



Operation LOCK-IN

AUGUST COLE + PW SINGER

The story within is fiction; It has been produced with the aim to spark discussion and creative insight that might challenge established thought.



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Foreword:

As U.S. Special Operations Command (SOCOM) plans and prepares for the future global operating environment of the 2030s, it must answer a growing list of crucial questions spanning from the types of missions that future special operations forces (SOF) teams will be called upon to fulfill to how to integrate fast-evolving technologies into formations.

The essence and value of irregular warfare mean SOCOM's future missions might range from partnership training and counterterrorism to projecting force worldwide, in order to hold adversary strategic targets at risk. In turn, SOF units, and also their adversaries, will employ emergent capabilities such as next-generation AI, sensing and mission management tools, and increasingly autonomous robotics. Whether these missions take place in jungles or subterranean environments, they will be shaped by the increasingly contested domains of outer space, cyberspace, and the electromagnetic spectrum. These will force a reexamination of the skills an operator will require, and even the ideal composition of a future team. They may even force a redefinition of what victory might look like in a world of instant global connections and where algorithms shape cognition and perspectives faster than kinetic operations.

And yet, while change comes faster and faster, there are constants. One is that victory will still depend on enduring human elements — embodied by the SOF Truths.¹

Written in support of SOF Week 2026 and SOCOM, the following “useful fiction” scenario is imagined, but draws upon real-world trends and open-source research. The narrative depicts how near-future SOF teams might conduct an irregular warfare mission with strategic effect, utilizing the emerging suite of technologies that will soon be at hand.

¹ <https://www.socom.mil/about/sof-truths>

PORT OF DAR ES SALAAM / 1901 LOCAL

“Sensor hit on *Anqing*, Type 055 destroyer, and corvette *Fushun* moored outboard in a nest configuration.”

“That is one hell of a juicy target. Doesn’t feel right just to swim right past a Type 055.”

Using the new Silent Comms system, Special Operator First Class Arthur “Artie” Paltrow had not actually said the words aloud, but they still reached Senior Chief Dale Bryant swimming next to him through the turbid waters of Dar es Salaam harbor. The next-generation molar mic used advanced subvocal electromyography sensors embedded in a tooth-clip, while a haptic neck-collar detected the neural firing patterns of the vocal cords before a sound formed. An edge-AI chip processed this “pre-speech” as data, turning it into an encrypted digital stream beamed by laser across to the other SEAL.

The two SEALs slowly moved past the 180-meter guided missile destroyer. Armed with 112 vertical launch cells and the ability to hit targets 2,000 kilometers away, the *Anqing’s* arrival in the Port of Dar es Salaam had tilted the entire regional balance of power in East Africa toward Beijing just by showing up.² It had also introduced a major complication to their mission, raising the security levels at the already heavily patrolled port facility. Perhaps of more concern was the smaller Type 056 corvette moored right beside it. The *Fushun* was a smaller vessel, more suited to littoral patrols, but it had considerable anti-submarine sensor capabilities, the kind that could also detect two Navy frogmen.

“Stay on target, Gold Leader,” Bryant replied.³

² <https://news.usni.org/2026/03/11/chinese-navys-new-type-0055-destroyers-join-taiwan-focused-command>

³ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ux-ycbZWcdY>

“Who’s *Gold Leader*?” Paltrow mouthed back. “I thought we were Task Unit Thresher.”

“Nevermind. Before your time.” The problem with this new generation, thought Bryant, was they knew their tech, but not the important stuff.



The speaker’s side of the conversation started with “thinking” the words as if about to activate the muscles used to produce speech. For the listener, the speaker’s recreated voice sounded like a life-like digital rendition, but free of the rebreather’s background noise. It even faithfully captured Paltrow’s chronic sinus infection, which, like so many SEALs, he just couldn’t shake. The condition had proven quite resistant to the complement of antibiotics the

team corpsman had provided during the pre-mission insertion phase — a ponderous transit on a local fishing dhow to a small fishing town north of Dar es Salaam.

While low-power, high-frequency laser pulses linked the pair for communications, they still swam tethered together by an old-school nylon buddy line, sucking on rebreathers 20 feet below the surface of the inky waters. Their full-face masks’ augmented reality displays⁴ relied on a fused sensor view of the water around them provided by miniaturized 3D sonar on their own sleds. In addition, two small drones the size of a single civilian SCUBA tank scouted ahead. This pair of mini-drones connected back to the SEALs’ sleds by self-reeling, stretchable fiber-optic lines. A third drone they called the “coffin” for its size and slow-opening access hatch followed 50 meters to the rear and carried the mission package.

Paltrow glanced in the direction of the Chinese destroyer tied up at the pier. His AR view rendered the below-waterline view in a green grid-like pattern

⁴ <https://www.navy.mil/DesktopModules/ArticleCS/Print.aspx?PortalId=1&ModuleId=523&Article=4031814>



outlining the hull. Compared to its slab-sided superstructure and helicopter bays, the softer lines of the Type 055's hull and keel looked equally severe when seen from below.

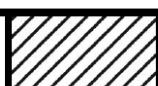
Yet, even with all the sensors, it was so murky that every few minutes Paltrow reached a gloved hand out to ensure his partner was still there. His fingertips touched Bryant's thin neoprene suit, mottled with sensor-defeat ridges that looked like a map's topographic lines.

Paltrow reached a gloved hand out to ensure his partner was still there.

"Buy me dinner first," Bryant responded over their closed comms.

Paltrow chuckled at the reticent Bryant cracking the joke. Paltrow enlisted in the Navy the day after graduating from Reno High School as a standout wrestler. He started his Navy service as an aviation machinist's mate aboard *USS Ronald Reagan*, but had been a SEAL for over six years and served with Bryant for the last three. After graduating from college in Bozeman, Montana, Bryant worked as a park ranger in Glacier National Park. An encounter with a trio of older SEAL snipers on a civilian winter mountaineering course changed his course. They had all geeked out over LIDAR terrain models and the ultralight design tricks of their custom backpacks. Realizing SOCOM units were stacked with advanced technology, Bryant enlisted in the Navy a week later with the goal of becoming a SEAL.

Clearing a cluster of shredded blue plastic bags from his sled's electric drive before it fouled the prop, Bryant considered the juxtaposition of the polluted waters he swam in. That afternoon, a late summer offshore squall gathered over the Indian Ocean like a mountain range. During mission planning, they considered employing a SEAL Delivery Vehicle mini-submarine deployed from a Navy ballistic missile submarine. The lighter footprint sleds won out; they were easier to slip into the country with the help of local partner forces, and the PLA closely watched the coast. So just after dusk during a pelting



rain, Bryant and Paltrow covertly slipped into the Mzinga River, moving aside the wadded plastic wrappers, jagged styrofoam blocks, and faded plastic jugs. Along with the raw sewage surrounding them, they had flowed with the current into the busy harbor.

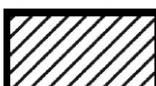
As they approached an inflatable barrier fitted with acoustic sensors protecting the perimeter of the Chinese warships, Bryant could not see Paltrow. Years of sensitive underwater missions like this together meant he knew his dive partner's tattooed shoulders would be tightly hunched with tension. As they advanced, Bryant reviewed the op's force list and wondered if it was enough given the difficulty of what they were attempting. In an ad-hoc operations center set up in a safe house with a sweeping view of the harbor, were three other SEALs, including his troop commander, along with an Air Force Combat Controller. In addition, a boisterous 3rd Special Forces Group Master Sergeant, Brent Chalmers, led a local team holed up in a disused fishing boat repair shop. He had tight relationships in the country built over years of deployments to Tanzania and the Horn of Africa. Drawn from that long-term network were two former Tanzanian coast guard officers and four former Tanzania People's Defence Force enlisted commandos ready to put to sea in a recently refurbished 36-foot sportfishing boat tied up to a rotting pier in front of the shop.

"What's our pace?" Bryant asked. "My display's glitched."

"We are eight mikes behind, as of waypoint 12."

"Current's way stronger on the ebb," said Bryant. "Maybe the model's bottom contour is wrong."

"Continue creep. Make up time on target," Paltrow said slowly, weighing the gravity of already being so far behind on this undersea sabotage mission when every minute mattered. "Conserve sled juice."



“Aye aye. *Fushun* at 150 yards,” said Bryant, calling their navigation. “Waypoint 13 in 30 seconds, then starboard turn 90 degrees.”

Three red icons flashed on each of their visor AR displays, and nothing needed to be said: PLAN sailors just tossed three surface drones from the *Fushun*’s deck. The compact wedge-shaped patrol drones would be online in moments, scanning the harbor’s surface as well as one meter below the surface.

Bryant reached over and squeezed Paltrow’s shoulder twice, and without a word, the two SEALs abruptly turned right. As they did, one of the SEALs watching the warships from the safe house saw the sailors launch the drones. He quickly fine-tuned the aim of a remote-controlled directional acoustic device affixed to the top of a nearby fuel tank, placed there by a local partner so it looked just like any one of the thousands of cheap Chinese security cameras in the area. Though it had only a few minutes of power, it was enough when aimed at the drones and the water around them to spoof their ability to sense the SEALs below until they passed by.

Though the PLAN drones should not be able to intercept the SEALs close-range comms, neither risked even subvocal speech as they fought the urge to thrash clear of the area.

Five minutes later, with the two Chinese warships and their USV drones safely behind them, Bryant muttered, “Target ahead.”

“Not much else could be a bigger target than a PLAN guided missile destroyer, but here we go,” Paltrow responded.

SOCOM HEADQUARTERS / 1208 LOCAL

General Carl Salerno squeezed the sun-faded blue racquetball in his right hand with a grip powerful enough to twist an apple in two, a favorite trick he

had performed for his five-year-old granddaughter a month ago when he'd been back home in North Carolina. To ease his painful back, he leaned against the wall at the back of the operations center, as was his habit during high-stakes moments.

The SOCOM Commander and Army Special Forces officer studied a simple digital scorecard at the far end of the room that showed a count no different than a Congressional vote tally: the 121 in the red box represented the targets yet to be secured and the 207 in the green box showed completed objectives. A row of side-by-side digital clocks displayed the local time at each of those locations, with one clock displaying Zulu time, used as a global reference. SOCOM's Director of Operations sat nearby, his shaved head weaving back and forth while engrossed in a VR rig as he shoveled spoonful after spoonful of rice and vegetables into his mouth from a sagging cardboard bowl.

"Sir, Task Unit Thresher made it to their critical waypoint, with an assist from their shoreside SEALs. I know that one can still give us some headaches, but they'll be on their target any minute."

Salerno smelled fresh coffee waft in the air around him and instinctively knew that his Command Sergeant Major Karen Long was now standing beside him. Neither of the two leaders had the air-brushed, over-muscled look that too many wrongly thought was required for a successful career in special operations. A former backup shooting guard at Georgetown University, Salerno was tall and thin, almost gaunt. The career MARSOC Senior Non-Commissioned Officer, by contrast, was a full 14 inches shorter, but with the functional paradox of a build that came from being a competitive Hyrox athlete: ropey, muscular forearms, a lean upper body, and powerful legs.

"There's a lot of PLA firepower in that harbor right now," Salerno said. "Something like 112 VLS cells on a Chinese Type 055 destroyer. Swam right by."



“Wish you were there?”

Dammit, I do really want to be there, Salerno thought. The SOCOM commander was a graduate of the U.S. Army’s Special Forces Underwater Operations School, which intensified the feeling every commander gets when they would rather be at the front than in the ops room. Salerno’s mentors, though, had taught him long ago that urge was a trap because that was not the role of a commander. He knew he shouldn’t be there in Dar es Salaam, or on any of the other LOCK-IN missions. Besides, the peculiarity of this moment was technology allowed him to see exactly what Task Unit Thresher’s operators saw. And, this generation of operators was so much more at home with robotics, sensors, and AI, he admitted to himself, than he was.

This generation of SOCOM operators was so much more at home with robotics, sensors, and AI.

“Always,” was all Salerno said in response. Long knew what he was thinking because she felt the same powerful draw.

The Chinese freighter *Chengdu Dawn* was in one of the port’s 13 berths for Panamax vessels, and local partners reported it had 23 crew plus an additional six Chinese private security guards from a state-owned company operating aerial and surface drones similar to those that the PLAN used to defend its nearby warships. Unlike their military counterparts, they took much longer to get their bots back to patrolling after bad weather let up. An OSINT analyst from DIA noted that was because the PMC’s owners docked the guards’ pay when they lost equipment, including the bots. Whether it was because the PLAN ships were in port or something else, this time the *Chengdu Dawn*’s security team was on duty much sooner than expected after the storm. The SEALs had no communications with their two shore teams, and so would have to figure out the next few minutes on their own.



Long offered a pair of VR glasses to Salerno to review the feeds from the task unit commander overlooking Dar es Salaam harbor. Instead, he shook his head, and Long tossed them to an aide, an Air Force major and special operations pilot, with a precise overhand lob. Salerno, the former basketball player, nodded approvingly. Salerno studied the personnel in the dimly lit room as much as what was shown on the room's theater-like screens.

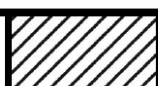
I'm not questioning them. I'm reconsidering my own judgment, Salerno reflected.

Linked to Theater Special Operations Commands (TSOCs) worldwide and the U.S. special operations teams operating in their theaters, the digital bridge between Tampa and the rest of the world was so far holding up. For now.

Normally, the TSOCs ran their regional operations. Given the global nature of what was underway, SOCOM headquarters oversaw the entire operation, along with the equally sweeping fusion of human operators and AI systems of all kinds. On the operation center's many large wall-mounted monitors, the two leaders watched in silence as hundreds of blue icons indicated U.S. special operations forces (SOF) targeting China's strategic and economic assets on five continents.

"What's caught your eye, Karen? Trouble?" Salerno asked, his usually warm South Philly accent clipped as he noted Long subtly shaking her head at the tablet held in her left hand.

"The last 10 or so ships will be the hardest to secure. Here—" Long tapped an icon along the coast of Peru. "I knew the Port of Chancay op was one we needed to stay on top of because of the PLA presence based there. But I wasn't expecting the same in Tanzania..."



She swiped over to the Horn of Africa, tapping the screen glass hard enough it could be heard over the room's running conversations and chattering keyboards.

Long took a sip of coffee before explaining her concerns to the commander. "The port in Dar is where it's dicey. This PLAN destroyer and corvette show up off schedule, peeled off the counter-piracy picket lines. Having those kinds of assets right next to the target really raises the risk to our operators and the region. We just don't have a clear idea of why the Chinese Navy firepower showed up."

"Could the PLA know our team is there?"

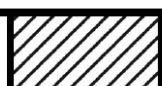
"No indication," Long said. "SIGINT says it was a medical emergency; the lead ship's political commissar got sick, and they wanted to fly him back to Beijing. He went to the airport and everything, so it squares. Just bad luck for the commissar...and us."

Long squinted at a screen on the other side of the room captured her attention. She and Salerno had enough experience in special operations to know that often very little went according to plan.

"We could have targeted the Chinese destroyer," Salerno said, tossing the ball to his Air Force aide with a no-look pass. The major, who went by "Junk," caught it without looking.

"Well, sir, I won't disagree, but we have to trust the fusion of all the intel and analytics. Hundreds of analysts and planners and millions of algorithms built this whole op," Long replied, her coastal Alabama drawl even stronger as she mulled the inherent risk in such complexity.

Three weeks ago, U.S. intelligence intercepts and human reporting on covert PLA and Ministry of State Security actions in the Indo-Pacific indicated China was poised to launch a major military operation to seize the capital, ports,



and airports of a U.S. ally in the region. As Task Unit Thresher's SEALs approached their target, Beijing's zero-hour was now just over 48 hours away.

What rapidly took shape and received the go-ahead to deter China was something never before attempted, and if unsuccessful, would never be considered again: Operation LOCK-IN.



In an era of high-fidelity AI modeling and all-seeing sensors, coming up with a truly novel operational concept was no small feat. Of all the U.S. options to deter China from invading an American ally, the most audacious won out with SOCOM in the lead. While planned by the Pentagon, Operation LOCK-IN's origin was rooted in work by U.S. analysts from across the government. Departments of Commerce, Treasury, and State contributed as much as those in the intelligence and defense communities. All involved employed a new generation of agentic computational and simulation analysis tools that shared data and insights automatically, reducing the bureaucratic drag that could be the downfall of such a complex operation.

The concept of Operation LOCK-IN could actually be credited to its target. Mao had once advised, "You fight your way, and I'll fight my way," and the Americans had finally taken that to heart. In a dark mirror of China's strategic concepts on how to defeat the U.S., Operation LOCK-IN would use hundreds of simultaneous global actions to strike at the vulnerabilities in not just the PLA's commitment to strategic autonomy and asymmetric engagement, but the CCP's commitment to societal stability. Each target had been selected for its direct or indirect effect on China's military and civilian supply chains, its defense industrial base, or even the political and financial toll it would take on its leaders, their closest supporters, and even their families. Most of all, if successful, LOCK-IN would land a

massive cognitive warfare blow against the psyche of Chinese Communist Party and PLA leaders, hitting them when and where they were most confident and most personally invested, and turning that confidence into fear.

It was an operation that only SOCOM could accomplish. While other militaries believed they had the same level of skill and professionalism, no other nation, especially China, had the global presence, decades of operational experience, and generations of professional and personal relationships that the command had built. SOCOM had forces deployed to at least 140 countries and many were continuing operations that had been going on longer than Salerno had been serving in special operations units.

In Dar es Salaam harbor, that meant one naval sabotage mission among dozens more like it elsewhere in the world. SOCOM dive-qualified personnel and partner forces were to simultaneously affix Mk X limpet smart mines to the hulls of Beijing-friendly commercial, fishing, and shadow fleet vessels carrying everything from rare earth elements extracted from the DRC to freshly stolen supercars from Barcelona. Once armed, GPS and inertial motion sensor triggers would detonate 3,000 grams of high explosive if the vessels left their location.

If successful, the mission would hold at risk this subset of more than 50 Chinese merchant marine and covert tanker and container ships at key Belt and Road ports (a “String of Pearls”) in Asia, the Middle East, South America, and Africa. Relationships nurtured with local partners over decades of counterterrorism training by Green Berets, Marines, SEALs, and others from the SOCOM tribes would now pay off in another way. So too were quietly assembled logistics networks that had prepositioned hundreds of caches of equipment of all kinds in hot spots and allied countries alike. There were hundreds of other similarly audacious missions led by SOCOM teams targeting interests representing the greatest strategic and personal value to PLA and CCP leaders. Beyond finances, the mission would invert the PLA’s evolving approaches to what it had termed dissipative warfare⁵ that

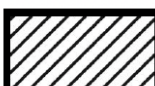
⁵ <https://jamestown.org/dissipative-warfare-the-plas-potential-new-strategy-in-the-ai-era/>

attempted to cause disarray and collapse within America's systems while preserving structure and order within China's.

Operation LOCK-IN would also send another message. While the CCP and PLA leaders saw themselves as having the advantage of waging war in their Indo-Pacific backyard, SOCOM would show that China simply could not escape its geography. Belt-and-Road targets and other prized assets around the world included railroad cars transporting oil and ores in conflict zones, and private aircraft fleets used by Chinese state-owned businesses. Global money laundering transactions, real estate deals and illicit counterfeit pharmaceutical manufacturing facilities that were part of the underbelly of the Belt and Road were also in SOCOM's crosshairs. Most of these targets were in littoral or maritime areas, but several included capital cities where shell companies, corporate cutouts, and logistics workarounds had been arranged by China's government elite to create a self-interested and self-reliant strategic autarchy that answered only to them.

**The underbelly of
the Belt and Road
was in SOCOM's
crosshairs.**

This complexity was front and center for Salerno. To take his mind off Task Unit Thresher's growing troubles, he cued up on his tablet a perfect blend of the two types of target that had fascinated him from the start of the operation. Targeted by a task force drawn mostly from the 75th Ranger Regiment's 2nd Battalion, it was the 10,400-kilometer railroad line from Xi'an to Tehran via Kazakhstan and Turkmenistan, which shipped oil that was being traded in financial centers around the world. There was no way China could secure a rail line that long, especially in nations where SOCOM personnel had been operating for generations. That was bad news for the mayor of Shenzhen, who had placed a multi-million dollar oil futures bet tied to that particular light-crude shipment.



Commandeering a nearby wall screen, Salerno pushed the target package to it so he could study the rail line's map. Then he switched views to a larger global view where spiderweb-like connections overlaid and linked icons of senior CCP or PLA leaders and their assets. He tapped next on a shadow fishing fleet west of northern Peru, owned by a shell company associated with a PLA Rocket Forces general officer. He commanded the PLARF's Base 61, which was headquartered in Huangshan and whose hypersonic missiles targeted the Taiwan Strait.

What snapped Salerno out of this mental excursion was his worry over the Mk X smart limpet mines. He had learned the hard way at the Army's brutal Key West dive school all about the failure modes of equipment and operators alike. The Mk X mines, which the operators called "suckers," were untested — a clean-sheet design invented for LOCK-IN. In a 96-hour sprint, the mines were designed, tested, and manufactured in a lesser-used corner of Fort Bragg. The distributed team included AI agents, signals specialists, quantum sensor researchers, materials and electrical engineers, and explosive ordnance disposal (EOD) personnel, among others.

It was a logistics miracle tying together inputs from a cast of cross-government and cross-industry experts. In the case of the six mines destined for SEALs Paltrow and Bryant, a U.S. intelligence officer working in a neighboring country teamed with a National Lab data scientist in Tennessee and an expat American aviation tourism operator to create a route to covertly put them into their hands.

Yet no matter the inventive insertion method to get the Mk X mines to the SEALs, Salerno knew this was a serious violation of the hard-learned lesson to never test a piece of gear for the first time in combat. And yet he still wished he could be there alongside the SEALs of Task Unit Thresher.

PORT OF DAR ES SALAAM

Paltrow affixed the first Mk X limpet mine to *Chengdu Dawn*'s starboard hull with an oddly organic sucking sound. But as he placed the second mine slightly forward of the ship's engine room, it would not lock into place.

"Got a problem with the second mine," Paltrow said, turning the mine over and over in the murky water to see if it was an obvious issue.

No matter the decade-plus of experience, approaching a target like this made Bryant's heart race as he watched his fellow SEAL, even if it was a 290 meter Panamax freighter, not a cutting-edge PLAN destroyer.

"Maybe something on the other side of the hull is interfering? The vessel isn't supposed to have any countermeasures," Paltrow said to himself, his comms system picking up the subvocal conversation he seemed to be having with himself. "Maybe hull repairs? With some other alloy other than the original steel? I just don't know."

Bryant said nothing and let Paltrow work the problem. One of the experimental mines would be enough to disable the ship, but the second was both a backup in case it failed and double the dilemma for anyone trying to remove them.

The rubber-coated mine was the size of a half-dozen laptops stacked together and had a wedge-shaped form that pointed toward the bow. In addition to its explosive payload, the mine's inertial navigation system gave it sub one-meter resolution for its location thanks to a quantum navigation chip.⁶ The quantum chip's sensors, which monitored changes in gravitational and magnetic fields to determine location, would trigger the mine to detonate if the vessel moved more than 100 meters.

Among *Chengdu Dawn*'s recently loaded thousands of TEU cargo containers, 81 of them contained high-grade cobalt hydroxide. Each container held 20 massive one-tonne bags of the rare earth element. The

⁶ <https://www.darpa.mil/news/2025/roqs-launches-first-phase>



cobalt typically traveled from Chinese-owned mines in the Democratic Republic of Congo, across Lake Tanganyika to Tanzania by lake ship then rail or along the TAZARA railway linking Zambia to Tanzania. Another 19 TEU containers contained tantalum, which was extracted from coltan ore mined in the DRC. These strategic overland lines that Beijing protected with private security forces operating drones and local guards brought the valuable rare earth elements to the Port of Dar es Salaam, creating a pressure point for irregular warfare.⁷

A “tiger team” of financial analysts, commodities traders, and asset managers — many of them U.S. military veterans or reservists — assembled by the Treasury Department designated this particular vessel as a strategic target. The Central Military Commission’s (CMC) vice chair had offshored hundreds of millions of dollars through a trading firm controlled by his niece, who lived

A cross-government and cross-industry team had mapped family investments and cracked the investment strategies employed by each official and their representatives.

outside of China. This cross-government and cross-industry team had not only mapped family investments and secret under-the-table accounts, but they had cracked the investment strategies employed by each official and their representatives. This was much more than using AI models to ferret out offshore savings accounts and triple-blind real estate trusts registered in the Caribbean; the tiger team was able to reverse engineer the highly speculative and aggressive investment strategies to figure out exactly how Operation LOCK-IN could hold them at risk.

In some cases, this involved crypto account takeover tactics or man-in-the-middle redirection of illicit funds. Others were outright interdictions of assets

⁷ <https://ssi.armywarcollege.edu/SSI-Media/Recent-Publications/Article/3938204/china-in-the-democratic-republic-of-the-congo-a-new-dynamic-in-critical-mineral/#:~:text=An%20examination%20of%20the%20Zambia,port%20of%20Lobito%20in%20Angola.>



or individuals critical to transactions that had second- and third-order links, which if severed would collapse the perceived safe-haven investment strategies of China's PLA and Communist Party elites. The CMC's vice chair was now heavily leveraged with a long position in a Shanghai-listed but PLA controlled, self-driving car company preparing to begin production on its most important sedan yet.

The shipment of cobalt and tantalum for this vertically integrated company was a crucial step in that manufacturing process that, if thwarted, would crash the stock price and expose the senior PLA officer to cataclysmic losses he would not be able to cover. Cobalt and tantalum had military uses too, but the message this particular pressure point sent was unmistakable.

None of that was on Paltrow's mind, however, as he watched the readout on his sled's batteries and scanned for any surface drone activity. He calmly moved astern five meters to a different section of the hull. A few minutes later, he attached the second mine.

"Alpha and Bravo mines placed. Preparing to arm now," Paltrow said to Bryant, who was trying to keep their two sleds and the coffin in position while the ebbing current tugged them toward the harbor mouth. The SEALs wore a device the size of a deck of cards on their right forearms to arm the mines, but it had to physically contact them to do so.

"Contact. Surface drones. Three," Bryant muttered, his voice dropping as he studied his screen to see where the Chinese patrol bots might be, and where they would be heading next. This possible situation and how to manage it was just one contingency among the dozens the SEALs and their Green Beret and Air Force counterparts discussed at their first safe house on the northern outskirts of Dar es Salaam.

"Four drones now."

SOCOM HEADQUARTERS

Watching red and blue dots converging on one of the wall screens now showing Task Unit Thresher's mission, General Salerno observed the Chinese surface drones approach the SEALs until the red and blue converged. It reminded him of the old-school Pac-Man arcade game he sometimes played in the back of a laundromat off South Street.

"Can we get a closer look at Thresher on the big screen?" Salerno called out to his aide, who shook his head.

"I want to see for myself the hacked feeds from the Chinese drones hunting Thresher," General Salerno said, standing in the middle of the room. "Junk, let me see those VR glasses now."

A few minutes later, Salerno moved to stand over the shoulder of a Space Force sergeant who had a chat window on his screen while another showed live video feeds from the four small Chinese USVs patrolling around *Chengdu Dawn*. The sergeant was linked with the Colorado-based ground control team operating a U.S. military satellite system whose coverage included the Horn of Africa.

The Space Force liaison was working to fulfill a tasking order for a space-based cyber mission requested by the SEAL commanding officer overseeing the Dar es Salaam operation.

Putting his VR rig back on, Salerno zoomed in on the harbor so he had a synthetic bird's eye view of the vessels. As much as he wanted to be where he felt the most comfortable in the field, this operation drove home how far he was from the ability to really understand what was happening as a commander. There were always too many variables. Too much risk. Too much distance. Operation LOCK-IN took this to the next level and he trusted the TSOC commanders and the team leaders knew if they needed his

support or intervention, they would get it. It was foolish to think that no matter how much of the world and its yottabytes of data produced around the clock, he could find the ground truth he craved while being physically so far from the action. That awareness had drifted further away, year by year, ever since he had been a captain leading an SF A-team, if he was being honest.

Still, the impulse was too powerful to ignore, and as the senior officer at SOCOM, he had to find a way to manage that tension between information and real knowledge however and whenever he could.

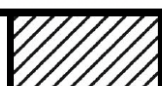
As the senior officer at SOCOM, Salerno had to find a way to manage that tension between information and real knowledge.

Salerno zoomed in on the two PLAN ships and then he followed the mission sim's time-lapse depiction of the SEALs' combat swim to their first target, *Chengdu Dawn*.

Task fixated and forgetting his proximity to Salerno, the Space Force liaison hurriedly grabbed his ringing phone and began a heated conversation that started with, "I meant what I wrote in the chat. This is as priority as it gets, and I don't know how you can't see that too. This request for effects supersedes everything else. Are we even on the same fucking planet?"

Salerno knew it was about the cyber fires the Air Force CCT had called in on the *Chengdu Dawn* just now. This was a critical moment, one of hundreds as Operation LOCK-IN built to its climax.

Salerno took off his VR rig and tossed it to Long, who tossed it to the Air Force aide stooped over and deep in conversation with a wiry Navy cryptologist who stood just over five feet tall. The headset bounced silently off the freshly installed sound-deadening carpet before clattering into the side of an analyst's metal desk.



Was this mission about to go wrong? Was this the unraveling of LOCK-IN? Is this how it might start? Salerno wondered, grateful that nobody in the room could read his mind, at least as far as he knew.

With a tap on the Space Force sergeant's shoulder, Salerno motioned for the handset and reproached himself a moment later as he picked it up. *Am I finally giving in to the temptation to feel involved at the tactical level?*

Deciding this was a critical moment for Task Unit Thresher, he put the headset on and cleared his throat.

“Sounds like I should have a word with someone.”

PORT OF DAR ES SALAAM

Pushing the depth limits of his rebreather unit just past 25 feet, Bryant looked up toward the surface, where the four Chinese security drones patrolled the lurking form of the *Chengdu Dawn*. A faint dawn-like glow from the pier's fluorescent lights filtered through the dark water. Tracking the PLA drones



certainly guided by an algorithm to optimize reestablishing a baseline acoustic profile of the waters around the vessel and the pier.

with the passive acoustic sensors on his sled, he watched on his AR feed how they followed an uneven zig-zag pattern that to his eye made no sense, but was

Bryant and Paltrow retethered together with a thin line as they figured out how to return to the ship to arm the two mines. Communication with the shore teams could be a lifesaver now, but that would require leaving the area to approach the surface during the drones' erratic search.



A series of tugs on the line from Bryant had Paltrow carefully return to the “coffin” cargo drone, which maintained a neutral position synced with their own. The sled’s electric drives maintained station near the freighter, a necessary but manageable risk at this depth.

As Bryant and Paltrow conserved batteries and oxygen, they had to trust the next few minutes would play out as planned. That was a dangerous assumption, but necessary to ensure they would accomplish their hastily planned mission.

During the mission work-up, the team received intelligence that the four USVs transmitted their sensor data and control feeds on poorly secured frequencies specific to the manufacturer. In fact, hundreds of ships targeted in Operation LOCK-IN were protected by Chinese PMC teams whose drones all shared the same vulnerability to jamming and spoofing. In this situation, the Air Force Combat Controller was to call for space-based cyber and EW effects on the ship and any aerial or surface drones. What wasn’t clear was how quickly the call for cyber fires would be fulfilled, given how many other targets could be a priority for this particular constellation of U.S. satellites.

A sharp whine rang out as the drones’ electric motors switched on.

After a tense five minutes of waiting, Bryant detached himself from Paltrow and swam over to the “coffin.” As he moved toward the drone, Bryant bumped head-on into an old tire tangled up in a snare of fishing net and foam buoys. Momentarily disoriented by the current, darkness, and the collision, he centered himself and kicked free of the garbage. Though the harbor water’s temperature would pass for most people as vacation-ready, being in it for this long and this deep meant the cold was settling into his hands and feet, impacting his ability to accomplish the mission.

Through the water, Paltrow felt a resonant, beehive-like humming, and then, nothing. The Chinese surface drones had stopped moving.



Bryant emerged from the darkness, a bundle under his arm that Paltrow could barely make out. He knew it was an inflatable rubber acoustic decoy that spoofed a sick spinner dolphin. It was a crude trick and a last resort as the carbon dioxide inflation was a potential giveaway.

A sharp whine rang out as the drones' electric motors switched on. The Chinese drones might be compromised or damaged, the SEALs knew, but they also might not be as they resumed their unpredictable patrol.

Bryant reached out to reattach the tether to Paltrow, feeling a perceptible sense of relief at the connection even if the pressure to complete the mission increased by the minute.

"Time check?" Bryant asked. "My display's still glitching."

"We needed to arm the mines 10 minutes ago," Paltrow responded.

"Let's get it done."

The whole of Operation LOCK-IN would falter if every operator who faced a hurdle like this fell short when the final step was a seemingly impossible one.

"Time to free Flipper," Bryant said, indicating he was going to inflate the dolphin and use it as a distraction so Paltrow could approach the mines.

As Bryant fumbled in the dark to locate the release mechanism for the dolphin decoy as the pair ascended to the surface, Paltrow activated a small red flashlight that bathed him in a crimson glow.

Just as Bryant was unfolding the decoy and about to pull the inflation toggle, the rough grinding roar of a motorboat's high-revving engines cut through the dark. The boat's bright external lights were lit up, giving each pass a ghostly glow. A moment later, Paltrow could swear he even heard blaring

music from the boat filtering down through the water. On the SEALs' AR displays a new icon appeared: a 36-foot sportfishing boat racing sloppy figure-eight patterns perilously close to the *Chengdu Dawn's* security perimeter.

“Was that Metallica?” Paltrow asked Bryant over their comms link, the roar of the motors again reverberating through the water around them and making it hard to hear his own voice.

“You know who loves classic metal? Chalmers,” Bryant responded. Whether the Green Beret Master Sergeant was on the sportfishing boat alongside his local partners who made up their ad-hoc immediate reaction force was a question Bryant very much felt he knew the answer to.

Paltrow cleared his throat as he suppressed a laugh. Bryant then inflated the acoustic decoy, and Paltrow approached the freighter's hull, where the two Mk X mines were affixed but unarmed.

“You’re all clear, kid!” Bryant mouthed to himself, surprised by how the comms system transmitted that to Paltrow when he had not meant to say it aloud.

While Paltrow focused on quickly arming the mines, Bryant used his AR view to scan the area for any sonar hits on additional drones or indications that the Chinese Navy ships had been alerted to the presence of the divers. The Doppler-like rising and falling of the sportfishing boat was all the cover Paltrow needed before the SEALs slipped away.

SOCOM HEADQUARTERS

Salerno tossed the faded racquet ball back and forth, from hand to hand, as he watched a satellite view of Task Unit Thresher’s commandeered

sportfishing boat break off from running its haphazard course harassing *Chengdu Dawn*.

“The SEALs are clear of the target, sir,” Long said, unscrewing the top of her coffee mug to finish the last lukewarm drops. “And Thresher’s, uh, QRF, broke contact and is heading out to sea, per their exfil plan.”

Salerno stopped tossing the racquet ball and squeezed it as he held it behind his back.

“You know, sir, Thresher had a 3rd Group Master Sergeant attached,” she continued, knowing Salerno had served as a battalion commander there.

Hundreds of targets had turned from red to green, indicating a successful mission. Each one a strategic asset under America’s control.

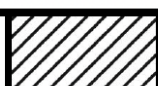
“Chalmers,” Salerno said. “Great NCO. No off switch. I’d expect he’s on that boat with his partners.”

“I can confirm, if you like, sir,” Long continued, a pained look on her face in case this was going to trip a rare outburst from the usually cool-headed commander.

Salerno turned and smiled. “No need.”

He pulled up the global map of Operation LOCK-IN’s targets he had been reviewing earlier. *Nearly there*. Hundreds of targets had turned from red to green, indicating a successful mission. Each one a strategic asset under America’s control. Would it be enough to deter Beijing from taking a step after which there was no going back? They would find out soon enough.

If there is no invasion, no violence, no death, Salerno considered, then this crisis would pass and the SOCOM forces would release the assets with very few people really knowing how calamity had been averted. If deterrence fails and there is a war, its painful cost would be felt across China’s entire military,



economic and, most importantly, its political system. It would be felt on a personal level for Beijing's leaders and their families in ways they had not imagined.

This is how it should be. The costs of war should be borne not only by the young who are sent to fight, but by the leaders who send them.