

PART II - THE TOOLS OF INFLUENCE AND ACCESS

USSOCOM and SOF: War Around the Edges

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INTRODUCTION

Over the past 35 years, the U.S. Special Operations Forces' expertise in asymmetrical, indirect, and direct action warfare has made them the envy of the world's militaries. They're not perfect by any means, but they are lean, effective, and mostly successful, with well-earned reputations for innovation, audacity, teamwork, tenacity, and courage. Their tactical actions often have strategic impact. Once known as quiet professionals, their continuous engagement in the wars of the last two decades has enabled the celebration of many victories, required the mourning of many lost teammates, and – most unexpectedly – dragged these warriors uncomfortably from the shadows such that they are now cause for great American pride.

But spending these last two decades focused primarily on larger-scale, enduring conflicts has required the United States Special Operations Command (USSOCOM) and its Special Operations Forces (SOF) to rebalance.¹ SOF is a smaller scale force and its traditional roles in rapid deployment direct action and longer-term global training gave way to continuous combat deployments on the conventionally organized battlefields of Afghanistan and Iraq, where SOF tactical units often served under non-SOF commanders.

During this period, the force has more than doubled in size, more than tripled in budget, and—during the more intense periods—more than quadrupled in

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1. USSOCOM is the United States Special Operations Command, a headquarters with primary responsibility for organizing, training, equipping, and deploying SOF. SOF is the Special Operations Force or Special Operations Forces, used almost interchangeably in singular or plural. "Special Forces" is a term that refers specifically to the Army's "Green Berets."

overseas presence. Although much training of foreign counterparts was skillfully accomplished—and was truly the bulk of the work—the face of SOF became the dramatic raids and assaults that captured political and public attention. More recently, both of these roles continued into Syria, where SOF trained multiple counterparts while spearheading the military defeat of ISIL/Daesh.

Recently, I have read and heard much about the future of Special Operations Forces. This is a good time for such discussion, given the wind down from combat operations in the Middle East and renewed emphasis on great power competition. In considering what USSOCOM and SOF should do for the next twenty years, we must remember the reasons why SOF's origins lay outside the conventional military force structure. In this gray zone era between undeclared conflicts and declared wars, we ought not be trying to figure out how SOF can support large-scale conventional operations. Instead, by focusing on how SOF can lead the asymmetric and irregular approaches to next-generation conflict, we will recognize SOF for what they are, and optimize them for what they might be expected to do.

I. WHY DO WE HAVE A USSOCOM AND SOF?

The history of United States Special Operations Forces and their place within the U.S. military structure is worth a brief review. While specialized operations, those that require unique capabilities and often require putting smaller units at higher risk, have been conducted by regular and irregular forces for at least three millennia, the modern age of U.S. special operations dates back to the behind-the-lines actions of the Office of Strategic Services (OSS) in World War II. The OSS was dissolved when that war ended in 1945, but within a few years, both the Central Intelligence Agency (in 1947) and an Army Special Warfare Group (in 1952) evolved from it.

Army Special Warfare, focused initially on the then-emergent Cold War, was built on the three pillars of psychological warfare (morale operations), unconventional warfare (supporting insurgents against an illegitimate government), and counterinsurgency (supporting a legitimate government against insurgents). Thus, it was more of a training force than a fighting force, and it recruited immigrants from Eastern Europe to fill its ranks. It was limited to the Army, although the other Services also established a few specialized elements within their conventional structures. As the Vietnam War ramped up in the early 1960s, special operations-like forces were expanded and established as enduring military formations across the Army, Navy, Air Force, and Marine Corps.

As sub-units assigned under conventional military commanders, these units (including Army Special Forces, Navy SEALs, Air Force Air Commandos, Marine Corps Force Recon, and more) struggled for funding, opportunity, and credibility throughout the 1970s. Their training was mostly on-the-cheap and within their respective services, where they were not warmly embraced. Focused on working at a personal level with foreign counterparts around the world, or on quick clandestine missions, the Special Operations Forces had little real

warfighting capability. They were designed for flexibility and early entry, with light loads and a small logistics tail. Expansive operations were beyond their reach.

The successful rescue of hostages by Israeli commandos at Entebbe, Uganda, on the day of our Bicentennial Celebration in 1976 raised President Carter's awareness of this gap in our military capabilities, and he soon directed the Army to close it. In early 1978, recruitment began for a secretive new unit to be created at Fort Bragg, North Carolina, its mission set aimed at counterterrorism, hostage rescue, direct action, and special reconnaissance. It was declared operationally ready in November of 1979, the same month that Iranian students took over the U.S. Embassy in Tehran and seized 98 American hostages, 52 of whom were held captive in a single location.

Six months later, the attempt to rescue the hostages, in an operation known as Eagle Claw, ended in disaster when a helicopter collided in the dusty night with an airplane on the ground at a remote Iranian desert site code-named Desert One. Eight service members died, the mission was aborted, and the remainder of the force limped home. The investigation into the failure cited deficiencies in the operational planning, pilot training and rehearsals, inter-service operability, and command structure, as well as poor weather. Eagle Claw was a wake-up call to the Department of Defense.

However, beyond approving a few more highly specialized units and establishing a higher headquarters at Fort Bragg, the Department of Defense didn't answer the call. It fell upon Congress, several years later, to force needed structural change and provide appropriate authorities and an adequate budget for special operations through the enactment of the Goldwater-Nichols Defense Reorganization Act of 1986 and the Nunn-Cohen Amendment to the National Defense Authorization Act of 1987. This was done over the strong objections of the Pentagon, where the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff was a fierce opponent because it would keep the Joint Chiefs and Services out of the SOF budget process.

Signed into law on November 14, 1986, the National Defense Authorization Act for Fiscal Year 1987 directed establishment of the United States Special Operations Command (USSOCOM), established an Assistant Secretary of Defense for Special Operations and Low Intensity Conflict (ASD (SO/LIC)), and authorized a new Major Force Program (MFP-11) that together ensured a high-level command focused on special operations, a senior presence within DoD, and a sufficient budget.²

USSOCOM was established as a Unified Combatant Command that was significantly unlike any other military organization. Within the commander's authority were duties and responsibilities of an operational force, a military department, and a defense agency, all with control over its own budget. The four-

2. *See id.* (detailing the authorities and responsibilities of the commander of U.S. Special Operations Command).

star commander reported directly to the Secretary of Defense, with ASD (SO/LIC), through the Under Secretary for Policy, providing oversight and advocacy. In my prior research of the formative documents, it was clear to me that Congress' intent was to create something unlike and outside the bureaucracies that had consciously inhibited the growth and relevancy of Special Operations Forces, similar to the Defense Research Projects Agency (DARPA), the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA), or the National Aeronautics and Space Administration (NASA), rather than the traditional Army, Navy, Air Force, or Marine Corps.

The intent was to have an at-the-ready, highly capable joint force that could go anywhere at any time, while maintaining a steady global presence to train and exercise with foreign militaries. Further, USSOCOM was to do this with a streamlined bureaucracy and an organic ability to test, procure, or modify necessary equipment and services. It would require specially selected people who were willing to commit to such service for most or all of their military careers.

As required by the new law, the Army, Navy, and Air Force incrementally—though not eagerly—transferred special operations units to the operational control of USSOCOM over the next few years. The Marine Corps, which had no units that were so designated, assigned various staff personnel to USSOCOM's headquarters in Tampa, Florida (until 2006, when a Marine Corps component of USSOCOM was established). The largest element of this new multi-service (joint) Special Operations Force (SOF) was the Army's Special Forces, whose mission set was still highly focused on training and enabling partnered foreign military and paramilitary units. Other units, like the Navy SEALs, Army Rangers, and a new Army helicopter regiment, were aimed more towards rapid response reconnaissance and direct action operations against enemy forces. Certain units were assigned to a subordinate joint command to be maintained at a higher level of readiness for operations that required either more secrecy or a quicker reaction.

It is worth noting that USSOCOM, while controlling a generally adequate and secure budget, has never received more than three percent of the funds allocated to the Department of Defense. It has vehicles, boats, helicopters, and propeller-driven airplanes, along with cutting edge small arms weaponry, communications equipment, and sensor technologies, but it does not buy high-cost hardware like fighter jets, bombers, ships, or submarines. In the language of the law, USSOCOM's money is to be spent only on things that are "special operations-peculiar," making SOF appropriately dependent on the big Services to cover many of its administrative and operational needs.³

II. USSOCOM, SOF, AND THE PIVOT TO CHINA

As America's defense strategy highlights competition with China in particular, special operations forces will need to adjust significantly. The temptation will be

3. 10 U.S.C. § 167(e)(4)(A).

to become more conventional in order to fit neatly into war plans that focus on large-scale operations against a near-peer adversary. The default starting point for such a shift will likely be from the force level and capabilities that exist now, after twenty years of fighting two simultaneous wars in Afghanistan and Iraq. However, this inclination should be resisted.

Instead, USSOCOM and SOF should adjust to the situation in the Indo-Pacific region from their pre-9/11 organization. This will require two major changes: first, they must shed some of the bulk and bureaucracy that reduces their speed, agility, and cleverness; second, they must quickly redesign SOF around the primary mission of building the strength and resolve of China's neighbors. This will require redevelopment of foreign training proficiency, linguistic skills, and micro-regional expertise. All the while, SOF must maintain and enhance certain unique technical and combat skills that are important pre-war, and essential when and if fighting breaks out.

As part of this, USSOCOM must be designated the lead command globally for what might be called "war around the edges." This is the current state of our relationship with China, and it is likely to remain so. By partnering with the forces of China's border and near-border nations, SOF can do much to support those challenging its ongoing regional intimidation through economic suppression, political interference, military threats, and persistent cyberattacks. This is not a matter of how USSOCOM can prepare to support a conventional war, but more about how USSOCOM can employ its enormous talent to help delay, prevent, or mitigate war. Even at the most junior ranks, SOF thinks strategically.

The "war around the edges" approach recognizes that China may choose to challenge us anywhere in the world, a thesis that equally applies to Russia and other rising adversarial powers with which we are in some form of conflict but are not engaged in direct military hostilities.

III. USSOCOM AS A MILITARY SERVICE?

The successes of SOF have brought much attention to USSOCOM. It is out of the shadows and onto the front pages, and some of the current discussion is about whether USSOCOM should be "elevated" to a military Service (like the new Space Force), with the commander as a member of the Joint Chiefs of Staff. In my view, this is a bad idea.

The commander of USSOCOM is designated as a Functional (not Geographic) Combatant Commander with global responsibilities. He reports directly to the Secretary of Defense and through him to the President, a command chain which permits accelerated problem solving and decision making.⁴ As a peer to the other Combatant Commanders, he is supported by all of the military services as directed by the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, who is the coordinating authority for the Service Chiefs' activities. And because USSOCOM, as a unified

4. I refer to these positions using the he/him pronoun, because so far, only men have held the roles of President and Secretary of Defense.

combatant command, takes its command direction from the Secretary of Defense, all of the Department of Defense's staff elements are also in support. This works well for both routine and urgent operations.

It is worth noting that the commander of USSOCOM has operational command of SOF only when those forces are in the United States. When deployed elsewhere, they work for the appropriate Geographic Combatant commander, usually through a regional Theater Special Operations Command (TSOC) that is led by a one- or two-star Admiral or General. The USSOCOM commander, in supporting the geographic commander, retains much influence over the employment of deployed forces through the TSOC, and directly as a peer. There is a provision in the law by which the President or Secretary of Defense can designate the USSOCOM commander as the operational commander anywhere in the world, which happens occasionally for missions that are especially sensitive, urgent, or precise.

This set of arrangements works well, giving USSOCOM the decision priority that it needs and providing flexibility in operational command relationships. Elevating the USSOCOM commander to a Service Chief (and SOF to a Service) would actually complicate the chain of command without benefit. Further, the commander would be burdened by significant additional day-to-day staff functions and reporting requirements from which he is now insulated. In fact, each Service should be reminded often of its lawful responsibility to actively support USSOCOM with all equipment and capabilities that are in common use by that Service.

IV. WHAT IS AN ASD (SO/LIC)?

As previously noted, the office of Assistant Secretary of Defense (Special Operations/Low Intensity Conflict) was established by the same law that authorized USSOCOM with the intent that the ASD reports through, and is supported by, the Under Secretary for Policy (generally regarded as the third-most important position in the Department). The ASD "oversees and advocates for Special Operations and Irregular Warfare throughout the Department of Defense to ensure these capabilities are resourced, ready, and properly employed in accordance with National Defense Strategy." This position is key to the success of USSOCOM and SOF. It must be filled by someone who understands the complexity of special operations and knows how to work the issues inside the Pentagon and across the government.

With the ASD both championing and tempering the policies, decisions, and actions of USSOCOM, the position requires someone who is savvy, clear-eyed, and direct. In my time as the USSOCOM commander (2007-2011), I was fortunate to work under the Honorable Michael Vickers, who served as the ASD(SO/LIC) for more than three and a half years. A former Special Forces soldier and CIA operative, he was non-political, Senate-confirmed, and highly regarded across DOD, as well as within both SOF and the Intelligence Community. That he remained in the position for nearly four years (and crossed over from the Bush

Administration to the Obama Administration) gave him true credibility and a powerful voice in issues that mattered. Vickers' bosses, the Under Secretaries for Policy (USD(P)), were the Honorable Eric Edelman and the Honorable Michèle Flournoy, each of whom served for three full years in the position.

Near the end of President Trump's term, an Acting Secretary of Defense, Chris Miller, "elevated" the office of ASD(SO/LIC) so that the ASD reported directly to him. Presumably, this was done to give SOF a louder voice, but it actually made the ASD last among equals, with almost all of the other direct reporters serving at the higher Under Secretary level. As a result, rather than being a priority effort for a single USD (USD(P)), the newly elevated ASD then had to compete with more senior Under Secretaries for the time and resources of the Secretary. Further, it made it more probable that ASD(SO/LIC)s would be highly politicized appointees whose terms would end with those of their appointing Presidents.

In early May of this year, Secretary of Defense Lloyd Austin partially reversed his predecessor's action and established ASD(SO/LIC) as a Principal Staff Assistant (PSA) "to assist the Under Secretary of Defense for Policy" (USD(P)). The office now reports directly to the Secretary of Defense for "matters relating to organization, training and equipping" of SOF and to the USD(P) "for all other policy matters." In my view, this is a good compromise that will give the ASD an appropriately strong voice in building the force while retaining the USD(P)'s essential advocacy on policy matters. Nonetheless, past failures were attributable to factors beyond just the reporting relationship.

Since 2014, eleven different people have held the position of USD(P), only four of whom were confirmed by the Senate (the other seven were either "acting" or "performing the duties of"). During that same period, there have been eight ASD(SO/LIC)s, only two of them Senate-confirmed. Of these 19 people, only five held their positions for longer than 12 months. Enabling USSOCOM and SOF to best prepare for and combat future threats requires appointing individuals who are credible and non-political experts, confirming them through the Senate process, and then leaving them in place long enough to become adept at their jobs and build the trusted relationships that are essential to success.

V. THE PEOPLE OF SOF

The true capability of SOF lies in its people. Although many fundamental principles were sacrificed for a wartime surge over the past two decades, Special Operations Forces are properly a mix of "operators" and "experts." The operators volunteer for this duty and pass a rigorous selection and training program, and are then assigned to SOF units for the duration of their careers. Fundamental to SOF operators are the personal familiarity, professional esteem, and high level of trust that develop over many years of working together. They are partnered in almost equal numbers with experts in administration, acquisition, logistics, intelligence analysis, maintenance, operational law, and many other fields. These experts are specially selected for duty in SOF, but will generally transfer back-and-forth

between SOF and conventional units, enabling a continuous refreshing of people, skills, and perspectives.

Given that the rough definition of a special operation is “an operation that no other force is capable of conducting,” there is an obvious requirement to develop skill sets and experience bases that are unlike those of the conventional forces. Yet the commander of USSOCOM is extremely limited in his ability to develop his assigned force. Because of the USSOCOM commander’s limited legislative and policy-based authorities to make key decisions that guide the careers of SOF personnel, the actual management is done by the Services that often have little awareness of SOF-peculiar requirements. Much of this is appreciated, as the commander of USSOCOM should not be performing all of the routine management functions of a Service chief. However, the current rules and habits for determining assignments, schools, and promotions often do not permit the SOF operators to gain deep expertise or knowledge in very specific areas. It is extremely difficult, for example, to create a SOF operator who knows the people, languages, terrain, climate, politics, and religions of a micro-region without hurting his/her chances for promotion to the top ranks, or to develop an operator who knows interagency and international atmospherics or can optimize the use of certain high-tech weapons and sensors.

There is a continuing need for such expertise—and much more—in SOF, but it is out of sync with traditional military skills. A SOF soldier may be much more valuable as a modern “Lawrence of Arabia” (or China, Colombia, or elsewhere) than as a more broadly experienced leader who punched all of the traditional promotion tickets. SOF also has a long history of employing women in key operational roles, even when they were excluded from direct ground combat. Now that women are qualifying as SOF tactical warriors, they and the other women who have gained specialized skills and experience in SOF should be formally recognized and codified as such to ensure that this indispensable capability never fades away.

My recommendation is to grant the commander of USSOCOM the authority to manage selected personnel to very high levels of focused expertise without damaging their careers. This could be done through the development of alternative career paths that would otherwise eliminate some of the historic criteria for promotion. The military Services could designate a specific number of promotions annually to be based solely on input from the USSOCOM commander.

VI. EQUIPPING SOF

An old SOF adage is “we don’t man the equipment; we equip the man or woman.” The pearl of USSOCOM as a headquarters is its acquisition authority, with the budget to support it. USSOCOM’s Acquisition Executive, while managing fewer and less costly programs, is a peer to the AEs of the Departments of the Army, Navy, and Air Force. The USSOCOM AE has the same authorities to procure, along with some additional permissions that allow for prototyping and testing equipment more rapidly and getting procurement contracts in place more

quickly. This ability to take an idea “from brain to battlefield” within one command is unique to USSOCOM and is an essential element of the innovative SOF culture. USSOCOM has developed much of the advanced technology and equipment now used by the broader military.

Despite this fact, a significant gap in USSOCOM authorities continues to be its inability to train and certify its own acquisition professionals. These experts typically come to USSOCOM for one assignment, after which they return to their parent Service. Because they qualified to a Military Department standard, and their future promotions will depend mostly on how well they perform within their Service structures, it can take most of their assignment before many acquisition program managers ever explore the edges of USSOCOM’s unique acquisition capabilities. Some never do. This handicaps the special operations force, which often needs specialized equipment quite quickly.

My recommendation is to grant USSOCOM the authority to augment Department acquisition credentials with SOF-specific qualifications, leave those who earn them in place at USSOCOM for longer tours, and offer them repeat assignments at USSOCOM over the course of their careers as acquisition professionals. Experience gained within the USSOCOM acquisition organizations should be viewed as a significant plus, and not as time lost from the Service structures.

CONCLUSION: SOF AS AN ENTERPRISE

USSOCOM and SOF together are a microcosm of the Department of Defense. They comprise members of all services—active duty, reserve, civilian employees, and contractors—with a dedicated budget, robust acquisition authority, and responsibility for a broad set of operational capabilities. They operate in the air, on and under the sea, and ashore, in all terrains and climates. All of this is under a single commander who is solely accountable for the readiness of the force. With a relatively small headquarters, his morning meetings include the leaders of all operational and staff functions. USSOCOM has senior advocacy in the Pentagon and representatives placed in every relevant government directorate, agency, and department. This SOF enterprise is admired, at least in part, by the other U.S. military departments and Services, and is the model for other nations that seek to build a high-end force.

The effectiveness of U.S. Special Operations Forces depends absolutely on a multi-faceted set of authorities and responsibilities. USSOCOM builds SOF to answer the non-traditional requirements of the Geographic Combatant Commanders. With less than two percent of DOD’s total budget and less than three percent of its manpower, USSOCOM does not control the institutional mass or terrain. It does not compete with anyone and adds value to everyone.

A concern of mine is the prevailing sense within the Department of Defense that if we are ready to win a big war, we are inherently ready for any smaller conflict. This has repeatedly been proven false. Success in smaller scale and irregular warfare requires different forces with different equipment, different training, and

a different approach. Previous efforts to simply integrate SOF into conventional campaigns have had sub-optimal results.

Special Operations Forces were not created for, and are not best suited for, large-scale conventional operations. They are best at using irregular techniques, specialized equipment, and unique modes of employment to solve unconventional problems, and they often operate with foreign partners in the most challenging political and military environments. They perform at their best when they are given the lead in addressing non-traditional conflict, with a broad array of Department of Defense capabilities in support. The urge to redesign them from what they are now, after twenty years of enduring combat deployments, should be resisted. Instead, seek to understand the value of their wide-ranging authorities and differentiated capabilities, and encourage them to push out to the edges as they address current and future global conditions, while always on hot standby for their next deployment. They will certainly be called to action soon, perhaps today, in some unexpected place, to accomplish what no other force is organized, trained, or equipped to do.