

The USSOCOM Trinity: Refining Special Operations Commitment to 21st Century Warfare

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This essay examines the ramifications of the new Defense Strategic Guidance on the United States Special Operations Command and recommends means and methods to capitalize on current success. These recommendations offer the National Command Authority and the USSOCOM Commander a single-source global capability to prevent and deter large-scale contingencies by leveraging a whole-of-government approach through Special Operations Forces operating as the forward edge of American influence.

The Defense Strategic Guidance issued on 5 January 2012 changes the paradigm under which the American Military Establishment prepared to fight wars for the last 20 years. What follows is an examination of the ramifications of this change in regard to its impact on United States Special Operations Command (USSOCOM), and suggestions for a means and method in fiscally-constrained environments to provide the United States of America with a global capability to prevent and deter large-scale contingencies through the transformative utilization of existing Special Operations Forces. By reinforcing success in USSOCOM's own model for countering terrorism and replicating the efficacy of subordinate unified commands and Joint Task Forces, USSOCOM will remain the Tip of the Spear.

Following the fall of the Soviet Union and the end of the Cold War, the underpinning of national defense planning was the ability to fight and win two Major Theater Wars nearly simultaneously. While the term Major Theater War was eventually refined to Major Theater Conflict, the overall understanding was that the American military would plan, train, and equip to conduct major combat operations on opposite sides of the globe at the same time. This was often termed the *win-win* or *win-hold-win* strategy. While the Pentagon's ability to realistically execute this strategy was often debated inside and outside the beltway through contracting and expanding budgets, the basic notion held.

The January 2012 Defense Strategic Guidance (DSG) departs from the two-decade-old strategy by describing essentially a win-spoil strategy in which the American military will plan, train, and equip to meet one major regional conflict while reserving the ability to “deny the objectives of or [impose] unacceptable costs on an opportunistic aggressor in a second region.”¹

The DSG is meant to be a “blueprint for the Joint Force in 2020, providing a set of precepts that will help guide decisions regarding the size and shape of the force over

subsequent program and budget cycles. . .”² Couched in terms of fiscal responsibility, the document calls for a military that is “smaller and leaner . . . agile, flexible, ready, and technologically advanced.”³ In a nutshell, the National Command Authority expects the Department of Defense to do more with less, reduce costs, and maintain readiness.

Ramifications for USSOCOM

No direct mention of Special Operations Forces is made in the DSG. Indeed, the term Special Operations is never used in the document. However, a close reading of the nine-page document determines that much of the tenets of Special Operations nest well inside the new strategy. The flexibility, agility, and diffuse operations suggested as a goal for the military, *writ large*, are fundamentals upon which Special Operations are based. Additionally, experience gained from a decade of global operations may put Special Operations at the forefront of the transformative change directed in the DSG.

The preceding decade has seen a continual expansion of United States Special Operations Command from its legislated U.S. Code Title 10 authorities and responsibilities to new and increasingly broad responsibilities. The 2004 Unified Command Plan designation of USSOCOM as the Department of Defense (DOD) lead for synchronizing operations against global terrorist networks was followed by the 2008 designation as the DOD proponent for Security Force Assistance and most recently by nomination as the DOD lead for countering threat financing.⁴ These additional and growing responsibilities represent an increasingly unique position for USSOCOM as a unified command.

Additionally, the January 2012 Defense Strategic Guidance puts a priority on fiscal stewardship while calling for a smaller “military [that] is agile, flexible and ready for the full range of contingencies.”⁵ The document also emphasizes “the need for a globally networked approach to deterrence and warfare.”⁶ Remarks by Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff General Martin Dempsey at the Atlantic Council on 9 December 2011 may have foreshadowed the changes in the newest DSG. As reported by Inside the Army’s Sebastian Sprenger, “Dempsey delivered his thoughts in the form of a question. ‘SOCOM is currently a functional command. Should we consider that SOCOM is the global combatant command, and most everybody else [is in support]?’”⁷

Whether the DSG opens the door for the current administration to designate USSOCOM as a Global Combatant Command rather than a functional unified command is open for debate; however, the concept is not new. First proposed by then-Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld shortly after the 9/11 terror attacks, USSOCOM as a Global Combatant Command met with resistance inside and outside of Special Operations.⁸ In a culture organized around strategic preparation based on the National Security Act of

1947, amended by the Goldwater-Nichols Act of 1986, any efforts to deploy forces outside the purview of Geographic Combatant Commanders questions the efficacy of the GCC in handling 21st century threats.

Given a changing strategic military posture and the ever-broadening responsibilities, this paper moves beyond the debate as to whether USSOCOM should become a Global Combatant Command for Special Operations and examines how it could meet that demand within the constraints and opportunities afforded by the new Defense Strategic Guidance.

Globalization and economic technology-transfer has proffered the rise of transnational non-state and sub-state actors. Criminal organizations such as narco-trafficking syndicates and violent extremist organizations increasingly cross regional Areas of Responsibility and, in some cases, purposely exploit the inherent seams of the Unified Command Plan. This premise is described in Joint doctrine in some detail: “Globalization and emerging technologies will allow small groups to use asymmetric approaches to include criminal activity, terrorism, or armed aggression on a transnational scale with relative ease and with little cost.”⁹

The DSG, in characterizing this “Challenging Global Security Environment,” describes the general policy for countering these threats:

For the foreseeable future, *the United States will continue to take an active approach to countering these threats* by monitoring the activities of non-state threats worldwide, working with allies and partners to establish control over ungoverned territories, and directly striking the most dangerous groups and individuals when necessary.¹⁰

Accepting the contemporary success in employment of counterterrorism forces, the author proposes the creation of two additional functional subordinate unified (sub-unified) commands that replicate the model. Further recommendations include functional Joint Task Forces created to provide a ‘cradle-to-grave,’ mission-oriented command structure leveraged against specific problem sets. Also advanced here is the establishment of Pan-Agency Special Staffs at almost every operational level of USSOCOM to plan, advise, and resource complementing capabilities and to integrate the whole-of-government approach into Special Operations as required.

The Trinity

When authorized by the SecDef through the CJCS, commanders of unified commands may establish subordinate unified commands (also called sub-unified commands) to conduct operations on a continuing basis in accordance with the criteria set forth for unified commands. --Joint Publication 1, pg. xii

Referred to here as The Trinity, this proposal represents a trio of subordinate unified (sub-unified) commands organized and determined by functional area and mission set to synchronize and execute the full spectrum of special operations missions on a global scale. Applying a very successful model developed for global execution of authorities, USSOCOM would create two additional sub-unified commands: a Strategic Development Special Operations Command (STRATDEVSOC) and a Special Activities Command (SACOM) and also execute missions within the Direct Action Special Operations Command (DASOC).

STRATDEVSOC works with and through partner nations to build military capacity and capability, conducts humanitarian aid, and assists civil development. These functions go beyond the traditional mission of Foreign Internal Defense and now Security Force Assistance to provide a long-term planning staff focused on indirect methods of countering extremism through investment and development. The bulk of USSOCOM's efforts in the near term would be under this command: deterring and preventing future threats and countering influence and extremist propaganda by building global relationships on American values and interests. This is where USSOCOM, as global purveyors of American interests, seeks to fight ideals with ideas.

STRATDEVSOC is also responsible for Special Operations support to the Theater Security Cooperation Plan, incorporating the Theater Special Operations Commands (TSOCs) as operational headquarters for current operations. Through the synchronization of Joint Combined Exchange Training, Counter Narcotics Training, Joint Advisory Teams, and select deployments of forward headquarters, Persistent Engagement becomes a reality—not just a talking point. Operationalizing the TSOCs under one unified command provides the ability to synchronize events, prioritize efforts, and allocate resources across Areas of Responsibility.

SACOM unifies all SOF efforts in Network Development and Illumination and provides a standing headquarters for Unconventional Warfare (UW) (Figure 1 depicts proposed Lines of Effort for all three sub-unified commands). This capability ensures that specific UW plans are tied directly to the National Security Strategy and are available as stand-alone, fully-developed options or as components to conventional plans. The command is also focused on Network Illumination, defined here as identifying all pertinent components of organizations or entities posing threats to the U.S. Network Development is the ability to 'see' beyond the horizon into denied locations and organizations by building networks of human and technical infrastructure. Additionally, SACOM becomes the coordination point within USSOCOM for Countering Threat Finance. Traditional functions and programs that fill intelligence gaps when other means are not available are also incorporated into SACOM.

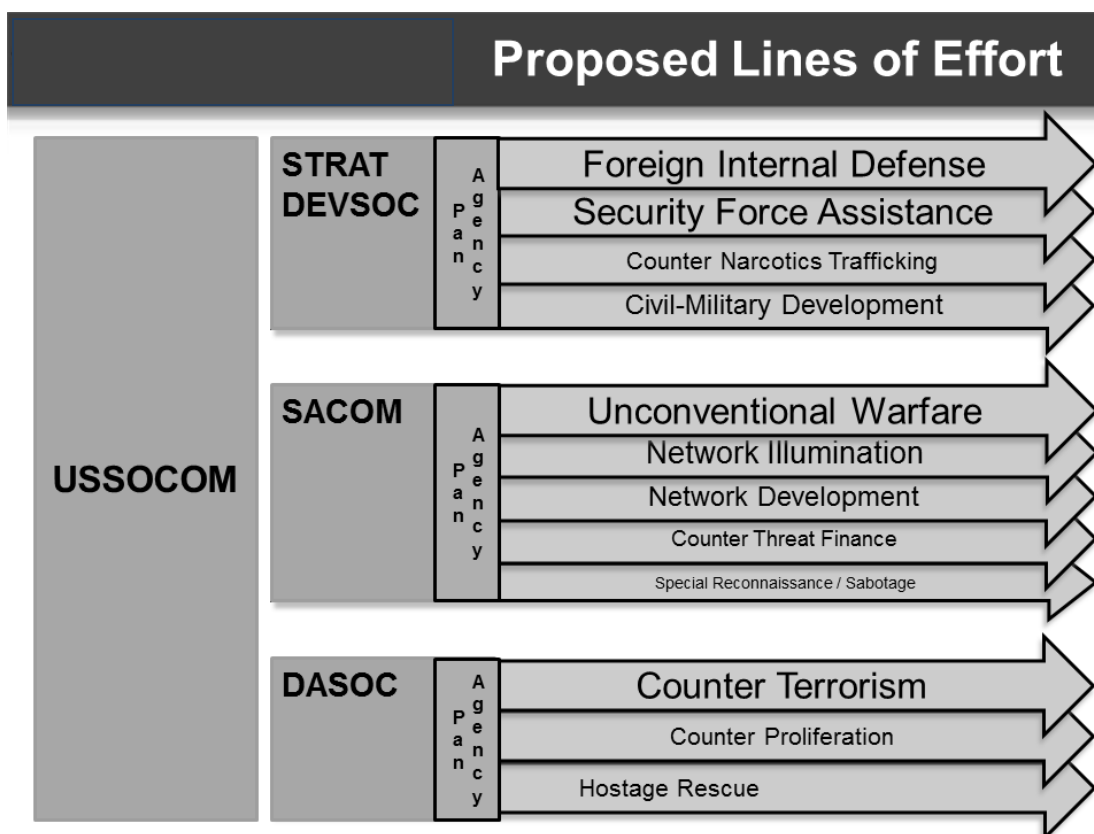


Figure 1. Proposed lines of effort for three sub-unified commands

Direct Action Special Operations Command is focused on fixing and finishing threats to the United States and its interests. Associated mission sets for DASOC include counterterrorism, hostage rescue, and counter proliferation. Much of the structural foundations and employment models found throughout this article currently exist and would continue in the construct of DASOC. The methodology for generating Joint Task Forces and globally employing Special Operations Forces has been proven feasible under current counterterrorism authorities.

Each of these three distinct organizations, when directed, will stand up a specialized, mission-oriented Joint Task Force to conduct activities against a specified target. These Task Forces are filled primarily within USSOCOM units and represent a ‘cradle-to-grave’ project mentality.

Mission-Oriented Joint Task Forces

A JTF is a joint force that is constituted and so designated by the [Secretary of Defense], a CCDR, a subordinate unified CDR, or an existing JTF CDR. **A JTF may be established on a geographical area or functional basis** when

the mission has a specific limited objective and does not require overall centralized control of logistics. --Joint Publication 1, pg. xvii

Unique within this proposal is the notion of cradle-to-grave, mission-oriented Joint Task Forces as the primary means of employing Special Operations Forces. Under this premise, and when authorized or directed, the sub-unified commander designates a JTF Commander, and primary and Special Staffs are fielded by USSOCOM units and the interagency. The new JTF analyzes its mission and requests tailored force packages to meet its objectives. For example, a notional JTF-AQIM (al-Qaeda in the Islamic Magrib) tasked with network illumination may use resources from 3rd, 7th, and 10th Special Forces Groups, in addition to Civil Affairs and U.S. Navy SEALs, to illuminate the network's command structure in North Africa, its narco-trafficking connections in South America, and its fundraising operations in Europe.

This task organization allows forces to be employed against a problem set rather than to a geographic area. Any number of units can now be deployed to a region with their activities de-conflicted by mission, not geographic areas of operation. Operationalized JTFs rely heavily on assigned liaison personnel to de-conflict authorized activities with regional stakeholders including Geographic Combatant Commanders, Country Teams and, when necessary, the host nation or coalition partners.

The Joint Task Force is variable by size and scope based on the phases and authorities it is operating under. For instance, a JTF created for UW against a specific country would be relatively small during planning and while building infrastructure; however, the JTF would grow according to its needs if given the directive to execute its plan.

For long-term missions, the JTF creates its own playbook, coordinated at the USSOCOM headquarters with the Service Component Special Operations Commands, ensuring that once units are assigned to the JTF, those units regularly return for subsequent missions and deployments. Through this means, experience and expertise are developed and continually improved upon at the lowest operational level. Relationships and local knowledge are not reinvented with every deployment when a new unit assumes the mission from its predecessor. Such a process may lead to a shorter overall mission for the JTF and creates a more stable deployment cycle, easing burdens on the home-front.

The Pan-Agency Special Staff

Success of this model is predicated on the incorporation of a whole-of-government approach to problem solving. First, however, the author would like to take formal

umbrage with the term “interagency,” which is currently *en vogue*. The term, at its roots, denotes working between agencies, clearly indicating that the agencies hold equal and sometimes competing stakes in any given scenario. The author here will suggest the term ‘Pan-Agency’ as better representative of coalition problem-solving capable of leveraging all assets of participating agencies for a common goal. Pan-Agency will be used henceforth to describe a synchronized, whole-of-government approach.

USSOCOM, in restructuring to meet global authority for Special Operations, would establish a Pan-Agency Special Staff (PASS) integrated with its traditional General Staff. Comprised of assigned representatives from Department-level U.S. Government Agencies, this Pan-Agency Special Staff contributes to mission analysis and resource requirements at the highest levels. A tailored PASS also accompanies each primary staff for the three sub-unified commands, but is not limited to Department-level agencies. For example, one might expect to see STRATDEVSOB PASS representatives from the Department of State, Department of Agriculture (DoAg), The Drug Enforcement Agency (DEA), and the United States Agency for International Development (USAID).

The PASS differs from the doctrinal Joint Interagency Coordination Group in the function and role of its membership. The PASS offers a direct planning component to USSOCOM and sub-unified commanders, with limited tasking authority and coordination responsibility to their parent agency. Particularly nuanced, this aspect requires either the Commander-in-Chief to exercise his Chief Executive role or the Congress to permanently legislate Pan-Agency cooperation in the same tradition as ‘jointness’ was codified under the Goldwater-Nichols Defense Reform Act.

The PASS at each sub-unified command help tailor the resource package for the Joint Task Forces and provide synchronization with each agency’s ongoing engagement strategies. Under this construct, one could expect to see DoAg and USAID personnel accompany a Civil Affairs team on Joint Combined Exchange Training to Angola; or providing DEA augmentation for Special Forces Operational Detachment - Alphas conducting Counter Narcotics Trafficking Training in South America.

The 2005 report *Beyond Goldwater-Nichols* by the Center for Strategic and International Studies recommended “national security agencies develop a national security career path that would give career professionals incentives to seek out interagency experience, education, and training.”¹¹ The multi-level Pan-Agency Special Staffs described here provide the beginnings of such a career path. This facet of the plan helps also to expand the Nunn-Biden Initiative to create rapidly deployable civilian capabilities.¹²

Though defined in Joint Publication 1, Unified Action is rarely is leveraged to maximum capacity. A PASS inherently functions as doctrinal Unified Action purports.

Unified action includes a wide scope of actions (including the synchronization of activities with other government agencies [OGAs], intergovernmental organizations [IGOs], and coordination with nongovernmental organizations [NGOs] and the private sector) taking place within unified commands, subordinate unified commands, or Joint Task Forces (JTFs) to achieve unity of effort.¹³

Reconciling the Guidance

The Defense Strategic Guidance provides a framework for analyzing the recommendations above and measuring the degree to which these recommendations would meet the intent of the National Command Authority. A cautionary note: while this methodology is meant as a cursory examination of the proposal, it is understood that strategic guidance often changes rapidly as administrations attempt to translate unique ideas to policy objectives.

In a fiscally-constrained budgetary environment, a globally synchronized Strategic Development Special Operations Command aids the economy-of-force tenets laid out in the DSG by prioritizing efforts and resources within USSOCOM across all Areas of Responsibility. *“Whenever possible, we will develop innovative, low-cost, and small-footprint approaches to achieve our security objectives, relying on exercises, rotational presence, and advisory capabilities.”*¹⁴ Additionally, the DSG describes the future of counterterrorism as being characterized by a mix of direct action and Security Force Assistance. This equal reliance on the indirect approach of security force assistance and traditional direct action justifies the elevation of the former to par with the latter within USSOCOM.

Further, in moving away from a strategy of fighting and winning two major regional conflicts nearly simultaneously, the DSG’s new strategy of win-spoil justifies a robust unconventional warfare capability. *“Even when U.S. forces are committed to a large-scale operation in one region, they will be capable of denying the objectives of – or imposing unacceptable costs on – an opportunistic aggressor in a second region.”*¹⁵ A standing Special Activities Command with an Unconventional Warfare focus provides the National Command Authority with an unprecedented capability meet the intent and guidance of the DSG. Synchronized utilization of standing networks, sabotage, and demonstrative air strikes in coordination with cyber-attack by sister components could blunt aggression with ‘unacceptable costs.’

Justification for a Direct Action Special Operation Command already exists; however, the DSG places reinforcing emphasis on counter proliferation and counterterrorism.

From a budgetary perspective, the employment of tailored force-packages through mission-oriented Joint Task Forces is critical to maintaining American foreign policy objectives with minimum cost. Increasing individual knowledge and expertise to create true culturally-attuned, locally-savvy, subject matter experts reduces the overall inefficiencies and costs associated with ad hoc deployments.

The President's position in the opening letter of the DSG that "Meeting these challenges cannot be the work of the military alone" is a strong message to the Department of Defense and all U.S. Government agencies that interoperability, cooperation, and mutual support of all the tools of American power is the touchstone of future foreign policy.¹⁶ USSOCOM accomplishes this with the creation of the Pan-Agency Special Staffs described above.

Redefining organizations based on mission types will refocus specialization. The preceding recommendations focus on operational structure and methods. As a byproduct, forces not engaged in operational activity would remain at home station under purview of respective Service Component Special Operations Command. Focus for these units is training and equipping with the knowledge that specialization is more important than generalization in order to hone the core competencies of each unique unit within USSOCOM. Flexibility is not having a toolbox full of different sized adjustable wrenches; flexibility is having a box full of specialized tools designed for specific jobs.

Conclusion

The assumption that USSOCOM will inevitably be designated as a Global Combatant Commander for Special Operations is not a light one. Some readers may choose to ignore the recommendations of this article on the basis that this postulation is beyond the scope of current evidence. The intent is not to pass judgment on professional opinions or personal feeling, but to accept the examination of future scenarios as critical to preparedness should they occur.

Furthermore, many may disagree with the fundamental structural changes recommended. Oft-cited counter points discuss a bi-lateral separation within USSOCOM of direct and indirect action capabilities. However, such a delineated structure does not adequately address the differences between overt and clandestine activities. For example, Foreign Internal Defense is often referred to as 'the other side of the counterinsurgency' from Unconventional Warfare. While the act of training a Host Nation soldier or a guerrilla is essentially the same, the logistics, planning, and support to each activity are grossly different.

This essay sought to outline a structure and methodology by which the United States Special Operations Command could capitalize on expanded authorities and

responsibilities. The most recent Defense Strategic Guidance was used to justify and measure the amount to which such changes would benefit the nation and the military in a fiscally-constrained environment. The recommendations contained herein require further research, and a feasibility assessment must be conducted before implementation of any point proposed. Nonetheless, these recommendations offer the National Command Authority and the USSOCOM Commander a single-source global capability to prevent and deter large scale contingencies by leveraging a whole-of-government approach through Special Operations Forces operating as the forward edge of American influence: building capacity and capability in friendly nation forces; developing influence and infrastructure in under-governed regions; limiting belligerent nation ability to project threats while countering terrorism and Weapons of Mass Destruction proliferation—in short, honing the edge of the Tip of the Spear.

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Endnotes

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³ *Defense Strategic Guidance*, January 2012: Secretary Panetta Executive Summary.

⁴ Andrew Feickert, *U.S. Special Operations Forces (SOF): Background and Issues for Congress*, RS21048, (Congressional Research Service , 15 July 2011), 2.

⁵ *Defense Strategic Guidance*, January 2012: President Obama Executive Summary.

⁶ *Defense Strategic Guidance*, January 2012: 7.

⁷ Sebastian Sprenger, “Dempsey Evokes Rumsfeld-era Idea of SOCOM As 'Global' Lead Command,” *Inside the Army*, 19 December 2011.

⁸ Sprenger, “Dempsey Evokes Rumsfeld.”

⁹ U.S. Joint Chiefs of Staff, *Joint Publication 1: Doctrine for the Armed Forces of the United States*, Change 1, 20 March 2009: I-8

¹⁰ *Defense Strategic Guidance*, January 2012: 1.

¹¹ Clark A. Murdock and Michele A. Flournoy, *Beyond Goldwater-Nichols: U.S. Government and Defense Reform for a New Strategic Era, Phase 2 Report*, (Washington D.C.: Center for Strategic and International Studies, July 2005), 7.

¹² Murdock and Flournoy, *Beyond Goldwater-Nichols*, 7.

¹³ *Joint Publication 1*, Executive Summary, x.

¹⁴ *Defense Strategic Guidance*, January 2012: 3.

¹⁵ *Defense Strategic Guidance*, January 2012: 4.

¹⁶ *Defense Strategic Guidance*, January 2012: President Obama Executive Summary.