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## Time for Action: Redefining SOF Missions and Activities

WORKING PAPER



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**U**.S. Special Operations Forces (SOF) have played a key role in the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, as well as in the broader U.S. effort to destroy al Qaeda and its violent extremist allies. In fact, over the past eight years SOF have experienced their most extensive and transformative use of the modern era. Still, these strategic national assets are not yet fully optimized for success.<sup>1</sup> The current list of SOF core activities, for example, can hinder SOF effectiveness by conflating missions with activities.<sup>2</sup>

This problem is exacerbated by the tendency to associate each activity on the list with either a specific SOF unit, branch, or command, or with one of the two broad approaches to special operations (currently described as “direct” and “indirect,” although this paper proposes a different construct). Together, this contributes to confusion and counterproductive divides across SOF. Simple changes in doctrine would help to minimize these problems and enhance SOF utility.

This paper describes the unintentional difficulties and misunderstandings that flow from the current list of SOF activities; disaggregates and re-categorizes them into a new construct that differentiates missions from activities; and redefines the two general approaches to the conduct of special operations. These proposals have importance beyond a mere academic exercise. Taken together, they attempt to develop a more unified SOF community, with all Special Operations Forces working in support of six shared missions to greater strategic effect.<sup>3</sup> By integrating and synchronizing activities as a united whole, the Special Operations community will be better positioned to disrupt and defeat threats and shape and enable environments in a world where SOF are increasingly relevant and in high demand.

## SOF CORE ACTIVITIES

The United States Special Operations Command (USSOCOM) currently cites 12 core activities as they relate to special operations:

- Direct action
- Special reconnaissance
- Unconventional warfare
- Foreign internal defense
- Civil affairs operations
- Counterterrorism
- Psychological operations
- Information operations
- Counterproliferation of weapons of mass destruction (WMD)
- Security force assistance
- Counterinsurgency operations
- Activities specified by the president or the secretary of defense<sup>4</sup>

While there have been key modifications to this list since originally defined by Congress – including the addition of counterproliferation of WMD and security force assistance, for example – the majority of these activities have characterized special operations for more than two decades.<sup>5</sup>

## Unintended Confusion and Divisions

Individuals working within the Special Operations community and those writing about SOF have tended to associate each of these activities with one of two broad categories of special operations: the “direct” approach or the “indirect” approach. For example, counterproliferation of WMD, counterterrorism, direct action, and special reconnaissance are often classified as “direct” approaches. Conversely, civil affairs operations,

foreign internal defense, psychological operations, and unconventional warfare tend to be characterized as “indirect” approaches to special operations.<sup>6</sup>

There are two main problems with this alignment. First, the terms “direct” and “indirect” are often used inconsistently, which suggests the SOF community lacks a common, foundational understanding of its own approaches. Sometimes “direct” and “indirect” are used to describe the actor who is conducting the special operations mission: U.S. Special Operations Forces themselves can conduct the operation (direct), or they can enable, train, advise, and work with foreign partners who will execute the activity (indirect). At other times, “direct” and “indirect” are used to describe how force is brought to bear: either through a raid, bombing, or other kinetic event (direct) or by influencing the motivations of our adversaries (indirect).

New terminology – commonly understood and consistently applied – is required. A more precise way to describe the actor is to use “unilateral” in place of “direct” when U.S. SOF are conducting the activity themselves, and “in partnership” instead of “indirect” when U.S. forces are working with or through host nation partners or via surrogates to achieve a common objective. Similarly, distinguishing language is needed to convey the different ways SOF bring force to bear or otherwise achieve effects. It may be more appropriate to describe SOF’s kinetic activities and other urgent, preemptive measures not as the “direct” approach but as “the disruption and defeat of the threat.” Rather than characterize SOF’s more long-term influence and engagement-oriented operations as the “indirect” approach, the community could refer to them as “the shaping and enabling of the environment.”<sup>7</sup> These terms more clearly distinguish them from the actor conducting the activity, and more aptly define the two broad approaches to special operations.<sup>8</sup>

These two approaches should not be construed as discrete lines of operation; SOF will often realize their most enduring effects when synchronized across both

approaches. Accordingly, equating specific SOF activities with one approach or the other reveals the second main problem of hard alignments: they obscure a full appreciation for how SOF can achieve greater strategic effect. If a SOF activity is thought to apply almost exclusively in support of disrupting and defeating a threat, for instance, it discounts how that activity intertwines with, reinforces, and is even indistinguishable from SOF efforts to shape and enable the environment. The two approaches both must draw from all SOF activities. Restrictively categorizing them de-emphasizes this important synergy and can potentially hinder the synchronization of effects if those responsible for planning and executing operations view these activities as independent actions.

The current list of SOF core activities can also create a counterproductive divide within the community when individuals mistakenly equate specific activities with a particular Special Operations unit, branch, or command. This divide manifests itself in two ways. First, individuals tend to draw inflexible lines regarding which part of the community can conduct particular activities or operations on the battlefield. This tendency results, in part, from a dual heritage that places a premium on speed, simplicity, surprise, stealth, and precision in the use of force in one instance, and privileges long-term engagement and influence with indigenous populations in another instance.<sup>9</sup> To be sure, there is necessary specialization across SOF and these distinct proficiencies are important to acknowledge and critical to preserve. However, even those units that tend to undertake a more violent and kinetic approach have skills in the influence and engagement-focused approach and vice versa.<sup>10</sup> While all units must embrace their niche roles, SOF should avoid entrenched stovepiping that prevents the appropriate or creative application of capabilities. Such inflexibility could undermine effectiveness, and potentially morale, if all competencies are not fully leveraged. A rigid identification of units or branches with singular roles obscures the fact that the commonalities across SOF units often are stronger than the differences required by specialization.

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The categorization of the current list of SOF activities is perhaps even more divisive when one unit or command becomes closely associated with a SOF activity and another is more closely linked with an activity that is better defined as a SOF mission. This could lead to resources, advocacy, force structure, and overall utilization being inadvertently or inappropriately weighted in favor of the latter unit, when, upon closer reflection, all Special Operations Forces are actually working to accomplish the same core missions. The current list of 12 SOF core activities, however, inhibits a common understanding of these shared goals and responsibilities by conflating SOF missions with the methods used to accomplish them. Accordingly, the current list should be disaggregated and reclassified (see Figure 1).

**FIGURE 1: A NEW CONCEPT OF SOF CORE MISSIONS AND ACTIVITIES****CURRENT LIST OF SOF CORE ACTIVITIES**

- Direct action
- Special reconnaissance
- Unconventional warfare
- Foreign internal defense (FID)
- Civil affairs operations
- Counterterrorism
- Psychological operations (PSYOP)
- Information operations
- Counterproliferation of WMD
- Security force assistance (SFA)
- Counterinsurgency operations
- Activities specified by POTUS or SECDEF

**PROPOSED RESTRUCTURING****Core Missions**

- Counterinsurgency
- Counterproliferation of WMD
- Counterterrorism
- Unconventional warfare
- Missions specified by president or secretary of defense
- Special operations in support of regular/conventional warfare

**Core Activities**

- Building partner capacity (FID/SFA)
- Civil affairs operations
- Direct action
- Information operations (includes PSYOP)
- Special reconnaissance

**Deconstructing the List of SOF Activities**

The example of counterterrorism – one of the stated SOF core activities – best illustrates this conflation. According to the official Department of Defense (DOD) definition, counterterrorism includes offensive measures taken to prevent, deter, preempt, and respond to terrorism.<sup>11</sup> Special Operations Forces can help prevent terrorism, for instance, by training and enabling the security forces of a vulnerable partner country as well as by engaging the indigenous civilian population in order to identify critical local needs – all efforts that help build environments that are inhospitable to terrorists. They can help deter terrorists from acting or receiving critical support for their operations by disseminating information that challenges their

violent ideological underpinnings and creates doubt among audiences regarding their causes and tactics. SOF can preempt an attack by uncovering the intentions and activities of a terrorist group and capturing or killing their operatives in a raid, and they can respond to specific acts of terrorism, such as a hostage barricade situation, by rescuing those held captive.

In other words, SOF can combat terrorism by conducting foreign internal defense, civil affairs operations, information and psychological operations, special reconnaissance, and various forms of direct action. Counterterrorism is actually a mission; the other activities are the means by which SOF will accomplish it.

Similarly, other activities on the current list – namely counterinsurgency, counterproliferation of WMD, and unconventional warfare – are better defined as core missions. These missions, along with counterterrorism, align with the nation's general approaches to addressing today's irregular, asymmetric, and potentially catastrophic security challenges. While irregular forms of conflict from both state and non-state actors are eclipsing conventional confrontations between militaries, traditional military threats from state adversaries remain part of the security landscape. Accordingly, SOF must continue to prepare to conduct special operations in support of regular or conventional warfare; this fact should also be acknowledged and included as a SOF core mission. Finally, the president or the secretary of defense can direct SOF to undertake additional missions. These should be distinguished from SOF activities and included as a sixth core mission for SOF.<sup>12</sup>

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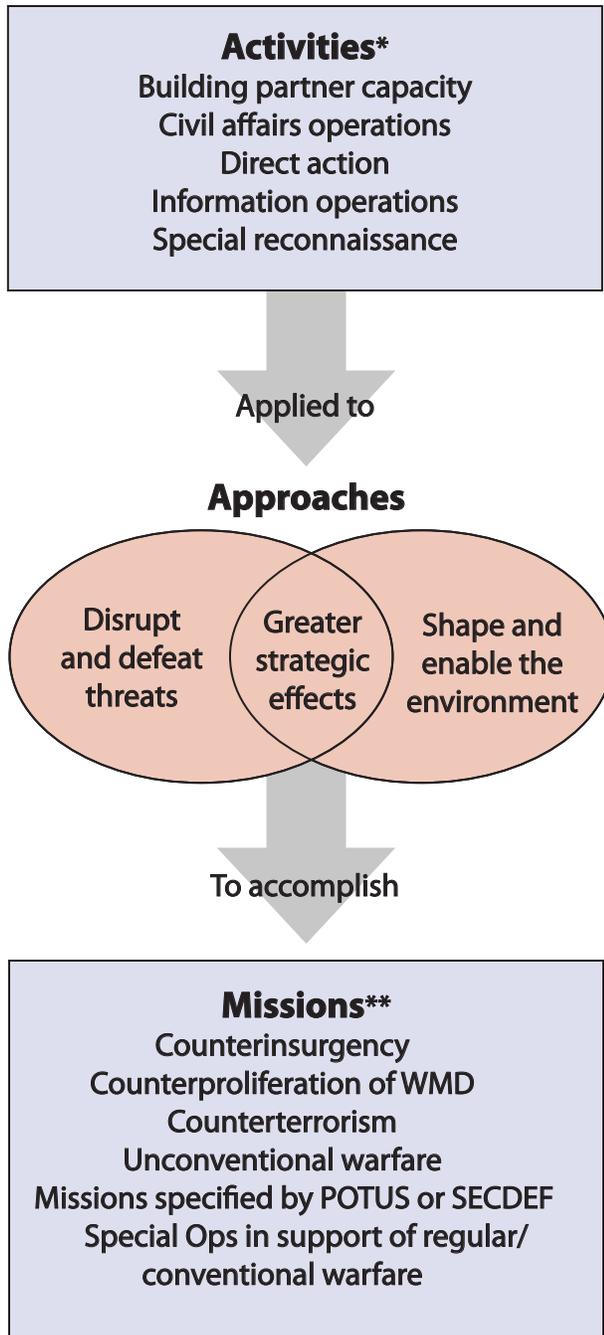
These six core missions, while distinct in many ways, are not mutually exclusive. Depending upon the specific situation and context, they can be mutually reinforcing and sometimes inseparable. The missions of counterterrorism and counterproliferation, for example, will necessarily converge in order to keep terrorists from acquiring or using WMD. An effective approach to combating terrorism should also include elements of counterinsurgency, and vice versa. Similar synergies will arise between and among the other missions as well.

Having defined the core missions, the remaining seven activities – direct action, special reconnaissance, foreign internal defense, civil affairs operations, psychological operations, information operations, and security

force assistance – are now more appropriately differentiated as SOF core activities that will be used in order to accomplish the missions. For example, just as SOF applies direct action and information operations in counterterrorism, they employ direct action and information operations in counterinsurgency as well. Additionally in this construct, each activity can be executed either unilaterally by U.S. SOF or in partnership with indigenous or host nation security forces, and each activity can be applied singularly or in combination to accomplish a mission.

This conceptualization streamlines and combines several of the remaining seven activities. First, foreign internal defense and security force assistance<sup>13</sup> are similar training and mentoring activities that enhance the security capabilities of our partners and allies. These two activities are combined here into a more aptly named activity: building partner capacity (BPC).<sup>14</sup> Second, the official DOD definition for information operations includes psychological operations as an intrinsic component.<sup>15</sup> Accordingly, they are collapsed into one activity for the sake of simplicity in this brief.<sup>16</sup> This leaves five core activities as they relate to special operations (see Figure 2).

**FIGURE 2:  
ACCOMPLISHING SHARED SOF MISSIONS**



\*Conducted unilaterally or in partnership  
 \*\*Often interconnected and mutually reinforcing

**TOWARD A MORE DRAMATIC  
RESTRUCTURING**

The construct presented in this paper draws directly from the current list of SOF core activities. With few exceptions, it does not add new missions or activities, nor does it dramatically alter the general lexicon used to describe special operations.

However, a more dramatic rendering of both missions and activities may ultimately be required to account for both the transformative application of SOF in the post-9/11 world, as well as the evolving nature of U.S. adversaries and the other security challenges SOF are being called upon to address. Future efforts to rethink SOF should consider several key questions. Is there a better way to describe special operations against networks and networked actors? How can the SOF community more appropriately account for the role of indigenous populations in the conduct of special operations? Should surrogate operations or the use of surrogates be identified as a core activity? Is there a way to define and incorporate specific preparatory or anticipatory actions? These are issues that require further thought and exploration in order to capture the full complement of SOF roles in today’s chaotic, interconnected, and complex security environment.

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## Endnotes

1. This policy brief reflects one section of a larger, forthcoming CNAS project on SOF by the author. That project, to be published in 2010, analyzes several key issues that are impeding the full optimization of SOF and hindering their defining value to the nation. The author does not assert that the conflation of missions and means in the current list of SOF core activities is the sole, or even the most significant, current impediment to optimal SOF utility.
2. For the purposes of this paper, this author defines "missions" as "tasks with a clear purpose" and "activities" as those "actions used to support or accomplish the mission." The Department of Defense (DOD) has three definitions for "mission," the first of which perhaps best describes this author's intent: "The task, together with the purpose, that clearly indicates the action to be taken and the reason therefore." The author distinguishes this from an "activity," which DOD defines, in one instance, as "a function, mission, action, or collection of actions." See *DOD Dictionary of Military and Associated Terms*, at [http://www.dtic.mil/doctrine/dod\\_dictionary/](http://www.dtic.mil/doctrine/dod_dictionary/). Experts in doctrine may use different terminology or find better language to differentiate the two.
3. These proposals may also have implications for SOF-related doctrine, organization, training, materiel, leadership, personnel, and facilities (DOTMLPF).
4. U.S. Special Operations Command Public Affairs, *Fact Book: United States Special Operations Command* (2009): 7.
5. Section 167 of Title 10, U.S. Code, directs the U.S. Special Operations Command to be responsible for the following activities as they relate to special operations: (1) direct action, (2) strategic reconnaissance, (3) unconventional warfare, (4) foreign internal defense, (5) civil affairs, (6) psychological operations, (7) counterterrorism, (8) humanitarian assistance, (9) theater search and rescue, and (10) other activities such as may be specified by the president or the secretary of defense. See 10 U.S.C. § 167(j). David Tucker and Christopher Lamb provide a detailed account of the evolution of SOF missions and activities. Please see David Tucker and Christopher J. Lamb, *United States Special Operations Forces* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2007): 164-174.
6. See, for example, Robert Martinage, *Special Operations Forces: Future Challenges and Opportunities* (Washington, D.C.: Center for Strategic and Budgetary Assessments, 2008): 42-43; and Tucker and Lamb: 153. It should be noted that those who tend to classify SOF activities as either "direct" and "indirect" generally acknowledge that their alignments are meant to be useful rather than definitive. See, for example, *Ibid.*: 154.
7. These approaches draw from concepts and terminology articulated in CONPLAN 7500 (which outlines a two-pronged framework for influencing our adversaries). See Eric T. Olson, "A Balanced Approach to Irregular Warfare," *The Journal of International Security Affairs*, No. 16 (Spring 2009), at <http://www.securityaffairs.org/issues/2009/16/olson.php>.
8. Kinetic activities also can serve to shape and enable the environment, just as SOF's more influence-oriented activities can help to disrupt and defeat an immediate threat.
9. See, for example, Tucker and Lamb: 149-150. These distinct roles are commonly described as "commando" and "warrior-diplomat" roles. See also Christopher Lamb, "Perspectives on Emerging SOF Roles and Missions," *Special Warfare*, Vol. 8, No. 3 (July 1995): 4-5.
10. Lamb: 4. Moreover, one of the USSOCOM commander's priorities has been to develop the "Three D Warrior": "The complexity of the present strategic environment requires that SOF operators maintain not only the highest levels of war fighting expertise but also cultural knowledge and diplomacy skills. These '3-D Operators' are members of a multi-dimensional force prepared to lay the groundwork in the myriad Diplomatic, Development, and Defense activities that contribute to the U.S. government's pursuit of vital national interests." Admiral Eric T. Olson, Commander, USSOCOM, "Remarks to the Washington Institute for Near East Policy," (17 September 2009): 5, at <http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/templateC07.php?CID=481>.
11. *DOD Dictionary*.
12. The categorization of this activity as a mission in this proposal is not meant to preclude the ability of the president or secretary of defense to assign new activities to SOF.
13. "In October 2008, USSOCOM was designated as the Department of Defense proponent for Security Force Assistance (SFA), which makes [USSOCOM] responsible for analyzing global needs for partner nation capacity building, and then making recommendations regarding force and resource allocation." Olson, "Remarks to the Washington Institute for Near East Policy": 12.

14. Some might consider “building partner capacity” to be a mission, but the author contends it is more accurately categorized as an activity in this new construct. While “building partner capacity” is laudable as an end unto itself, the United States enhances the national security capabilities of weak but willing partners in order to enable them to prevent and respond to terrorism, counter the use or proliferation of WMD, defeat insurgencies or hostile governments and regimes, and to protect and defend themselves against traditional military threats.

15. DOD defines information operations as “The integrated employment of the core capabilities of electronic warfare, computer network operations, *psychological operations*, military deception, and operations security, in concert with specified supporting and related capabilities, to influence, disrupt, corrupt or usurp adversarial human and automated decision making while protecting our own.” DOD Dictionary (Emphasis added). USSOCOM, however, uses a different definition for information operations that does not specifically include psychological operations. According to the SOCOM *Fact Book*, information operations are “operations designed to achieve information superiority by adversely affecting enemy information and systems while protecting U.S. information and systems.” U.S. Special Operations Command, Office of Public Affairs: 7.

16. The author acknowledges that information operations include both a hardware/infrastructure/systems component that is truly distinct from the cognitive/intellectual/emotional aspect of information, perceptions, and influence. Accordingly, it is natural to want to disaggregate the two. However, until DOD better defines these two activities – and better accounts for the role of strategic communications, public affairs, and public diplomacy as they relate both to information and psychological operations – this proposal will rely upon the current DOD definition that includes psychological operations as a component of information operations.

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U.S. Army Col. Bill Coultrup, the commander of Joint Special Operations Task Force - Philippines, greets Philippine President Gloria Macapagal-Arroyo at the inauguration ceremony for an upgraded airport on the island of Jolo in the Philippines December 14, 2009.

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