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TSOCs: Great Power Competition's Over the Horizon Force Enabler
Leveraging SOCOM HVI Network Targeting against C4ISR Critical Nodes

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Abstract

During a future conflict with a nation-state engaged in Great Power Competition with the United States, leveraging of all joint capabilities to combat specific operational tasks will be critical to achieve strategic objectives. Theater Special Operations Commands (TSOCs) are a uniquely trained, manned and funded precision fighting force, of which the Geographic Combatant Commander (GCC) doctrinally has Operational Control (OPCON). This unique Command and Control (C2) relationship between GCC and the Commander of United States Special Operations Command (CDRUSSOCOM) enables a GCC to organically reach down through a doctrinally defined C2 structure direct to a TSOC unit. These units are capable of conducting Special Reconnaissance (SR) coupled with Direct Action (DA) utilizing the numerous lessons learned from the counter-insurgency (COIN) and counter-terrorist (CT) fights to wage effective precise targeted actions against critical nodes in a denied areas as a force enabler. By applying nodal analysis tactics, techniques and procedures (TTPs) utilizing the suites of tools developed to find, fix and finish (F3) High Value Individuals (HVIs), TSOCs can enhance survivability of Large Force Employment (LFE) through locating, assessing and eventually applying kinetic and non-kinetic effects on critical nodes of systems that enhance adversaries' capabilities. Lessons learned from the methodology of intel collection and network architecture mapping of terrorist organization can be applied toward Chinese and Russian C4ISR structures. Of note, TSOCs do not need to completely shift away from their previous primary mission toward that of an exclusive IADS fighting force. However, keeping the ethos of SOF and applying that toward a new target set could result in exactly the large force enabler that can operate in a A2/AD environment, therefore, posturing the United States ahead of her adversaries in GPC.

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“The character and form of war are constantly changing, yet its fundamental nature remains the same. Though Great Power Competition is now our primary national security challenge – a departure from conducting almost two decades of continuous irregular war against violent extremist organizations worldwide – the requirement for mastery of irregular warfare persists. Far from abandoning these critical competencies, we will sharpen these capabilities for application against peer competitor, nation-state adversaries.”¹

In the 2017 National Defense Strategy (NDS), the United States Department of Defense (DoD) officially pivoted the security apparatus of the United States’ focus toward preparing for “long-term strategic competition”.² Unfortunately, at the time the NDS was written, the broader national-security and foreign-policy establishment has not produced a strategy document that adequately defined what it meant by the phrase.³ For the purposes of this paper, Great Power Competition (GPC) is the symbolic shift to competition among major powers, and the subsequent effort of the United States to develop policies for that environment. In this vein the DoD must establish policies, doctrine and operational plans that harness the experiences, lessons, and expertise hard learned throughout 20+ years of conflict abroad.

The 2020 NDS Irregular Warfare (IW) Annex describes the future GPC conflict as, “a struggle among state and non-state actors to influence populations and affect legitimacy. [Irregular Warfare] IW favors [an] indirect and asymmetric approach, though it may employ the full range of military and other capabilities, in order to erode an adversary’s power, influence, and will.”⁴ The NDS clearly defines IW specific missions as, unconventional warfare (UW), stabilization, foreign internal defense (FID), counterterrorism (CT), and counterinsurgency (COIN). These functions will continue to be of significance

¹ Secretary of Defense, *Irregular Warfare Annex: National Defense Strategy of the United States of America*, 1.

² Boroff, “What Is Great-Power Competition, Anyway?”

³ Boroff.

⁴ Secretary of Defense, *Irregular Warfare Annex: National Defense Strategy of the United States of America*, 2.

in GPC, but what has not been tactically considered is the leveraging of geographic combatant command (GCC)-aligned subordinate unified SOF commands (Theater Special Operations Commands (TSOC)) in activities such as military information support operations, cyberspace operations, countering threat networks, counter-threat finance, civil-military operations, and security cooperation in order to shape the information environment and other population-focused arenas of competition and conflict.

The 21st Century saw the DoD predominantly engaged in the Global War on Terror (GWOT). This resulted in full-scale combat operations in nation-states, conducting counter insurgency (COIN) all over the world. This focus on COIN created a culture and infrastructure across the DoD to support these sustained operations. One of these culturally defined infrastructures shaped by the twenty-plus years in the COIN fight is Special Operations Command (SOCOM). The tactics, techniques and procedures (TTPs) forged through repetitive deployments as well as lessons learned from operational failures forged the most effective high value individual (HVI) find, fix and finish force in the world. As the DoD pivots the focus of its NDS toward GPC, SOCOM's lessons and operational procedures could be leveraged in line with this pivot.

SOCOM is the unified combatant command charged with overseeing the various special operations component commands of the Army, Navy, Air Force and Marines. In addition to these service component commands, SOCOM owns subordinate unified commands whose role is to plan and oversee SOF within the geographically bounded area of responsibility (AOR). These are commonly referred to as TSOCs. The Commander, USSOCOM, exercises combatant command (command authority) of all special operations forces. Geographic combatant commanders (GCCs) exercise operational control (OPCON) of their supporting theater special operations commands and most often exercise OPCON of SOF deployed in their

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areas of responsibility (AORs).⁵ The Secretary of Defense (SecDef) assigns OPCON of the TSOCs and attached SOF tactical units to their respective GCC via the Global Force Management Implementation Guidance.⁶ This enables the GCC to reach down and utilize SOCOM assets in a supporting role to accomplish the overarching Large Force Employment (LFE) operation through the established Command and Control (C2) relationship within the COCOM. This supporting role in the GPC fight should leverage the TSOCs nodal targeting expertise.

America's adversaries believe that information superiority, defined as the ability to secure access to and control the flow of mission-critical data, will overwhelmingly dictate the course of future wars.⁷ The nation-states the United States is engaged in GPC with are investing in highly sophisticated command, control, communications, computers, intelligence, surveillance and reconnaissance (C4ISR) suites, which will form the backbone of their integrated air defense systems (IADS) as well as sea and undersea defense networks.⁸ To this end, IADS are the critical node which will limit the United States Air Force from conducting any operations within the sphere of control of our adversaries. This interference has been termed Anti-Access/Area Denial (A2/AD). Operating within an A2/AD environment has been a shift for the Air Force from the 'normal' combat operations that have been flown over the last two decades. That isn't to say that the Air Force isn't prepared nor hasn't trained to operate in that environment. What is happening however, is the Air Force is transitioning to needing to operate with a clearly defined air centric Forward Line of Own Troops (FLOT) and Fire Support Coordination Line (FSCL). In Operation Inherent Resolve (OIR), the ground forces heavily focused on the FLOT and FSCL and its movement east and west across Syria. The same can be said of Operation Desert Storm (ODS). This barrier that prevented the movement

⁵ Joint Chiefs of Staff, *Doctrine for the Armed Forces of the United States: Joint Operations*, 16.

⁶ Joint Chiefs of Staff, *Doctrine for the Armed Forces of the United States: Special Operations*, 9.

⁷ Brimley et al., "The Future of Anti-Access/Area Denial," 13.

⁸ Brimley et al., 13.

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of ground troops could be equated to the barrier which will prevent the Air Force from operating in areas currently established with a robust IADS. In both OIR and ODS utilized air power as the over-the-horizon (OTH) force enabler to prosecute central nodes of the military/terrorist network respectfully in order to move that FLOT. GCCs and their subordinate Air Component Commanders need to look at their TSOCS as that OTH capability to move the A2/AD FLOT, enabling the Combat Air Forces (CAF) to prioritize and prosecute additional targets and nodes.

Former Chief of Naval Operations Admiral John Richardson, aptly sums up the flaw in our DoD perception of A2/AD's:

To some, A2/AD is a code-word, suggesting an impenetrable 'keep-out zone' that forces can enter only at extreme peril to themselves. To others, A2/AD refers to a family of technologies. To still others, a strategy. In sum, A2/AD is a term bandied about freely, with no precise definition, that sends a variety of vague or conflicting signals, depending on the context in which it is either transmitted or received.⁹

With that context, taking an Air Force focused lens to the problem, the critical nodes that enable A2/AD for adversary states are C4ISR infrastructure. This barrier's existence limits all operations equally, both combat and non-combat. Theater based intelligence collection platforms have to take advancements in IADS capabilities into consideration when conducting missions. TRANSCOM platforms, both airborne and maritime have to take into consideration the assumed level of risk applied to transiting through adversary areas of control. C4ISR is the critical node that A2/AD relies on in order for adversary states to wield soft and strong power levers withing GPC. All the operational experience and tactical expertise of SOCOM units can be leveraged against critical nodes of a Command, Control, Communications and Computers

⁹ Richardson, "Chief of Naval Operations Adm. John Richardson."

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Intelligence, Surveillance and Reconnaissance (C4ISR) network in a similar manner to a HVI terrorist network in a COIN conflict.

Within SOCOM there are units capable of autonomous Special Reconnaissance (SR) missions which include unique HUMINT (human intelligence) and SIGINT (signals intelligence) collection as well as Direct Action missions.¹⁰ SR entails reconnaissance and surveillance actions normally conducted in a clandestine or covert manner to collect or verify information of strategic or operational significance, employing military capabilities not normally found in the conventional force.¹¹ These actions provide an additive collection capability for GCCs and supplement other conventional reconnaissance and surveillance actions in denied areas inaccessible by any other means. SR complements national and theater intelligence collection assets and systems by obtaining specific, well-defined, and time-sensitive information. SR may also complement other collection methods constrained by weather, terrain-masking, or adversary defenses.¹² This has enabled SOCOM conduct ‘Intelligence Preparation of the Operational Environment’ (IPOE) in support of DoD sanctioned operations in emerging target countries.¹³ Units with these capabilities were vital to the characterization and subsequent dismantlement of terrorist networks globally. This formula for nodal analysis married with kinetic and non-kinetic effects has been tried and tested using SOCOM’s premier CT units. Under Title 10 of the U.S. Code, which governs the armed services, operations do *NOT* require congressional notification so long as they are ‘traditional military activities’ that ‘prepare the battlespace’ for future operations. Under this distinction, the Pentagon has the authority to send, “troops to any country in the world if it could make the case that the United States was at war inside that country—or

¹⁰ Joint Chiefs of Staff, *Doctrine for the Armed Forces of the United States: Special Operations*, 33.

¹¹ Joint Chiefs of Staff, 33.

¹² Joint Chiefs of Staff, 33–34.

¹³ Joint Chiefs of Staff, 34.

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might be at some point in the future.”¹⁴ Under the Obama administration, the 2009 Joint Unconventional Warfare Task Force (JUWTF) Execute Order legalized DoD clandestine operations conducted in order to prepare the battlespace around the planet for future conflict.¹⁵ The intelligence collection capabilities of the DoD in conjunction with the direct action/field craft capabilities of SOCOM, under the legal framework stitched together over two decades of COIN operations has created an organization that is perfectly positioned with the resources, training and culture to help prepare the GPC battlespace.

SOCOM has been granted a wide reach with freedom of maneuver and has proven competent in conducting preemptory operations in order to posture the United States in the most advantageous way to achieve strategic effects once conventional or non-conventional COIN operations take place. In the world of GPC, tactical action is, at best, “a peripheral aspect of the challenge; the very idea of competition implies that the nation is not yet “at war” in the way it was during the GWOT.”¹⁶ This inherently means that SOF will not, and should not, have a leading role in the nation’s strategy, which is a monumental shift from the focus and strategy for the last two decades. GPC is a technological development race, all the while balancing the critical soft powers of economic and diplomatic influence. These tenants of the DIME model will play a greater role in GPC than in GWOT and a fundamental shift in mindset will be required in order to more carefully balance those aspects with that of military power. “In rivalries characterized by the threat of intense, high-end military conflict, the country’s conventional capabilities, nuclear forces, and military alliances will play the key role in deterring and, if necessary, defeating near-peer powers.”¹⁷

SOCOM has a role in the GPC, but as outlined above, that role is supporting rather than the supported role they have had during GWOT. SOCOM has the requisite knowledge of how to conduct

¹⁴ Mazzetti, *The Way of the Knife*, 77.

¹⁵ Priest and Arkin, *Top Secret America*.

¹⁶ Brands and Nichols, “Special Operations Forces and Great-Power Competition in the 21st Century,” 4.

¹⁷ Brands and Nichols, 5.

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targeted nodal analysis in order to identify critical components of a target system (i.e., Terrorist Organization) and then prosecute that critical component (i.e., HVI) in order to disrupt, degrade or destroy the terrorist organization. The freedom of maneuver has afforded them that opportunity.

The race between the United States and its adversaries toward information superiority, the golden arrow of C4ISR, centers on securing access to mission-critical data. Therefore, the logical defining factor that will enable 'winning' would be denying one's opponent to that same data. This is where TSOCs have a role to play in preparing the battlespace. TSOCs should incorporate a mission into their portfolio focused on: intelligence collection of, and developing capabilities to, deceive, degrade, deny, disrupt, or destroy enemy C4ISR infrastructure in the sea, air, and land domains. It is important to note that there are two mission-sets defined by this stance. The first, is an intelligence collection operational capability utilizing the specialized skillsets learned over decades of operations and the incorporation of rapid technological advancements that SOCOM has the proven capacity to employ with great effect. The second mission set is the introduction of a special forces enabled-SEAD (suppression of enemy air defense) portfolio to TSOC units.

The defining feature of the GPC adversary IADS is multilayered sensor arrays, coupled with new data fusion technology designed to contest, as defined by the Chinese Ministry of Defense, the three enablers and three strategic attacks utilized by the United States.¹⁸ The three strategic attacks include stealth, long-range cruise missiles, and SOF enabling helicopters, while the three enablers entail information dominance, electronic warfare and ISR.¹⁹ Consequently, adversary investment in advanced surface-to-air missile (SAM) systems enabled by the unparalleled C4ISR advancements are a tenant of an A2/AD national strategy. Systems like the S-400 are proliferating worldwide. "Russia is expanding its industrial base to

¹⁸ Brimley et al., "The Future of Anti-Access/Area Denial," 15.

¹⁹ China and State Council Information Office, *China's National Defense in the New Era*.

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produce S-400s more rapidly. China is also entering the SAM market, increasing the likelihood of proliferation. In the future, adversary short-, medium-, and long-range SAM systems will form layered defenses that can intercept aircraft, cruise, missile, and ballistic missile threats at ranges past 600 km.”²⁰ These systems, crucially enabled by the aforementioned C4ISR systems, are specially designed to offset the U.S. stealth advantage as well as the DoD’s long-range standoff munitions advantage. These two areas of strategic attack are critical to the current USAF doctrinal playbook for peer-peer conflict.

TSOCs can play a central role in creating, maintaining, shaping, leveraging and exploiting systems of interest throughout battlespace. The mission is twofold. First stage would be to use SOCOM intelligence gathering capabilities with physical and non-located access beyond what the Intelligence Community as a whole as well as the air focused component experts have for collection capabilities. Following this, once vulnerabilities are determined utilizing that unique collection, SOCOM has exclusive access and emplacement to act upon those vulnerabilities in order to achieve strategic effects. An example could be gaining access to C4ISR infrastructure in order to enable conventional operations by mitigating factors that the current combat air forces are unable to overcome within an acceptable level of risk (ALR).

²⁰ Brimley et al., “The Future of Anti-Access/Area Denial,” 16.

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