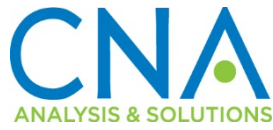


# Advice from SOF on the Use of SOF for the Next Administration

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**Photography Credit:** A U.S. Army Special Forces Green Beret sniper, assigned to 7th Special Forces Group (Airborne), Operational Detachment-A, scouts for enemy movement during a special reconnaissance mission while participating in Integrated Training Exercise 2-16 at Marine Corps Air Ground Combat Center, Twentynine Palms, Calif., Feb. 17, 2016. (U.S. Air Force photo by Tech Sgt. Efren Lopez/Released).

**Approved by:**

**October 2016**

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Jonathan Schroden'.

Dr. Jonathan Schroden  
Director, Special Operations Program

## Executive Summary

On October 14, 2016, CNA convened a half-day meeting of experts to discuss the use of special operations forces (SOF) by the next administration. Our speakers consisted of a former Assistant Secretary of Defense and six former SOF Commanders whose rank at retirement ranged from one to four stars. Our audience of approximately 50 attendees consisted largely of active duty SOF and their civilian equivalents. The conversation was held under the Chatham House Rule of non-attribution. The overarching themes of that discussion included the following:

- ***The sanctity of SOF.*** SOF are a limited resource that are most effective when given clear policies and permissive rules of engagement (ROE), when employed and supported in accordance with the “SOF Truths,” and when allowed to have a strong voice in the decisions and policies governing their employment. Our attendees recommended that policymakers and conventional military commanders should:
  - Educate themselves—and seek SOF input—on the relative strengths and weaknesses of SOF, and when they should and should not be used.
  - Set policy and ROE, and trust that SOF will accomplish the mission, given their flexibility, adaptability, and record of success.
  - Recognize that SOF are fully committed and continuing at the present pace of deployments risks burning out the force. Preservation of the force requires growth or relieving SOF of some of its currently assigned missions.
- ***Preparation of the policy environment.*** In strategic policy and resource discussions, SOF are often reliant on non-SOF experts to represent their capabilities and interests. Our attendees recommended that SOF leaders should:
  - Proactively engage influential civilians inside and outside of government in order to educate them on SOF capabilities, limitations, and requirements.
  - Seek a more active voice when the use of SOF is considered as a policy option, for example by placing a flag or general officer on the National Security Council Staff.

- Clearly articulate the SOF narrative. For public audiences, this should include who SOF are, what they do, and why—while not revealing methods. For policy audiences, this should include a framework for how to think about SOF using past successes as examples.
- ***Balancing the future force.*** Countering terrorism will initially be a priority for the next administration and SOF will play a central role in this mission. But the U.S. is also facing increasing threats from China and Russia, among others. For SOF to play a role in shaping near-peer adversaries that is commensurate with their core competencies, some rebalancing of the force is required. Our attendees recommended that policymakers and SOF leaders should:
  - Recognize the role that SOF can—and should—play in shaping the environment around rising and resurgent near-peer adversaries. Give SOF greater space, authorities, and resources to act clandestinely in this role.
  - Re-examine the balance between surgical strike and special warfare capabilities, personnel, and resources.
  - Increase the diversity of the force via greater recruitment of minorities and women, and place an emphasis on their development, mentorship, and retention. Also increase emphasis on language and micro-regional studies.
  - Develop SOF's operational level capabilities, by codifying lessons from the Special Operations Joint Task Forces, resourcing USSOCOM to source and sustain them, and developing planners for SOF-centric campaigns.
- ***SOF as a source of innovation.*** SOF have pioneered numerous technologies and tactics that have benefitted the conventional military. The reasons behind SOF's ability to innovate include a willingness to rapidly experiment and foster freedom of thought—these should be imitated and reinforced. Our attendees recommended that policymakers and military leaders should:
  - Shift the military service schoolhouses away from teaching mostly conventional war doctrine and “what to think,” to a balance of conventional and unconventional approaches and an emphasis on “how to think.”
  - Adjust military service manpower policies to enable non-traditional career paths, new ways of developing leaders, and lateral transfers into service.
  - Create a robust intellectual hub at USSOCOM to foster, develop, and transition new technologies and tactics to SOF and the conventional force.

The next administration will face a multitude of challenges and SOF will continue to play a central role in many of them. The recommendations above will help ensure SOF are as successful for the next administration as they have been for the last one.

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## Introduction

On October 14, 2016, CNA convened a half-day meeting of experts to discuss the use of special operations forces (SOF) by the next administration. Our speakers and panelists consisted of a former Assistant Secretary of Defense and six former SOF Commanders whose rank at retirement ranged from one to four stars. Our audience of approximately 50 attendees consisted largely of active duty SOF and their civilian equivalents, ranging from the rank of Major to Lieutenant General. The conversation was held under the Chatham House Rule of non-attribution to facilitate a frank exchange of ideas.

The discussion began with a keynote brief on the dynamics of the current and likely future security environment, which prompted significant discussion on actions the next administration could take to ensure SOF are being used strategically and in line with their full range of capabilities to address future security challenges, while simultaneously preserving and balancing the force for the future. The remainder of this proceedings document will summarize that keynote presentation and discuss four overarching themes on the use of SOF and some associated recommendations for the next administration that were made by our attendees.

## Setting the stage for SOF

Throughout the 1990s, the United States' primary strategic focus encompassed a relatively small area of the globe (as one participant put it, "the parts of the world where the lights are on at night"). The attacks of September 11, 2001, were a painful reminder that not all threats come from the developed world. In the 15 years since, the United States has marshalled considerable resources to combat the national security threats emanating from "the parts of the world where the lights are off at night." The U.S. military was not necessarily prepared to work with or against these nations and groups within them, and was forced to adapt quickly to meet the challenges of a new operating environment.

Looking forward, the U.S. is likely to face a polarized set of challenges. On one hand, conflicts that we tend to think of as non-traditional (those less than declared, major combat operations) have increased in frequency and will likely continue to do so. The factors that will drive increases in such non-traditional conflicts are numerous and challenging, and include the growth of megacities, climate change and water scarcity,

transnational criminal networks, government-sponsored cyber-attacks, global pandemics, the proliferation of nuclear/biological weapons, and youth unemployment. With their history of leading the fight and adapting to overcome, SOF are uniquely suited to operate in this complex future environment. On the other hand, the U.S. is also facing renewed challenges from nation-states such as China and Russia. A challenge facing the next administration will be to balance U.S. military capabilities—and those of SOF—to address these threats simultaneously.

Looking at SOF specifically, the role that they have played in the national security of the United States has increased dramatically during the Obama administration. SOF have gained attention for the incredible missions they have accomplished around the world, the killing of Osama Bin Laden being just one of many. This increase in operational activity has been accompanied by a corresponding increase in staffing and funding. When President Obama took office in 2009, United States Special Operations Command (USSOCOM) consisted of around 56,000 personnel with a base budget of about six billion dollars. When the next President takes office, USSOCOM will consist of around 70,000 people with a base budget of nearly eleven billion dollars. However, SOF have shouldered a heavy burden in carrying out these missions, suffering a high number of casualties over the last eight years and maintaining a high operational tempo (OPTEMPO) that has increasingly strained special operators and their families.

The next President will inherit an increasingly complex security environment and a trendline of increased reliance on SOF. Going forward, the next administration will need to make hard decisions on how and where to employ SOF, how to balance the force's capabilities with U.S. national security priorities, and how to prevent the burnout of this strategically important asset.



## Key themes

We have categorized our attendees' comments on the use of SOF by the next administration into four main themes: the sanctity of SOF; preparation of the policy environment; balancing the future force; and SOF as a source of innovation. We will discuss each of these in turn.

### The sanctity of SOF

SOF are a limited resource that are most effective when given clear policies and permissive rules of engagement (ROE), when employed and supported in accordance with the "SOF Truths," and when allowed to have a strong voice in the decisions and policies governing their employment. Furthermore, in order to employ SOF in the most effective way, policymakers must have a precise understanding of what SOF are, how they operate, and their relative strengths and weaknesses.

SOF are sometimes colloquially defined as "forces that do missions that no one else can do." However, this definition can lead to problems when SOF are tasked with accomplishing any mission deemed too difficult or specialized for general purpose forces (GPF). Some missions that SOF are currently conducting may be better suited for GPF, and reassigning those missions would free up SOF to address the most important challenges to our national security. One such example raised by participants is elemental foreign internal defense (FID). Teaching foreign militaries rudimentary skills such as shooting in straight lines at short distances may be more fitting a task for GPF to handle. Another example is the provision of snipers; GPF relied on sniper support from SOF to a large degree in Iraq and Afghanistan. While some situations required the capabilities that SOF snipers have, there were other situations that GPF snipers could have handled, if GPF had sent more personnel through sniper school and developed a greater capacity in this area.

Participants stated that shielding SOF from missions that could be handled by GPF will be important for the next administration because SOF today are fully committed against the nation's near-term terrorist threats, leaving little capacity to focus on longer-term challenges such as shaping the environment around near-peer competitors. Policymakers should recognize that growing more SOF would require time and significant resources—and some attendees argued that doing so is not a viable option without reducing standards or the perception of SOF as "special." In

addition, SOF maintain a continually high OPTEMPO and the demand for SOF capabilities is only likely to increase—but continuing at the current pace of deployments risks burning out the force. Addressing these issues means either continued growth for SOF—and the resources and risks that such growth would entail—or finding ways to reduce the burden on SOF and reprioritize the capabilities of the force.

Once policymakers have a good understanding of the role of SOF, the tasks best suited for them, and their limitations, they will need to set policy and the ROE governing operations. In deciding how much leeway to give SOF in pursuit of mission objectives, policymakers should trust SOF’s record of success and their ability to adapt to overcome. One example that participants discussed was partnering with an allied nation on counterterrorism (CT) operations. In such operations, participants felt that SOF should be trusted enough to enable host nation units to the point of closing on an objective. While host nation forces should execute the last phase of the mission (direct action) whenever possible, those forces need the reassurance that SOF are not going to stop at the “last terrain feature” and leave them if something goes wrong. Knowing that U.S. SOF are there if needed has a big impact on host nation forces’ confidence to execute the mission. Participants recognized that there will be a temptation to limit SOF ROE in order to reduce the likelihood of casualties. However, attendees argued that the next administration should avoid this temptation and associated micromanagement of SOF, and instead trust SOF’s well-earned reputation for success.

## Preparation of the policy environment

SOF are often reliant on non-SOF experts to represent their capabilities and interests, especially in senior-level policy and resourcing discussions. In order to address this, participants suggested two avenues of approach. First, SOF leaders should seek to provide greater input directly into the decision-making process on policies that will impact SOF missions and capabilities, for example, by placing a SOF general or flag officer on the National Security Council Staff. Second, USSOCOM needs to better craft the “SOF narrative” that describes what SOF are and what they do. For example, direct action is an obvious SOF mission at this point in time, but participants reminded us that SOF have a list of core activities that include such missions as hostage rescue and recovery, special reconnaissance, civil affairs, military information support operations (MISO), and unconventional warfare (UW). Our attendees suggested that USSOCOM should strive to more clearly communicate its story across all of SOF’s core competencies.

Expanding on the second point, our attendees suggested several ways of talking about SOF. One participant said that, broadly speaking, SOF operations “get people into places they’re not expected to be with stuff they’re not expected to have.” Others

pointed out that SOF are experts at marrying the lowest and highest levels of technology to produce unique combat effects. An example of this was the use of SOF on horseback (cavalry) to call in precision fires during the initial invasion of Afghanistan in 2001. SOF are also an international force, training partner nations, taking a “by, with, and through” approach to their operations, and building lasting relationships with other countries’ militaries. One participant summed up the mantra of SOF as “knowledge beats doctrine. Finesse beats mass. Personal relationships matter. Presence without value is perceived as occupation.”

Attendees generally agreed that SOF have not always been successful at communicating such messages to those not already familiar with them, particularly policymakers. Going forward, they argued that USSOCOM should consider devoting greater attention to articulating the SOF “story.” This will likely entail two versions, tailored to different audiences. One version, told to the general public, will comprise what SOF do and why, but leave out the how—to try and give SOF the credit they deserve while not revealing sensitive methods. The second version, meant for inside the Department of Defense and policy-making circles, may go into greater detail, using past successes as examples to lay out a framework for how to think about the use of SOF. After developing these narratives, SOF leaders must be proactive about engaging with influential civilians to convey the SOF “story.” In the absence of a sustained effort to engage policymakers, SOF risk losing the opportunity to influence what capabilities they should have and how they should be used in the future. Our attendees suggested that USSOCOM should pursue the dual initiatives of better articulating the SOF “story” and actively engaging with policymakers, with the understanding that both are necessary for injecting the SOF voice into policy.

## Balancing the future force

The security of Americans and U.S. interests will continue to be a dominant issue for the next administration, and countering terrorist threats will initially be the centerpiece of this effort. But the U.S. is also facing threats from a rising China and a resurgent Russia, among others. As with the last administration, SOF will be tasked by the next President to play a central role in the CT mission. But for SOF to play a role in shaping near-peer adversaries that is commensurate with their core competencies, either overall growth of the force or some amount of rebalancing will be required. While some attendees believed that further growth of SOF might be possible, others focused on issues that would need to be addressed to rebalance the force. The latter include policymakers placing a greater priority on the use of SOF as a shaping force (before open hostilities), the roles and resources of SOF’s surgical strike versus special warfare capabilities, SOF human capital, and the lack of SOF representation and capabilities at the operational level of war.

Several attendees raised the point that SOF, with their small footprint and high-end capabilities, should be playing a greater role in shaping the environment around near-peer adversaries and acting as a disruptive force before hostilities break out. When setting policy, the next administration should consider expanding the authority of SOF to act in the Phase 0 environment—to include shaping activities—and even consider instituting a “Phase Minus-1,” deemed the “war prevention” phase. Additionally, SOF should be given more leeway to operate in the so-called “Gray Zone,” which would involve a return to more clandestine activities and strict silence about those activities. Opening the aperture for operations in the Gray Zone would allow the United States to respond to the actions of rising and resurgent near-peer adversaries in kind, rather than resorting to higher visibility actions.

Additionally, the notion of balance between SOF designed for surgical strike missions and those designed for enabling indigenous warfighting (special warfare) came up numerous times during our discussion.<sup>1</sup> One participant described the missions performed by these forces as the two mutually dependent halves of SOF, but ones that are currently aligned more to near-term priorities (e.g., surgical strike against terrorist threats) than to a balance between these and longer-term priorities such as shaping near-peer adversaries, stabilizing weak states, and leveraging the so-called “indigenous mass” of partner nations’ security forces (i.e., special warfare). Getting to a position of balance between these capability sets first requires the next administration to rebalance its priorities between near- and longer-term threats. If that happens, balancing the force will also require reprioritization of resources (or potentially increases) across the surgical strike and special warfare capabilities, but also investments in modifying professional military education (PME) for special operators, so that they better understand (and can potentially lead) both sets of SOF activities.

Participants stated that training and education in all SOF-specific skills and mission sets is essential for the development of a balanced force. The Joint Special Operations University (JSOU) is the designated organization within USSOCOM for teaching such skills to special operators. A number of attendees expressed a desire to see USSOCOM offer more courses on languages and micro regions, be it through JSOU or another organization. In addition, SOF PME should place more of an emphasis on studying the SOF core missions in their totality, so that SOF understand the full panoply of SOF missions and capabilities. While direct action is a necessary

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<sup>1</sup> These two sets of forces are sometimes colloquially referred to as either “Black SOF” and “White SOF,” respectively; or the “National Mission Force” and “Theater SOF”. Several participants objected to these characterizations, saying they were unhelpful and not aligned with existing doctrine on special operations.

and useful tool for SOF, the need to conduct CA, security force assistance, and FID will continue into the future.

Issues of SOF human capital, particularly relating to the recruitment of minorities and the integration of females into the entirety of the SOF community, were also discussed. Several participants noted that, contrary to some press coverage, females have been integrated into many SOF units in meaningful ways for years. For example, in Iraq and Afghanistan, Female Engagement Teams (FETs) and Cultural Support Teams (CSTs) proved invaluable in the conduct of special operations. Additionally, females are deeply involved in such core SOF activities as civil affairs and MISO, are flying SOF air platforms, and play various roles in the National Mission Force. Attendees understood the decision to open all SOF roles to women, but were sensitive to potential pressures to lower standards if the next administration takes a position that “equal opportunity should equate to equal outcomes” in terms of numbers of women getting through SOF assessment and selection pipelines. That said, attendees also stated that USSOCOM should pursue greater recruitment of minorities and women across all of SOF, while also working to provide them increased mentorship and leadership opportunities, so as to develop their leadership skills and prepare them for positions of senior leadership later in their careers.

Attendees highlighted that there is a lack of SOF representation and capabilities at the operational level of war and decision making. This has proven a tough problem to solve. As an example, participants pointed to how difficult it was to insert a special operator into the chain of command for utilizing SOF in Afghanistan, despite the prominent role that SOF played in that theater. While eventually SOF were successful in doing so (resulting in the stand-up of the Special Operations Joint Task Force-Afghanistan (SOJTF-A)), this organization, along with its manning structure, has yet to be formally codified. Attendees argued that, given the future security environment and the increasing likelihood of “SOF-centric” campaigns, USSOCOM should seek resources (and policymakers should provide them) to man and sustain SOJTFs in the future. USSOCOM should also work to develop its own cadre of planners for SOF-centric campaigns. Pursuing these initiatives will enable USSOCOM to more easily embed itself into operational level decision making once the policy environment has been prepared for that to occur.

## **SOF as a source of innovation**

SOF have pioneered numerous technologies and tactics that have benefitted not only the SOF community but also the conventional military. In order to preserve SOF’s ability to innovate, participants suggested two main ideas. First, that the new administration should consider potential changes to the way the services (Army, Navy, Air Force, and Marines) handle PME and manpower policies, and second, that

USSOCOM should work to establish an intellectual hub to collect and disseminate SOF technologies and tactics to the broader military community.

On the subject of PME, a number of our attendees noted that the U.S. military education system (primarily the War Colleges) focuses primarily on the study of conventional wars rather than non-traditional ones. In addition to the observable rise in the number of non-traditional vis-à-vis conventional conflicts since the end of the Cold War (and thus the utility in all military personnel studying them), these are the conflicts that SOF in particular have been heavily involved in. Furthermore, several participants noted that the military education system places too much emphasis on what to think, rather than how to think. This has the effect of stymieing creative thinking in our military's young leaders, both in SOF and the GPF. Potential solutions to this issue suggested by participants included the next administration working with the military services and USSOCOM to deliberately modify and balance PME being provided by the services; or potentially giving USSOCOM full control of PME for SOF.

Participants also suggested that policymakers should push the services to revise their manpower policies to, among other things, enable alternative career paths, lateral transfers into service, and new ways of developing leaders. Attendees noted that a rebalancing of the force would also require an increase in personnel with unparalleled knowledge and experience in specific regions throughout the SOF community. Currently, however, this is not realistic as these types of personnel would not be promoted past a certain point as a result of service promotion policies that discourage the unconventional career paths required to develop such expertise. If these experts are to be a component of SOF in the future, the services will need to modify existing policies to provide adequate pathways and incentives for promotion of such individuals to leadership positions.

The U.S. Army John F. Kennedy Special Warfare Center and School (SWCS)—the U.S. Army's Special Operations Center of Excellence—represents the intellectual hub for United States Army Special Operations Command (USASOC). Attendees argued that currently, there is no such hub within USSOCOM that is dedicated to designing and executing an integrated framework for developing, employing, and disseminating SOF technologies and tactics more broadly. This hampers USSOCOM's ability to address many of the issues described above, such as preparing the policy environment and bringing greater balance to the force. Attendees thus recommended that USSOCOM consider creating an organization to be a foundry of knowledge on SOF capabilities and innovation hub for the military more broadly. In standing up such a center, USSOCOM could look to SWCS as an example or even look to an existing research institution, such as a Federally Funded Research and Development Center (FFRDC).

## Conclusion

Today's operating environment is complex and the future looks to be even more so. Accordingly, the next administration will face a multitude of challenges. From a continued stream of terrorist threats to the rise and resurgence of near-peer competitors, the next President will be responsible for protecting America and her interests at home and abroad from a wide range of security challenges. SOF will continue to play a central role in many of these challenges, due to their flexibility, adaptability, small footprint, and past record of success.

In order to bring the full capabilities of SOF to bear, attendees recommended that the next administration consider taking a number of steps. To protect the sanctity of SOF, policymakers should educate themselves on SOF and their limitations, and set policy and ROE accordingly, trusting SOF to get the job done. Additionally, USSOCOM must become adept at preparing the policy environment by clearly articulating SOF's story to those unfamiliar with special operations, proactively engaging with influential civilians, and seeking to inject SOF input into decisions involving their use. The next administration and USSOCOM should seek to balance the future force by reexamining priorities for the use of SOF against near- and longer-term threats, expanding SOF authorities to operate in the Gray Zone, and encouraging greater diversity in the force. Finally, SOF must remain a source of innovation for the future. To accomplish this, the next administration should push for changes to service schoolhouse curricula and manpower policies, and USSOCOM should establish an intellectual hub for collecting and disseminating technologies and tactics outside of SOF channels. Addressing these issues will help ensure SOF remain a successful and sustainable force in support of the myriad challenges likely to be faced by the next administration.

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