U.S. Army Special Forces soldiers assigned to 20th Special Forces Group (Airborne) and members of the Lithuanian National Defence Volunteer Forces (KASP) conduct mission planning 16 September 2018 during exercise Saber Junction 2018 at the Joint Multinational Readiness Center in Hohenfels, Germany. Special operations forces worked alongside the KASP during Saber Junction 18 to conduct irregular warfare in enemy occupied territory in support of the U.S. Army's 173rd Airborne Brigade as they executed land operations in a multinational joint environment. (Photo by 1st Lt. Benjamin Haulenbeek, U.S. Army)

Redefining Irregular Warfare

Partnerships and Political Action

Henry C. Pulaski

Since the conclusion of the Second World War, the U.S. military has been responsible for defending against national security threats that fall into three general categories: nuclear conflict, large-scale conventional conflict, and asymmetric challenges. The first two categories are existential challenges. The United States is faced with the rise of adversarial nation-states whose resources enable the growth and maintenance of militaries capable of challenging the United States in a global head-to-head contest. Our national strategy to avoid such a contest has been deterrence: ensuring such overwhelming conventional and strategic military superiority that the conflict appears futile to the potential challenger. The pursuit of deterrence has placed a national defense resourcing priority on the development and maintenance of conventional and strategic capabilities. The investment has delivered, and the U.S. military is unquestionably the world's most advanced fighting force with unrivaled strategic depth and force projection capability. The U.S. military's strength is the bedrock of America's national defense and underpins multiple defense alliances that protect U.S. interests, influence, and allies globally. For the last seventy years, the U.S. military's conventional and strategic strength has successfully deterred existential threats. However, deterrence has not dissuaded our adversaries from all attempts to erode U.S. influence and the U.S.-underpinned world order. Instead, it has driven our adversaries to develop successful asymmetric capabilities and initiatives that erode U.S. influence while simultaneously remaining below the threshold that would warrant U.S. conventional retaliation.

There is a common thread in the successful asymmetric challenges to U.S. interests: our adversaries have repeatedly dominated the ideological penetration of target populations. Through the proliferation of ideology, our adversaries co-opt target populations, winning the contest of influence. Without an analogous tool to effectively and reliably contest our adversary's expansion of influence and encroachments on U.S. interests, the U.S. military has resorted to deploying conventional forces, lowering their readiness for large-scale combat. Interventions in these scenarios have proven ineffective at securing long-term gains in U.S. influence. Instead, these interventions frequently conclude with the adversary's influence strengthened. To arrest what has now become a cycle of strategic defeat in asymmetric contests, the U.S. military is faced with a clear problem. How does the United States meet asymmetric challenges without decreasing readiness to address existential threats of nuclear or large-scale conventional conflict? On the one hand, the U.S. military must continue to maintain conventional and strategic overmatch. On the other hand, the U.S. military must develop the ability to compete and win on the same plane as its adversaries—in the contest for influence over target population groups.

Within current U.S. military doctrine, an adversary's asymmetric challenge would be dealt with under one of two activities, unconventional warfare (UW) or foreign internal defense (FID). In unconventional warfare, the United States aids a resistance movement in coercing or overthrowing a government; in foreign internal defense, the United States aids a host-nation government as they counter an insurgency or resistance force.[1] While both address the military component of the challenge, neither incorporates deliberate political action (ideology, political system, or governance structure), even when a successful force application is anticipated to result in a political vacuum. This article argues that fortifying U.S. influence against rising global threats and providing U.S. policymakers with low-cost options to expand U.S. influence requires the cultivation of a new concept within the U.S. special operation forces (USSOF) spectrum of activities, one that incorporates political action as a deliberate component when the circumstances dictate. This concept is proposed under a revised and focused definition of the term "irregular warfare."

Irregular warfare (IW) is defined here as the combination of nontraditional force and political action in pursuit of an influence-based objective. Following this definition, IW becomes another special operations subtask alongside the likes of UW, FID, counterinsurgency, and counterterrorism. In this construct, USSOF elements executing IW are responsible for the development and integration of political action alongside, and as a priority above, the cultivation of nontraditional force (guerrilla, paramilitary, nonaligned partners). The mechanics of this IW concept are rooted in the theory of "Revolutionary Warfare"

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(RW) initially popularized by journalist, academic, and war correspondent Bernard Fall in the mid-to-late 1950s.[2] Fall developed this theory through his close observation and study of the Vietminh during the French Indochina War and the U.S. Vietnam War. His RW theory illuminated the criticality of political action in the Vietminh's strategy against the French and subsequent U.S. forces. Fall intended that his work on RW would help allied leaders understand the power of RW, as it was being applied by our Cold War adversaries. He hoped that RW would act as an instructional primer for allied special operations forces who could use the understanding to cultivate their own supported RW campaigns. Perhaps it was Fall's early death in Vietnam alongside U.S. troops, or perhaps it was that generation of military leader's inclination toward conventional force application, but Fall's ideas about RW were not broadly integrated into military doctrine. Instead, it was eschewed for a hypermilitarized version of counterinsurgency and unconventional warfare that focused principally on the elimination of the adversary's military force. Regardless of its popularity within the U.S. military, Fall's theory of RW continued to accurately characterize adversary-backed movements throughout the developing world during the Cold War.

Over the last twenty years however, the mechanics of Fall's theory, which highlights the power and importance of the combination of nontraditional force and political action, continued to explain the success of a number of movements adversarial to the United States. The Islamic State employed a combination of Islamic terrorism (force) and Salafi-jihadism (political action) in the pursuit of Islamic caliphates (influence). The Iranian regime employed the powerful combination of the Quds Force (force) and Islamic radicalism (political action) to cultivate a series of actors; Hezbollah, Hamas, and the Houthi Movement Ansar Allah (influence). Moreover, the mechanics were not limited in application to movements embracing Islamic radicalism; the Russian Federation employed the combination of state-sponsored private military companies (force) and clandestine coup d'etats and mutinies (political action) in the pursuit of autocratic alliances (influence). While Fall would have certainly recognized these activities for what they were, I doubt even he would feel the term "revolutionary warfare" still applies. In its place, I would like to think he would approve of the use of "irregular warfare," to more comprehensively address the variance of political ideologies employed.

This paper will take this concept of IW through various forms of military application. The term "IW strategy" is used to capture how the United States could employ IW at the national level to seek a specific influence-based outcome through the application of a nontraditional force combined with a political action. The term is "IW campaign" is used to discuss the specific details of the execution of an in IW strategy from the initial development of potential force and political-action options through to a stabilized influence outcome. And, the term "IW operation" is used to describes the military framework necessary to assemble authorizations and the appropriate capabilities to execute an IW campaign. Moving forward, this revision of IW will serve as the foundational concept from which the USSOF community can develop offensive IW capabilities, pursue the development and acquisition of unique IW authorities, and justify structural evolution of USSOF formations for IW optimization.

Strategic Objective Alignment

The adversary's perspective. The last two decades have provided U.S. adversaries the opportunity to observe firsthand the U.S. military's expeditionary force projection capability. In response, our adversaries have shown us how to combat a dominant conventional force with overwhelming technological and firepower superiority by displacing the conventional forces' influence over a target population. Understanding how the adversary accomplishes this feat provides insight into the mechanics of an effective IW campaign, which can help inform USSOF IW operational design.

To establish influence over a target population and undermine U.S. military efforts, our adversaries cultivate political action within the target population that encourage beliefs inherently antithetical and incompatible to U.S. interests. Second, the adversaries raise, train, and employ an indigenous cadre to ensure ideological proliferation within the target population. This two-part strategy has seen successful employment by U.S. adversaries in a variety of global environments and circumstances, ranging from the Third International (a.k.a. Communist International) operating in the developing world to international and transregional Salafi-jihadist movements.[3] Each actor that employed a

strategy with these components well has found success expanding their influence over time, usually at a cost to our own. We have found over the last several decades that our adversaries' influence-focused strategies are difficult to contest, especially with the application of conventional force.

In recent contests, the United States has attempted to use conventional forces to counter our adversaries' IW campaigns. The adversary harbors no hope of defeating U.S. conventional forces in direct ground combat. However, the presence of conventional forces provides the adversary with two opportunities. First, it allows the adversary to reinforce its narrative of permanency; second, it creates the opportunity for the adversary to begin inflicting casualties on U.S. uniformed troops, broadly understood by our adversaries as the fastest way to erode U.S. domestic support. When attacking U.S. conventional forces, the adversary concurrently conducts a propaganda campaign intended to fortify cooperation within the indigenous population. The central narrative of the propaganda campaign is as dangerous as it is simple: "Regardless of what happens on the battlefield from day to day, eventually the Americans will leave, and we will remain." This narrative is powerful because it is grounded in demonstrated truth. The world is aware of historical and recent examples in Vietnam, Iraq, and Afghanistan. When conventional forces are deployed into ambiguous situations to combat asymmetric threats and mounting casualties erode domestic support, this narrative becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy. To see this narrative through, all the adversary needs to do is wait. Balancing their lives between U.S. conventional forces who isolate themselves from them and the adversary that lives among them, the civilian population hedges in favor of the adversary.

But the U.S. military does not have to endure this cycle forever. The adversary's application of this strategy stands as both evidence and a model for USSOF IW campaigns that can combat this adversarial approach.

Envisioning a different outcome. One of the U.S. military's greatest strengths is a cultural focus on candor and openness about lessons learned and mistakes. We learn from our failures and the adversary's successes in combat, and we use those lessons to improve. However, our adjustments and realignments are designed too often based on our own operational biases and do not consider the adversary's definition of defeat. From the adversary's perspective, the supreme objective is to secure favorable influence over the target population. The adversary needs the target population to provide insulation from conventional attack and to act as an ideological estuary. For an adversary in conflict with the U.S. military, influence over the target population is existential. For this reason, counterinsurgency theorists correctly identified influence over the population as the center of gravity.[4] Inversely, the U.S. military has chosen too often to define operational success as control of geographic terrain. The presence patrols in Iraq and Afghanistan in the 2004–2007 time frame stand as an excellent example. This misalignment in the understanding of the importance of the population from an influence perspective creates conditions in which the U.S. military successfully secures terrain occupied by a population that the adversary has successfully brought under their influence. In this situation, the U.S. military and the adversary both believe they are achieving their strategic objectives in the same time and physical space. However, there is no argument that the adversaries influence within the population is of greater strategic value in the modern context. When the U.S. military and the adversary operate on two separate plains of understanding, we are, in effect, failing to close with the enemy. To enter a decisive engagement

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with the adversary, we must ensure that the U.S. military's objectives and the adversary's objectives are inversely aligned.

If we understand the adversary's operational objective is to achieve his political action plan and establish resilient influence over the population, then we can confidently state that the following situational characteristics would represent the adversary's failure:

- popular rejection of the adversary's political action (alienation/loss of freedom of movement/loss of access),
- the displacement of the adversary's influence with an opposing political action compatible with that of the United States,
- a trend within the population toward greater Western alignment, and
- a recognition that these changes in the population are both organically driven and permanent.

These conditions would not only make it impossible for actors and agents of the adversary to move freely within the population, but it would also place the population on the path to active rejection of the adversary's ideology and active assistance to the friendly forces. In this situation, the environment necessary for the adversary to fortify and expand influence would cease to exist. In other words, it would result in the adversary's defeat.

With this understanding of the adversary's failure as our guide, we can craft an IW strategy that delivers an end state we can define as victory. Like our adversaries, the objectives of our IW strategy must be population and influence focused. We must establish effective indigenous force partnerships for access to the operational area and indigenous population, support the development of partner influence through political action (preferably one that is also incompatible to the adversary), and synchronize the application of both force and political action in the pursuit of stable influence over the population at a cost to that of the adversary.

Irregular Warfare Campaign Design

In the last section, we dissected an adversarial application of irregular warfare. The intent of this examination was to highlight core aspects of the strategy that can then be either co-opted by USSOF in their own IW strategy and employed back at the adversary or intentionally mitigated through disciplined execution. This section takes the examination one step further by using the core aspects of the adversary's irregular warfare strategy to inform the development of a template for USSOF irregular warfare strategy through the various phases of execution. Based on key lessons learned from the adversary's application of IW, this USSOF IW strategy is framed by three central constraints:

- It must focus, throughout the phases of the operation, on the desired end state of defended or expanded U.S. influence, which frequently takes the shape of aligned partner influence.
- It recognizes that U.S. combat troop presence is a temporary condition, and that the achieving long-term strategic objectives requires a legitimate indigenous partner.
- It will require USSOF to assist in the development and execution of political action in any instance which partner force application creates, or is intended to create, a political vacuum.

Establishing a partnership and setting operational conditions. Despite the USSOF community's emphasis on indigenous partner operations, there is a high degree of ambiguity within current USSOF doctrine about how indigenous relationships are initiated that threatens effective relationship development. U.S. Special Forces UW doctrine explicitly acknowledges that other government agencies or higher echelons would likely be responsible for the identification of, initial contact with, and policy deconfliction for potential indigenous partners of resistance forces prior to the involvement of Special Forces operational elements.[5] While there are certainly situations in which this may be the case, decoupling the operational element from the relationship establishment process or delegating that process to other organizations sows potential conflict and confusion into the relationship from the onset. While other government agencies are obviously competent in the cultivation and development of relationships for their agency's own purposes, if a military or paramilitary application of the relationship is the long-term goal, then the USSOF executing elements should strive to be involved from the earliest possible point and at the highest possible echelons. In contrast to UW doctrine, the IW methodology dictates that in an ideal situation, the development and management of the relationship with the indigenous partner is the responsibility of the executing military entity continuously from relationship inception through stabilization.

This ensures clarity and continuity in the conditions and expectations framed in the establishment of the relationship for both parties. The initial establishment phase of any relationship is the most sensitive and critical phase. As the operation grows in scale and consequence, the conditions and expectations agreed upon at establishment will be placed under immense strain and pressure. If the managing element was not party to the agreements established in the initiation of the relationship, the relationship will bend to meet the partner's circumstantial needs, potentially to the detriment of the campaign.

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Political action. While the U.S. military has a long and mixed history of developing indigenous partnerships, for the last seventy years, the U.S. military has avoided responsibility for the development and implementation of political action. This avoidance is based on the belief that military activities are apolitical and, therefore, must be tied strictly to definable and quantifiable tactical and operational objectives. But this traditionally was not the case. The U.S. military occupied much of the North American continent and later conducted expert occupations of Germany and Japan precisely because they recognized the importance of attaining governance objectives. This in no way conflicts with neutrality in internal U.S. partisan politics. Instead, detaching the U.S. military's activities from a desired political outcome and the necessary governance development that must occur concurrent to combat operations just ensures that the U.S. military will fail to achieve its strategic objectives. If the U.S. military truly assumes responsibility for reaching its strategic objectives, it must recognize the practical and critical role that that political and governance functions play. Any activity inherently required to achieve a strategic military objective should be considered within the scope of traditional military activities. The divorce of military and governance affairs does not stand as a wise, time-tested precedent.

World War II is frequently used as an example of the U.S. military's ability to unilaterally conclude a conflict and to usher in an era of stability as it did in both Germany and Japan. This historical recollection often omits that the U.S. military had its own Military Government and Civil Affairs Branch specifically designed and developed during ongoing combat operations with the explicit intent of establishing effective governance as a vehicle for stability in the wake of operations.[6] While it may not be necessary to reestablish a governance branch within the U.S. Army, the importance of ensuring the effective concurrent development of an indigenous government alongside the development of an indigenous force as collective components of the indigenous movement cannot be overstated.

Political action is the vehicle that ultimately delivers stability and influence. The path to successful indigenous government requires cultivation through every phase in IW. An aligned governance component is the tool that ties the legitimacy created during combat operations to the stability desired at their conclusion. USSOF should ensure the delivery of effective indigenous government exists as a component of the indigenous partner's strategy from the onset of the relationship. Effective IW execution requires USSOF to provide appropriate organic experience and expertise to shape and influence the agenda and policy of the indigenous government through its development and implementation. Just as force application and political action are most powerful in concert, so must the USSOF military advisors and political-action advisors work in concert to ensure the appropriate resourcing and support to political action development as the priority throughout the IW campaign. This is one of several aspects of the IW methodology that has been

absent from USSOF doctrine and modern operational history, at least in the last several decades. The lack of U.S. involvement in the development of political action can lead to counterproductive situations in which the United States finds itself with an operationally successful partner who implements an incompatible governance or political position. If the end state is incompatible and U.S. influence has not been expanded or fortified, the effort is for naught.

When political action is not a priority, the probability of policy incompatibility between the United States and indigenous governments is high, leading to significant risks to indigenous government legitimacy. As a matter of necessity, the indigenous government will develop policies and laws continuously. Without intimate and constant involvement in the development process of these policies, it is highly likely that the indigenous government will implement policies that conflict with U.S. national interests or values to a degree that the U.S. government cannot endure. In these instances of conflict, USSOF influence can be used to alter, modify, or retract policies in question. However, post-decisional retractions are fraught with risk. They fuel the narrative of incompetency at best or foreign control at worst, serving to undermine the legitimacy of the indigenous government in the eyes of the population. The adversary will attempt to convince the population that the indigenous government is nothing more than a puppet regime of the U.S. government. The most effective way to buttress against this narrative is to ensure synchronization during the indigenous government's policy development process—to be so intimately involved in the development of laws, policies, and declarations that their content can be influenced before they're ever made public. This upstream involvement requires a high concentration of talent and resources, but it is the most effective way to ensure compatibility without the risk of eroding the legitimacy of the indigenous government.

Indigenous governance and population integration. Effective political action helps prevent policy collisions as the indigenous government ushers in stability at the conclusion of combat operations. However, political action during the execution of combat operations is of equal or greater importance. From the initiation of combat operations, the local government operates in concert with the indigenous force to assume an ever-increasing role representing the broader ideological movement in the population. This is especially true for population groups that fall under the control of the indigenous movement through the progress of combat operations. While the indigenous force will earn legitimacy in the eyes of the population during combat operations, the population instinctively recognizes that a military force cannot govern and hedges against the indigenous partner unless a more permanent structure falls into place following the advance of the indigenous force. IW strategy requires USSOF to work to set conditions for compatible indigenous governance through political action prior to the commencement of combat operations.

The learned experience of the last two decades tells us that the endless pursuit of tactical and operational objectives, the sterile and dogmatic pursuit of the militarized arm of the adversary, does not bring about a favorable strategic outcome. Effective targeted military pressure serves only to diffuse the adversary back into the population. Only the combination of a purposefully cultivated indigenous force and government can defeat the militant manifestation of the adversary and truly turn the population caustic against the adversary's presence. It is true the indigenous-U.S. military force will defeat the adversary in the terms we traditionally associate with counterinsurgency, FID, and UW, but it will be the indigenous government that actually ushers in the independent stability that the U.S. military has never been able to effectively realize. These two components are interdependent and indispensable and must be developed concurrently from a singular unified command-and-control construct. This approach is a significant departure from doctrinal and cultural comfort zones of the U.S. military, but any reasonable definition of strategic success depends on it. They must both be at the forefront of the USSOF IW strategy during the buildup to the displacement of the adversary. Commencing displacement without the framework of both an indigenous force and government reduces the chances of success significantly.

Active displacement. Once the relationship is established, the partner force is developed and resourced, an indigenous government is positioned to assume control, and the indigenous movement is ready to confront the influence of the adversary. Optimally, this confrontation is militaristic in nature. In every

A U.S. Army Special Forces soldier demonstrates to U.S. and Panamanian security forces how to secure a casualty 1 February 2018 prior to an air evacuation during a training exchange in Colón, Panama. U.S. irregular warfare campaigns must ensure indigenous governments have the resources to reinforce their security services to prevent the resurgence of the adversary's influence, provide external national defense, and address crisis response in support of the civil government. (Photo by Staff Sgt. Osvaldo Equite, U.S. Army)

historical instance noted, the adversary underpinned its ideological expansion with the threat or use of violence. Legitimacy is not always earned righteously. If an adversary can employ violence as a tool to underpin ideological expansion and is able to do so without consequence, the population will inevitably view the adversary as legitimate. We must not fail to recognize this challenge for the opportunity it is. Challenging the adversary's monopoly on violence is the most efficient way to displace influence. If a demonstration of military capability is required to establish the indigenous force's legitimacy, what better way to put it on display than by applying it against the adversary? An established and overt adversary military or paramilitary force provides the optimal scenario to supplant adversarial influence while simultaneously establishing the indigenous movement's legitimacy. An indigenous force that defeats an adversary's military capability in open combat has provided the population with visual evidence that is impossible to ignore. However, we must also recognize that this phase of an IW campaign presents the greatest risk of USSOF inadvertently undermining the legitimacy of its own indigenous partner.

When advising the indigenous force during combat operations, USSOF personnel are naturally inclined to assume the role they were selected and trained to perform. USSOF elements at the operational level will face immense internal pressure to assume the command of the indigenous force, lead in combat, and close with the enemy. To meet the intent of the IW strategy, USSOF ground force commanders will be required exercise extreme discipline in the application of unilateral U.S. capability. Leaders must take into consideration the impact of USSOF unilateral action on the indigenous force's legitimacy, which directly impacts strategic success. Any USSOF unilateral action or perceived direct command of indigenous forces reinforces the adversary's narrative that the indigenous

force is not capable of winning without U.S. support. If applied, U.S. unilateral force should focus on creating optimal conditions for indigenous partner operational momentum and be conducted in such a way to reduce indigenous population awareness. This change in force application guidance places indigenous movement legitimacy at the center of the decision-making process. In some instances, it may reduce or limit the application of U.S. unilateral capability to prevent adverse cost to indigenous movement legitimacy.

In addition to the cultivation of legitimacy, combat also provides an excellent opportunity for command-and-control crystallization and coalition development within the indigenous movement and among the indigenous movement and aligned opposition groups. The challenges of combat create the conditions for the creation of resilient teams and alliances that allow distinctly different groups to set aside petty differences and unite for collective success. The United States is no exception. The alliances formed during the two European-based world wars remain a heavy influence on our foreign policy today. As the indigenous force accrues successes on the battlefield, it will concurrently recruit personnel and groups to its ranks. USSOF should reinforce a chain of command with the indigenous force as the preferred central authority in the indigenous coalition. The provision of materiel to the developing indigenous coalition through the primary indigenous partner will also act to strengthen the desired command relationships and architecture, with the added benefit of creating leverage with the primary indigenous partner if required. Indigenous force central authority of the expanding coalition will ensure USSOF presence can remain minimal, hence protecting the broader indigenous movement's legitimacy. There is a natural inclination in the U.S. military, especially prominent in USSOF culture and practices, to build direct relationships at the lowest possible echelon of the indigenous force structure. If the intent is to protect and fortify the indigenous force's legitimacy while simultaneously attempting to centralize control of the developing coalition, this common USSOF practice is counterproductive and should be avoided at all costs.

USSOF responsibility for the concurrent and synchronized development of political action along with an indigenous fighting force under a single unified command is one of the central tenets of this strategy and one of the strongest departures from U.S. military campaign strategy that emphasizes these activities sequentially, not concurrently. For decades, the U.S. military has struggled to eliminate the adversary's access to and freedom within the indigenous population. This methodology addresses that struggle through political action. Political action will often take the form of a concurrently developed indigenous government that fills any political vacuum created by the conduct of the IW campaign. The role of political action, and of the indigenous government, is to force a confrontation of influence within the target population. This function of the sponsored indigenous government is one of the key features missing from our unconventional warfare doctrine. In this IW strategy, political action supported indigenous government assumes the responsibility for integrating secured populations, fosters a collective sense of ownership through population involvement, diversifies the internal security services, and cultivates a sense of agency within the population that assists inculcation of the indigenous movement's governing ideology. In the areas under indigenous movement control, the indigenous government begins the steady and deliberate transition to stability, deconstructing the stasis of military control and building connective tissue with the population, driving the postcombat transition to full indigenous government control.

The transition to stability. The elimination of adversary main combat units, physical occupation of terrain, and the complete transition of target population control and management to the indigenous government security services represents the commencement of the stability phase. This is where the hard work protecting the legitimacy of the indigenous movement during the combat phase of operations pays off. While the indigenous force will continue to exist, it will begin the demobilization process and transition to a standing force. The retention of a smaller standing force ensures the indigenous government has the resources to reinforce its security services to prevent the resurgence of the adversary's influence, provide external national defense, and address crisis response in support of the civil government.

Where the primary activity of the military in this phase is to step back, the primary responsibility of the civil government is to step forward. In our current doctrine, there is a great deal of ambiguity about who

specifically in the U.S. government should assume lead in advising the indigenous government through this transition phase. Any gap between combat operations and the commencement of effective indigenous government will irrevocably erode the perception of legitimacy and competency of government in the eyes of the population. People are not patient. The transition from combat operations under the command of the indigenous force and steady-state stability under the indigenous government should be considered a decisive point for achieving the desired strategic end state. The execution of the strategy up to this decisive point has been responsibility of USSOF. Certainly, there will be government-focused advisors (both U.S. military and other government agencies) involved in advising the indigenous government throughout the various phases of the campaign. Despite the primary focus on transition from combat operations to stability and the success of the indigenous government during this phase, USSOF should retain overall command to ensure the steady flow of resources, provision of support through the transition, and continuity of focus on the desired end state of the IW strategy. This period is the indigenous government's "zero day." Leaders should recognize that they will only have one chance to deliver on the expectations of the population. Any critical failures during this period of transition risk corrupting the foundations of the indigenous government, which stability is ultimately built on.

Failure to ensure the nascent indigenous government survives and thrives through the transition places the entire enterprise at risk. The deliberate focus on a governance component of the indigenous movement from the onset of the campaign is specifically intended to set optimal conditions for this transition period and beyond. The indigenous government's primary strategic purpose (from a U.S. perspective) is to stabilize the population, defend against a resurgence of the adversary, and fortify U.S. aligned influence gains. If the population loses confidence during the transition, it returns the momentum to the adversary and sets the partner on a negative trajectory extremely difficult to arrest. If popular dissatisfaction results in the transition from the sponsored indigenous political and governance partner, the adversary will work to cultivate and co-opt the entity that arises to fill the void. This failure will also serve as a practical warning to other potential partners in the target area and region, as we are now seeing.[7] The common perception may become, "While the U.S. may be there to provide the support necessary to meet mutual tactical and operational objectives, it will hang us out to dry when it comes time to solidify our political position." If this narrative prevails, it can easily undermine the U.S. military's options for IW activities in an entire region for an entire generation.

The purpose of this section was to emphasize the need for continuity in the leadership of the U.S. executing element throughout all phases of the campaign until the strategic objectives are met and to ensure that responsibility for campaign leadership remained firmly with USSOF in an IW campaign. While the necessity for continuity is clearly justified in doctrine like Joint Publication 3-0, *Joint Campaigns and Operations*, it routinely breaks down at this transition point in practice.[8] This may be in part due to the understanding by U.S. military leaders that the success of the indigenous government is ultimately the responsibility of governance and diplomatic experts from other departments and agencies in government. This strategy diverges from the past on this specific point. The objective of this IW strategy is the specific displacement of adversarial influence through political actions. The indigenous force is the catalyst for this process, but the strategic objective of influence is not achieved until the indigenous government has assumed control and is fully functional and successful. The indigenous government is the vehicle that delivers stability. It is that stability over the long term that fortifies U.S. influence expansion at the cost of the adversary.

To the victors go the spoils: post-operation partnerships. The fortification of influence is the not the only benefit of the successfully conclusion of an IW campaign. Influence within the indigenous force and government will inevitably remain strong, especially for those forces and personalities from USSOF instrumental in facilitating the successful outcome. Much like our adversaries during the Cold War benefited strategically for decades from the relationships established during their sponsorship of communist and nationalist movements in the developing world, IW strategy sees the same opportunities for the U.S. government in today's environment. It is not hard to imagine the development of a constellation of stable partners that have unique regional influence, expertise, and knowledge created

through the execution and success of IW and, almost more importantly, experience in the conduct and execution of effective IW methodology. These partners will continue to defend mutual interests, illuminate opportunities to expand influence of mutual benefit, and may even be well positioned to contribute to new efforts themselves. While influence is the objective of this strategy, the relationships cultivated through the pursuit of influence will inevitably yield strategic utility and benefit in and of themselves.

The Way Ahead

Truly embracing IW strategy and its methodology as a core USSOF function will require more than simply agreeing to the logic of its application. There are several concepts and principles introduced here that are difficult, if not impossible, for the vast majority of the USSOF community to execute due to structural and authority limitations. This section explores some of the possible structural and authority evolutions that would empower USSOF in the effective and optimal execution of IW.

Form follows function. To optimize for the successful execution of the IW methodology, USSOF would need to alter the composition and disposition of the operational units tasked with its undertaking. Specifically, operational elements would adopt a formation size that inherently minimizes signature and supports the perceived legitimacy and independence of partners, increases the mean level of seniority and experience to a level sufficient to effectively manage a comprehensive IW campaign, and ensures the integration of specialists with expertise not only in indigenous force development, but also political action. Absent these adaptations, USSOF elements tasked with the execution will struggle to manage the IW efforts and to see them through to the desired strategic end state.

The size of the executing element has huge impacts on both the development of the relationship with the indigenous partners as well as the perceived legitimacy of the indigenous partner in the eyes of the population. Through either observed interaction or the natural alignment of policies, the adversary will accuse the indigenous partner of being a puppet of the West or the United States in the normal course of the propaganda component of the conflict. This accusation will live, ever present, in the minds of the indigenous population. It is the executing element's responsibility to ensure the IW campaign in execution is not playing into the adversary's narrative. Executing-element signature reduction is one of the key tools to address this challenge, and a key component to signature reduction is committing the fewest possible personnel required to meet the operational requirement. A reduced USSOF element size also has the added benefit of creating a situational of mutual dependency between the USSOF element and the indigenous partner. A USSOF element at an optimal size to address primary mission requirements, the development of the indigenous partner, and the protection of the partner's legitimacy will likely be too small to organically address all its support and security needs. Inevitably, this should lead to a situation where the USSOF elements support and security needs are addressed by the indigenous partner. The natural interdependence this encourages supports the cultivation of trust and the strengthening of the relationship. However, this course of action is not without obvious physical and operational risk. USSOF will require competent, empowered operational personnel, trusted to assess the risk effectively and endowed with the discretion to adjust the operation accordingly.

“The adversary will accuse the indigenous partner of being a puppet of the West or the United States in the normal course of the propaganda component of the conflict.”

Designing an operational-element structure optimally suited for the execution of IW is not limited solely to considerations over size. The breadth of the

operational element's management and development portfolio, including both indigenous force and government, requires a very high mean level of competency, viewed as a factor of experience and training, within the USSOF executing element. This required mean level of competency is not present in the current USSOF team-level maneuver unit due to the high percentage of relatively junior soldiers. The effective execution of IW will also require an alteration to the USSOF professional development and assignment policies, increasing the percentage of senior, experienced soldiers. This allows the executing USSOF elements to manage the complexities of concurrent indigenous force and indigenous governance development and synchronization. Even if unique expertise not organic to USSOF is brought in specifically to shape and influence political action development, it will remain the responsibility of the USSOF leadership to ensure comprehensive IW strategy consistency through the execution of the campaign, especially during the combat phase.

Lastly, even with a small cadre of experienced and highly trained personnel, the USSOF executing element will lack the organic expertise to influence and shape the development of the indigenous governance structure in a way that ensures long-term compatibility with U.S. policy. There are options for tapping into this experience in both the U.S. military and in other government departments. However, to ensure maximum synchronization, U.S. military advisors with the competency to undertake this role would be preferable. These advisors would be fully integrated into the USSOF element, regardless of their home-station organizational affiliation, and would be under the command of the USSOF element responsible ultimately for the execution of the IW campaign.

Optimization for IW will inevitably require some degree of evolution and adaptation from the USSOF community. While it may be possible for USSOF to assemble a purpose-built element specifically to service an IW requirement, it would be a missed opportunity for organizational modernization. The IW methodology has broad application. IW represents a far more applicable and efficient core employment model for USSOF in the defense of U.S. interests than retaining USSOF maneuver-unit formation construct optimized for USSOF support to conventional forces in a large-scale conventional war against any of our primary adversary-state actors.

Supporting authorizations. Even if USSOF pursues an aggressive modernization and optimization campaign designed to adapt its formation for optimal execution of IW operations, structural changes alone will be insufficient. USSOF is also restricted from the comprehensive execution of this IW strategy by a distinct absence of persistent authorities and funds.

In a declaration of war or authorization of the use of military force, USSOF formations can access appropriated funding to support indigenous forces (albeit not indigenous governments). The initiation of an IW campaign may or may not be a supporting function to a declaration of war or a broader authorization of the use of military force. For the optimal degree of flexibility, USSOF should consider advocating for an authority and appropriation that allows for support of IW campaigns and operations in situations where the broader pursuit or defense of influence is the U.S. national interest. These low-cost, low-intensity IW campaigns would fall well below the threshold of a declaration of war but would allow the United States to defend or expand its national interest when under threat from adversary states or movements. A standing authorization would afford the U.S. military flexibility and would position the U.S. military to act at the speed of opportunity.

In addition to the establishment of funding lines explicitly intended to support IW, the Department of Defense (DOD) must also pursue funds and expertise in the field of political action. While it should remain the intent of the DOD to establish partnerships with other U.S. government departments and agencies to provide personnel to assist in the development and execution of political action, the integration of personnel from other department or agencies is not always circumstantially possible. The DOD should be prepared to address this requirement organically. There is some capability and capacity to address this requirement within the Civil Affairs Branch, but the capability within civil affairs was not designed specifically for this purpose, indicating a need for either adaptation in civil affairs or the need for the establishment of a new USSOF political action cadre altogether. Adopting the tenets of this strategy and optimizing USSOF elements for it will be half measures if the U.S. military is not prepared to address

the concurrent political action requirements critical for long-term stability and influence fortification.

Conclusion

Over the next several decades, we are likely to witness the various protections and deterrents that prevent total war stretched to their limits. In addition to its role in conventional and strategic deterrence, the U.S. military and especially the USSOF community should offer policymakers and senior leaders options that either effectively neutralize an adversary's asymmetric aggression or allow for the application of throttled pressure against an adversary in a manner unlikely to escalate to a direct strategic conflict. While our potential adversaries have high concentrations of conventional capability in their proverbial backyards developed to address their national security priorities, they all remain highly dependent on their networked global access for economic survival, raw material imports, and influence. This IW concept represents a capability that could be applied to erode our adversary's global access and impose costs proportional to those levied against us. However, effective execution of this concept will require significant evolutions within the USSOF formation including, but not limited to, structural adaptations at the maneuver-unit level, the acquisition of specific authorities and funds, and professional development pathway optimization. Despite the obvious hurdles, the return on the investment would be worth it if we could match, contest, and reverse the success of our adversary's asymmetric campaigns against our interests and influence. ■

Notes

1. Joint Publication (JP) 3-05, *Joint Doctrine for Special Operations* (Washington, DC: U.S. Government Publishing Office [GPO], 22 September 2020), II-7–II-11.

2. Nathaniel L. Moir, "Bernard Fall and the Vietnamese Revolutionary Warfare in Indochina," *Small Wars & Insurgencies* 28, no. 6 (2017): 909–46, https://doi.org/10.1080/09592318.2017.1374594.

3. *Britannica*, "Third International," last updated 12 July 2024, https://www.britannica.com/topic/Third-International.

4. David Kilcullen, *Out of the Mountains: The Coming Age of the Urban Guerrilla* (London: Hurst, 2013).

5. Army Techniques Publication 3-18.1, *Special Forces Unconventional Warfare* (Washington, DC: U.S. GPO, March 2019).

6. Field Manual 27-5, *United States Army and Navy Manual of Military Government and Civil Affairs* (Washington, DC: U.S. Government Printing Office, 22 December 1943). The Military Governance and Civil Affairs Division was based in Charlottesville, Virginia, where officers were prepared to reestablish governance in the wake of Allied military operations.

7. A recent example is the failure of the political action plan of the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF), which sought to achieve their desired level of international recognition. The SDF implemented a successful political action plan throughout the execution of their combat operations phase designed to attract, integrate, and align Arab tribes and other ethnic minorities within their area of operations. The SDF political action platform included key promises of equality through Western alignment. However, the lack of institutional support from the U.S. military for this political action plan left it highly vulnerable. As a result, international recognition was not forthcoming, and the area remains under significant Turkish pressure today. The unfulfilled political plan of the SDF has left their alliances frayed, creating influence opportunities for the Islamic State and the Syrian regime alike.

8. JP 3-0, *Joint Campaigns and Operations* (Washington, DC: U.S. GPO, 18 June 2022).