

The three R's: A case study in special operations forces relationships



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by [Marc Polymeropoulos](#) | April 01, 2020

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There is plenty of quality academic writing on how the relationship between the CIA and the United States's special operations forces must evolve. Conventional wisdom has it that the CIA and SOF were so dedicated to counterterrorism operations since 9/11 that we collectively took our eyes off the ball in countering actions of state actors such as [Russia](#) and China, which we now term near-peer competitors.

I view this issue from the unique perspective of my old job as a CIA case officer in the field, where the rubber meets the road with a front-row seat to how we both collect intelligence and fight. I suggest that we look at the three Rs, relationships, resources, and Russia (and similar foes), as we assess the future CIA-SOF relationship.

Relationships. Let's start with a fundamental fact: Ties between the CIA and SOF are at a historic high. When a CIA case officer sees a SOF operator pop up overseas, the first question is not "why are you here?" That marks a striking shift in attitudes. Prior to 9/11, distrust and some disdain were commonplace. I heard it all from both sides. Yet, the reaction when these two organizations now meet is far different. We are more apt to ask about each other's spouses and children and make plans to meet up for drinks or dinner in between postings and deployments. Why is this? Why is there a familiarity and trust that now exists?

The answer, of course, is that we were in lockstep together for two decades from the cold mountains of eastern Afghanistan, the teeming alleyways of East Africa, and the heat of the Syrian Desert. We have risen through the ranks together from case officers and SOF operators to leadership positions in both outfits. This affords for extraordinary personal connections, the value of which cannot be underestimated. The trust I had in my SOF colleagues was written in the blood and sweat of the last 20 years. Does that mean that I necessarily agreed with what they were doing each and every time? Of course not. CIA and SOF are two distinct entities, and they often have substantive differences on a variety of subjects. What is important, however, is that the deconfliction mechanisms that exist are not only formalized but also are based on personal ties that can withstand the inevitable failed joint

For example, as a case officer, it was to handle an agent who was not an American in a war zone. As a foreigner recruited in war zones, I often would have to go to an agent meeting. An agent meeting is a sacred place.



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Agents are the crown jewels that we protect. If exposed, agents could suffer terrible sanctions, including torture and death. Yet, we integrated SOF into agent operations for good reason. It provided SOF units with our faith in trusting them with exposure to our agent's identity. In addition, SOF operators would have the ability to question the agent in person on how to hunt terrorist targets better. To me, this was a no-brainer. It became my norm when I ran operations in war zones.

This does not mean, however, that I ceded my agent-handling responsibilities to SOF. The CIA is the gold standard when it comes to espionage tradecraft. I wouldn't ask a Navy SEAL to include me in a raid to take down a terrorist target. I know how to handle an agent. They know how to breach doors and dominate a location. But bringing the two sides together in an agent operation builds a huge amount of trust. So as we shift our focus to our near-peer competitors, these CIA-SOF personal relationships offer huge benefits. We must use them to maximum effect.

Resources. As a case officer or manager in a CIA station, the first question we ask after receiving a collection requirement is "do we have the money and materiel to accomplish this task?" Here, I see great promise when the CIA and SOF maximize productivity and effort by working together.

Consider a hypothetical scenario. A CIA station in one of our embassies abroad is under pressure from Washington as the Chinese are using funds to buy influence among the business and political elite of a certain country. The station learns that a SOF element is arriving to train the local security services. The first question the station will ask the element is a variation on "what level of tradecraft training do you have?" Put simply, do the arriving operators have the requisite street skills, such as surveillance detection training? Do they know how to detect and defeat surveillance teams and technical efforts?

Remember, a station has many tasks to accomplish and is, in essence, undermanned 24/7. But with a positive response from the SOF team, the station will be jazzed with the arrival of what the military calls "force multipliers." In my experience as a case officer and station manager, if a SOF member had tradecraft

night. Instead, I hope
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The last R: Russia. The
target set away from
peer competitors. The
Defense Strategy calls for just this shift, and the
CIA is doing the same. But the third "R" is not
just Russia. It also encompasses China, Iran, and
North Korea.

Since 2001, the CIA and SOF have become
highly adept at what we call "manhunting." The
Find-Fix-Finish paradigm revolutionized the
counterterrorism fight: We find a target's
location, we fix that they will be in this location
for a period of time (and scrutinize their
defensive and escape options), and then we
capture or kill them. The death of Iranian
Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps Gen. Qassem
Soleimani was a perfect example of how good
the U.S. has become in tracking adversaries. But
when it comes to nation-state targets, let me be
very clear: I am only calling for the "Find-Fix"
portion of an operation and am not advocating
"Finish" options.

Still, if we are so worried about Chinese
espionage activities globally, shouldn't we more
actively follow Chinese Ministry of State Security
and People's Liberation Army intelligence
officers? Shouldn't we determine whom they
are meeting with and why and how they are
doing so? Are these officers calling on certain
companies? Are they trying to recruit host-
country targets?

We want to establish so-called "pattern of life"
assessments on these adversaries. The CIA and
SOF can work this surveillance problem set
together, just as they did against al Qaeda and
the Islamic State.

True, there are challenges to overcome. This
shift may take a change in mindset for SOF
because there is no kinetic finish component to
such operations. Truth be told, the "three F"
fight had become a drug for many of us in both
outfits. We relished the finality of the finish
portion, as the target was neutralized and one
less terrorist was alive to threaten our fellow
citizens. The near-peer world is not like this at
all, and SOF will need to adapt. For example,
manhunting on near-peer entities is just one
part of an operation. Compartmentalization, or
person-to-person limitation of access to
intelligence, will necessitate that SOF units may
never know the fruits of their labor. If SOF
obtained a pattern of life profile for a Chinese
intelligence officer and then passed this
targeting package to the CIA for a potential

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reason why this relationship should not flourish
in the post-2021 environment.

Marc Polymeropoulos is a former CIA senior operations officer. He retired in 2019 after a 26-year career serving in the Near East and South Asia. His book Clarity in Crisis: Leadership Lessons from the CIA will be published in June 2021 by HarperCollins.