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## The Global SOF Network: Posturing Special Operations Forces to Ensure Global Security in the 21st Century

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### **Recommended Citation**

Yoho, Keenan D.; deBlanc-Knowles, Tess; and Borum, Randy. "The Global SOF Network: Posturing Special Operations Forces to Ensure Global Security in the 21st Century." *Journal of Strategic Security* 7, no. 2 (2014) : 1-7.

DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.5038/1944-0472.7.2.1>

Available at: <https://scholarcommons.usf.edu/jss/vol7/iss2/2>

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## **The Global SOF Network: Posturing Special Operations Forces to Ensure Global Security in the 21st Century**

### **Abstract**

Globalization's "interconnecting" effects have blended with an ethos of instability to create an extraordinarily complex global security environment. Though the number of armed conflicts worldwide has declined since the early 1990s, the character of those conflicts has evolved in some troubling ways. Conventional inter-state wars are less common, but they have been displaced by a proliferation of smaller scale, asymmetric, diffuse and episodic struggles: What Trinquier calls "subversive warfare or revolutionary warfare." The participants in these conflicts are not limited to national military forces, but include a range of non-state actors, including militias, ethnic groups, illicit transnational networks, informal paramilitary organizations, and violent extremists. Many of today's most vexing global threats, including those that affect the United States' national security interests, emanate from terrorist networks, transnational criminal organizations, rogue states, and the intersection of activities and shared objectives among malicious actors operating from frontiers or "ungoverned spaces." Special Operations Forces (SOF) have had an essential, but evolving, role in countering those threats.

The articles assembled in this issue of *Journal of Strategic Security* examine SOF's role in the global, joint force of the future. Through a military-academic partnership between U.S. Special Operations Command (USSOCOM) and the University of South Florida, five papers have been selected for the purpose of further developing dialogue on issues related to SOF's pivot toward partnership-driven, indirect action. Some common themes emerge in these works: a view that future security rests in partnerships, and an acknowledgement that the threats, constraints, and realities of the current strategic environment demand applications of "smart power" to assure collective security.

## Introduction

Globalization's "interconnecting" effects have blended with an ethos of instability to create an extraordinarily complex global security environment. Though the number of armed conflicts worldwide has declined since the early 1990s,<sup>1</sup> the character of those conflicts has evolved in some troubling ways. Conventional inter-state wars are less common, but they have been displaced by a proliferation of smaller scale, asymmetric, diffuse and episodic struggles: What Trinquier calls "subversive warfare or revolutionary warfare."<sup>2</sup> The participants in these conflicts are not limited to national military forces, but include a range of non-state actors, including militias, ethnic groups, illicit transnational networks, informal paramilitary organizations, and violent extremists. Many of today's most vexing global threats, including those that affect the United States' national security interests, emanate from terrorist networks, transnational criminal organizations, rogue states, and the intersection of activities and shared objectives among malicious actors operating from frontiers or "ungoverned spaces."<sup>3</sup> Special Operations Forces (SOF) have had an essential, but evolving, role in countering those threats.

When Admiral William H. McRaven assumed command of U.S. Special Operations Command (USSOCOM) in 2011, he initiated a rigorous process assessing how to best position and sustain United States SOF to meet current and future challenges to U.S. national security. Guiding the assessment was an assumption that "there are no local problems;"<sup>4</sup> solutions, therefore, must come through cooperating, collaborating, and building capacity with partner nations. McRaven referred to the product of that assessment as the Global SOF Network strategy.

### The World of Action – Direct and Indirect

Since September 11, 2001, the public has generally pictured SOF as a cadre of elite warriors maneuvering in the dark of night, breaking down doors and apprehending terrorists. Those direct action activities are indeed among U.S. SOF's specialties, but their role is much broader and includes a range of indirect operations as well. Every day, in over 75 countries around the world, U.S. SOF work with partner nations to build the capabilities of indigenous special operations forces to better confront the threat of violent extremism, terrorism and other threat networks. In addition to building foreign internal defense, U.S. SOF regularly deploy throughout the world on humanitarian assistance and disaster relief missions, providing vital medical services to underserved

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<sup>1</sup> Hewitt, J., Wilkenfield, J., & T.R. Gurr, T.R., *Peace and Conflict* (Boulder, CO: Paradigm Publishers, 2010).

<sup>2</sup> Trinquier, Roger, *Modern Warfare: A French View of Counterinsurgency* (Westport, CT: Praeger Security International, 2006).

<sup>3</sup> Clunan, A. and Trinkunas, H., "Conceptualizing Ungoverned Spaces" in *Ungoverned Spaces: Alternatives to State Authority in an Era of Softened Sovereignty* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2010).

<sup>4</sup> Posture Statement of Admiral William H. McRaven, USN, Commander, United States Special Operations Command, Before the 113<sup>th</sup> Congress, Senate Armed Services Committee, Emerging Threats and Capabilities Subcommittee.

populations and aid to communities devastated by natural disasters. These indirect actions are the backbone of the Global SOF Network.

Working with and through partner forces is the hallmark of SOF's indirect approach. Adhering to the support role is critical in these operations. Host nations must take the lead. Host forces best understand the threats, the local operating environment, the population; and they can anticipate the secondary effects of intervention. When U.S. SOF train and build capacity within host nation forces, they simultaneously enable enduring, adaptive solutions and enhance the reach and depth of SOF intelligence and operations against shared problems.

SOF are expanding their indirect missions as they increasingly seek to intervene earlier in the continuum of military operations. For several years, the U.S. Department of Defense has used the term "Phase Zero" operations to refer to the pre-conflict phase of armed struggles. Phase Zero activity is almost always part of a joint interagency operation, and is most often conducted in partnership with host nation forces. The operations aim to identify and remediate early indicators of instability and disorder, and shape the operating environment before deteriorating conditions make conflict inevitable. These tasks draw on diplomacy and development assistance, not just on military tactical skill. Phase Zero operations employ a "strategic diplomacy" for which interagency partnerships within and across U.S. agencies are as important as connections between U.S. and host nation forces.

Operational success in countering current threats and preventing future conflict lies in a whole-of-government approach. SOF represents just one component. SOF must coordinate and synchronize efforts with interagency partners, both domestically and with the interagencies of partner nations. The Global SOF Network strategy strives to pursue a multidimensional, coordinated and de-conflicted approach to achieve strategic priorities and maximize resources in today's constrained fiscal environment.

As the U.S. military transitions from a protracted war, USSOCOM is re-focusing its efforts, believing that by remaining engaged with the world and allied partners in a positive, productive manner, the U.S. can make strides towards deterring aggression and malicious actors worldwide. The Global SOF Network provides the U.S. with an agile, flexible presence abroad, founded on partnerships and mutual trust. It allows for U.S. presence to be networked and globally coordinated, as are the adversaries that pose a threat to U.S. national security and interests.

The ongoing drawdown of troops in Afghanistan makes available more U.S. SOF to pursue indirect operations designed to increase security and prevent areas of instability from deteriorating into large-scale contingencies. This is being done through a strategy of engagement, not attrition. Working with allies empowers them to confront and combat the threats originating within their own borders, preventing local issues from escalating into global problems.

SOF's pivot to indirect operations requires a concomitant shift in resources and a new program of professional education to prepare the next generation of SOF

leaders. President Obama, recognizing the importance of global partnerships and indirect operations, called on Congress in May 2014 to support a new counterterrorism partnership fund to “allow us to train, build capacity and facilitate partner countries on the front lines.”<sup>5</sup>

While U.S. SOF operators are the most skilled in the world at hostage rescue and kill and capture missions, these direct action missions by themselves have a limited ability to create a safer, more stable world and protect U.S. interests at home and abroad. The future of SOF, in accordance with Presidential direction and as envisioned in the Global SOF Network initiative, lies in joint operations, with U.S. SOF operating by, with, and through its interagency and international partners.

### Persistent Engagement and Building Trust

USSOCOM’s success in leveraging worldwide partnerships to create a global network requires a foundation of mutual trust. Ensuring returns on those partnership investments requires enduring engagement. An oft-repeated adage at USSOCOM is: “You can’t surge trust.” Trust, by definition, requires a willingness to accept vulnerability or risk based on confident expectations regarding another’s behavior. Being regarded as trustworthy is a distinction that must be earned. Research on trustworthiness consistently identifies three major predictors: ability (perceptions of a trustee’s competence and consistency), benevolence (perceptions of the trustee’s caring, goodwill, empathy, and commitment to shared goals), and integrity (perceptions of the trustee’s objectivity, fairness, honesty, and dedication)<sup>6</sup>. From that perspective, the deck appears stacked in favor of U.S. SOF as a highly skilled, reliable cadre of operators, collaborating with partners to prevent and solve shared problems. But trust still must be built. Partnership investments, whether through foreign internal defense or development support, should be made early and persistently, allowing for personal relationships to deepen and mature through recurrent cooperative efforts. U.S. SOF can network and coordinate with partner forces to maintain an agile and flexible global presence, accomplishing more with less.

A positive, forward step for the Global SOF Network came in February 2013, when USSOCOM was granted authority over the Theater Special Operations Commands, effectively streamlining the command relationship between the strategic headquarters and the SOF deployed in theater. This change gave USSOCOM greater responsibility for resourcing and organizing U.S. SOF worldwide, but not greater authority to deploy and direct them. Operational command and control over deployed SOF remains the sole purview of the Geographic Combatant Commanders.

The Global SOF Network, in essence, is a strategy to reorganize U.S. SOF worldwide and refocus on training, partnership, and collaborative missions. The Global SOF Network vision aligns U.S. SOF regionally, promotes persistent

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<sup>5</sup> “Transcript of President Obama’s Commencement Address at West Point,” *New York Times*, May 28, 2014, available at: [http://www.nytimes.com/2014/05/29/us/politics/transcript-of-president-obamas-commencement-address-at-west-point.html?\\_r=0](http://www.nytimes.com/2014/05/29/us/politics/transcript-of-president-obamas-commencement-address-at-west-point.html?_r=0).

<sup>6</sup> Borum, Randy, *The Science Of Interpersonal Trust* (McLean, VA: The MITRE Corporation, 2010).

partnerships, and where logical, supports forward basing. A key component of the strategy involves integrating foreign partners into the network. To that end, Admiral McRaven has integrated international SOF Liaison Officers at USSOCOM headquarters to facilitate communication and information sharing between U.S. SOF and their partners, and strengthen partnerships through engagements and training opportunities. After the recent 13 years of combat in coalition environments, U.S. SOF have reached unprecedented levels of interoperability and coordination with in-theater partners. Headquarters-based liaison officers bring this tactical and operational interoperability to the strategic level, maintaining the progress achieved through tactical/battlefield partnerships and furthering the ability to communicate, de-conflict, and coordinate across the Global SOF Network.

### Prevention: The New Containment?

In 1946, George Kennan wrote an 8,000 word telegram to Secretary of State James Byrnes in response to a U.S. Treasury Department query about why the Soviet Union was not supporting the newly created International Monetary Fund and World Bank. Kennan's message, now referred to as the "long telegram," outlined a policy of "containment"—preventing or containing the spread of communism—that would become the centerpiece of U.S. policy toward the Soviet Union for the next 45 years. Kennan concluded that Soviet strategy was "impervious to logic of reason" but "highly sensitive to logic of force," so they typically would withdraw when they encountered significant resistance. The idea was that by shaping the Soviet Union's surrounding environment through development initiatives and multi-lateral alignments such as the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) and Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), the U.S. could create a virtual wall around the Soviet Union that would thwart and deter its expansion. Today, the threat is not so monolithic, nor is it emanating solely from state actors, yet the logic of containment, in some form, resonates. That which is to be "contained" is not so much a state whose socio-political ideology is antithetical to our own, but a set of warlord-led, feudalistic movements operating in ungoverned spaces and driven by an anti-Enlightenment mindset.

*Plan Colombia*, for example, a U.S. foreign aid program, may be seen as a form of containment whereby the U.S. provided both economic and military assistance aimed at suppressing violence, corrosive effects of corruption attending the illicit narcotics trade, and a roiling insurgency that threatened the country's stability. On the whole, *Plan Colombia* has been successful in reducing the narcotics trade and facilitating peace talks, effectively quelling the diffuse proliferation of criminal violence that threatened the future of the Colombian state. The Global SOF Network relies on similar indirect approaches by engaging with host nation partners and targeting precursors to massive instability and inter-group conflict. These operations are designed not only to contain clusters of disruption and disorder, but also to prevent them from threatening state sovereignty and escalating into large scale wars.

### Contributions of the Special Issue

The articles assembled in this issue of *Journal of Strategic Security* examine SOF's role in the global, joint force of the future. Through a military-academic

partnership between U.S. Special Operations Command (USSOCOM) and the University of South Florida, five papers have been selected for the purpose of further developing dialogue on issues related to SOF's pivot toward partnership-driven, indirect action. Some common themes emerge in these works: a view that future security rests in partnerships, and an acknowledgement that the threats, constraints, and realities of the current strategic environment demand applications of "smart power" to assure collective security.

One critical issue in future force planning is improving coordination and relationships among institutions that constitute the security interagency. Christopher Lamb highlights the imperative of multilateral and interagency collaboration to effectively navigate the current threat environment with not only a direct, but also a very robust indirect approach. Successful indirect operations require a high degree of interagency collaboration. Identifying the key mechanisms and operating characteristics that support those connections is critical. Lamb points to the success of the Joint Interagency Task Force (JIATF)-South as one potential exemplar of interagency success. The JIATF-South began in 1994 to support counter-narcotics operations in South America. Key operating characteristics contributing to JIATF-South's continued success were replicated by General (ret.) Stanley McChrystal in Afghanistan, as well as in other task forces. Lamb draws upon the interagency lessons McChrystal outlines in his autobiography,<sup>7</sup> which highlight the importance of 1) collaboration at all levels, 2) reorganization of the sponsoring organization (such as SOF) to accommodate collaboration and sharing, 3) end-to-end mission planning that focuses on the seams of interagency coordination to ensure follow-through and completion of tasks and operations, and 4) delegation of authority to the lowest levels of the organization (what is referred to frequently as "mission command").

In his contribution, Paul Rexton Kan investigates the nexus between narcotics and other drivers of instability and conflict, and details an approach for SOF to integrate counter-drug operations with actions against other national security threats. Kan notes that illicit drug trafficking produces approximately \$600 billion in profit annually and accounts for 7.5% of annual global trade. He highlights the vexing connections that exist between groups involved in drug trafficking, and those propagating violent extremism as a means to achieve political, ideological or religious goals. The *Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia* (FARC) in Colombia, the Taliban in Afghanistan, and the Movement for Unity and Jihad (MUJAO) as well as Al-Qaida in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) in West Africa have all used proceeds from the drug trade to purchase arms, pay for expertise that increases their operational effectiveness, and attract recruits with promises of prosperity. Kan argues that counternarcotics operations are not an end itself, but a means to countering violent extremism by cutting off vital financial support.

Emily Spencer demonstrates that cultural intelligence or cross-cultural competence of special operations forces is a necessary condition for success in pre-conflict, partnership-building activities. Spencer defines cultural intelligence, or cross cultural competence, as "the ability to recognize the shared beliefs, values, attitudes and behaviors of a group of people and, most

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<sup>7</sup> McChrystal, Stanley, *My Share of the Task* (New York, NY: Penguin, 2013).

importantly, to apply this knowledge toward a specific goal.” Spencer argues that the concept of cultural intelligence is not new, but to be effective in military applications, it must be understood and employed “in the context of the national, international, host nation, and enemy domains.”

Whitney Grespin notes that while U.S. SOF are, and should always remain, the world’s most capable direction action force, they are also adept and trained in partner-nation capacity building. Grespin argues that “[a]n investment in partner nation capacity building now is a down payment against terrorist attacks and costly ground engagements in the future.” Furthermore, building partner capacity expands America’s options for protecting its own national security interests. Grespin points out that in Iraq and Afghanistan SOF worked predominantly in direct action, at the expense of security assistance and capacity-building activities. During these conflicts, responsibility for indirect action such as village stability operations (VSO), was given to general purpose forces. This represents “a fundamental shift in responsibility for the conventional forces, as SOF forces have historically specialized in enabling partner nation foreign military capacity through the teaching of technical fighting and military administration skills while mitigating destabilizing drivers of conflict.” Grespin warns that it is important for the U.S. to preserve SOF’s capacity-building capability as they are uniquely skilled to carry out such missions at a relatively low-cost and with a small operational footprint. Comprising just 1.7% of the total U.S. defense budget, SOF provides a significant return on the defense and preventive security investment.

In a reprint of his article that first appeared in Prism (the journal of the Center for Complex Operations at National Defense University), Scott Morrison describes a need to recalibrate the operational concepts of direct and indirect approach “from a broader strategic vantage point.” Morrison points out that the direct and indirect approaches are not separate, compartmentalized tactics but are part of a continuous, strategic move, arc or campaign. Citing Sir Basil Liddell Hart’s insights on the power of the indirect approach in strategy, Morrison states that SOF power may be used as an “economy of force instrument to upset an adversary’s equilibrium and balance through proactive and preventative insertion, presence, and action in coordination with a multinational collaborative network of SOF networks.” Morrison invokes John Arquilla and David Ronfeldt’s conclusion that in the future security environment “it will likely take networks to fight networks, much as, in an earlier era, it took tanks to fight tanks.”<sup>8</sup>

A Global SOF Network represents the cornerstone of a new, prevention-oriented security posture. As special operations forces around the world collaborate in prosecuting complex problems, a new synergy emerges that is stronger than the sum of its parts. Through persistent support and engagement, U.S. SOF can continue to build trust among their international partners. They can not only train host national forces, but also empower them, to better defend their interests and secure their local spaces. They are able to not only share skills and tactics, but also the ability to analyze and solve security problems. Navigating and adapting in unfamiliar environments; engaging, partnering and building trust;

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<sup>8</sup> Arquilla, John, and David Ronfeldt, *The Advent of Netwar* (Santa Monica: RAND, 1996), 57.



and problem solving amidst uncertainty will be core competencies for a globally networked SOF postured to combat the threats of today, and of the future.

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