

UNITED STATES SPECIAL OPERATIONS COMMAND

Special Operations Forces Operating Concept



A Whitepaper to Guide Future Special Operations Force Development

Directorate of Force Management and Development

Concept Development and Integration Office

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COMMANDER'S FOREWORD

The *Special Operations Forces (SOF) Operating Concept (OC)* describes in broad terms the framework for how SOF will operate in the future. Nested with the Chairman's *Capstone Concept for Joint Operations – Globally Integrated Operations* and informed by current strategic guidance, it addresses the challenges SOF will face in the future. The purpose of this document is to influence force development and wargaming by establishing an overarching construct for SOF operations in a demanding future environment.

SOF will always provide critical capabilities to resolve crises and support major operations; however, our success in the future environment will be determined by our ability to navigate conflicts that fall outside traditional peace-or-war constructs. SOF's greatest value to the Nation, and consequently the primary idea of this concept, lies in our global perspective, coupled with the ability to act early with partners to provide a range of options for policy makers. Operating ahead of crisis allows SOF and partners to develop long-term and cost-effective options to prevent or mitigate conflict.

To create decision space and strategic options for Geographic Combatant Commanders and National leadership, SOF will execute Integrated Campaigning with partners. This concept expands the construct of a "campaign" from a series of related major military operations to a series of integrated activities executed with a growing list of partners. Future campaign plans must be deliberately designed to synchronize whole of government approaches. Whether providing a supporting role, or in the lead, SOF will utilize an Integrated Campaigning approach to coordinate participation and support from partners to achieve US policy objectives.

USSOCOM's contributions to successful Integrated Campaigning will be enabled by optimizing our SOF operators, enhancing SOF unity of effort, and maximizing the development and sustainment of purposeful partnerships. Expanding these capabilities will require both operational and institutional changes. The Enterprise will need to develop doctrine that describes new methods for integrating our actions, both internally and with our partners. It must also change how we select, educate, train, equip, and manage our people. This concept is designed to act as a catalyst for these changes.

This document is more than a vision; it is an actionable framework to improve future SOF readiness and further capability development to ensure we have the right force in the right place with the right tools at the right time.


Joseph L. Votel
General, U.S. Army
Commander

1. Introduction

Agility and flexibility are the foundational strengths that allow Special Operations Forces (SOF) to rapidly seize opportunities and adapt to unforeseen requirements and operational challenges. Facing a complex and uncertain future, the Nation expects SOF to apply these strengths to more fully integrate with partners and better identify and develop strategic opportunities to advance and protect US interests.

In an increasingly interconnected world, a broadening array of state and non-state actors employing irregular and hybrid approaches challenge US interests. Identifying activities and intentions of these malign actors within disordered societies and disenfranchised populations is challenging, but not impossible. To achieve this, persistent operations and deep understanding of the human domain will be necessary to identify and influence relevant actors to produce outcomes acceptable to the US.

The risk of not acting, or acting late, can dramatically alter the world landscape, eroding the Nation's security, influence, and standing while allowing nefarious actors to inflict horrific human catastrophe as demonstrated by ISIS in Iraq and Syria. Limited and reactionary responses are the result of insufficient awareness and understanding of emerging indicators of instability.

SOF will always provide critical capabilities to resolve crises and support major operations. However, SOF's value to the Nation lies in our global perspective, coupled with the ability to act early with partners to provide a range of options for policy makers. Operating ahead of crisis allows SOF and partners to develop long-term and cost-effective options to prevent or mitigate conflict, providing decision space and strategic options to achieve outcomes favorable to the US.¹

2. Future Operating Environment

The future operating environment will be characterized by an increasingly complex set of challenges in every part of the world – from the destabilizing influence of state aggression, to the expansion of radical networks across regions, to the growing threat of ubiquitous information warfare.² These threats will be increasingly transnational, trans-regional, and multi-domain and cannot be addressed in isolation. This era of extraordinary security challenges has been described as “the age of everything,” an age where commanders must meet the high demand for all types of missions and threats.³

¹ Within this document, the term “partner” refers to *organizations or actors with similar and intersecting interests and values.*

² The future environment is more fully described in USSOCOM's Strategic Appreciation and USSOCOM 2035.

³ Ashton B. Carter, *Maintaining the Edge in the Age of Everything*, 02NOV15; Bradley Peniston, *Work: “The Age of Everything Is the Era of Grand Strategy,”* NOV15.

The spread of technology into an increasing number of cultures and societies is driving change in the strategic environment. Easier access to information is permitting the diffusion of power and influence to a broader range of actors, state and non-state, who have not traditionally wielded it. Adversaries can now easily access tools that range from advanced weapon systems and cyber capabilities to improvised explosive devices, all of which provide an expanding variety of coercive options at their disposal. Populations, enabled by advances in communications, are increasingly challenging the legitimacy of their governments and demanding change on a range of issues. Governments unwilling or unable to accommodate change will face increasing pressure from segments of their populations.

Beyond the employment of improved technology, adversaries will continue to blend traditional and irregular techniques, capabilities, and resources to execute hybrid approaches in the gray zone⁴, the space between peaceful competition and war. Actors will seek to advance their interests by exploiting local grievances, existing instabilities, weak governments, and cultural seams while avoiding America's conventional military dominance. As a result, SOF will increasingly be confronted with uncertainty and doubt regarding the nature of crises and conflicts, the parties involved, and the validity of the legal and political claims at stake.

While hybrid and irregular approaches continue to expand, traditional war remains a real and costly possibility. Hybrid approaches by state actors could rapidly generate unintended consequences and spiral into major conflict with threatened state, or non-state stakeholders.

Future trends will require SOF to more deeply understand the operating environment and develop capabilities to act earlier. SOF, as part of the Joint, Interagency, Intergovernmental and Multinational (JIIM) network, must be increasingly flexible, agile, and capable of integrating operations across national and Geographic Combatant Command (GCC) seams to effectively neutralize threats to US interests.

3. Operational Challenge

How will Special Operations Forces conduct and support operations to prevent strategic surprise and counter adversary actions that frustrate US strategic objectives?

The operational challenge requires SOF to adapt to the future operating environment. SOF will be required to develop a deeper understanding of the environment to see and act ahead of flashpoints of instability, inform the development of US options, and reduce operational and strategic blind spots.

⁴ USSOCOM White Paper *The Gray Zone*, 09SEP15

4. Central Idea

SOF will act early, persistently, and precisely to create decision space and strategic options for Geographic Combatant Commanders and National leadership to achieve sustainable outcomes favorable to US National interests.

SOF must already be in place around the globe, integrated with an evolving community of partners, to identify subtle changes in environments and understand the significance of those changes. Early detection enables leadership to make informed decisions, exploit opportunities, and employ appropriate preventative measures. This process creates the strategic space necessary for our Nation to develop and implement effective policy.

The application of SOF capabilities alone will not achieve policy objectives. They are achieved by the integration of JIIM partners' capabilities focused toward shared objectives and common goals. Understanding this, SOF will execute Integrated Campaigning as part of a larger JIIM team to achieve the Central Idea of this concept.

Integrated Campaigning

Campaigns will become more diverse and sophisticated, and the idea of a campaign will expand from a series of related major military operations to a series of integrated JIIM activities to achieve operational and strategic objectives. Campaign plans will be deliberately designed to synchronize whole of government approaches to ensure the most effective capabilities are applied to problem sets regardless of the agencies in which they reside. Campaign plans will be used to coordinate participation and support from partners when the US is in the lead, or will be developed to support partner-led campaigns.

Within and across multiple campaigns, SOF activities spanning the range of military operations will occur simultaneously. Campaigns will be problem focused and organized regionally or trans-regionally as appropriate. They will be layered globally and may intersect based on the actors, problems, or geography. Close coordination to synchronize effects will be accomplished through interconnected networks of partners executing and supporting operations. Campaigns will be led by a Joint Task Force, an interagency organization, partner nation, or by SOF depending on the scope and scale of the campaign.

Integrated campaigns may last for decades, requiring strategic patience, as the will of the adversary and root causes of confrontation are not easily reversed. Within the emerging operational environment, success will be defined by the preservation of US and allies' interests without escalation to major operations.

SOF will support or lead campaigns to counter irregular and hybrid approaches employed by adversaries, often occurring in the gray zone. SOF success in these campaigns will be enabled by

operators' and units' deep understanding of environments, regions and populations, and establishing and sustaining critical relationships with key powerbrokers.

To develop a better understanding of the human domain in regional and localized communities, SOF will expand its investment in cultural and language education for select forces. However, deep understanding, situational awareness and the ability to influence relevant actors will only be achieved through relentless physical and virtual presence in targeted areas. SOF will achieve persistent presence by conducting continual activities, both overtly and clandestinely, in areas prioritized by location of partners, adversary activity, and populations at risk.

The deep understanding derived by operators from these activities, coupled with US Country Team⁵ and other partners' understanding, will help identify inflection points of instability before they expand to tactical, operational, or strategic challenges. Early detection will enable more targeted and timely responses and provide policy makers increased options and the time and space for planning, decisions, and approvals.

SOF roles will vary by campaign, but they will normally support the development and execution of the campaign's human objectives, those actions taken to influence actors relevant to the problem. Activities to counter adversary irregular and hybrid approaches will span SOF core activities and could range from Military Information Support Operations to precise and discreet application of SOF's robust strike capability.⁶

SOF will also be a critical component of US Support to Resistance⁷ (STR) efforts. STR, the coordinated application of all instruments of US National power to enable a resistance movement, includes activities ranging from political support, to the provision of non-lethal and lethal aid, to the conduct of unconventional warfare. STR allows the US to counter regular, irregular and hybrid threats without a direct confrontation with an adversary, reducing or precluding the need to commit US military forces on a large scale. STR activities seek to empower legitimate local actors who can communicate a compelling narrative, mobilize supporters, and restore stability primarily with local forces and resources.

At the strategic level, USSOCOM's Combatant Command authority of Special Operations Forces within each GCC area of responsibility (AOR) uniquely postures it to support the GCCs, Department of Defense, and the interagency with the development and integration of trans-regional priorities and campaigns. Executing these campaigns will ensure trans-regional

⁵ A US Country Team is the senior, in-country, United States coordinating and supervising body, headed by the chief of the United States diplomatic mission, and composed of the senior member of each represented United States department or agency, as desired by the chief of the United States diplomatic mission. Source: JP 3-07.4

⁶ Comprehensive list of SOF Core Activities can be found in JP 3-05, Special Operations.

⁷ From the USSOCOM, Support to Resistance white paper, "Building the Case for a US Government Guide," 22 October 2015.

priorities are not subsumed by regional priorities and drive the synchronization of strategic plans to the tactical level.

Based on its ability to see regionally and trans-regionally, USSOCOM will use a layered approach to synchronize SOF efforts and effects with various partners through the Theater Special Operations Commands (TSOCs) and GCCs. SOF may conduct activities against a state or non-state actor, or their proxies, in one GCC AOR to achieve an effect on that same actor located in another GCC's AOR. Increasing pressure applied in one area will allow SOF, or partners with differing perspectives or deeper regional understanding, to detect instability in other areas. This will support broader opportunities across multiple networks, and greater effectiveness across multiple, integrated campaigns.

Should the US be unable to deter, limit, or defeat malign actors, or should an adversary commit an act so egregious as to be unacceptable to the US or its allies, SOF will always be prepared to support major operations. The return on investment from Integrated Campaigning is the reduced frequency, scale, scope, and duration of hostilities. Deep understanding of a region and its human domain, and relationships with relevant actors will be leveraged in conjunction with unified JIIM action to terminate conflict and restore stability, faster and at a lower cost, than had no prior action been taken.

Integrated Campaigning will create decision space and strategic options for policy makers by identifying and developing opportunities with partners, detecting inflection points of instability, and deterring adversaries. Acting early, persistently, and precisely will reduce, but not eliminate risk. Although tactical risk may rise during the conduct of simultaneous campaigns, the strategic risk of inaction will increase exponentially over time, along with the ultimate cost of resolution.

SOF support to and execution of successful Integrated Campaigning will be achieved through optimizing the use of SOF operators, enhancing SOF unity of effort by more effectively blending forces and capabilities, and maximizing the development and sustainment of purposeful partnerships.

Enabled SOF Operators

The first SOF Truth, *Humans are more important than hardware*, remains the cornerstone belief for USSOCOM. SOF's success is dependent on the agility and flexibility of its enabled SOF operators. USSOCOM will implement the Future Special Operator Concept to ensure the Enterprise⁸ can place the right operators in the right place, at the right time, and with the right training and education to enhance SOF's future success.

⁸ For the purpose of this paper, the SOF Enterprise includes US and partner nation SOF, and those structures which support special operations, including the NATO SOF Headquarters, partner nation USSOCOM-like headquarters, and other government agencies.

To meet the challenges of the future operating environment, USSOCOM will recruit, select, develop, and manage a more diverse force. USSOCOM will support nontraditional career patterns, educate and train innovative and adaptive leaders, and continually align institutional education and training programs with changes in the operational environment. USSOCOM will enable SOF operators' freedom of action by defeating biometric technology, minimizing detection through social media, enhancing deception measures, providing robust intelligence support, and expanding nonstandard logistics.

USSOCOM will enable its operators to be more agile by developing and rapidly injecting the latest technology into SOF units, leveraging the cyber domain to deliver precise effects in support of SOF objectives. SOF will also continue to explore innovative means to improve overall performance, survivability and rehabilitation of its operators. This will include exploiting advances in human-machine interface, remote health monitoring, enhancement of individual physical capabilities, increased individual lethality, robotics, and neural implants and prostheses.

Strategic thinking, discovery, and opportunity development will be encouraged at every level. SOF will pulse operational units and seasoned operators for feedback when framing and designing campaigns. SOF operators will also be encouraged to innovate, question, and challenge assumptions and processes to inform the chain of command with findings and analysis at the point of action, providing valuable insight into ambiguous and rapidly changing environments.

The key to USSOCOM's future success lies in continued investment in and advancement of a SOF talent development and management system. The ultimate measure of success will be effective operations by enabled SOF operators who can navigate complex and uncertain future operating environments.

SOF Unity of Effort

SOF will increasingly think, organize critical capabilities, and fight as one team, with divisions between National Mission Force (NMF) and Theater SOF becoming significantly less distinct. SOF will blend forces from across the Enterprise with the requisite capabilities into coherent force packages to exploit opportunities and challenges.

Increased integration of NMF and Theater SOF will provide a distinct advantage to TSOC and GCC campaigns by enhancing their ability to achieve desired effects and will present a more unified SOF team to partners. Integrating the complementary capabilities of National and Theater SOF provides options to commanders and increases the effectiveness of SOF.

Within campaigns, all SOF will be placed under a single special operations commander with the requisite command authorities to direct all forces employed in pursuit of a common purpose.

The establishment of a single SOF operational command per campaign will optimize utilization and effectiveness of SOF enablers across formations and priorities, increase coordination, and ensure complementary effects within SOF and within the broader GCC or trans-regional campaigns' command and control architecture.

Purposeful Partnerships

SOF must continue to identify, develop, and sustain purposeful partnerships to enable successful Integrated Campaigning. Partnerships reduce response time, extend reach into denied territory, and foster more creative design options for problem solving.

Purposeful partnerships allow SOF to better understand the human domain and complex operating environments. Partnerships reduce SOF cultural and conceptual gaps and provide expanded, penetrative, and diverse information and intelligence networks. These networks are critical to identifying precursors of instability before they reach tipping points.

To achieve greater collective JIIM agility and flexibility, SOF will formally embed and exchange liaison elements with an evolving list of partners to achieve an unprecedented degree of understanding and capability for integrated action. SOF will modify organizations to ensure that each liaison element is properly structured and manned by SOF personnel with the education and experience to be valuable, productive contributors to partner organizations while advancing and protecting US interests globally.

5. Conclusion

SOF must expand and enhance its value to the Nation by operating ahead of crises to prevent strategic surprise and deter, disrupt, or defeat adversary hybrid and irregular approaches in the gray zone, precluding the need for large-scale deployment of military forces. Empowered by enabled SOF operators, fueled by SOF unity of effort, and aided by purposeful partnerships, SOF will support and conduct Integrated Campaigning to provide National leadership with decision space and options to protect US security interests globally.

Appendices:

A – Required Capabilities

Appendix A – Required Capabilities

The SOF Operating Concept required capabilities are derived from the elements of the Central Idea. These required capabilities are inter-related and mutually supporting. This Appendix represents the start point for future Special Operations Forces capability development across the Enterprise to prepare the force to adapt to and succeed in the future operating environment.

1. *Integrated Campaigning.* The following capabilities will enable SOF's ability to plan, support and conduct Integrated Campaigning to meet the challenges of the future.

The ability to holistically understand and counter irregular and hybrid warfare and approaches increasingly used by competitors, adversaries and enemies to advance interests and frustrate US objectives.

- *Proficiency in developing greater understanding of competitor and adversary irregular, and hybrid approaches to better design, plan, and coordinate effective and efficient SOF prevention and deterrence measures, and responses.*
- *Proficiency of SOF organizations to more effectively and efficiently plan, coordinate and execute SOF missions supporting Integrated Campaigning with partners, to prevent, deter, and counter competitor and adversary hybrid approaches.*
- *Proficiency for SOF operators to conduct cyber-enabled SOF operations to influence foreign audiences and reduce the risk to the force and gain advantage over competitors, adversaries, and enemies.*
- *Sufficiency of mobility platforms to infiltrate and operate in denied spaces in small teams with low-signature (clandestinely) to support partners, gain situational understanding, provide early warning of crisis/conflict, and counter state and non-state hybrid and irregular threats.*

The ability to enable, plan and execute trans-regional approaches that support Integrated Campaigning and provide broader options to US decision makers.

- *Sufficient authorities and permissions to prepare the environment – develop the opportunities and options through the collection and dissemination of information and intelligence, and development of virtual, physical, and human infrastructure as a hedge against potential challenges and threats.*
- *Sufficient staff with the proficiency to analyze and assess the environment, plan and support activities and campaigns, and coordinate with partners (i.e. state, non-state, civilian and military).*

- Proficiency to understand the disposition and intention of trans-regional networks, and the characteristics and conditions of the global strategic environment that affect National and military decision making.
- Sufficiency to collect, store, retrieve, analyze, and disseminate data on SOF and adversary activities in each geographic region to gain broader understanding of threats to instability and develop, coordinate, and synchronize trans-regional options.

The ability to sustain persistent engagement globally to advance and protect US National interests.

- Sustainable forward posture (forces, footprint, and agreements) in foreign countries to establish and maintain critical relations, develop and sustain critical partnerships, and support building partner capabilities and capacities.
- Proficiency and sufficiency to understand and operate in the human domain.

The ability to generate and leverage conventional and nonstandard logistics support globally to enable rapid and flexible SOF response and sustainment across the range of military operations.

- The capacities and flexibility to support and sustain SOF operations globally, in multiple theaters, from days to years, using standard and nonstandard capabilities, and leveraging partner capabilities.
- The proficiency and resources to leverage Service, Joint, Interagency, Multinational and commercial support; and to develop SOF organic logistics capabilities as required to sustain and support small-footprint, global, and disaggregated operations.
- The authorities, permissions, and abilities to employ nonstandard logistics and communications capabilities to support operations in denied and politically sensitive areas to operate undetected in an increasingly transparent operating environment.

The ability to employ precision capabilities (Hostage Rescue and Recovery (HRR), Countering Weapons of Mass Destruction (CWMD), and Counterterrorism (CT)) globally, at any time, under all conditions, to protect the force, prevent instability, and eliminate threats to the Nation.

- The sufficiency to execute HRR, CWMD, and CT globally, at any time, under all conditions, unilaterally and with partners, to eliminate threats to the Nation.
- The sufficiency in resources to support training, equipment, and technologies to support HRR, CWMD, and CT mission readiness.
- Sufficiency of authorities, permissions, and abilities to operate using indigenous systems for communications, surveillance, reconnaissance, and logistics to operate undetected in an increasingly transparent operating environment.

2. Enabled SOF Operators. SOF's success is dependent on the agility and flexibility of its enabled SOF operators. Integrated Campaigning is predicated on, and empowered by, SOF's unique value to the Joint Force, USG, and allies and partners. That value is first and foremost determined by enabled SOF operators.

The ability to recruit, select, develop, and enable SOF operators to act ahead of crises.

- *Capability to support irregular career patterns and manage SOF careers to meet the challenges of the future operating environment.*
- *Expand capacity to improve overall human performance, survivability, and rehabilitation of its operators.*
- *Proficiency to routinely understand and leverage communications capabilities through commercial networks, and corresponding social-media analysis, as a force protection measure to monitor potential adversary communications and operations.*

3. SOF Unity of Effort. SOF unity of effort will be increased by blending NMF and Theater SOF to provide GCCs, USG, and partners with full-spectrum SOF capability as part of Integrated Campaigning. Central to this capability is thinking, organizing, and fighting as one SOF team with more coherent force packages to exploit opportunities and challenges.

The ability to more effectively blend forces from across the Enterprise with the requisite capabilities into coherent force packages to exploit opportunities and challenges.

- *Sufficiency of SOF doctrine to enable increasingly effective integration of NMF and Theater SOF.*
- *Sufficiency of training venues and resources to enable more effective integration of NMF and Theater SOF.*
- *Proficiency of SOF HQs elements to C2 and Mission Command diverse, integrated SOF capabilities.*

4. Purposeful Partnerships. SOF alone cannot advance and protect US National interests, nor plan, coordinate, support, and conduct Integrated Campaigning. Purposeful, evolving, and sustained partnerships are critical to SOF's agility and flexibility.

The ability to influence indigenous actors, groups, and populations to identify, develop, and sustain purposeful partnerships.

- *Proficiency to more effectively influence the perceptions, will, and behaviors of relevant actors and populations to build effective, legitimate, interoperable, and self-sustaining partners (tactical to strategic) to advance and protect mission and campaign objectives.*
- *Sufficiency of liaison elements to build trust and support sustained interaction with interagency partners, allies, coalition partners, and non-governmental organizations.*