

Counterpoint to U.S. Special Operations Forces Cuts

Lt. Col. Doug Livermore, North Carolina National Guard



A soldier with the 5th Special Forces Group (Airborne) operates a drone during a raid exercise 15 March 2021 at the Muscatatuck Urban Training Center, Indiana. U.S. special operations forces conduct regular training focused on building partner force capacity while enhancing readiness for worldwide deployments in response to threats to national security. (Photo by Staff Sgt. William Howard, U.S. Army)

The current geopolitical circumstances in which the United States finds itself are fraught with challenges and opportunities that its special operations forces (SOF) are uniquely able to address, making any significant reduction in SOF manpower unwise and potentially catastrophic for the long-term security of the Nation. Drawn from all the U.S. Department of Defense (DOD) services, SOF is organized under the functional command of the U.S. Special Operations Command (USSOCOM).¹ U.S. SOF has a long and proud history of making significant contributions to the advancement of our national interests in unique but impactful ways. This impact is only made possible through the distinctive capabilities SOF brings, borne from the most exacting assessment and selection processes, training, technology, and international access gained through constant overseas deployments. Specifically recruited, designed, and employed to punch well above its weight class, U.S. SOF provides an incredibly efficient return on investment to the Nation. Finally, if cuts to U.S. SOF are unavoidable, USSOCOM should undertake every effort to retain the most skilled service members and critical capabilities within its Reserve Component (RC) formations.

Increasingly, U.S. SOF is diversifying its capabilities far beyond those of traditional combat operators with which most Americans are familiar with from Hollywood and the nightly news. For the last two decades of the Global War on Terrorism (GWOT), Americans have come to think of all SOF personnel as barrel-chested, weapon-festooned warriors who spend their every waking hour solely kicking down doors and shooting terrorists. The reality is much more nuanced, as U.S. SOF requires a wide range of diverse skills and capabilities to effectively operate—computer system technicians, logisticians, psychological operations experts, and cyber operations specialists in addition to the “traditional” SOF operators. Particularly as USSOCOM continues its pivot away from the counterterrorism focus of the GWOT and reorients onto competition with Russia and China, advanced technical skills like cyberspace operations and psychological operations designed to influence relevant populations will gain in prominence.

U.S. SOF is a critical component of what has come to be known as the “Influence Triad,” in which these specialized forces provide the on-the-ground access

and placement that enables U.S. Space Force and U.S. Cyber Command elements to have their own outsized strategic effects.² Unfortunately, to preserve its core SOF capabilities, it is likely that USSOCOM personnel cuts would fall disproportionately on these components with more specialized applications.³ While recognizing the importance of maintaining such unique capabilities, much of USSOCOM’s cyberspace and psychological operational capability would either be outsourced to less capable formations or abandoned entirely. U.S. SOF personnel are not homogenous, and manpower cuts reducing any niche specialty within the broader force would severely undermine not just our special operations activities. Inevitably, personnel reductions to USSOCOM would negatively impact on the entire Influence Triad upon which much of our strategic competition relies.

Global Impact

The rapidly growing prevalence of irregular warfare and related asymmetric/hybrid threats to U.S. interests and security demonstrate the growing complexity of strategic competition in the modern world.⁴ SOF has been at the forefront of meeting these challenges to ensure the maintenance of a stable, rules-based order. While irregular U.S. formations have been a part of our history since before there was even a country, modern U.S. SOF came into being in the fires of World War II, when the Office of Strategic Services (OSS) emerged to fight against the Axis powers.⁵ Operating deep behind enemy lines across Europe, Southeast Asia, and elsewhere, the

Lt. Col. Doug Livermore, North Carolina National Guard, is the deputy commander for Special Operations Detachment–Joint Special Operations Command. He recently returned from a yearlong mobilization as the deputy commander for Special Operations Advisory Group–Iraq. In addition to his evacuation and advocacy work with the nonprofit organization No One Left Behind, Livermore is the national director of external communications for the Special Forces Association, national secretary for the Special Operations Association of America, and the director of external communications for the Irregular Warfare Initiative. He is widely published as a subject-matter expert on and advocate for special operations and national security issues.



Soldiers in the Special Forces Communications Sergeant Course practice using a PDA-184 computer and an AN/PRC-117G satellite radio 29 August 2019 at the Yarbrough Training Complex, Fort Bragg, North Carolina. The satellite communications module qualified students to be proficient in installing, operating, and maintaining a satellite communications link. (Photo by K. Kassens, U.S. Army)

OSS worked alongside the British Special Operations Executive and indigenous groups like the French Resistance to wage a “butcher-and-bolt reign of terror.”⁶ While the OSS was disbanded shortly after the war in September 1945, the Central Intelligence Agency and the U.S. Army Special Forces trace their lineage to the OSS and count many former OSS commandos among their ranks. Established in 1987 to functionally control all the DOD’s various service SOF, the OSS’s distinctive arrowhead emblem is represented in USSOCOM’s own crest.⁷

Throughout the Cold War, the presence of U.S. SOF in Western Europe served as a strong deterrent to the Soviet Union’s ambitions of invading the region. Building off the legacy of the OSS, U.S. Army Special Forces units trained with Western European partners to prepare “stay behind” forces to attack rear areas in the event of any Soviet invasion.⁸ These SOF units

were trained in a wide range of unconventional warfare techniques, which provided a degree of unpredictability and uncertainty to the Soviets. Famously, some Special Forces units were even equipped and prepared to deploy man-portable nuclear weapons, which were intended to wreak havoc upon Soviet invasion corridors.⁹ Whereas conventional American forces might potentially take months to deploy to Europe in the event of a Soviet invasion, SOF units could deploy rapidly and effectively to respond to any potential Soviet incursions. Moreover, the presence of U.S. SOF in the region provided the United States with a valuable intelligence-gathering capability that could be used to preemptively detect and counter any Soviet moves.¹⁰ Ultimately, the presence of U.S. SOF in Western Europe served as a strong deterrent that helped to prevent the Soviets from launching an invasion of the region.

In Asia, U.S. SOF has played an instrumental role in deterring and defeating threats to U.S. interests without the need to deploy large conventional formations. Having learned the lessons of America's disastrous involvement in Vietnam, U.S. SOF provided more subtle and nuanced responses to challenges, such as by helping the Philippines fight against communist and Islamist insurgencies over the past decades. In what has been the world's longest-running communist insurgency from 1968 to the present, the United States provided training and equipment to the Philippine military to help it combat the communist New People's Army.¹¹ This assistance helped the Philippines gain the upper hand and eventually defeat the New People's Army, though the organization continues as a terrorist group.

In the early 2000s, the United States shifted most of its focus to helping the Philippines fight against Islamist insurgents such as the Abu Sayyaf Group. This included providing intelligence, training, and equipment to the Armed Forces of the Philippines, as well as deploying U.S. personnel to advise and assist in combat operations.¹² The assistance provided by the United States has been critical in helping the Philippine government defeat both the New People's Army and Abu Sayyaf Group, and it has helped to secure peace and stability in the region.

Closer to our own borders, the United States began to provide Colombia with support in its fight against the communist Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC) and drug-trafficking cartels in the late 1990s.



Special Forces soldiers from the 10th Special Forces Group (Airborne) exfiltrate a counter-improvised explosive device (C-IED) lane in an MRZR off-road utility vehicle 11 June 2020 at Panzer Local Training area near Stuttgart, Germany. The C-IED training was a five-day course with both day and nighttime lanes that incorporated various types of simulated explosives and scenarios. (Photo by Sgt. Patrik Orcutt, U.S. Army)



A soldier (center) assigned to the 7th Special Forces Group (Airborne) coaches members of the Colombian *Compañía Jungla Antinarcóticos* during “Glass House Drills” meant to simulate clearing the interior of a building during a joint training exercise 20 November 2015. The *Junglas*, as they are known, trained with the Special Forces soldiers on Eglin Air Force Base as part of the Western Hemisphere’s longest enduring security partnership formed to counter narcotic and human trafficking. (Photo by Maj. Thomas Cieslak, 7th Special Forces Group [Airborne])

Since its formation in 1964, the FARC had waged a protracted and horrifically bloody insurgency against successive Colombian governments, while the considerable expansion of the drug cartels’ narcotics exports to the United States had reached epidemic proportions. U.S. support was formalized in 2000 through Plan Colombia, a multibillion-dollar aid package that provided military assistance, counternarcotics training, and economic aid to help strengthen Colombia’s government and fight crime and terrorism. U.S. SOF played a key role in the implementation of this plan by providing intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance, as well as training and advising Colombian forces.¹³ Despite legitimate concerns raised by the international humanitarian community involving alleged excesses by the Colombian government, this support played a critical role in Colombia’s successful efforts to defeat the FARC and drug-trafficking cartels and helped to ensure stability and security along America’s southern flank.

Following the al-Qaida terrorist attack on the United States in September 2001, the invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq marked the start of the most significant chapters in the Global War on Terrorism, characterized by the swift and remarkable initial successes achieved by U.S. SOF. With unparalleled speed and precision, these elite units executed daring missions that dismantled key enemy strongholds and disrupted terrorist networks. In Afghanistan, the rapid overthrow of the Taliban regime in 2001 showcased the effectiveness of our SOF, which worked in tandem with local Afghan allies to achieve swift victories.¹⁴ Similarly, in 2003, the lightning-quick advance of SOF during the initial stages of the Iraq invasion demonstrated its unparalleled capability to swiftly neutralize high-value targets and secure strategic objectives.¹⁵ This early success highlighted the potency of special operations in asymmetrical warfare, though the subsequent challenges of nation-building and long-term



Ukrainian special operations soldiers and U.S. Army Special Forces soldiers assigned to 10th Special Forces Group (Airborne) enter an enemy-occupied building during exercise Combined Resolve XI on 10 December 2018 at the Joint Multinational Readiness Center in Hohenfels, Germany. During Combined Resolve XI, special operations forces conducted operations in enemy-occupied territory to support and operate with conventional forces. (Photo by 1st Lt. Benjamin Haulenbeek, U.S. Army)

stability would later emerge as complex and protracted issues.

American SOF has played a pivotal role in the implementation of Special Operations Command Europe's Resistance Operating Concept (ROC), particularly in the context of Ukraine and the deterrence of Russian aggression. First published in 2020 following years of collaboration between Special Operations Command Europe and the Swedish military, the ROC proposes a holistic approach to "developing a nationally authorized, organized resistance capability prior to an invasion and full or partial occupation resulting in a loss of territory and sovereignty."¹⁶ Drawing from the ROC and leveraging their expertise in unconventional warfare, psychological operations, and strategic advisory roles, U.S. and partnered foreign SOF have collaborated closely with Ukrainian forces to enhance their capabilities and resilience in the face of external threats. Through training, advising, and providing

critical support, U.S. SOF has contributed to developing a robust resistance posture within Ukraine, fostering a capacity to counter Russian aggression.¹⁷ These forces have played a key role in bolstering Ukrainian defenses, cultivating a broader deterrence effect against potential adversaries. By aligning with Ukrainian counterparts and embodying the principles of the ROC, U.S. SOF has strengthened the resilience of Ukraine and contributed to regional stability in the face of

evolving geopolitical challenges.

To ensure the enduring defeat of the Islamic State (IS) in Syria and al-Sham's physical caliphate in the Levant, U.S. SOF played a decisive role by again applying its unique capabilities and persistent relationships across the Middle East. Operating in close coordination with regional partners, starting in 2014, U.S. SOF executed a multifaceted strategy that combined direct action, advisory support, and intelligence gathering.¹⁸ These forces spearheaded critical operations to dismantle key IS strongholds, eliminate high-value targets, and disrupt the group's command and control structures. Through its expertise in counterinsurgency and irregular warfare, U.S. SOF not only contributed to the territorial defeat of IS but also facilitated the training and empowerment of local forces to prevent the resurgence of the terrorist organization. Most recently, I returned from a yearlong mobilization as the deputy commander for Special Operations Advisory Group-Iraq, where our team advised the Iraqi Counter-Terrorism Service and Federal Intelligence and Investigations Agency from the tactical to ministerial levels as part of the continuing effort to enable our partners to maintain crushing pressure on IS.¹⁹ The success in the Levant stands as a testament to the effectiveness of U.S. SOF in combating transnational threats and ensuring the lasting defeat of a significant terrorist entity in the region.

In direct alignment with the 2022 U.S. National Defense Strategy (NDS), U.S. SOF has had a unique and impactful role in collaborating with U.S. Indo-Pacific Command partners and allies to deter China in regions such as the Philippines and Taiwan.²⁰ Operating at the forefront of irregular warfare, U.S. SOF has provided critical support through training, advising, and capacity-building initiatives.²¹ By working closely with local forces,



U.S. SOF has not only enhanced the capabilities of partner nations but has also fostered a collective deterrence against potential Chinese aggression. The nuanced and matchless understanding of the region and cultural sensitivities exhibited by U.S. SOF has enabled effective cooperation, contributing to a cohesive and coordinated approach to regional security. Through its strategic advisory roles and engagement in joint exercises, U.S. SOF has bolstered the resilience of partner nations, sending a clear signal of deterrence to mitigate potential threats in the Indo-Pacific theater in a way that conventional DOD formations are ill-equipped to provide.²²

American SOF boasts a storied history of operating on the fringes of U.S. national security strategy, consistently making substantial and often pivotal contributions to shaping the global environment. Their unique capabilities in unconventional warfare, counterterrorism, and strategic advisory roles position them as a force multiplier with the ability to exert influence in regions crucial to U.S. interests. U.S. SOF's adaptability and agility has proven critical in the ever-evolving contemporary geopolitical environment. Operating in the shadows and addressing emerging threats with precision, it provides a nuanced and proactive approach to security challenges. Whether countering terrorism,

An Army "Green Beret" advises a Maghawair al-Thowra (MaT) soldier on base defense tactics during a surprise inspection 27 May 2020 at MaT base within the 55 km deconfliction zone in Syria. Coalition forces in Syria continue to train, advise, and assist our partner force in the fight to defeat the Islamic State and counter violent extremist organizations. (Photo by Staff Sgt. William Howard, U.S. Army)

supporting allies in deterrence efforts, or executing complex operations, U.S. SOF remains indispensable in navigating the complex and dynamic global environment. As geopolitical conditions continue to evolve, the enduring importance of U.S. SOF in safeguarding and advancing U.S. interests becomes increasingly evident, underlining its irreplaceable role in shaping the world's strategic contours.

Capabilities

The unparalleled effectiveness of U.S. SOF stems from a distinctive amalgamation of exceptional training, state-of-the-art technologies, and sustained involvement in some of the globe's most politically sensitive yet strategically crucial regions. Its rigorous training regimens hone specialized skills, preparing it for a diverse range of missions. Equipped with cutting-edge technologies, U.S. SOF can operate with precision and agility, adapting to dynamic and challenging



Special Forces soldiers insert onto a rooftop from an MH-47G helicopter during the annual U.S. Army Special Operations Command capabilities exercise at Fort Bragg, North Carolina, held 10–13 June 2019. The exercise scenario, based on potential real-world special operations forces mission requirements, was designed to improve interoperability with conventional forces, enhance interagency and intergovernmental partnerships, and test capabilities. (Photo by Spc. ShaTyra Reed, U.S. Army)

environments. Moreover, its persistent engagement in key geopolitical hotspots ensures an intimate understanding of local nuances and complexities. This unique combination of skills, technology, and experience empowers U.S. SOF to navigate delicate situations with finesse, providing the Nation with a strategic advantage in addressing multifaceted global challenges.

Commencing with exceptionally demanding assessment and selection processes, each facet of U.S. SOF undergoes a continuous and evolving training pipeline meticulously crafted to comprehensively cultivate personnel skills at initial, intermediate, and advanced levels. This rigorous training continuum ensures that SOF operators are not only highly specialized in their respective domains but also possess the adaptability and resilience necessary to confront an array of complex challenges. By investing in the continuous development of its personnel, U.S. SOF aims to provide the Nation with a cadre of elite operators capable of

delivering effective and strategic service throughout their careers.²³ This commitment to lifelong learning and skill enhancement reinforces the prowess and versatility of U.S. SOF, enabling it to remain continuously relevant and effective in advancing our national security interests.

The distinctive research, development, and acquisition authorities vested in USSOCOM empower the force to swiftly tailor its technological capabilities to address evolving requirements and outpace potential adversaries. Unlike its conventional DOD counterparts, which require decades (or more) to acquire new equipment, USSOCOM can uniquely respond to emerging threats through these rapid-acquisition authorities.²⁴ This agility in the technological domain is paramount in the ever-changing landscape of modern warfare. With the ability to expedite innovation and deploy cutting-edge solutions, U.S. SOF maintains a competitive edge, ensuring that its equipment and



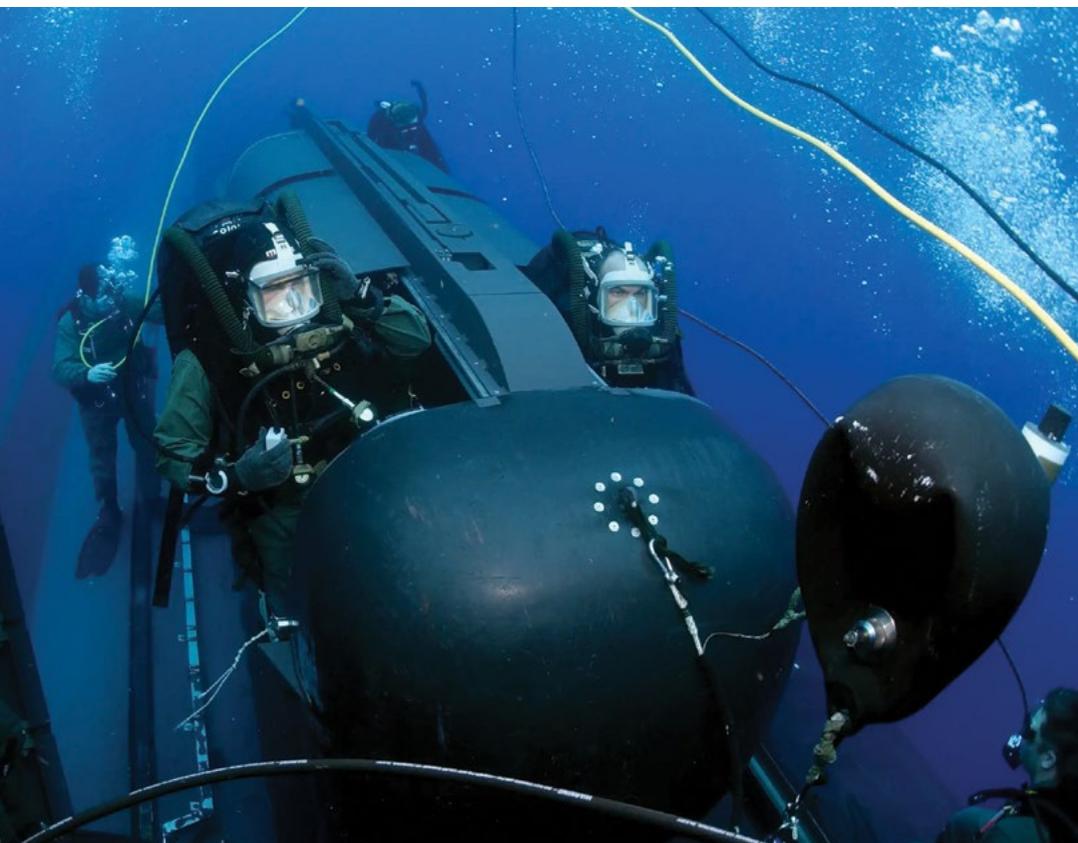
A formation of MC-130J Command II aircraft from the 1st Special Operations Squadron flies off the coast of Okinawa, Japan, on 6 January 2021. The MC-130Js provide unique and extremely risky low-level infiltration, exfiltration, and resupply capabilities to special operations forces in hostile or denied territory. (Photo by Capt. Renee Douglas, 353rd Special Operations Wing Public Affairs)

technology align with the dynamic nature of global security challenges.²⁵ This adaptability underscores the importance of granting SOF the flexibility to explore, develop, and acquire advanced technologies, enabling it to respond effectively to emerging threats and maintain a strategic advantage in the complex and rapidly evolving competition space of special operations.

American SOF strategically cultivates a resilient and extensive network of international contacts by engaging persistently with partners and allies worldwide. This proactive approach enables SOF to harness the power of the informal global SOF network, uniquely positioning it to navigate the increasingly unpredictable global environment in a manner unparalleled by other elements of the DOD.²⁶ The depth of this engagement is facilitated through ongoing security cooperation initiatives, the National Guard's state partnership programs, and the utilization of SOF-specific authorities and permissions such as 10 U.S.C. § 127e (Support of Special Operations to Combat

Terrorism) and Section 1202 (Support of Special Operations for Irregular Warfare) of the National Defense Authorization Act.²⁷ These frameworks not only enhance interoperability but also foster a collaborative environment where U.S. SOF can seamlessly share expertise, intelligence, and resources with its international counterparts. This robust ecosystem of relationships ensures that U.S. SOF remains at the forefront of global security efforts, equipped to respond effectively to emerging threats and challenges.

The substantial investments directed toward USSOCOM's formations over the past several decades have yielded a force that stands unparalleled in terms of training, equipment, and connectivity within the DOD. This robust investment has resulted in a highly specialized and adaptable force, uniquely positioned to address the complexities of modern warfare. U.S. SOF's superior training programs have honed skills that are not only specialized but also versatile, allowing for agile responses to a broad spectrum of threats. The



U.S. Navy SEAL Delivery Vehicle Team 2 launches a SEAL Delivery Vehicle (mini submarine) from the Los Angeles-class submarine USS *Philadelphia*. Such teams provide a specialized capability for conducting covert infiltration and exfiltration littoral operations in regions of potential conflict such as the South China Sea. (Photo by Chief Photographer's Mate Andrew McKaskle, U.S. Navy)

cutting-edge equipment at its disposal, coupled with advanced technologies, affords U.S. SOF capabilities that are unmatched by any other DOD component. Furthermore, its extensive network of international partnerships and collaborations underscores its connectivity, providing a strategic advantage in the global security situation. In essence, the considerable investments in U.S. SOF underscore its irreplaceable utility and its critical role in safeguarding national interests.

Investment

Despite constituting a relatively modest percentage of the overall DOD budget, U.S. SOF plays an outsized role in meeting the most pressing needs of the geographic combatant commands (GCC). While positioned as a supporting entity, U.S. SOF efficiently undertakes the critical task of shaping conditions for the conventional

elements of the joint force. The ability of SOF to deliver substantial impact with a comparatively small budget underscores its exceptional efficiency and the concept of “return on investment.”²⁸ This cost effectiveness is a testament to the specialized nature of SOF operations, emphasizing their ability to achieve strategic objectives with precision, agility, and a judicious allocation of resources. The strategic importance of U.S. SOF becomes evident in its capability to maximize impact while operating within constrained budgetary frameworks, reinforcing its indispens-

able role in the broader defense apparatus.

As both a service-like entity and a functional combatant command, the budget allocated to USSOCOM is notably dwarfed in comparison to the traditional services. In the fiscal year 2024 forecasts, USSOCOM's budget equaled approximately 1.6 percent of the overall DOD budget request.²⁹ Although USSOCOM does not share the same level of operations and management budget requirements as the services, it boasts the distinction of producing the most highly capable military forces that consistently deploy globally. This emphasizes the strategic efficiency of USSOCOM, which excels in cultivating and deploying elite special operations forces despite its relatively constrained budget. The focused nature of USSOCOM's mission allows it to prioritize the development of specialized capabilities, contributing to its reputation as a force multiplier and a crucial component in addressing complex, high-stakes scenarios on a global scale.

The evident preference for U.S. SOF in sustaining ongoing engagements with crucial partners and allies, including the Baltic States and Taiwan, underscores the force's enduring significance in shouldering a disproportionate share of deployment requirements. Many



An airman with Special Operations Forces Medical Element, 18th Wing, prepares freeze-dried plasma during a simulated casualty evacuation drill 8 October 2020 at Ie Shima, Okinawa, Japan. U.S. Special Operations Command has sponsored extensive medical research focused on upgrading lifesaving medical capabilities and techniques to support personnel recovery from isolated locations. (Photo by Cpl. Ethan M. LeBlanc, U.S. Marine Corps)

partners and allies, fully appreciating the enhanced capabilities and reputation of our SOF, insist on working with such forces over conventional DOD formations.³⁰ This trend, which originated in 2001 with the Global War on Terrorism, persists into the current operational landscape and is projected to continue in the foreseeable future.³¹ The specialized skills, adaptability, and cultural acumen inherent to U.S. SOF make it an invaluable asset in navigating complex geopolitical relationships and addressing evolving security challenges. As the operational tempo remains high, U.S. SOF's role in fostering strategic partnerships and bolstering global security emerges as a consistent and essential aspect of U.S. military strategy.

While the war plans of the GCCs heavily rely on the conventional elements of the joint force as the supported elements, U.S. SOF assumes a more prominent role in the preconflict campaign plans. These plans strategically leverage the unique capabilities, engagements, and authorities/permissions of U.S. SOF to not only deter aggression but also set conditions for rapidly defeating threats should deterrence fail. The incredible work done by U.S. and partnered SOF with Ukrainian forces in the years before the escalated Russian invasion of 2022 clearly demonstrated the outsized nature such forces can have during the initial phases of a broadening conflict.³² The agility, specialized skills, and inherent flexibility of U.S. SOF make it instrumental in shaping the preconflict conditions, offering a proactive and versatile approach to address emerging security challenges. By emphasizing the use of SOF in the preconflict phase, the military optimizes its ability to respond rapidly and effectively to potential threats, aligning with the evolving nature of global security.

Pound for pound, U.S. SOF consistently demonstrates an extraordinary efficiency, punching well above its weight class in terms of both taxpayer dollars and DOD personnel billets. Despite operating with a comparatively smaller budget and authorized size, the USSOCOM effectively addresses the most crucial requirements of the GCCs. In peacetime, U.S. SOF plays a pivotal role in deterring aggression, leveraging its specialized capabilities and strategic engagements. Simultaneously, during wartime, it skillfully shapes the battlefield to provide indispensable support to the broader joint force. This efficiency not only highlights the exceptional value proposition of U.S. SOF but also underscores its strategic importance in maintaining a robust and agile national defense posture.

Safeguarding Future Capabilities

In the scenario where USSOCOM faces the unavoidable necessity of cutting active-duty billets, it becomes crucial to prioritize retaining capacity and capabilities within the RC. Failing to preserve these vital elements in the RC would have severe consequences, potentially causing catastrophic damage to the DOD's ability to effectively deter the aggression of global competitors or mount a successful defense should deterrence prove insufficient. Recognizing the RC as a reservoir of essential skills and expertise is paramount to

maintaining the strategic depth necessary for a flexible and responsive national defense posture, particularly in the face of evolving geopolitical challenges.

The U.S. SOF RC already plays a pivotal role in advancing the goals of the NDS, employing various strategies such as the State Partnership Program and persistent engagement through Joint Combined Exchange Training. Through the State Partnership Program, meaningful engagements with the Baltic nations strengthen alliances and foster interoperability.³³ These partnerships, facilitated by the RC, enhance regional security and align with the overarching objectives of the NDS. The persistent engagement through Joint Combined Exchange Training further allows for the cultivation of critical skills and the establishment of enduring relationships, ensuring that U.S. SOF in the RC remains an asset in supporting and bolstering our partners and allies across the globe. Notably, the U.S. Army Special Operations Command maintains special operations detachments within its RC structure, each commanded by a colonel and providing senior level command and control to joint task forces while advising partners and allies.³⁴ Special Operations Detachment-NATO from the Maryland Army National Guard deployed and assumed command of Special Operations Advisory Group-Iraq in 2022, the first time a special operations detachment had taken responsibility for an entire joint and international task force, further demonstrating the continued utility of RC elements of U.S. SOF to the Nation.³⁵

If U.S. SOF members are compelled to transition from active duty, it becomes imperative to provide compelling incentives for their continued service in the RC. Retention bonuses previously offered for such

Spc. Josh Brimm, 307th Tactical Psychological Operations (PSYOP) Company, 7th PSYOP Group, plays a counter-improvised explosive device message on a loud speaker during a mission around Malajat, Afghanistan, on 3 June 2011. The purpose of the mission was to gather information from the local population and to distribute PSYOP flyers and radios. (Photo by Sgt. Canaan Radcliffe, U.S. Army)

transfers served as effective motivational tools and must be considered for renewal and expansion.³⁶ However, it is also crucial to acknowledge the potential strain on the U.S. SOF RC force structure, which may be insufficient to absorb the surplus of personnel transitioning from active duty. Much like the active-duty force, the RC is limited in the total number of personnel it may employ, requiring expansion. To mitigate additional adverse effects stemming from required cuts, USSOCOM should proactively engage in contingency planning. This involves budgeting for increased transfer incentives and making necessary force structure adjustments to ensure a smooth transition, minimize disruptions, and retain a highly capable and motivated RC within U.S. SOF.

Oftentimes, U.S. SOF personnel transition from active duty to the RC and seek outside employment that significantly augments their military service. Many choose roles within the U.S. government, leveraging their specialized skills and experiences to contribute uniquely to various agencies.³⁷ In my own case, I left active duty nearly a decade ago, transitioning to a contracting career and eventually serving as a senior intelligence officer and director within the Office of the Secretary of the Navy. In those years, I have also continued my U.S. SOF service with three different special operations detachments, advancing in rank and responsibility. This dual-hatted approach not only allows SOF personnel to maintain their military readiness but also provides them





Staff Sgt. Aidan McNulty, Civil Affairs Team 142, Company D, 91st Civil Affairs Battalion, writes down a patient's medical information 19 February 2021 at a medical clinic in Bobo-Dioulasso, Burkina Faso. Civil Affairs Team 142 partnered with the 25th Régiment Parachutiste Commando medical personnel to conduct a joint medical readiness training exercise and supply basic medical services to local populations. (Photo by Spc. Nathan Hammack, U.S. Army)

with distinctive perspectives and connections within the interagency and international communities. Integrating SOF expertise into different facets of the U.S. government ensures a valuable exchange of insights and fosters a more comprehensive understanding of global security challenges, ultimately enhancing the effectiveness of U.S. SOF in an evolving strategic landscape.

Regardless of any success that we might witness with active-duty U.S. SOF personnel transitioning to the RC, the loss of those active-duty billets will undoubtedly significantly undermine the overall readiness and capabilities of USSOCOM to contribute to the national defense. While every effort should be exerted to prevent cuts to the active-duty force structure of USSOCOM, prudent measures should be taken to mitigate the potential negative repercussions of such reductions. Above all else, USSOCOM is renowned for its adaptability, resilience, and commitment to forge itself into whatever force the Nation requires. A strategic approach involves retaining

the best and brightest U.S. SOF members within the RC. By doing so, the considerable investments made in these highly skilled individuals can continue to be leveraged for the benefit of national defense. This approach not only safeguards the wealth of experience and expertise within the SOF community but also ensures that these exceptional individuals remain active contributors to the broader defense apparatus, even in a part-time capacity within the RC.

Conclusion

In an era defined by escalating global complexity and an array of security challenges stretching across the world, the prospect of reducing personnel from USSOCOM appears misguided. The distinct capabilities, substantial capacity, and extensive global connections inherent in USSOCOM personnel are critical assets in navigating the uncertainties of the contemporary security environment. The specialized skills

and adaptability of these service members make them indispensable in addressing the multifaceted threats facing the United States. Opting for poorly considered cuts to USSOCOM personnel not only risks weakening our most impactful force but also poses a direct threat to the DOD's capacity to execute the *NDS* effectively. In times of pervasive uncertainty, preserving the strength and capabilities of USSOCOM is vital for maintaining a robust and responsive national defense posture.

The unique role of USSOCOM personnel in irregular and asymmetrical warfare, coupled with their ability to operate in politically sensitive and geographically diverse environments, positions them as an irreplaceable asset for addressing evolving security challenges. Their distinct skill set is not easily replicated

within conventional military forces. Any reduction in USSOCOM personnel would not only compromise the United States' ability to counter emerging threats but could also undermine the strategic objectives outlined in the *NDS*. Recognizing the importance of USSOCOM in navigating the intricacies of global security, it becomes imperative to weigh the long-term consequences and potential vulnerabilities that would arise from ill-advised cuts, emphasizing the need to safeguard this essential force to ensure the Nation's security interests are effectively preserved. ■

All opinions expressed are those of the author alone and do not reflect the official positions of any department or agency of the U.S. government.

Notes

1. U.S. Special Operations Command (USSOCOM) Office of Communication, *Fact Book 2023* (MacDill Air Force Base, FL: USSOCOM, 2023), 10–11, <https://www.socom.mil/FactBook/2023%20Fact%20Book.pdf>.
2. Will Beurpere and Marsh Ned, "Space, Cyber, and Special Operations: An Influence Triad for Global Campaigning," *Modern War Institute*, 6 September 2022, <https://mwi.westpoint.edu/space-cyber-and-special-operations-an-influence-triad-for-global-campaigning/>.
3. Todd South, "Personnel Cuts and Force Redesign Ahead for Army Special Operations," *Army Times* (website), 1 November 2023, <https://www.armytimes.com/news/your-army/2023/11/01/personnel-cuts-and-a-force-redesign-ahead-for-army-special-operations/>.
4. The White House, *National Defense Strategy* (Washington, DC: The White House, 2022), <https://www.whitehouse.gov/wp-content/uploads/2022/11/8-November-Combined-PDF-for-Upload.pdf>.
5. "The Office of Strategic Services: America's First Intelligence Agency," *Central Intelligence Agency*, accessed 30 November 2023, <https://www.cia.gov/legacy/museum/exhibit/the-office-of-strategic-services-n-america-s-first-intelligence-agency/>.
6. Fredric Boyce and Douglas Everett, *SOE: The Scientific Secrets* (Gloucestershire, UK: Sutton Publishing, 2003), 205.
7. "The OSS Primer: An Enduring Legacy," U.S. Army Special Operations Command, accessed 30 November 2023, <https://www.socom.mil/OSS/oss-legacy.html>.
8. Christopher Klein, "How Green Berets Became the US Army's Elite Special Forces," *History Channel*, 7 November 2023, <https://www.history.com/news/green-berets-armys-special-forces>.
9. Colin Schultz, "For 25 Years, U.S. Special Forces Carried Miniature Nukes on Their Backs," *Smithsonian* (website), 10 February 2014, <https://www.smithsonianmag.com/smart-news/25-years-us-special-forces-carried-miniature-nukes-their-backs-180949700/>.
10. Olav Riste, "'Stay Behind': A Clandestine Cold War Phenomenon," *Journal of Cold War Studies* 16, no. 4 (Fall 2014): 35–59, <https://direct.mit.edu/jcws/article-abstract/16/4/35/13485/Stay-Behind-A-Clandestine-Cold-War-Phenomenon>.
11. Keith B. Richburg, "Philippine Communists Claim Colonel's Killing," *Washington Post* (website), 23 April 1989, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/archive/politics/1989/04/23/philippine-communists-claim-colonels-killing/b0a989aa-234c-4847-baa8-50bb56085703/>.
12. Linda Robinson, Patrick Johnston, and Gillian Oak, *U.S. Special Operations Forces in the Philippines, 2001–2014* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation, 2016), <https://doi.org/10.7249/RR1236>.
13. David Sosa, "Peace Colombia: The Success of U.S. Foreign Assistance in South America," U.S. Global Leadership Coalition, 10 May 2017, <https://www.usglc.org/blog/peace-colombia-the-success-of-u-s-foreign-assistance-in-south-america/>.
14. Walter L. Perry and David Kassing, *Toppling the Taliban: Air-Ground Operations in Afghanistan, October 2001–June 2002* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation, 4 January 2016), <https://doi.org/10.7249/RR381>.
15. John D. Gresham, "Operation Iraqi Freedom (OIF): Special Operations Forces and the Liberation of Iraq," *Defense Media Network*, 19 March 2015, <https://www.defensemedianetwork.com/stories/operation-iraqi-freedom-oif-special-operations-forces-and-the-liberation-of-iraq/>.
16. Otto Fiala, *Resistance Operating Concept* (MacDill Air Force Base, FL: Joint Special Operations University Press, 2020), 17, <https://jsou.edu/Press/PublicationDashboard/25>.
17. Walter Pincus, "U.S. SOCOM Has History with Ukraine's Special Forces," *The Cipher Brief*, 12 April 2022, https://www.thecipherbrief.com/column_article/u-s-socom-has-history-with-ukraines-special-forces.
18. Michael Gordon, "Explainer: U.S. Strategy to Defeat ISIS," *Wilson Center*, 30 September 2022, <https://www.wilsoncenter.org/article/explainer-us-strategy-defeat-isis>.
19. Crispin Smith, "Still at War: The United States in Iraq," *Just Security*, 18 May 2022, <https://www.justsecurity.org/81556/still-at-war-the-united-states-in-iraq/>.

20. The White House, *National Defense Strategy*, 23–25.
21. Stavros Atlamazoglou, "With Tension Rising in the Pacific, US Special Operators Have a New Goal: Creating 'Multiple Dilemmas' for China," *Business Insider*, 8 December 2022, <https://www.businessinsider.com/us-special-operators-focusing-on-creating-multiple-dilemmas-for-china-2022-12>.
22. Gordon Richmond, "Sharpening the Spear: Moving SOF's Operating Concept Beyond the GWOT," *Modern War Institute*, 23 February 2022, <https://mwi.westpoint.edu/sharpening-the-spear-moving-sofs-operating-concept-beyond-the-gwot/>.
23. Bryan P. Fenton, "How Special Operations Forces Must Meet the Challenges of a New Era," *Defense One*, 11 May 2023, <https://www.defenseone.com/ideas/2023/05/how-special-operations-forces-must-meet-challenges-new-era/386216/>.
24. Inspector General Report No. DODIG-2021-125, *Evaluation of U.S. Special Operations Command's Supply Chain Risk Management for the Security, Acquisition, and Delivery of Specialized Equipment* (Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Defense, 14 September 2021), https://media.defense.gov/2021/Sep/16/2002855097/-1/-1/1/DODIG-2021-125_REDACTED.PDF.
25. U.S. Special Operations Command, "USSOCOM: Special Operations Forces Acquisition, Technology and Logistics (SOF AT&L) Overview," *Defense Media Network*, 7 July 2021, <https://www.defensemedianetwork.com/stories/ussocom-special-operations-forces-acquisition-technology-logistics-sof-atl-overview/>.
26. Tim Nichols, "Special Operations Forces in an Era of Great Power Competition," *Johns Hopkins School of Advanced International Studies*, May 2023, <https://sais.jhu.edu/kissinger/programs-and-projects/kissinger-center-papers/special-operations-forces-era-great-power-competition>.
27. Kimberly Jackson, *Authorities and Permissions to Conduct Army Special Operations Activities Abroad* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation, 2022), 4, <https://doi.org/10.7249/RR-A412-4>.
28. Isaiah Wilson III, "Rediscovering the Value of Special Operations," *Joint Force Quarterly* 105 (2nd Quarter, April 2022), <https://ndupress.ndu.edu/Media/News/News-Article-View/Article/2999171/rediscovering-the-value-of-special-operations/>.
29. Office of the Undersecretary of Defense (Comptroller)/ Chief Financial Officer, *Defense Budget Overview: United States Department of Defense Fiscal Year 2024 Budget Request* (Washington, DC: Department of Defense, March 2023), A-1, https://comptroller.defense.gov/Portals/45/Documents/defbudget/FY2024/FY2024_Budget_Request_Overview_Book.pdf.
30. Steven Kashkett, "Special Operations and Diplomacy: A Unique Nexus," *Foreign Service Journal* 94, no. 5 (June 2017): 22–27, <https://afsa.org/special-operations-and-diplomacy-unique-nexus>.
31. Ibid.
32. Kevin D. Stringer, "Special Operations Forces Institution-Building: From Strategic Approach to Security Force," *Joint Force Quarterly* 110 (3rd Quarter, 2023): 75–87, <https://ndupress.ndu.edu/JFQ/Joint-Force-Quarterly-110/Article/Article/3450149/special-operations-forces-institution-building-from-strategic-approach-to-secure/>.
33. "The U.S Army's Security Force Assistance Triad: Security Force Assistance Brigades, Special Forces and the State Partnership Program," *Association of the United States Army*, 3 October 2022, <https://www.ausa.org/publications/us-armys-security-force-assistance-triad-security-force-assistance-brigades-special>.
34. Joseph Trevithick, "Maryland Now Has a Special Forces Unit Dedicated to Countering Russia," *War Is Boring* (blog), Medium, 16 June 2016, <https://medium.com/war-is-boring/maryland-now-has-a-special-forces-unit-dedicated-to-countering-russia-ff4cc5688d4f>.
35. As a member of Special Operations Detachment-NATO, I served as the deputy commander for Special Operations Advisory Group–Iraqbased in Baghdad from January to October 2022.
36. "Bonuses," *Army.mil*, accessed 30 November 2023, <https://myarmybenefits.us.army.mil/Benefit-Library/Federal-Benefits/Bonuses?serv=122>.
37. John E. Peters, Brian Shannon, and Matthew E. Boyer, *National Guard Special Forces: Enhancing the Contributions of Reserve Component Army Special Operations Forces* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation, 6 November 2012), https://www.rand.org/pubs/technical_reports/TR1199.html.