

Innovating SOF to Counter Proxies, Puppets and Partners in Great Power Competition

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The views expressed are the authors' and do not represent official NDU, DOD, or USG positions.

Defining the Competition Space

Hybrid Warfare – “conventionally unconventional”

- Longevity of the concept
 - Political warfare, full-spectrum, total war
 - Soviet active measures
- Flexibility of the approach
 - Role of regular forces – **Conventional war is alive and well**
 - Ukraine, Syria
 - Shoygu – fielded 600 types of weapons
 - 3D printed UAV bombs
 - Arms trade increasing, increasing competitors
 - Might we see another Churchill-esque assessment that “the world is arming as it has never armed before”...

Defining the Competition Space

- Flexibility of the approach
 - Role of irregular forces – **Hearts and minds matter most of all**
 - Influence – the key asset
 - Information and interpretation – the key avenue to secure it
 - Governance – the key arena to battle for legitimacy as the hinge of resilience or collapse
- Fluidity of the battlefield
 - Everything gets operationalized so everything must be utilized to win
 - Everyplace is a potential battlefield because everyone has vulnerabilities to exploit

Defining the Type of Competition

Globally Integrated Campaigning – more than “whole of government”

- Playing on multiple boards at different levels in numerous venues
 - Strategic Interest + Strategic Intent + Strategic Capabilities + Strategic Communication
- Whole government
 - DOD – example: conventional forces as sledgehammer to the “death by 1000 cuts” of irregular warfare
 - SOF Truths – require and give support
 - Interagency partnerships – example: SOF-CSO “competition advisors”

Defining the Type of Competition

Logic of Escalation Management – riskier risks, more options to manage them

- Low opportunity costs
 - Global game board so no one can be everywhere
 - Local pieces have global impact because of global interconnectedness
- Low sunk costs
 - Investments are transitory to gain advantage or gauge adversary response
 - “Failure is a winning option” - great powers are buyers in a buyers market
- Victory is not fungible
 - Low visibility – playing = strategic victory
 - High interest – winning = strategic necessity

Defining the Effect of Competition

Positional Advantage is Key

- Presence to compete is key measure of victory in hybrid warfare

Positional Advantage is Possible

- Identifying adversary strategic vulnerabilities
- Operationalizing them below threshold of escalation
 - Buzzing gnats – Braying donkeys = raising operating costs
 - Putting an extra meeting on Putin's agenda is victory because forces refocus from other more vital places to US

Defining the Effect of Competition

Accepting “durable disorder” is handing victory to Putin

- Lines of contact can stabilize
- Lines of communication can develop

Currently in transition period ala early Cold War

- Need to clarify room to maneuver and spheres of influence
- SOF can help do that...

Current SOF Capabilities and Authorities

Special Operations Forces

- Small signature, highly flexible, currently exists within the competition space
 - *But focused on CT only?*
- Low-cost employment creates high-payoff strategic gains—presence matters

Human Network Mastery

- Mature network-centric understanding and targeting methodologies
 - Kinetic, governance building, and influence operations (population-based approaches)
- Existing relationships within the competition space
 - Regional and cultural expertise combined with long-standing relationships = available opportunity

Authorities

- Transition from Counter-Violent Extremist Organizations to Global Competition
- Counter-Terrorism EXORD → ?
 - 127e vs. 1202 surrogate funding authorities

Seeing through VEOs to GPC

VEOs in Competition

- “Cobra Kai” – strike first, strike hard, no mercy
- Rigidity of purpose, short timeframes – maintain market share in crowded field of revisionists
- Patron-client “honor among thieves”
 - GPC gives VEOs much needed attention
 - VEOs give great powers much needed outlets for “pushing rivals”

From Endstate to Starting Point

- From near target to far enemy

Past is Prologue

- Return of proxies, puppets, partners

Proxies

Regional or Local Antagonists → Global Impacts

- Interconnectedness – smorgasbord of targets
- Open societies – buffet of vulnerabilities
- Democratic systems – 7 course meal of internal conflicts

Past Great Power Proxies

- Ancient Rome, Cortez in Mesoamerica, Belgian colonial policy, and early 20th century Japanese machinations in Manchuria

Present Great Power Proxies

- Maduro Regime, Jalisco Cartel, ISIS 2.0
 - Russian response to US/EU Support for Guaido – reinforce troops, equipment = escalation of proxy battle

SOF example

- Wagner Group

Puppets

Lowest Cost for Great Power

- Unclaimed
- Easy to cut away

Members Least Likely to Know

- Little awareness of global implications or supporters

Example today

- Migrant Caravan, Antifa

SOF Example

- Libya

Partners

Most Costly for Great Power

- Clear linkage risks escalation

Need Unique Benefit for Great Power

- Cheerleader for international reputation
- Regional partnership
- Can legitimize otherwise illegitimate activities – Hezbollah

SOF example

- SDF as more than partner in fight against ISIS
 - Democracy building efforts – political, military membership
 - Democratic potential – increasing governance capacity
 - Democratic partner – counter to Syria, Turkey, Iran

Innovating SOF to See Through VEOs

Global – Presence Operations

- The mechanisms are already in play...
 - Joint Combined Exchange Training partnerships, Counter-Illicit Drug Trafficking partnerships, governance building, etc.
 - SOF already have regional and relationship accesses needed to create effects in the competition space
 - *We just need to direct them to do so...*
- Raising Adversary Strategic Operating Costs
 - Special Operations Forces are the premier tool to increase adversary operating costs
 - **Perception works in our favor...what they assess we can do is equally as important as what we can actually do**
 - Either way...adversaries have to commit resources to counter threats (real or perceived)
 - Coffee in Dushanbe...
 - Identify highest-payoff locations for presence (where US presence can most disrupt to peer competitor interests)
 - Only so much SOF go around...
 - Spreading the US narrative through partner activities (and also countering Russian and Chinese narratives...)

Innovating SOF to See Through VEOs

Regional – COIN Contra Cartels

- How Drug Cartels exist as a threat to the security of the United States
 - Narcotic production, flow into United States, loss of governance legitimacy and reputation
- How Drug Cartels exist to increase US operating costs
 - Cost for law enforcement response, cost for health / treatment programs
 - **Take away: this is what we are talking about: hybrid warfare environment = everything can be operationalized...**
 - Our adversaries are increasing our operating costs...
- Special Operations Forces vs. Drug Cartels?
 - “The organized use of subversion and violence to seize, mollify, or challenge political control of a region.” Joint Chiefs of Staff, *Counterinsurgency Operations*, JP 3-24, Washington, DC: Joint Chiefs of Staff, 2009, IX.
 - Required authorities
 - Differences in targeting an ISIS suicide network and a drug cartel smuggling network

Challenges to SOF in GPC

Paradigm Shift (not SOF of the 1980s...or 2001)

- External – Core attributes much broader than counter-terrorism / counter-VEO force
- Internal – Need appropriate authorities to meet decision-maker goals...
- New game, new team (Department of State, Intelligence Community, Department of Defense)

Key is need to expand perspectives

- Need agility to see opportunities ~ develop intellectual overmatch
- Need agility to seize opportunities ~ apply existing capabilities in creative ways

Purpose of this SMA Project...

Future Conversations

“SOF Paradigm in GPC”

- UNCLASSIFIED Speaker Series/Project (confirmed, reaching out to others)
- White Paper

Date	Title	Speaker(s)
01 APR 2019	Innovating SOF to Counter Proxies, Puppets and Partners in Great Power Competition	Dr. Spencer Meredith (National Defense University) LTC Mike Maloney (US Army Special Operations Command)
08 APR 2019	Raising Great Power Operating Costs: Strategic Opportunities in Central Asia	CW4 Nickolas Bidoli (US Army Special Operations Command)
15 APR 2019	Countering Electronic Warfare Undermatch in the European AOR	CW4 Jeffrey Elwell (US Army Special Operations Command)
22 APR 2019	Developing and Utilizing Civil Affairs Countergovernance Capabilities as Political UW	MAJ Jeffrey Uherka (US Army Special Operations Command)
06 MAY 2019	Nonviolent Resistance and Expanding the UW Toolkit	MAJ Thomas Doherty (US Army Special Operations Command) MAJ Robert McBride (US Army Special Operations Command)
10 JUN 2019	Training for Multidomain Operations: Designing Optimal Combined Exercises	Dr. David Walton (National Defense University)

- CLASSIFIED Speaker Series/Project (under development)
- White Paper