. In each case, technological advancements and innovations, together with new military concepts and doctrines, were needed to compensate for and ‘offset’ our rivals’ numerical advantage and increasing capabilities.<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> Gregory Treverton, *Intelligence for an Age of Terror* (New York, NY: Cambridge University Press, 2009).

<sup>18</sup> Gregory Treverton, “U.S. Intelligence Priorities” (televised discussion at the Center for Strategic and International Studies, Washington, D.C., broadcast live on C-SPAN2 on 4 March 2016), available at: <https://www.c-span.org/video/?405999-1/discussion-national-intelligence-council-chair-gregory-treverton>.

<sup>19</sup> Nathan P. Myhrvold “Strategic Terrorism: A Call to Action,” *Prism* 4, No. 4 (2014): 39–56.

<sup>20</sup> Robert Martinage, “Toward a New Offset Strategy: Exploiting U.S. Long-Term Advantages to Restore U.S. Global Power Projection Capability” (study, Center for Strategic and Budgetary Assessments, Washington, D.C. 2014).

The first offset was the ‘New Look’ of President Dwight D. Eisenhower in the 1950s, which prioritized nuclear deterrence. At the start of the Cold War, the U.S. had a near monopoly on nuclear weapons. It gave us a competitive advantage over the Soviet peacetime conventional superiority of more than 200 army divisions.<sup>21</sup> The strategy kept nuclear weapons and their delivery systems ready as a first strike capability to contain and offset the threat presented by Soviet troops massed in Eastern Europe. New weapons procurement programs such as the still-in-service B-52 bomber were accelerated. In the fall of 1953, NSC 162/2 stated that the U.S. would respond to Soviet aggression with massive retaliatory damage with nuclear weapons at a place of its own choosing.<sup>22</sup> Eisenhower, also concerned about the strength of the economy, sought a way to reduce defense spending while sustaining our comparative advantage. So, between 1954 and 1961, the DOD budget as a percentage of gross national product fell from 13 percent to 9 percent. To further reduce costs, the strategy relied on allies for burden-sharing and on the newly created Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) to conduct covert operations for strategic impact.

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The deterrence value of the U.S. nuclear arsenal was reduced over time as the Soviet strategic nuclear forces grew and developed the capability to reach U.S. continental targets. The resulting condition of mutually assured destruction established a balance of terror between the two superpowers.<sup>23</sup> The Cold War turned hot during the Korean War (1950 to 1953), and after that stalemated proxy war, the Soviets again tested American commitment to massive retaliation in Europe during the U.S.-inspired Hungarian Revolution of 1956. The decision not to intervene in that clear case of aggression encouraged the Soviets to pursue their strategic goals through indirect forms of aggression and proxy wars in the Third World. Since massive retaliation failed to distinguish between deterrence and defense, it left the U.S. president without other policy alternatives at the local level, thus losing its credibility. During the Kennedy administration, massive retaliation was replaced by ‘flexible response,’ a strategy supported by the secretary of defense, Robert McNamara, and chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, General Maxwell Taylor. President Kennedy summarized it when he said that the U.S. must be ready “to deter all wars, general or limited, nuclear or conventional, large or small.” Under a flexible response strategy, the president’s policy options ranged from launching intercontinental ballistic missiles to using the

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<sup>21</sup> Jon Hoffman, “The New Look Strategy,” OSD Historical Office Memo (Washington, D.C.: Office of the Secretary of Defense, 13 June 2014).

<sup>22</sup> National Security Council, NSC 162/2: A Report to the National Security Council on Basic National Security Policy (Washington, D.C.: National Security Council, 30 October 1953), accessed 10 April 2016 at: <https://fas.org/irp/offdocs/nsc-hst/nsc-162-2.pdf>.

<sup>23</sup> President John F. Kennedy used the term “balance of terror” in his inaugural address. John F. Kennedy, Inaugural Address (speech presented at the U.S. Capitol, Washington, D.C., 20 January 1961), accessed 20 April 2016, <http://www.bartleby.com/124/pres56.html>.

newly created Army Special Forces or Green Berets.<sup>24</sup> The first test of President Kennedy's new approach was the failed 1961 Bay of Pigs invasion—a CIA covert operation.<sup>25</sup>

In the 1970s, as the Cold War intensified in the battlefields of the Third World, two scientists, Secretary of Defense Harold Brown and Under Secretary of Defense for Research and Engineering William Perry, organized the Long Research and Development Planning Program and shepherded an 'offset strategy' to maintain the U.S. comparative advantage over the Soviet Union. Its main organizing principle was a paradigm shift: "Technology can be a force multiplier ... to help offset numerical advantages of an adversary. Superior technology is one very effective way to balance military capabilities other than matching an adversary tank-for-tank or soldier-for-soldier."<sup>26</sup> The cornerstone was the exploitation of the U.S. technological advantage in communications and guided munitions or 'smart weapons.' By penetrating and operating within the adversary's OODA (observe, orient, decide, act) loop with fewer of these more accurate weapons, the U.S. could achieve greater mass and reach more targets. The program successfully invested in and fielded "leap-ahead capabilities like standoff precision strike, stealth aircraft, wide-area surveillance, and networked forces."<sup>27</sup> Together with GPS, cell phones, and other innovations that were part of the revolution in communications that followed, we have maintained our military superiority during the second offset period. The American people and the rest of the world were shown those capabilities in action during Operation Desert Storm briefings by General H. Norman Schwarzkopf, Jr., leader of the coalition forces. The world watched in awe as real-time video images showed precision-guided munitions ('smart' bombs and missiles) scoring direct hits on static and moving targets.<sup>28</sup>

In September 2014, Secretary of Defense Chuck Hagel initially propounded the third offset strategy.<sup>29</sup> Like the two previous strategies, it seeks to offset our adversaries and maintain military superiority through innovative technologies. He, in proposing a new Defense Innovation Initiative in November 2014, put it:

And while we spent over a decade focused on grinding stability operations countries like Russia and China have been heavily investing in military modernization programs to blunt our military's technological edge, fielding advanced aircraft, submarines, and both longer and more accurate missiles. They

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<sup>24</sup> Maxwell D. Taylor, *The Uncertain Trumpet* (New York, NY: Harper and Brothers, 1960).

<sup>25</sup> Irwin F. Gellman, "It's Time to Stop Saying that JFK Inherited the Bay of Pigs Operation from Ike," History News Network, December 5, 2015, available at: <http://historynewsnetwork.org/article/161188#sthash.6Cjf7hNz.dpuf>.

<sup>26</sup> Secretary of Defense Harold Brown, *Department of Defense Annual Report Fiscal Year 1982* (Washington, D.C.: Department of Defense, 19 January 1981), x.

<sup>27</sup> Secretary of Defense Chuck Hagel, "Defense Innovation Days" (opening keynote for the Southeastern New England Defense Industry Alliance, Newport, Rhode Island, 3 September 2014).

<sup>28</sup> The Gulf War (2 August 1990 to 28 February 1991) was codenamed Desert Shield for operations leading up to Desert Storm, the combat phase.

<sup>29</sup> Hagel, "Defense Innovation Days."

are also developing new anti-ship and air-to-air missiles, counter-space, cyber, electronic warfare, undersea, and air attack capabilities.<sup>30</sup>

James Carafano criticized the plan as a “rambling disappointment” and referred to it as the “fairy dust” strategy, but the third offset already exists and is incorporated in DOD’s FY2017 budget request.<sup>31</sup> It is needed because the “margin of technological superiority,” particularly for guided munitions, is eroding. The U.S. military advantage is being undermined by the proliferation of disruptive technologies, in particular Anti-Access/Area Denial capabilities. According to former Deputy Secretary of Defense Robert Work:

The erosion results primarily from two factors. First, potential competitors are pursuing levels of advanced weapons development that we haven’t seen since the mid-1980s. Second, our attention has been rightly focused in the Middle East for the past 14 years, and post-war budget cuts have limited our own technical investments.<sup>32</sup>

The third offset is mostly geared to deal with the problem of ubiquitous precision-guided munitions or ‘smart weapons.’<sup>33</sup>

Former Secretary of Defense Ash Carter identified five evolving challenges that drive the third offset: deter Soviet aggression in Europe; in the Asia-Pacific, beware of China’s rise; North Korea; Iran; and global terrorism. To confront all these challenges simultaneously requires full-spectrum warfare, new thinking, new posture, and new and enhanced capabilities across all domains—air, land, sea, cyber, space, and electronic warfare.<sup>34</sup> Former Secretaries Hagel and Carter have consistently emphasized that innovation lies at the heart of the third offset. However, unlike the two previous strategies, which were mostly driven by DOD technological leadership, the third offset is highly dependent on the interoperability between the most advanced and innovative sector of the U.S. economy, located on the West Coast, and the military.

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<sup>30</sup> Secretary of Defense Chuck Hagel, Reagan National Defense Forum Keynote (speech delivered at the Ronald Reagan Presidential Library, Simi Valley, California, 15 November 2014).

<sup>31</sup> James Jay Carafano, “The Third Offset: The ‘Fairy Dust’ Strategy,” *The National Interest Blog*, 24 November 2014, <http://nationalinterest.org/feature/the-third-offset-the-fairy-dust-strategy-11722>.

<sup>32</sup> Terri Moon Cronk, “Work Calls for Third Offset Strategy to Bolster Future of Warfighting,” *DoD News*, 10 September 2015, available at: <http://www.defense.gov/News/Article/Article/616806/work-calls-for-third-offset-strategy-to-bolster-future-of-warfighting>.

<sup>33</sup> Shawn Brimley and Loren Dejonge Schulman, “Sustaining the Third Offset Strategy in the Next Administration,” *War on the Rocks*, March 15, 2016, <http://warontherocks.com/2016/03/sustaining-the-third-offset-strategy-in-the-next-administration/>.

<sup>34</sup> Secretary of Defense Ash Carter, “Remarks Previewing the FY 2017 Defense Budget” (speech to the Economic Club of Washington, D.C., 2 February 2016), <http://www.defense.gov/News/Speeches/Speech-View/Article/648466/remarks-previewing-the-fy-2017-defense-budget>. See also: Department of Defense, FY2017 Budget Fact Sheet, 5, [http://www.defense.gov/Portals/1/features/2016/0216\\_budget/docs/2-4-16\\_Consolidated\\_DoD\\_FY17\\_Budget\\_Fact\\_Sheet.pdf](http://www.defense.gov/Portals/1/features/2016/0216_budget/docs/2-4-16_Consolidated_DoD_FY17_Budget_Fact_Sheet.pdf).

## Silicon Valley

Under the third offset, close cooperation and interoperability with Silicon Valley, other tech hubs, and academia is a DOD top priority because our adversaries have access to cutting edge technologies and we are losing our tech advantage. To achieve its goals, DOD opened the Defense Innovation Unit Experimental, or DIUx, office in Mountain View, California, which reports directly to the Secretary of Defense in order to accelerate decision-making.<sup>35</sup> As our enemies and adversaries countermeasure our advances in technologies, the race is accelerating to leverage our emerging advances in computing and big data, robotics, autonomous operating guidance and control systems, visualization, biotech, miniaturization, and additive manufacturing like 3-D printing, as well as new concepts and doctrine.

Technology that is fast-fielded saves lives on the battlefield as shown, for instance, in Afghanistan and Iraq when our dismounted soldiers confronted the threat of improvised explosive devices. These devices were virtually undetectable by the aging metal detectors used by the troops because they used pressure plate triggers with almost zero metal content. As casualties mounted, former Army Colonel Pete Newell, now managing partner of BMNT Partners, found a solution in the handheld gradiometer. It is a technology used to find small wires during construction projects with a ground penetrating radar. It is also an example of how partnerships between the military and civilian sectors succeed. As an Army officer, Newell was the fourth director of the Army's Rapid Equipping Force, the outfit responsible for developing disruptive technologies solutions, and sought to change the force into a more innovative system.<sup>36</sup>

## USSOCOM in a Third Offset

### *Beginnings*

In the post-WWII period, the development and deployment of U.S. special forces grew with the need for specialized units during the Cold War. In WWII, U.S. special forces mainly consisted of the Army 1st Ranger Battalion, (Brigadier General Frank) Merrill's Marauders (5307th Composite Unit), Russell Volckmann's guerilla troops, the Devil's Brigade (a combined American-Canadian unit), and the Alamo Scouts (6th Army Special Reconnaissance Unit).<sup>37</sup> The Army Rangers trace their ancestry to the expert riflemen organized by the First Continental Congress to harass British

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<sup>35</sup> According to the DIUx website, <https://www.diux.mil>, it is now called DIUX 2.0 after Secretary of Defense Ash Carter replaced the original top officials with a flatter leadership structure to use "lean launch pad" methodologies to innovate. Another office opened in July 2016 in the Boston area, and there are plans for other technology hubs.

<sup>36</sup> Rachel A. Brune, "Innovation in the Army, Part I: It Starts with the Warfighters," *Task & Purpose*, 30 September 2014, accessed 10 May 2016, <http://taskandpurpose.com/innovation-army-part-one-starts-warfighters/>. Steve Fyffe, "New Stanford Class Targets National Security Problems with Silicon Valley-Style Innovation," Stanford University Center for International Security and Cooperation, 2 May 2016, accessed 10 May 2016, <https://cisac.fsi.stanford.edu/news/new-class-targets-national-security-problems-silicon-valley-style-innovation>. Hayagreeva Rao, Robert Sutton, David Hoyt, "The Rapid Equipping Force Customer Focused Innovation in the U.S. Army" (case study, Stanford University Graduate School of Business, 2013), accessed 10 May 2016, <http://www.gsb.stanford.edu/faculty-research/case-studies/rapid-equipping-force-customer-focused-innovation-us-army>.

<sup>37</sup> "U.S. Special Ops: A History of Excellence," *Special Ops, Newsweek Special Edition*, updated reissue, 2015.

regulars. In peacetime, the U.S. had traditionally rapidly demobilized its troops as a protection against military interference in politics. After WWII, however, thousands of troops remained stationed abroad and the persistent engagements required specialized units.

On 1 July 1947, the U.S. Air Force (USAF) authorized the first pararescue teams. Then, the 10th Special Forces Group was activated on 20 June 1952 and received from President Kennedy on 12 October 1961 the right to wear the Green Beret. The modern USAF Special Operations began on 14 April 1961, followed by the Navy SEALs on 1 January 1962. While the Green Berets and Rangers continue to be called special forces, all of them are now known as the Special Operations Forces (SOF). Meanwhile, President Truman terminated the wartime intelligence and paramilitary Office of Strategic Services (OSS) in 1945. With the passage of the National Security Act of 1947, the OSS became the antecedent to the newly created CIA, the first permanent peacetime intelligence agency, which assumed the OSS functions.

Until the United States Special Operations Command (USSOCOM) was created, SOF units operated under and were funded by their respective armed service, which created issues of inter-service rivalries, lack of interoperability, and poor coordination that affected special operations. The most notorious example was Operation Eagle Claw, the failed Iranian rescue mission of April 1980 which led to the establishment of USSOCOM and its USAF component, the Air Force Special Operations Command. The operation highlighted the necessity of joint planning and training.<sup>38</sup>

### **Creation**

In the overcast early morning hours of 25 October 1983, Navy helicopters loaded with Marines departed the USS Guam (LPH 9) and headed westward toward the Northern part of the Caribbean island of Grenada. At about the same time, U.S. Air Force C-130s carrying Army Rangers headed toward the Southern part of the island. The last of the Windward Islands, the island of Grenada is a former British colony 400 miles south of Puerto Rico. It became a U.S.



A U.S. Marine Corps Boeing CH-46 Sea Knight helicopter is shown on the flight deck of the amphibious assault ship USS Guam (LPH 9) during Operation Urgent Fury, the invasion of Grenada, 28 October 1983. Source: U.S. Air Force photo by TSgt. Mike Green

<sup>38</sup> Air Force Historical Support Division, Operation Eagle Claw Fact Sheet, 8 October 2015, accessed 20 May 2016, <http://www.afhso.af.mil/topics/factsheets/factsheet.asp?id=19809>.

political concern after pro-Castro Marxists gained government control in 1979 and began to receive military training and weapons from Cuba and the Soviet Union. In 1983, President Reagan disclosed that because the Grenadian government had signed a treaty with the Soviet Union for a 10,000-foot runway capable of receiving Soviet bombers that was being constructed by the Cubans, the island presented a national security threat. On 13 October 1983, radical leaders overthrew and arrested the popular Prime Minister Maurice Bishop, who was later assassinated with dozens of his followers. Coup leaders thereafter imposed martial law and a 24-hour shoot to kill on sight curfew.

American concerns about the airport runway soon were overtaken by reports that more than 600 U.S. medical students were in Grenada's capital city of St. George's. Fearful of a repetition of the Iranian hostage crisis, the Reagan administration's national security team had begun operational planning for a rescue mission. The planners of the rescue operation also were unsure about the whereabouts of the students. The Joint Chiefs of Staff broadened the scope of the operation to include removal of the coup leaders and a return to order. Inauspicious weather was not the sole obstacle facing the airborne troops, however. They had no maps of the island and little useful intelligence about the nature, capabilities, and deployment of enemy troops. The Marines on the north side could not adequately communicate with the Rangers on the south side of the island. On 25 October, Operation Urgent Fury began.

By 29 October, 599 American citizens had been evacuated along with 121 from other countries, and combat operations ended by 2 November. The U.S. forces met with strong unexpected resistance from the Cuban troops on the island and the Grenadian Army, and did not gain full control until mid-December. The operation was nevertheless deemed a success with 700 students rescued, 755 Cubans repatriated to their island, and 6,000 U.S. troops flown back to their bases. U.S. forces sustained 19 killed and 116 wounded; Cuban forces sustained 25 killed, 59 wounded, and 638 combatants captured. Grenadian forces casualties included 45 killed and 358 wounded; at least 24 civilians were killed, 18 of whom were killed in the accidental bombing of a Grenadian mental hospital.<sup>39</sup>

Deficiencies in communications, planning, and organization during Operation Urgent Fury and the failed Operation Eagle Claw highlighted the dysfunctional command and control system established by the National Security Act of 1947. The two operations underlined the need for a new structure emphasizing jointness in operations with standardized communications and intelligence protocols for all the armed services. Within a year, USSOCOM was legislated into existence by Congressional action in the Goldwater-Nichols Defense Reorganization Act of 1986 (Public Law 99-433) and the Nunn-Cohen Amendment to the National Defense Authorization Act of 1987. The legislation created a new four-star command to prepare SOF to carry out assigned missions and, if directed by the president or secretary of defense, to plan for and conduct special

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<sup>39</sup> Details of the history and execution of this military operation are drawn from various sources, including: "Invasion of Grenada," Wikipedia, accessed 20 May 2016, [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Invasion\\_of\\_Grenada](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Invasion_of_Grenada). For U.S. casualty information, see: Nese F. DeBruyne and Anne Leland, "American War and Military Operations Casualties: Lists and Statistics," Congressional Research Service, RL32492, 2 January 2015, accessed 20 May 2016, <https://www.fas.org/sgp/crs/natsec/RL32492.pdf>.

operations.<sup>40</sup> Just a few months later, during Operation Earnest Will in the Persian Gulf, and later during the invasion of Panama in 1989, the usefulness of the new command structure would be proven.

USSOCOM is a unified combatant command with service-like responsibilities “to organize, train, and equip Special Operations forces.” Its original mission was “to synchronize the planning of special operations and provide SOF to support persistent, networked, and distributed Geographic Combatant Command (GCC) operations to protect and advance our nation’s interests.”<sup>41</sup> All that makes USSOCOM a unique command, but its commander, with some exceptions, does not command

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***It is my job to provide them the best special operations force in the world.***

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any forces in combat or crisis. Rather, he is a supporting commander to geographic commanders and the chiefs of mission. As Admiral McRaven, former commander of USSOCOM, put it: “It is my job to *provide* them the best special operations force in the world. It is their job to *employ those forces in support of U.S. policy.*”<sup>42</sup>

In February 2013, Secretary of Defense Leon E. Panetta, with the concurrence of the geographic combat commanders, granted to USSOCOM authority over the theater special operations commands (TSOCs). He gave USSOCOM authority over all special operations forces, including those assigned to the European, Pacific, Central, Southern, Africa, and Northern Commands. The GCCs, however, would maintain operational control of the TSOCs, which meant that no missions by special operators could be conducted within a GCC area of responsibility without the approval of the geographic commander and the chief of mission or ambassador.<sup>43</sup> The additional authorities provided USSOCOM with the responsibility to resource and organize United States Special Operations Forces (USSOF) globally, but no greater authority to deploy and direct them.

SOF are a unique capability and the U.S.’s primary tool in the fight against global terrorism—the fifth challenge on former Secretary Carter’s list of major threats. As of this writing, SOF are operating in more than 80 countries and an increasing number are being deployed across the Middle East and Africa.<sup>44</sup> As they are, some of their tactical technological advantages are being eroded. For instance, in Afghanistan, Iraq, and elsewhere, the SOF have “owned the night” due to their edge in night vision technology. In addition to more and cheaper units being produced, thefts and illegal exports of advanced gear are reaching our enemies in Afghanistan and Iraq. Court records show that, in 2008, several shipments were destined for China and Japan. Losing tactical

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<sup>40</sup> *U.S. Special Operations Command Fact Book: Deter, Disrupt, and Defeat Terrorist Threats*, USSOCOM Public Affairs, 2009, <https://fas.org/irp/agency/dod/socom/factbook-2009.pdf>.

<sup>41</sup> General Joseph L. Votel, commander, USSOC (statement before the Senate Armed Services Committee, Washington, D.C., 8 March 2016), [http://www.armed-services.senate.gov/imo/media/doc/Votel\\_03-08-16.pdf](http://www.armed-services.senate.gov/imo/media/doc/Votel_03-08-16.pdf).

<sup>42</sup> Donna Miles, “New Authority Supports Global Special Operations Network,” *DoD News*, 15 May 2013, <http://archive.defense.gov/news/newsarticle.aspx?id=120044>.

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>44</sup> General Joseph L. Votel, statement before the Senate Armed Services Committee.

night-fighting superiority affects not only mission performance, but also has significant strategic significance by limiting our target selection and operational capabilities. Moreover, enemies possessing them will use night vision gear to kill our troops at night.<sup>45</sup>

### **The Global SOF Network and the Third Offset**

Global terrorism and transregional criminal organizations are spreading like a virus and there will never be a sufficient number of USSOF and resources to confront them. SOF must have unique skill sets so they cannot be mass-produced. Operators need to be tech-savvy and are tech reliant because they engage in time-sensitive, high-risk missions requiring high levels of precision. Because of the nature of their missions, they must also be agile in identifying and dealing with problems rapidly. This requires them to acquire technology fast and, for that purpose, they have the authority under U.S. Code Title 10 and under the Congressional Major Force Program-11 to bypass Department of Defense (DOD) acquisition red tape. They also must maintain close relationships with industry to accelerate acquisition procurement.

Deployments of SOF often arise unexpectedly, so to meet demand, the size of USSOCOM's elite forces grew from 33,000 to 69,000 and its budget grew from \$2.3 billion to over \$10 billion during the past decade, despite force structure downsizing elsewhere. But the combination of Congressional sequestration and the refocusing of force structure required by the third offset priorities creates fiscal uncertainty.<sup>46</sup> Budget cuts on the services also affect USSOCOM because the command depends heavily on conventional forces (CF) as mission enablers and because it invests significantly in modifications to CF acquisitions.

To obtain rapid access to emerging technologies in a dynamic security environment, USSOCOM has created its own innovation incubator in Ybor City in Tampa, Florida. Called SOFWERX, it looks like a high-tech startup and, at first blush, resembles DIUx in Mountain View, California. However, there is a critical difference between the two: USSOCOM is the only combatant command with direct appropriations and procurement authorities and that can sign acquisition contracts on the spot, while DIUx operates as a matchmaker between DOD and the tech industry. Nonetheless, a USSOCOM buying decision remains a complicated event.<sup>47</sup>

Like the rest of the U.S. military, USSOCOM's technological edge and readiness is threatened not only by fiscal constraints but also by the proliferation of tools like information technology and the unconventional tactical methods that they are encountering. So from early on, they have been on the innovation bandwagon to enhance capability, maintain technological superiority, and modernize the force. One example is the Tactical Assault Light Operator Suit program. Under the SOF Warrior program, new technologies are needed to sustain their decisive

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<sup>45</sup> Peter Eisler, "Enemies securing U.S. night-vision gear," *USA Today*, 14 May 2008.

<sup>46</sup> Andrew Feickert, "Special Operations Forces (SOF): Background and Issues for Congress," RS21048, Congressional Research Service, 8 April 2016, accessed 15 April 2016, <https://www.fas.org/sgp/crs/natsec/RS21048.pdf>. See also: Department of Defense, FY2017 Budget Fact Sheet.

<sup>47</sup> Sandra I. Erwin, "Secretive SOCOM Opens Up to Private Sector," *National Defense*, 25 January 2016, <http://www.nationaldefensemagazine.org/blog/Lists/Posts/Post.aspx?ID=2068>. As of December 2016, until Congress is satisfied, DIUx can spend only 75% of its authorized operational funds and 25% of its R&D prototyping funds.

combat system superiority. SOF Warrior focuses on enhancing capabilities at the unit and individual level in areas such as laser markers, weapons, counterimprovised explosive devices, and the family of SOF vehicles.<sup>48</sup> Additional critical procurement programs include “a precision strike package, rotary wing upgrades, and the AC/MC-130J in support of SOF aviation; improved wet and dry submersibles ... and upgraded communications, weapons, and visual augmentation.”<sup>49</sup>



The Defense Advanced Research Projects Agency's Ground X-Vehicle Technology (GXV-T) program is working to improve combat vehicles. Source: DARPA

## The Human Dimension

The human dimension of SOF is their center of gravity and they have the essential lead in the ongoing global war against terror and VEOs. USSOCOM has about 56,000 active duty personnel, and 7,400, and 6,600 civilian men and women, respectively.<sup>50</sup> Throughout his two terms in office, President Obama was fond of fighting asymmetric enemies by using SOF to get more ‘bang for the buck’ while keeping a small footprint to avoid having troops on the ground.

Instead of large deployments of troops, SOF embed with local militaries to bolster their capabilities as well as “to train, advise, accompany and/or assist.” In general terms, SOF are a tool of the military that provide strategic warning and prepare the environment, while enabling conventional forces with a ‘warm start’ and amplifying the effectiveness of hard power.<sup>51</sup> During these times of fiscal austerity, the heroic narratives of SOF missions, such as the Osama Bin Laden takedown, stir the public’s mood and imagination. But by using the SOF so frequently in dangerous and risky missions, the country risks exhausting a precious resource, raising the dangerous possibility of overusing or misusing this valuable national asset.

The negative signs have been visible for some time now as a combination of high operating tempo, long family absences, casualties, post-traumatic stress disorder, and other stressors after 14

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<sup>48</sup> “Q & A: Michael D. Lumpkin, Assistant Secretary of Defense for SO/LIC,” *Special Operations International*, 16 December 2015, <http://www.specops-dhp.com/interesting-post/2170/>.

<sup>49</sup> General Joseph L. Votel, commander, USSOC (statement before the House Armed Services Committee Subcommittee on Emerging Threats and Capabilities, Washington, D.C., 1 March 2016), 15, <http://docs.house.gov/meetings/AS/AS26/20160301/104552/HHRG-114-AS26-Wstate-VotelJ-20160301.pdf>.

<sup>50</sup> Andrew Feickert, “Special Operations Forces (SOF): Background and Issues for Congress,” 1.

<sup>51</sup> Steven P. Bucci, “The Importance of Special Operations Today and Going Forward,” in *The 2015 Index of U.S. Military Strength*, ed. Dakota L. Wood (Washington, D.C.: The Heritage Foundation, 2015), 47–60.

years of war have led to the accelerated fraying of the force. Burnout leading to combat ineffectiveness and suicides became a growing risk because, as General Joseph L. Votel, commander of U.S. Central Command put it: “We are always at war.”<sup>52</sup>

To address the health readiness issues, USSOCOM established the Preservation of the Force and Family (POTFF) task force. Recent Assistant Secretary of Defense for Special Operations and Low Intensity Conflicts Michael D. Lumpkin explained: “The POTFF programs are designed to address the stress that comes with a high number of repeated deployments and the unique nature of SOF deployments. These programs provide services which relieve four domains affected by stress: human performance, psychological performance, spiritual performance and social performance.”<sup>53</sup> The POTFF, however, is a supplement to the respective Armed Services responsibility to its troops and when their budgets are reduced, the health services provided by USSOCOM are affected, too.

In a globalized conflict environment of great power competition, SOF are needed to provide the DOD with a reliable, agile, skilled, experienced, and mature, niche global force to lean on as its foundational military capabilities transition during the third offset force realignment. New missions and new roles are likely to be assigned to SOF in the future, as our enemies are nation-states. Many of these missions will deal with localized crises requiring SOF to work with allies and partner nations (PN) to share the burden and/or achieve greater mass. To address future contingencies, a Global SOF Network (GSN) concept was adopted during the Obama administration and implemented under the leadership of Admiral McRaven. It seeks to rebalance the two main aspects of SOF.

## **The Two Flavors of SOF and the GSN**

SOF activities come in two flavors: direct-action approaches and indirect-action approaches. Direct-action approach activities are raids and other kinetic operations admired by the general public that target the enemy directly, such as the Osama Bin Laden takedown. They are extremely time-sensitive, risky, precisely executed operations that aim for high impact. As explained by Admiral McRaven: “The direct approach is characterized by technologically-enabled small-unit precision lethality, focused intelligence, and interagency cooperation integrated on a digitally-networked battlefield.”<sup>54</sup> Direct action raids like those to search, capture, or eliminate high value targets may or may not have high strategic effects. In fact, they might consume resources, readiness, and capacity particularly when directed not for strategic impact but for purely local tactical situations like pleasing a chieftain.

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<sup>52</sup> Ben Watson, “Special Operations Commander Says Burden On Elite Troops Is Here to Stay,” *Defense One*, 10 July 2014, <http://www.defenseone.com/politics/2014/07/special-operations-commander-says-burden-elite-troops-here-stay/88402/>. In 2010, Admiral Eric Olson, former USSOCOM Commander, initiated a study of SOF warriors and their families and was able to document a fraying of the force with strong data.

<sup>53</sup> “Q & A: Michael D. Lumpkin,” *Special Operations International*.

<sup>54</sup> Admiral William H. McRaven, USN, Commander, U.S. Special Operations Command (posture statement before the 112<sup>th</sup> Congress Senate Armed Services Committee, Washington, D.C., 6 March 2012), [http://www.socom.mil/Documents/2012\\_SOCOM\\_POSTURE\\_STATEMENT.pdf](http://www.socom.mil/Documents/2012_SOCOM_POSTURE_STATEMENT.pdf).

Indirect-action approach operations are characterized by long-term, persistent engagements, or commitments to empower and aid other countries to improve their military capabilities. According to Admiral McRaven: “These long-term efforts increase partner capabilities to generate sufficient security and rule of law, address local needs, and advance ideas that discredit and defeat the appeal of violent extremism.”<sup>55</sup> The GSN is an indirect approach designed to implement the January 2012 Defense Strategic Guidance, which calls for a distributed overseas posture for SOFs. The GSN is also the second line of operation established by Admiral McRaven as part of *USSOCOM 2020*.<sup>56</sup> GSN is a collective, global approach to conflict. It rests on the belief that many of today’s challenges must be faced in coalition with other partners and not necessarily through military action alone. It focuses on Phase Zero or pre-conflict situations and uses partner’s 3D skill sets (defense, diplomacy, and development) to be preemptive, preventive, and punitive, as well as constructive and adaptive. A successful Phase Zero mission would make it unnecessary to use U.S. troops.

The GSN concept has three main components: small-footprint and low level presence, greater responsiveness, and regional capacity building. It does so by establishing a structure that increases SOF forward presence and creates networks of allies and PNs.<sup>57</sup> To operationalize the concept, for instance, USSOCOM has Special Operations Liaison Officers embedded in embassy teams or PN organizations and some partners or allies have been integrated into USSOCOM headquarters as liaisons. Since obtaining authorization over the TSOCs in 2003, USSOCOM has worked intensively to create and extend the GSN. Problems associated with integration, interoperability and culture, however, must be overcome if GSN is to succeed in the third offset period.

### **Challenges to the GSN: Interoperability**

The GSN is needed because defense budget sequestration has led to a global drawdown of U.S. forces stationed abroad, at the same time as the 2015 national military strategy, for instance, calls for the U.S. to operate whenever possible in coalition with trusted allies and friends.<sup>58</sup> SOF will be forward deployed as part of the GSN. As a global network in a resource constrained environment,

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<sup>55</sup> Ibid.

<sup>56</sup> Admiral William McRaven, *United States Special Operations Command 2020 (SOCOM 2020): Forging the Tip of the Spear* (MacDill AFB: U.S. Special Operations Command, 2012), 3, accessed 11 April 2013, <http://www.defenseinnovationmarketplace.mil/resources/SOCOM2020Strategy.pdf>.

<sup>57</sup> Thomas S. Szayna and William Welsch IV, “Developing and Assessing Options for the Global SOF Network,” Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation, 2013, accessed 30 April 2016, [www.rand.org/pubs/research\\_reports/RR340.html](http://www.rand.org/pubs/research_reports/RR340.html). See also: Richard Rubright, “A Strategic Perspective on the Global SOF Network: Little Money, Unclear Ends, and Big Ideas” in *The Role of the Global SOF Network in a Resource Constrained Environment* (MacDill AFB, FL: JSOU Press, 2013), 5–17.

<sup>58</sup> Joint Chiefs of Staff, *The National Military Strategy of the United States 2015: The United States Military’s Contribution to National Security*, Chairman’s Foreword (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Department of Defense, June 2015), accessed 22 May 2016, [http://www.jcs.mil/Portals/36/Documents/Publications/2015\\_National\\_Military\\_Strategy.pdf](http://www.jcs.mil/Portals/36/Documents/Publications/2015_National_Military_Strategy.pdf). See also: U.S. Department of Defense, “Sustaining U.S. Global Leadership: Priorities for 21st Century Defense,” January 2012, 2–3.

it would face problems inherent to military coalitions; namely, how to maintain strategic, operational, and tactical interoperability.

What is interoperability? Definitions abound, so we should start by differentiating it from integration and compatibility. It lies above compatibility and below integration. It is the building block of jointness and information superiority. It is a capability with a multiplier effect. The *Department of Defense Dictionary of Military and Associated Terms* defines it as “the ability to operate in synergy in the execution of assigned tasks.”<sup>59</sup> Interoperability allows dissimilar forces, units, or systems to operate together. It might involve different nationalities or armed services, or both working together.

Because no one can do it alone in the current security environment, if you are going to fight, then interoperability is a necessary condition for coalition operations, as we learned during

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***Working in an interoperable coalition is also a form of working smarter with less money.***

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NATO’s involvement with the International Security and Assistance Force (ISAF) in Afghanistan. As John Deni, a professor at the Strategic Studies Institute noted: “ISAF has forced NATO countries to develop an unprecedented depth of operational and tactical interoperability.”<sup>60</sup> Working in an interoperable

coalition is also a form of working smarter with less money. In order to achieve interoperability, you must follow a process involving joint planning, training, and exercises, as well as setting standards. The results are usually measured in terms of less duplication, a pooling of resources, and better synergies.<sup>61</sup>

There are four traditional levels of military interoperability in warfare: strategic, operational, tactical, and technical. In today’s flattened battlefield space, the four levels would best work in a non-linear, non-hierarchical ‘chaotic’ way. Strategic interoperability is the ability of militaries from different countries to interact and operate together to achieve the objectives of a campaign. ISAF is an example. It maximizes the PN contribution to the overall effort.

Operational interoperability is the ability of units to provide services to, and access from, other forces or units and to use the exchanged services in order to operate effectively together.<sup>62</sup> Exercises, simulations, and wargames are used to train and identify asymmetries in the coalition. Reviews of Operation Urgent Fury, a combined operation in Grenada, showed that joint task forces were formed from units that had not trained together before; there was no fully integrated, interoperable communications system; and there was insufficient operational planning, a lack of training and realistic exercises, and an absence of maps. When the maps were found, they had to

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<sup>59</sup> Joint Chiefs of Staff, *Joint Publication 1-02, Department of Defense Dictionary of Military and Associated Terms*, 8 November 2010 (as amended through 15 February 2016).

<sup>60</sup> John R. Deni, “Maintaining Transatlantic Strategic, Operational and Tactical Interoperability in an Era of Austerity,” *International Affairs* 90, no. 3 (12 May 2014), 583.

<sup>61</sup> Anthony W. Faughn, *Interoperability: Is It Achievable?* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Program on Information Resources Policy, October 2002), accessed 20 May 2016 [www.pirp.harvard.edu/pubs\\_pdf/faughn/faughn-p02-6.pdf](http://www.pirp.harvard.edu/pubs_pdf/faughn/faughn-p02-6.pdf).

<sup>62</sup> Joint Chiefs of Staff, *Joint Publication 1-02*

be flown in rather than electronically transmitted. In contrast, during Operation Just Cause, the unilateral U.S. invasion of Panama in 1988, command structure and interagency relationships were established five months prior to the operation, planners in every operational area were included, and fire support was rehearsed and coordinated with all services.

Tactical interoperability is the joining of units and capabilities into a combined fighting or working force. At this level, in order to establish trust and confidence in each warrior, the key is to put them through realistic training and exercises. There are three challenges presented when SOF work with conventional forces that must be overcome to avoid fratricide. They are: land management, as multiple units must determine ownership for situational awareness; communication; and marking of force. The last two also are needed for integration and mission accountability. Technical interoperability in the information age is the core in 21st century warfare. The most critical interoperability systems are the networks that support command and control, intelligence, movement and maneuvers, fires and protection.



Slovenian and Italian Army Joint Terminal Attack Controller soldiers are debriefed by a U.S. Air Force JTAC trainer during Allied Spirit IV, a multinational exercise to enhance tactical interoperability and test secure communications between NATO members and partner nations. Source: U.S. Army photo by Sgt. 1st Class Caleb Barrieau

To be interoperable in an effective way, there must be realistic training exercises under conditions of rapid deployment. When working with infrequent allies or partners, a critical question is how much technical interoperability is enough? At the operational and tactical level, one must be able to identify who are the key people.

The GSN is an indirect approach, however, so the emphasis is not on achieving interoperability to wield force but on being an interoperable network of networks to achieve operational success. A network is basically a bundle of relationships, so it is critical for the GSN to pay close attention to the personal, language, and cultural aspects of coalition building and maintaining when working with PN. SOF have a unique skill set that includes language and culture training but, as Emily Spencer puts it, we must solve the people puzzle and educate and train SOF to raise their cultural intelligence.<sup>63</sup>

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<sup>63</sup> Dr. Emily Spencer, "Solving the People Puzzle: Educating and Training SOF Operators for Enhanced Cultural Intelligence," in *The Role of the Global SOF Network in a Resource Constrained Environment* (MacDill AFB, FL: JSOU Press, 2013) 23–30.

Cultural aspects are critical in dealing effectively with the mission partners, in particular how to treat the local population, from women and children, to the sick, young men, the angry, prisoners, gang leaders, etc. Issues of socio-cultural space must also be noted, such as body language, dress, food/dietary, personal hygiene, tattoos, proximity in personal and group meetings, conversational rules, drinking, praying, religious items, etc. When operating in a host nation, one must learn to ask the right questions. Several items on a short language checklist for GSN include: determining the level of language skills available and required; problems with the translator, a key person who might be dangerous to the mission due to ethnic or religious biases, incompetence, or local language barriers to understanding (dialects, slang); and modes of communication, from verbal, to visual or hand signing, to electronic.

## **Conclusion**

The strategic security environment continues to change dynamically in ways threatening to the national security and survival of the United States. As in previous times, the current military and civilian leadership is moving to maintain and secure the level of superiority that has kept the world safe and American democracy prosperous and secure. In that effort, SOF actively remain at the point of the spear while the country transitions into an unknown future full of challenges.





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