

Foundations and Adaptation: Transforming Policy into Operational Capability for Army Special Operations Forces

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Abstract: The current and future security environments will require the United States to have versatile military forces able to operate throughout the spectrum of conflict. Army Special Operations Forces (ARSOF) were created to provide this versatility. In order to have the strategic impact for which ARSOF was created, these forces must be remissioned from the tactical tasks which currently consume their availability, returned to the core competencies for which they were founded, and adapt their bureaucratic structure to maximize their strategic potential. This change will occur in a time of limited budgets and within the constant struggle of parochialism within and among the services. Through the Phase 0 operations for which ARSOF was tailored, they will provide policy makers with the capability to prevent future decisive engagements and maintain the US as a global power.

“A rapidly changing world deals ruthlessly with organizations that do not change and USSOCOM is no exception. Guided by a comprehensive enduring vision and supporting goals, we must constantly reshape ourselves to remain relevant and useful members of the joint team.”

--General Peter J. Schoomaker, USA¹

History informs our present and provides insight to our future and the future appears bright for US Army Special Operations Forces (ARSOF). Throughout ARSOF's history, the roles and missions of Civil Affairs (CA), Military Information Support Operations (MISO), and Special Forces (SF) have expanded and contracted dependent upon the political climate and the security environment. This paper proposes that these ARSOF units should return to their core competencies in order to meet the present threat, while the future security environment will demand these same capabilities under a different organizational

structure. A growing body of literature from the military and academia suggests future US conflicts will trend toward irregular and unconventional threats, so the capabilities of Army Special Operations Forces seem destined for prominence in the Department of Defense. However, as GEN Schoomaker suggests in the quote above, ARSOF is not immune to the need to transform to remain relevant. ARSOF leaders must quickly translate current policy into tangible operational capability, while simultaneously keeping an eye on the future. This innovation must take place over the next two decades, in a time of continuing conflict, budgetary restrictions, and a globalizing international system. If transformed properly, ARSOF will provide national leaders with a unique range of capabilities in defense, diplomacy, and development which are suited to the threats of the future. This paper uses the term ARSOF to refer specifically to Army Civil Affairs, Military Information Support Operations, and Special Forces for the sake of brevity, realizing that Army Special Operations Forces also include other units such as Army Rangers and Special Operations Aviation.ⁱⁱ

ARSOF Beginnings

The current units that comprise the US Army Special Operations Forces originated in World War II. Civil Affairs units were first established early in the war to bridge the military-political gap found when governing occupied countries.ⁱⁱⁱ The larger Army was uncomfortable with this idea, as governance was not perceived as a military function. Immediately following V-E Day, President Truman announced that civil administration of occupied territories would transfer from the War Department to the State Department. There was a consensus that this was the right course of action, but the State Department lacked the resources to effectively administer the areas. So, despite concurrence on the ideal situation, the War Department continued to conduct civilian administration.^{iv} This case proved to be a harbinger of things to come.

Psychological Operations had an equally rocky beginning in World War II, with psychological warfare capabilities shuffled from the Army to the Office of

Strategic Services (OSS) and back again. Psychological activities were seen by military leadership as dishonorable and inherently 'un-military.'^v Although used extensively in World War II, military leadership was quick to disband psychological warfare capabilities following the war's conclusion. Fortunately, then-President Eisenhower recognized the value of psychological operations from his experience as the Allied Commander and sponsored its re-establishment as an effective tool in the fight against Communism.^{vi}

As with psychological operations, the confluence of the existential threat of Communism and the power of an influential sponsor, explains the establishment of Special Forces. A former OSS member, Aaron Bank, saw the need for a military unit that could, "develop, support; organize, train, or exploit indigenous guerilla"^{vii} forces within enemy territory. Originally, created within the Psychological Warfare Center at Fort Bragg, North Carolina, Special Forces units were staffed by former OSS members and European émigrés.^{viii}

In the years since the creation of Civil Affairs, Psychological Operations (now MISO), and Special Forces, these specialized units have seen a constant cycle of growth and contraction in size, missions, and acceptance within the Army. The number of personnel and level of prominence within the military seem to be indirectly proportional to the number of missions ARSOF claims to be able to conduct at any period of time. During the conflict in Vietnam, when Special Forces was at the zenith of its personnel strength, SF units conducted indirect 'by, with, and through' operations and clandestine strikes, while their General Purpose Force (GPF) counterparts conducted extensive advisory missions with the South Vietnamese Army. In the years after Vietnam, ARSOF was drawn down in size and argued for a broader range of missions, until the operations in Somalia. During the late 1990's, another era of grasping for a concrete role, ARSOF again expanded its mission set, until it was called to complete the purpose for which it was created in Afghanistan.^{ix} Throughout its history, ARSOF is in a continuing struggle for acceptance in the Army. At other times, ARSOF is its own worst enemy, as it deviates from its core competencies in search of tasks to remain relevant. The last nine years of conflict have seen ARSOF reduced to

tactical support of GPF in contrast to having the strategic impact for which it was organized, trained, and equipped. For example, Army Special Forces, after leading the classic unconventional warfare overthrow of the Taliban regime, transitioned to a direct-action tactical method in support of GPF. Civil Affairs units working either with Provincial Reconstruction Teams, or independently, are finding themselves—as they did in post-WWII Europe—trying to hand over governance and stability operations to US government agencies that do not have the capacity to conduct them. Military Information Support Operators are enmeshed in supporting the GPF population-centric COIN campaign. While there are key supporting roles that ARSOF should fill in Iraq and Afghanistan—training of Afghan Commandos and Iraqi Counter-Terrorist Forces, as well as MISO operations in support of COIN—there is an opportunity cost associated with the large amount of ARSOF personnel that these missions currently occupy. That cost is felt in places where ARSOF should, and would traditionally, be conducting the operations for which they were formed. The following analysis uses the above history, coupled with the scope provided by ARSOF capstone documents and national security policy statements, to propose a roadmap for immediate and long-term change.

The Near Future (5-10 Years)

In its recent history of expanding and contracting core missions and roles, ARSOF has done itself a disservice in not firmly establishing its roles and limitations. However, the conflicts in Iraq and Afghanistan may provide an excellent backdrop for the reestablishment of these standards. The last seven years of both conflicts have shown the utility of ARSOF support to GPF operations. With the GPF-supporting role of ARSOF displayed, now is the time to reestablish ARSOFs independent role in achieving strategic goals—the unconventional warfare and influence missions for which ARSOF was created. What makes ARSOF uniquely suited to conduct these missions is the training and organization of the personnel that includes regional specialization and

language ability. Ironically though, there currently exists a contradiction between the renewed ARSOF focus on language capability and its deployment of forces. For instance, 3rd Special Forces Group retains the primary responsibility for operations in Afghanistan, and the accompanying Theater Security Cooperation Plan (TSCP) training missions in the former soviet republics. Yet, the personnel assigned to 3rd Special Forces Group are trained in French and Arabic languages, for use in Africa. Meanwhile, 1st Battalion, 10th Special Forces Group, with its core of Russian language-trained soldiers, is headquartered near USAFRICOM, and therefore is conducting training missions in Africa. Although ARSOF purports to be refocusing on language capability, it is deploying French and Arabic-trained operators to Russian-speaking countries, and Russian-trained operators to Africa. An immediate re-alignment of forces to their traditional AORs would truly place priority on language and regional specialty. In addition, forces gained by the drawdown dividend—ARSOF personnel that are able to be repurposed from the current conflicts and applied towards more strategic goals—must refocus training and mindsets to the long-term view inherent in strategic operations in support of national policy. This refocus must take place in the context of national and military political realities: current national security policy and military infighting over roles and functions, and future budgetary constraints.

The 2010 Quadrennial Defense Review (QDR) helps define the US defense strategy for the near-term future. The QDR lists strategic priorities in the following order: prevail in today's wars, prevent and deter conflict, prepare to defeat adversaries and succeed in a wide range of contingencies, and preserve and enhance the all-volunteer force.^x ARSOF units have a role in all of these priorities, but particularly in the 'prevent and deter conflict' role. As the 'prevail in today's wars' priority begins to decline, one can assume a comparable decline in ARSOF requirements. The ARSOF units freed from this priority can reassume their intended roles in Phase 0 operations—namely, preventing the next decisive engagement by building the capacity of our allies and disrupting, defeating, and deterring current and future enemies. These operations will take place in regions of political and social unrest that affect the interests of the US and our allies.

This renewed focus on Phase 0 operations, will take the form of increased bilateral military exchanges in support of the Theater Security Cooperation Plans as well as MISO and CA support to country teams' long-range development plans.

An additional factor affecting the need for ARSOF to adapt is the shrinking of the capability gap between SOF units and GPF units who are becoming 'more SOF-like.' Many transformations in GPF have allowed them to take on missions usually considered the exclusive domain of ARSOF, and ARSOF must redefine its capabilities to remain relevant.^{xi} GPF units are currently involved in the training of both Iraqi and Afghan Army units—the type of FID operation that once was the exclusive domain of Army SF. In addition, as GPF commanders have realized the power of information operations, the use of tactics to influence popular perceptions have become a component of all military operations—no longer the sole purview of psychological operations specialists. Instead of trying to protect ARSOF's role as the 'primary capability' in FID and influence operations, leaders should define the strategic and politically-sensitive operations which ARSOF is uniquely suited to conduct and use the GPF capabilities to compliment them at the tactical and operational levels. The GPF have a history of advisory and stabilization experience—from post-World War II, through Korea, to Vietnam—and the future security environment will provide enough work in developing nations to occupy the full range of US military capabilities.

Military innovation and adaptation does not occur in a vacuum, and the current fiscal situation in the US means that ARSOF decision-makers must argue every recommendation in budgetary terms. President Dwight Eisenhower once said, "the patriot today is the fellow who can do the job with less money."^{xii} ARSOF leaders must be these patriots. Fortunately, budgetary constraints are an area where ARSOF has a strong argument for prominence and growth. Personnel costs are the largest portion of the DoD budget,^{xiii} and SOF units are inherently smaller organizations than GPF. Although the development and sustainment costs for an individual ARSOF soldier is higher than a GPF soldier,

the comparative personnel numbers of ARSOF units are lower. Also, training and equipping is only a small portion of personnel cost, the largest portion is in healthcare and retirement—areas where there is no distinction between ARSOF and GPF individuals. In addition, the ARSOF focus on exceptionally enabled individuals and units, which places priority on training the human platform over purchasing expensive technological platforms,^{xiv} will yield a greater return on investment than equipment that has a finite life cycle. Finally in the personnel vein, ARSOF has seen rapid growth in the last four years, especially in the indirect action forces of SF, CA, and MISO. These personnel increases are already allocated and paid for, so the cost associated with their repurposing is minimal compared to having to create military structure. The argument for force structure in the future becomes one of capabilities as compared to cost, as Defense Secretary Gates notes, “an effective, affordable, and sustainable U.S. defense posture requires a broad portfolio of military capabilities.”^{xv} Therefore, in a future defined by maintaining the maximum capability at the lowest cost, ARSOF presents decision-makers with a great return on their investment—high-capacity forces with low personnel numbers that are, by design, capable of strategic impact.

The Distant Future (15+ Years)

Although it is difficult to forecast the future security environment, some effort at prediction is necessary in order to prevent any major bureaucracy from becoming irrelevant. Using the military axiom that intelligence drives operations, this paper uses the *Global Trends 2025* document, produced by the National Intelligence Council and the Office of the Director of National Intelligence, as a ‘crystal ball.’ Several of the predictions made in the *Global Trends* report have significant impact on the military, and specifically ARSOF. China and India will continue to rise in power, along with non-state actors such as businesses, religious organizations, and super-powered individuals, resulting in a redefined international system. Additionally, the increasing diffusion of technology will make terrorists groups and rogue states more dangerous as they potentially

acquire and use weapons of mass destruction.^{xvi} The overall tone of the *Global Trends* report, as well as the writings of other military and diplomatic strategists suggests that a confrontation with the rising powers of China or India is unlikely, but that the US will remain engaged in regional conflicts in developing parts of the world, and under threat from terrorist organizations.^{xvii} These strategic predictions place priority on forces that are able to operate independently in developing nations, with indigenous counterparts, in order to build their capacity to handle their own problems. This is the very mission set for which ARSOF was created.

The future security environment will be rife with continuing regional conflicts as traditional societies in the developing world collide with the effects of globalization. When the US is no longer the dominant global power, the nation will no longer have the latitude to conduct unilateral conventional military operations in regional conflicts. Military intervention will either take the form of coalition operations with regional and/or other global powers, or will require small-scale operations. As language and culturally trained and attuned soldiers, operating in small autonomous units, ARSOF is uniquely suited for both coalition and small-scale operations in developing nations. In addition, the diffusing technologies associated with WMDs will place preeminence on not only surgical, counter-proliferation direct action capabilities, but also on a global human intelligence network that can stop these technologies from getting into the wrong hands. The threats of the future validate the need for capabilities ARSOF currently possesses. However, most of these threats call for an architecture that places priority on indirect operations—operating by, with, and through local security forces—over the direct action missions, which currently occupy a majority of SOF structure and budget. Therefore, this paper proposes the following top-down changes to meet this future threat.

The United States Special Operations Command should be divided into two directorates—the indirect action and direct action directorates. In the foreseeable future, Army SF, CA, and MISO, could feasibly join with the forces of

Marine Special Operations Command (MARSOC), to form the core of SOCOM's indirect action (IA) directorate.^{xviii} This directorate would be separate from the direct action capabilities, such as Army Rangers, Navy SEALs, and special mission direct action units. The transformation to joint doctrine and training in the IA directorate would shift this organization towards the global scouts program. This program would place SOF operators—often individuals or small teams—in key developing countries where there are US interests. Personnel would retain their functional specialty and become experts in the area to which they are assigned. IA teams would assist the country team and the intelligence community by providing ground-level human intelligence. This capability is not currently the focus of either Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) or defense attaché personnel assigned to embassies. Furthermore, the IA directorate should strengthen ties with both the CIA and Department of State to nest its operations in the country plans of State and the requirements of the intelligence community. Additionally, the IA directorate would need an innovative personnel management system, mirroring the specialization of Foreign Service Officers and CIA Case Officers. In this way, IA personnel, truly become the 'global scouts' that they claim; providing not only ground-level human intelligence, but also strategic reconnaissance for future unconventional warfare (UW) and foreign internal defense (FID) operations.

In conjunction with the creation of the IA directorate, Army Special Forces should remove direct action from its core tasks. Direct action operations are performed to a higher capability by other SOF units and to an acceptable capacity by most US military ground forces—they are not what make Special Forces 'special.' Instead, the ability to conduct unconventional warfare—the guerilla warfare, sabotage, and subversion involved in supporting an insurgency against an enemy government—is what makes Special Forces unique. While Foreign Internal Defense (FID) is often considered 'the other side of UW,' it should remain a secondary task for Army SF. Marine Special Operations are uniquely suited, and have a culture better attuned to conducting FID. This should remain the primary mission of MARSOC. Army Civil Affairs and Military

Information Support Operations should continue to do their core missions, but with a radical shift in timing—from ‘picking up the pieces’ in the aftermath of large conventional campaigns to conducting operations in support of Phase 0, long before conflict occurs.

Some will argue that the separation of SOCOM into direct and indirect directorates will further stovepipe an already divided organization. While there is merit to the argument that both direct and indirect actions should be intertwined, the functional stovepipes already exist within the current organizational structure. Formalization of this de facto split has more advantages than disadvantages. This split will refocus ARSOF on its core tasks, and prevents the trend of SF focusing too heavily on direct action missions and CA and MISO focusing at the tactical level of operations only. Finally, the formation of directorates creates the synergistic effect of grouping units with similar focus, so that doctrine and training can be aligned to truly move towards joint operations—whether direct or indirect in nature. In this proposal, SOCOM facilitates the interagency cooperation so integral to both direct and indirect operations.

Army Special Operations Forces are at a unique point in their history. They currently occupy a position of distinction within the military that they have not previously enjoyed. While some may argue that this is a period to just enjoy the new-found acceptance of ARSOF, this would be a missed opportunity. In a future security environment defined by a globalizing international system, diffusion of dangerous technologies, constrained budgets, and general purpose forces closing the capability gap with ARSOF, this is precisely the time to develop a long-range plan for ARSOF transformation. Change begins with the drawdown of ARSOF in Iraq and Afghanistan, and the repurposing of these forces to their traditional roles—conducting Phase 0 operations worldwide. However, the future security environment demands more than a ‘return to the basics’—it will demand ARSOF units that are adaptable, flexible, and always on the cutting edge of technological and doctrinal changes. In order to fully maximize their capability and facilitate the strategic impact for which ARSOF was

created, the bureaucratic structure above ARSOF units must be drastically reshaped. If this return to core competencies and adaptation of organizational structure is done properly, ARSOF will prove that successful prosecution of indirect action can prevent the need for direct action and large-scale conflicts.

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ⁱ Peter Schoemaker, found in US Naval War College, *Joint Maritime Operations Syllabus and Study Guide*, Academic Year 2010-2011, 3-50.

ⁱⁱ This paper uses ARSOF to refer to the 'warrior-diplomat' skills inherent in Army Special Forces, Civil Affairs and Military Information Support Operations. It does not intend to discount the role of Army Rangers, Special Operations Aviation, or other Special Operations elements, but rather to use one term for the sake of brevity. As discussed later in the paper, the direct action roles of other ARSOF elements distinguish them from the warrior-diplomat skills of the three branches above. There is an argument to be made for new terminology to describe the type of skills in the three focus branches, as they are more closely aligned with other SOF units (such as MARSOC) than with the DA skills of fellow Army SOF units.

ⁱⁱⁱ David Tucker and Christopher J. Lamb, *United States Special Operations Forces*, (New York: Columbia University Press, 2007), 75.

^{iv} Tucker and Lamb, *USSOF*, 77.

^v Tucker and Lamb, *USSOF*, 77.

^{vi} Tucker and Lamb, *USSOF*, 81.

^{vii} Department of the Army, FM 31-20, *U.S. Army Special Forces Group*, (1955), 7.

^{viii} Tucker and Lamb, *USSOF*, 87.

^{ix} Table 5.3 from Tucker and Lamb's, *United States Special Operations Forces*, 166, shows the 'mission creep' that takes place when SOF elements are not engaged in combat operations (1993-2003) and how the number of primary missions consolidate during combat operations (Somalia, Iraq and Afghanistan). This reflects both the tendency of SOF to 'do it all' in times of relative peace and the 'return to basics' mission contraction during times of conflict. This paper posits that, as a subset of total all Special Operations Forces, the same is true for Army SOF units, and the 'return to basics' is required throughout the conflict spectrum.

^x Robert Gates, *Quadrennial Defense Review 2010* (Washington, DC: GPO, 2010), v-vi.

^{xi} Tucker and Lamb, *USSOF*, 234.

^{xii} Dwight Eisenhower, as quoted by Robert Gates, in a Speech at the Eisenhower Library on Defense Spending, Abilene, KS, May 08, 2010.

^{xiii} Robert Gates, Speech at Duke University, Durham, North Carolina, September 29, 2010.

^{xiv} Thomas Csrnko and Michael Repass, "Special Forces 2025," White Paper (Fort Bragg, NC, June 2010), 8.

^{xv} Robert Gates, Speech to International Institute for Strategic Studies, Singapore, June 05, 2010.

^{xvi} Director of National Intelligence, *Global Trends 2025*, (Washington, DC: GPO, 2008), iv.

^{xvii} Thomas Barnett, Secretary of the Navy Guest Lecture Series: Speech to Naval Postgraduate School, 26 October 2010, Monterey, CA; and CAPT Wayne Porter, Cebrowski Institute Speech to NPS Faculty and Students, Naval Postgraduate School, 30 November 2010, Monterey, CA.

^{xviii} This concept is derived from ideas in Tucker and Lamb's, *United States Special Operations Forces*. However, Tucker and Lamb, do not include MARSOC in the indirect action component, nor do they assign priority for tasks to specific units. They also suggest the establishment of a new command, which this paper argues is unnecessary.