



Special Obfuscations

The Strategic Uses of Special Operations Forces

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THE ISSUE

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ONE STRATEGY, A WORLD OF POSSIBILITIES

The opening paragraphs of the 2018 National Defense Strategy (NDS) contain a stark sentence: “Inter-state strategic competition, not terrorism, is now the primary concern in U.S. national security.” With that statement, the Trump administration suggested a strategic reemphasis with far-reaching consequences for the missions and activities of the nation’s special operations forces (SOF). Reading the 2018 NDS, one might conclude that after playing pivotal roles in the terrorism- and insurgency-centric campaigns of the last 18 years, SOF will need to make profound changes to remain relevant.

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close follow-on oversight of implementation. It will also require strategic clarity so that the force can accomplish needed reforms and organizational change.

To date, however, the administration has not provided details about what this rebalance means for the Department of Defense enterprise nor for SOF in particular. The NDS is too vague for military leaders to define a balance of effort, manpower, and resources between SOF’s ongoing post-9/11 missions and that which it should do in support of strategic competition.

Insufficient guidance on how to balance missions risks two outcomes: organizational inertia and bureaucratic entrepreneurship. Inertia would continue SOF’s high deployment tempo to confront non-state actors in the Middle East and Afghanistan even as new missions stress readiness and weaken the force. Entrepreneurship may be how SOF responds to strategic ambiguity, seeking to set its own path or even drive policy. In the near term, a lack of shared expectations will complicate decisions about force allocation; press reporting about [Secretary Esper’s tug-of-war with military leaders and Congress](#) over the appropriate

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presence of U.S. military personnel (almost exclusively SOF) in North and West Africa has the hallmarks of a disconnect between grand strategy and practical implementation.

Policymakers must make choices about the future of the wars in Afghanistan and the Middle East and the nature of strategic competition in order to determine how SOF should support national strategy. Failure to provide this supporting guidance will leave SOF on aimless autopilot, cede it excessive autonomy, or both.

BUSINESS AS USUAL

From the first military units to arrive in Afghanistan in 2001 to the recent raid that killed ISIS leader Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi in Syria, U.S. SOF has been virtually synonymous with the American way of war since 9/11. In addition to involvement in large-scale American combat operations in Afghanistan and Iraq, SOF also offered a smaller footprint approach to combating terrorists and insurgents in places as diverse as the Philippines, Yemen, and Somalia.

Without explicit and purposive changes to missions, deployments, and force structure, SOF may be inclined to continue with what has been its status quo for almost 20 years. The vast majority of the force has spent their careers focused almost exclusively on terrorism and insurgency; continuing that focus is obvious and comfortable. It might also be agreeable to policymakers who hope to rely on continued SOF ownership of those fights while the conventional force turns its attention elsewhere.

Yet this inertia puts the force itself at risk. The recent [SOCOM Comprehensive Review](#) of SOF culture and ethics identifies weak points in the force. On top of the expected wear and tear on a force that at some points was spending more time fighting overseas than living at home, one of the review's conclusions was that a "never-say-no" approach to deployments contributed to a culture that came to view tactical competence as the sole indicator of SOF excellence. It is no surprise, then, that the review also identified an atrophy in skills among special operators not directly related to countering terrorists and insurgents.

Leaving SOF narrowly focused on and solely responsible for the current campaigns will continue to consume skills, capabilities, and personnel. Moreover, if SOF continues to focus on operations against non-state actors but loses key enablers [e.g., intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance (ISR) platforms, afloat staging bases, and strike assets] because they are aligned to strategic competition, operational risk to SOF personnel will increase and readiness will degrade further.

HOME ALONE

Alternatively, in the absence of clarity on its role in state-based strategic competition SOF may proactively position to be a part of the solution. The elite ethos in these units generates a sense of obligation to solve pressing problems that do not yield to conventional solutions and the confidence to do so even when those problems are outside SOF's "lane." SOF is aware of those pressing problems because of a robust network of liaison officers in key offices in Washington established and nurtured since 9/11. This network allows the SOF enterprise to keep a finger on the pulse of policy discussions in Washington and identify opportunities for bureaucratic entrepreneurship.

On a small scale, this entrepreneurship can take the form of simple internal recalibration of resources and activities over which SOF elements have control. If this recalibration is disconnected from civilian leaders' expectations, these investments may be wasted on the wrong priorities and become a source of friction between SOF and regional commanders that employ them, or between SOF and civilians. Entrepreneurship may also be expressed through a trial-and-error approach, whereby SOF personnel propose troop allocations and activities to try and divine through the policy approval process what civilian leadership wants.

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There is no doubt that regional and functional SOF elements can be engines of military innovation because they are agile and culturally accepting of creativity. Without framing guidance, however, this engine can drive in the wrong direction, a phenomenon the House Armed Services

Committee noted recently when expressing concern that “theater special operations commands continue to self-generate requirements without limitation or validation.”

Unfortunately, the institutional center of gravity for SOF guidance, the Assistant Secretariat for Special Operations and Low Intensity Conflict (ASD SO/LIC), [has been marginalized](#) within the Office of the Secretary of Defense (OSD). The position of Assistant Secretary has been [vacant since June 2019](#), and even an acting Secretary has come and gone without a permanent official being named and confirmed to the post. The office of ASD SO/LIC is staffed by capable and experienced civil servants, military officers, and political appointees, but in a period of strategic change there is no substitute for Senate-confirmed leadership that has the Secretary’s confidence and understands Secretary’s vision. This state of affairs deprives civilian leadership of its main conduit for supplying guidance and oversight over SOF activities even as it deprives SOCOM of its senior advocate inside OSD.

Members of Congress have expressed concern to Secretary Esper about the marginalization of ASD SO/LIC, to little effect. Overall challenges in operationalizing strategic competition have a similar impact: geographic commanders to whom some SOF elements are assigned for day-to-day control also labor in uncertainty about how to employ them. This abdication of civilian leadership will pressure SOCOM into determining SOF’s role in national strategy on its own, or in collaboration with the services and other Combatant Commands.

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THE ART OF THE POSSIBLE

There is ample reason to think SOF could have a key role in strategic competition. For example, robust nuclear and conventional deterrence relationships make force-on-force confrontations with China or Russia unlikely and push competition into the gray zone, where SOF expertise in irregular warfare would be valuable. Between Russia’s increasing use of private military companies in Ukraine and Syria and China’s use of coercive economic policies to gain security advantages in Asia, great power competition already has a distinctly unconventional flavor.

What might a shift in SOF missions and force structure to support the NDS look like? By doctrine, SOF has a rich and varied toolset ranging from humanitarian missions to direct action. To support a campaign of competition, it is unlikely SOF would need to invent new mission areas, but it may need to reprioritize or innovate capabilities and doctrine to pursue them in the current environment. Areas long de-emphasized could now demand a rebalance in SOF force structure and deployment cycles. Such efforts could be grouped to support what we call “high end” and “low end” competitive activities.

On the high end of competition, SOF would provide its traditional support to war plans, ensuring interoperability with the general purpose force, with its own services, and with allies and partners in preparing for and deterring interstate military conflict. In periods of high tension, SOF’s clandestine capabilities are an appealing tool for achieving military goals while avoiding escalation. If policymakers seek a limited demonstration of force to communicate American seriousness, such as destroying a target previously thought to be out of American reach, SOF may be the ideal tool for the job. (The strike that killed Qassem Sulemani could be understood this way.) In war, SOF would be called on to use its capabilities in support of the overall campaign: to seize airfields, sabotage enemy military capabilities, conduct special reconnaissance, and even target enemy leadership.

On the low end, SOF could form the backbone of the DoD’s gray zone activities. Drawing on the capabilities it developed during the Cold War, the special operations community could expand its force structure and activities dedicated to information operations and foreign internal defense, activities traditionally associated with unconventional warfare. SOF deployments for such approaches are already reportedly being applied in Eastern Europe and Asia. At the lower end of competition, commanders are also likely to turn to SOF to conduct low-visibility activities to impose costs on adversaries and to secure access and relationships that can be resources if competition becomes more intense or if conflict breaks out.

SUPPLY SIDE OF SOF

For the first time in almost 20 years, SOF planners will need to assume that the best-case scenario is one of flat resources, not growing resources. This means that increases in one area must be debited from other areas. Once policymakers have answered the questions about how they would like SOF to balance legacy missions with strategic competition, they must turn to the missions from which SOF force structure will necessarily be reallocated.

Assuming a flat level of resourcing, policymakers will have no choice but to reduce the scope and scale of SOF efforts in Afghanistan and the Middle East. The special operations enterprise, and in particular Army SOF, remain deeply invested in ongoing operations, with real consequences for deployments and readiness. Every active-duty Army Special Forces Group, including those assigned to Europe and Asia, had a servicemember killed in Afghanistan or Syria in 2019. Using SOF to compete with Russia and China, for example, means tasking those groups to focus more on their historic areas of responsibility and less on post-9/11 conflicts.

It will also mean a review of these operations for their nexus with strategic competition. Although the NDS assumes that the United States can minimize its counterterrorism efforts, Afghanistan and the Middle East must be evaluated for their relationship to goals other than defeating terrorism and insurgencies. These theaters could provide challenges to or opportunities for strategic competition which should be incorporated in policy deliberations about U.S. presence. How does the future of Afghanistan, for example, factor into U.S. competition with China, Russia, or Iran? Does an unstable Afghanistan or a Taliban-controlled Afghanistan affect the United States, China, and Russia in similar or different ways? Even if Syria presents limited opportunities for strategic competition with Russia and Iran, it may provide a valuable opportunity to observe their military and intelligence operations up close.

CONCLUSION

During this period of change, policy guidance on how to implement the NDS and prioritize competing demands will help the SOF community arrest negative readiness trends and help channel into new challenges the innovation and drive for which the community is well known. Policymakers should initiate a rational process to determine the right balance of missions for SOF and then estimate the steps necessary to implement needed investment changes and timelines for implementation. This exercise would help both to build future budgets and to establish expectations among policymakers, lawmakers, and SOF itself. To help set these expectations, policymakers and military leaders owe each other candor on risk tolerance, the resilience of the force, and what constitutes an appropriate use of SOF.

Implementing strategic change will be difficult not only due to organizational inertia but also because it will be demanded of a force coping with the cumulative impact of two decades of continuous operations. Years of high operational tempo have degraded not just readiness to complete missions successfully but the very culture of the force. SOCOM itself has “uncovered not only potential cracks in the SOF foundations at the individual and team level, but also through the chain of command, specifically in . . . discipline and accountability.” As long ago as 2014, another SOCOM assessment revealed “a huge delta” between personnel exhibiting symptoms of stress, addiction, and depression and those who were actually being treated. To their credit, the services have begun to address some of these challenges in recent years. National leadership can support these efforts by clearly communicating what will be expected of the force in the future.

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The shift in strategic focus away from counterterrorism should not leave SOF in its wake. Instead, policymakers must think through how best to use and renew the special operations community before either it or the strategic environment rush to fill the policy gaps. ■

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