

# The Role of Special Operations Forces in Global Competition

David A. Broyles and Brody Blankenship

April 2017





This document contains the best opinion of CNA at the time of issue.  
It does not necessarily represent the opinion of the sponsor.

**Distribution**

DISTRIBUTION STATEMENT A. Approved for public release: distribution unlimited.  
SPECIFIC AUTHORITY: N00014-16-D-5003 4/18/2017

Other requests for this document shall be referred to CNA Document Center at  
[inquiries@cna.org](mailto:inquiries@cna.org).

**Photography Credit:** BELGRADE, Serbia-A U.S. Navy SEAL assigned to Naval Special Warfare Unit 2 observes the target as a member of the Serbian Special Anti-terrorist Unit shoots in the prone position on the M249 Squad Automatic Weapon during a Special Operations Command Europe Joint Combined Exchange Training Nov. 28. (photo by Staff Sgt. Larraine Whetstone/24th Press Camp HQ)

**Approved by:**

**April 2017**

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "J. Schroden".

Dr. Jonathan Schroden, Director  
Special Operations Program

REPORT DOCUMENTATION PAGE				Form Approved OMB No. 0704-0188	
Public reporting burden for this collection of information is estimated to average 1 hour per response, including the time for reviewing instructions, searching existing data sources, gathering and maintaining the data needed, and completing and reviewing this collection of information. Send comments regarding this burden estimate or any other aspect of this collection of information, including suggestions for reducing this burden to Department of Defense, Washington Headquarters Services, Directorate for Information Operations and Reports (0704-0188), 1215 Jefferson Davis Highway, Suite 1204, Arlington, VA 22202-4302. Respondents should be aware that notwithstanding any other provision of law, no person shall be subject to any penalty for failing to comply with a collection of information if it does not display a currently valid OMB control number. <b>PLEASE DO NOT RETURN YOUR FORM TO THE ABOVE ADDRESS.</b>					
1. REPORT DATE (DD-MM-YYYY) 04-2016		2. REPORT TYPE 1Rev		3. DATES COVERED (From - To)	
4. TITLE AND SUBTITLE The Role of Special Operations Forces in Global Competition				5a. CONTRACT NUMBER N00014-16-D-5003	
				5b. GRANT NUMBER	
				5c. PROGRAM ELEMENT NUMBER 0605154N	
6. AUTHOR(S) David Broyles, Brody Blackenship				5d. PROJECT NUMBER R0148	
				5e. TASK NUMBER B70500	
				5f. WORK UNIT NUMBER	
7. PERFORMING ORGANIZATION NAME(S) AND ADDRESS(ES) Center for Naval Analyses 3003 Washington Blvd Arlington, VA 22201				8. PERFORMING ORGANIZATION REPORT NUMBER DRM-2017-U-015225-1Rev	
9. SPONSORING / MONITORING AGENCY NAME(S) AND ADDRESS(ES) Office of the Chief of Naval Operations OPNAV N81 Navy Department Pentagon Washington, DC 20350				10. SPONSOR/MONITOR'S ACRONYM(S)	
				11. SPONSOR/MONITOR'S REPORT NUMBER(S)	
12. DISTRIBUTION / AVAILABILITY STATEMENT  DISTRIBUTION STATEMENT A. Approved for public release: distribution unlimited.					
13. SUPPLEMENTARY NOTES					
14. ABSTRACT Nations have a variety of options for exerting influence, such as through diplomatic, military, or economic means. In recent years, some nations have shifted to more ambiguous activities for exerting global influence, in attempts to achieve benefits normally obtained through conventional war, but without triggering such a war. In this report, we explored a different way of thinking about these ambiguous activities and their implications, which suggested a need to shift U.S. focus away from preparing to win tomorrow and toward winning today. From this shift, we described a different approach to U.S. activities in such competitive environments. We also identified the unique qualities of U.S. Special Operations Forces (SOF) as the military force having the best alignment with these different activities.					
15. SUBJECT TERMS SOF, Special Operations Forces, Ambiguous Warfare, Gray Zone, Phase 0, Political Warfare, Competition, Competition Short of Armed Conflict, Counteractive					
16. SECURITY CLASSIFICATION OF:			17. LIMITATION OF ABSTRACT	18. NUMBER OF PAGES	19a. NAME OF RESPONSIBLE PERSON
a. REPORT	b. ABSTRACT	c. THIS PAGE			19b. TELEPHONE NUMBER (include area code)
U	U	U	SAR	58	Knowledge Center/Robert Richards 703-824-2123



## Abstract

Nations have a variety of options for exerting influence, such as through diplomatic, military, or economic means. In recent years, some nations have shifted to more ambiguous activities for exerting global influence, in attempts to achieve benefits normally obtained through conventional war, but without triggering such a war. In this report, we explored a different way of thinking about these ambiguous activities and their implications, which suggested a need to shift U.S. focus away from preparing to win tomorrow and toward winning today. From this shift, we described a different approach to U.S. activities in such competitive environments. We also identified the unique qualities of U.S. Special Operations Forces (SOF) as the military force having the best alignment with these different activities.

This page intentionally left blank.

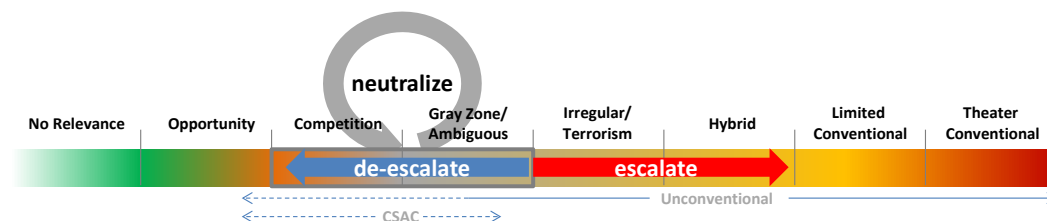
## Executive Summary

Nations have a variety of options for exerting influence, such as through diplomatic, military, or economic means. In recent years, some nations have shifted to more ambiguous activities for exerting global influence, in attempts to achieve benefits normally obtained through conventional war, but without triggering such a war.

A variety of evolving terms describe this shift, including “ambiguous warfare,” the “Gray Zone,” and “competition short of armed conflict.” Regardless of the terminology, the common theme of these ideas is that **adversaries are acting to win today, without entering open conflict**. In contrast, the traditional U.S. approach in pre-conflict environments, often called “Phase 0,” has been on preparing for *future* open conflict; these actions have primarily consisted of planning and building partnership capacity through activities such as security force assistance. Thus, while the United States prepares for *future* open conflict, adversaries act purposely *today* to prevent the environment from ever entering that future conflict.

This disparity in approaches suggested a need to shift the U.S. focus toward winning today. Given the evolving nature of the global environment and the concepts describing them, we wanted to use an approach that could be tailored to the specific situation. We identified a “non-traditional” counteractive approach for activities today, which describes **de-escalating**, **neutralizing**, and **escalating** actions, as depicted in the graphic below.

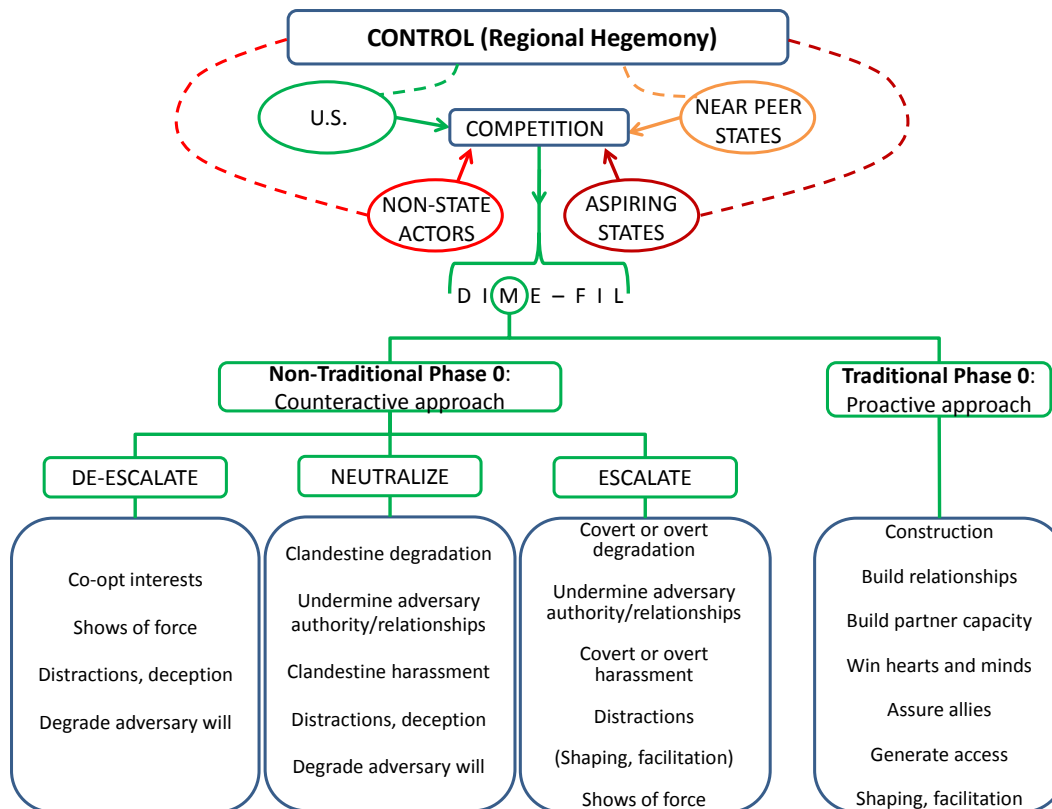
A counteractive approach in the spectrum of conflict



De-escalating actions attempt to resolve sources of conflict or keep the environment from shifting to open conflict. Neutralizing actions attempt to stop adversary actions. And escalating actions attempt to shift the environment into open conflict. These actions generally involve a high degree of sophistication, a high degree of risk,

an ability to operate clandestinely or covertly, and an understanding of the surrounding political environments. We combined these ideas in the figure below, which demonstrates the traditional and non-traditional approaches to Phase 0, and shows examples of activities in each. The actions listed are meant to be demonstrative and not exhaustive, and the adversary's response ultimately determines whether an action de-escalates, neutralizes, or escalates.

An overview of options in global competition<sup>a</sup>



<sup>a</sup>DIME-FIL: Diplomatic, Information, Military, Economic, Financial, Intelligence, and Legal (or Law Enforcement)

This counteractive approach requires capabilities that largely align with U.S. Special Operations Forces (SOF) competencies. The qualities of SOF include the ability to operate in politically sensitive environments, under time-sensitive or high-risk conditions, in clandestine, covert, or low-visibility modes, in working with or through indigenous force, with regional and cultural expertise. SOF have focused on counterterrorism, counterinsurgency, and direct action missions over the past decade, but in order to address the ambiguous activities occurring today, they will need to give more attention to other missions in the SOF toolkit (such as unconventional warfare, special reconnaissance, and preparation of the environment). Although conventional forces have the ability to perform some of



these missions, such as the ones under the “traditional” Phase 0, SOF are trained, are equipped, and have the authorities to perform the missions listed under the “non-traditional” Phase 0, particularly the clandestine and covert activities.

Special operations forces have a greater role to play in today’s global competition through a counteractive approach to adversary maneuvers. SOF have been doing some of these activities, but the United States has only recently recognized that adversaries are exploiting the U.S. view of Phase 0 as “preparing for future war” vice “competing in the here and now.” As a result, the United States should aggressively explore the detailed actions that SOF can execute through a counteractive approach in the regions that matter for global competition taking place today.

This page intentionally left blank.

# Contents

<b>Introduction.....</b>	<b>1</b>
Background.....	1
Methodology.....	2
Caveats on terminology and scope.....	2
<b>Action Framework.....</b>	<b>4</b>
<b>Views on Today's Global Environment .....</b>	<b>6</b>
Phase 0 and other views .....	6
Ambiguous warfare .....	9
Gray Zone and competition short of armed conflict .....	10
Other concepts: MOOTW, political warfare .....	10
Spectrum of conflict .....	11
Other notable concepts.....	12
Summary of global environment themes .....	13
<b>Views on Outcomes and Objectives .....</b>	<b>15</b>
Types of outcomes.....	15
Challenges of defining outcomes .....	17
Approaches to defining outcomes.....	17
Objectives from current guidance .....	18
Objectives from a general approach .....	18
Summary of outcomes and objectives.....	20
<b>Actions.....</b>	<b>22</b>
Actions in today's global environments.....	22
Summary of actions: global competition options .....	24
<b>SOF Capabilities in Global Competition .....</b>	<b>26</b>
SOF activities and attributes.....	26
Relevance of SOF activities to de-escalating, neutralizing, and escalating actions .....	28

Conclusion.....	29
<b>Appendix A. Overview of Special Operations Forces.....</b>	<b>32</b>
Army Special Forces .....	32
Air Force Special Operations Wings .....	33
Naval Special Warfare Groups .....	34
Marine Raider Battalions.....	36
<b>References.....</b>	<b>37</b>

## List of Figures

Figure 1.	Action framework.....	4
Figure 2.	Phases in the notional operation plan.....	7
Figure 3.	Another view of the phasing model.....	8
Figure 4.	Modified spectrum of conflict.....	11
Figure 5.	Examples of different outcomes.....	15
Figure 6.	A proactive approach.....	18
Figure 7.	A counteractive approach .....	19
Figure 8.	A counteractive approach in the spectrum of conflict .....	20
Figure 9.	An overview of options in global competition .....	25
Figure 10.	Areas where SOF can act in today's global environments.....	28
Figure 11.	The action framework in the context of DIME-FIL.....	31
Figure 12.	Organization of Army Special Operations Forces.....	33
Figure 13.	Organization of Air Force Special Operations Wings.....	34
Figure 14.	Organization of Naval Special Warfare Forces.....	35
Figure 15.	Organization of Marine Corps Special Operations Forces .....	36

This page intentionally left blank.

## List of Tables

Table 1.	Examples of de-escalating, neutralizing, and escalating actions.....	23
Table 2.	Special Operations Forces' core activities.....	27

This page intentionally left blank.



## Glossary

A2/AD	Anti-access, area denial
ASD SOLIC	Assistance Secretary of Defense for Special Operations and Low Intensity Conflict
CAO	Civil Affairs Operations
COIN	Counterinsurgency
CSAC	Competition Short of Armed Conflict
CT	Counterterrorism
C-WMD	Countering Weapons of Mass Destruction
DA	Direct Action
DIME-FIL	Diplomatic, Information, Military, Economic, Financial, Intelligence, Legal (or Law Enforcement)
FHA	Foreign Humanitarian Assistance
FID	Foreign Internal Defense
GEF	Global Employment of the Force
HR/R	Hostage Rescue and Recovery
ISR	Intelligence, Surveillance, and Reconnaissance
JOE	Joint Operating Environment
MISO	Military Information Support Operations
MOOTW	Military Operations other than War
NMS	National Military Strategy
NSS	National Security Strategy
PE	Preparation of the Environment
SFA	Security Force Assistance
SMA	Strategic Multi-Layer Assessment
SOCOM	Special Operations Command
SOF	Special Operations Forces
SR	Special Reconnaissance
UW	Unconventional Warfare

This page intentionally left blank.

# Introduction

Nations have a variety of options for exerting influence. One method for describing these options is DIME-FIL, which organizes the elements of national power into Diplomatic, Information, Military, Economic, Financial, Intelligence, and Legal (or Law Enforcement) categories [1]. In recent years, some nations have shifted to more ambiguous activities for using these elements and exerting global influence, in attempts to achieve benefits normally obtained through conventional war, but without triggering such a war [2].

As a part of the military element of national power, U.S. Special Operations Forces (SOF) have relevance in these global influence activities. Although SOF have had an increasingly prominent role in the military element of national power, recent SOF operations have focused on certain activities that use only a portion of the SOF toolkit [3]. This CNA-initiated study examines the broader role that SOF can serve *today* in global influencing activities, using the full range of their capabilities.

## Background

The idea for this study grew out of conversations with planners at Special Operations Command (SOCOM), who noted that they were reviewing a couple of Joint concepts that did not incorporate SOF as a fundamental part of the concept. In further discussions with other organizations, we realized that the roles of SOF in counterterrorism (CT) and counterinsurgency (COIN) have received more attention than other SOF roles over the last 16 years. Over this period, the focus on CT and COIN has resulted in changes: internally, other skills in the SOF toolkit (such as unconventional warfare) have atrophied, while externally, policy makers and planners have become less familiar with those other skills, which has likely contributed to the aforementioned observation that Joint concepts have not appropriately incorporated the full spectrum of SOF capabilities.

These observations suggested a need to reacquaint policy makers and planners with the broader tool set that SOF have available.

## Methodology

In order to describe the utility of the SOF tool set, we first need to describe the challenges occurring in today's global environments and the ways to think about achieving objectives within those environments. Then we can describe the roles that SOF can serve to achieve those objectives as part of the military contribution of national power. Our discussion follows these steps:

1. **We describe a framework that links actions to global objectives.** This framework has three components: actions, environments, and objectives. We describe in greater detail today's global environments, different objectives in those environments, and actions to achieve those objectives.
2. **We describe SOF roles and capabilities** and how they can serve as part of the military contribution to actions in today's global environments. We also describe how SOF roles and capabilities fit into the larger context of government actions and how they interact with the other elements of national power.

## Caveats on terminology and scope

In this report, we touch on a number of topics that lack precise definitions and that have broad meanings or evolving terminology. For example, we discuss anti-access and area denial (A2/AD), ambiguous warfare, and the Gray Zone.<sup>1</sup> Due to the lack of precision, we describe the general boundaries of these ideas, from which we summarize general themes. We take this approach in order to avoid the pitfalls of ongoing debates and discussions [8].

In addition, this paper uses a variety of words to describe the results of actions. We use "outcome" and "end state" to describe the general result of an action, and we use "objective" or "goal" to describe a *desired* outcome. We discuss this topic more in the section on outcomes.

---

<sup>1</sup> We originally conceived this study as "The Role of Naval SOF in an Anti-Access and Area Denial Environment." When we understood more about the actual issues, however, we realized that the relevant environment was much broader than an A2/AD environment, and in fact was broad enough to include all SOF. Further, we found that mentioning A2/AD tended to bias people toward thinking of high-tech conventional war, when instead, we wanted to focus on actions today, before the outbreak of high-end conflict; in addition, the term "A2/AD" itself has come under some scrutiny [4-7].

Finally, this topic has the potential to cover wide swaths of material, so we scope the discussion and note the following caveats:

- We restrict the discussion to **unclassified information**, because one purpose of this report is to re-familiarize audiences with SOF capabilities. We want the results to be available to as wide an audience as possible.
- The framework **requires additional regional analysis** in order to understand the *interpretations* of actions and the impacts on achieving objectives. For example, a particular action in the Pacific region might receive a different response than the same action in the Caribbean. Those responses might also change with time, as global perspectives and events evolve. As a result, we keep our framework at a higher level, allowing analysts to fill in the appropriate regional and temporal details.
- From a military perspective, **responsibilities and authorities may not align**. Due to uncertainties in the strategic landscape, we describe *possible* objectives and actions, with the assumption that authorities would follow strategy.
- We did not examine the **tactical or operational adaptation of capabilities**. Simple tweaks to SOF capabilities might help address new situations or might help achieve more objectives. More significant changes to SOF manning, training, and equipping might enable SOF to support other efforts.

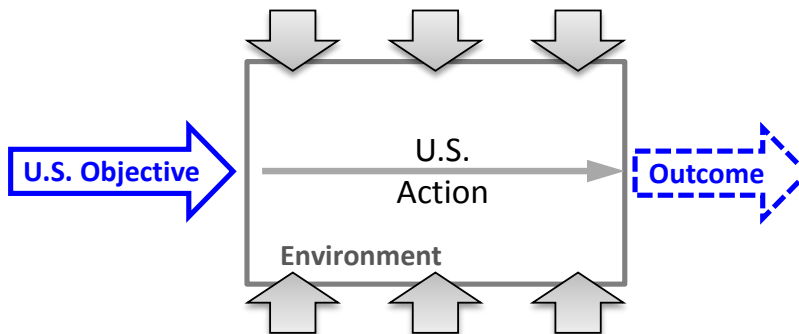
# Action Framework

In order to describe the actions that SOF can take today in global operations, we must understand the broader picture of what the United States is trying to achieve. This section describes a framework for linking actions to objectives, so that we can better understand how SOF actions can impact global operations.

Figure 1 below shows a simple and general framework for thinking about the connection between objectives and actions. It begins with an objective, and then has three components: environment, action, and outcome.

- **Objective.** An objective describes a goal or a result that a nation or group wants to achieve. The objective may be a goal itself, or it may be a step to a greater goal. We can identify different types of objectives (e.g., friendly, adversary).
- **Environment.** The environment will impact any actions that occur within it. The influences of the environment may be physical (e.g., geographic considerations, adversary forces) or non-physical (e.g., political considerations, friendly or adversary perceptions), and its boundaries may be local or global.
- **Action.** Nations or groups perform activities that they intend to help achieve their objective.
- **Outcome.** An action in an environment results in an outcome. We use the term “outcome” here, because the outcome may or may not match the objective.

Figure 1. Action framework



From this framework, we make the following observations:

- Each component has some influence on the others. Stated differently, the components are **coupled**. For example, the choice of action likely depends on the specific environment. We may assess that geographical features will lower the chances of an action achieving an objective, and so we may alter our action accordingly; or we may assess a political backlash against one of our objectives, and so we may alter that objective *or* our actions.
- **The outcome and the objective may or may not match**, either due to the failures of our actions, or due to our failure to estimate the environment correctly;<sup>2</sup> we discuss this topic further in the section on outcomes.
- We want to **keep the framework simple** in order to retain clarity as we link objectives to actions. Even with this simple framework, the discussion will become complex. We can add detail later for specific areas of interest.

In order to describe the actions of SOF as one of the elements of military power, we must first discuss the types of environments that we expect to encounter and the types of objectives that we want to achieve.

---

<sup>2</sup> We use the terms “outcome” and “end state” interchangeably to denote the result of an action. We use the terms “objective” and “goal” to describe an outcome that we desire.

# Views on Today's Global Environment

In order to describe the actions that SOF can take today in global operations, we must understand the environment, or the context, in which those operations will take place. The standard method for planning Joint military operations uses the phasing construct, as described in Joint doctrine [9-10]. In particular, the Joint planning construct uses Phase 0 to describe the environment before open conflict, and Phases I-V to describe how a conflict progresses. Phase 0 itself is a relatively new concept; in recent years, other ways have arisen of describing the environment before open conflict. For example, terms such as the “Gray Zone” and “ambiguous warfare” attempt to encapsulate such environments.

This topic is an area of current debate and discussion, and the thoughts and ideas continue to evolve. As a result, we cannot offer precise definitions or boundaries for these concepts. Even so, we can identify general and common themes, and then use these themes to discuss the role of SOF. In this way, we can avoid the tangle of terminology, and focus on the role that SOF can play today.

This section explores the following questions:

- What are ways of describing global environments that exist today?
- What are ways of understanding competition and conflict, and the environments in which these activities occur?

## Phase 0 and other views

Joint doctrine uses *phases* to describe the different focal points during an operation or a campaign. The *phase* concept helps staffs “visualize, design, and plan the entire operation or campaign and define requirements in terms of forces, resources, time, space, and purpose” [9]. Figure 2 shows a visualization of the level of military effort across these notional phases (Phases I through V).



Figure 2. Phases in the notional operation plan

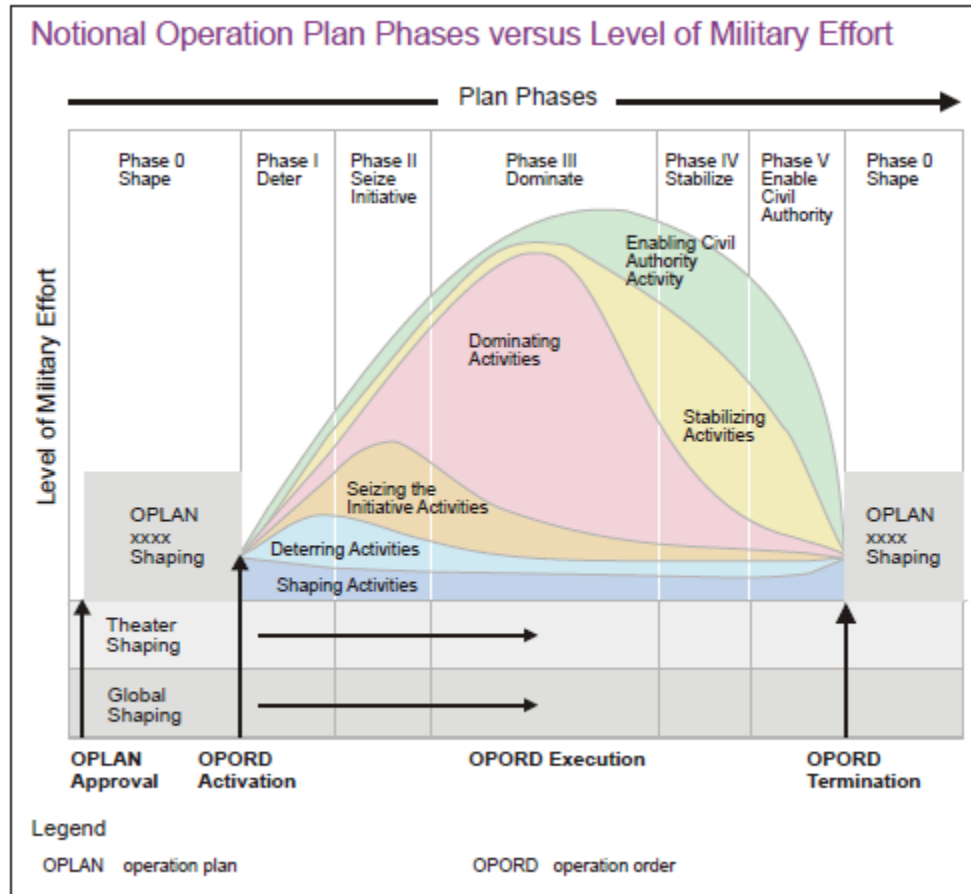


Figure V-3. Notional Operation Plan Phases versus Level of Military Effort

Source: [9].

In 2006, General Wald, then deputy commander of U.S. European Command, introduced the term "Phase Zero" [11]. At the time, attention was turning toward Africa (U.S. Africa Command began initial operations the following year [12]), with a high degree of interest in preventing conflicts and in building partner nations' capacity (to provide for their own security, develop their own resources, and conduct similar missions).

Joint doctrine eventually incorporated the idea of Phase 0, where it has retained the quality of "routine military activities" with the intent of dissuading potential adversaries and strengthening relationships with allies (along with the idea of winning "hearts and minds"). Doctrine emphasized "shaping perceptions and

influencing the behavior of both adversaries and partner nations,” but the idea of shaping retained a focus toward future contingency operations (Phases I-V) [10].

Figure 3. Another view of the phasing model

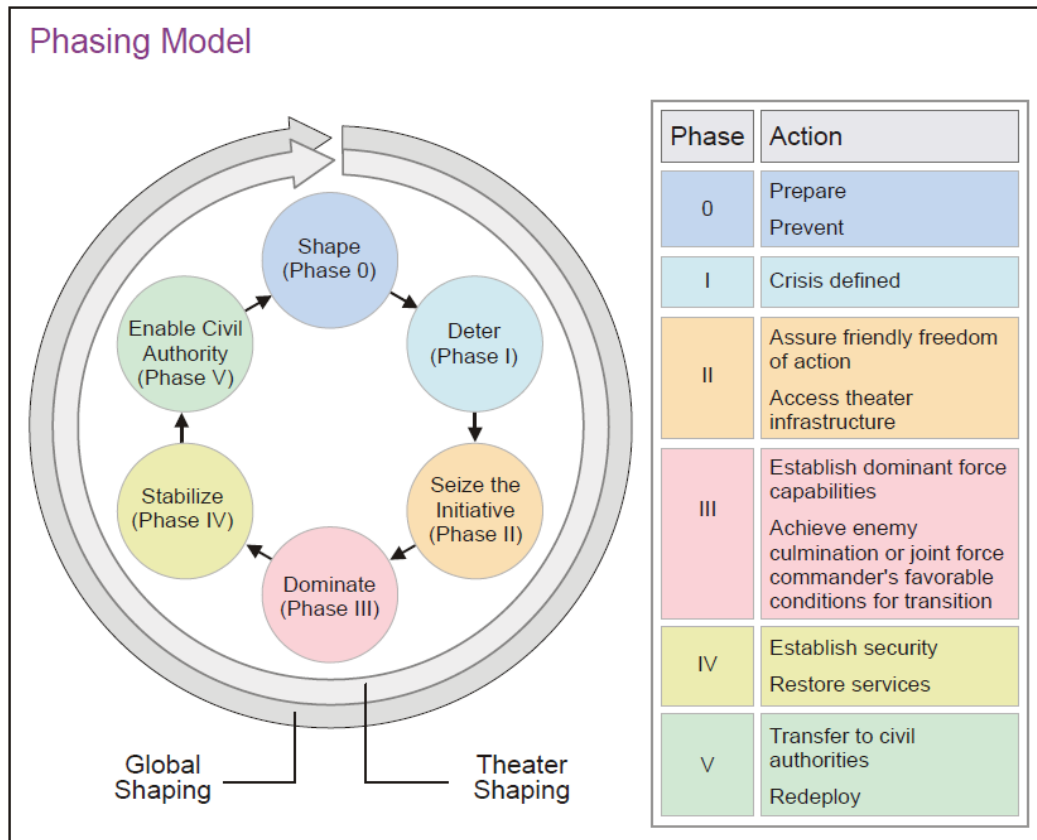


Figure III-17. Phasing Model

Source: [10].

Figure 3 shows another visualization of the phases, and emphasizes the cyclical nature of the construct (returning to Phase 0). From the concept of plan phases, we draw three related observations:

- This structure encourages a return to Phase 0, either through deterrence, or through successful completion of Phases I-V.
  - As a corollary, military forces should spend most of their *time* in Phase 0, though this result may not always occur (e.g., Afghanistan).
- *Shaping* has both an immediate (today) function and a preparatory (tomorrow/Phases I-V) function.

Since Operations Desert Shield and Desert Storm, the United States has established itself as peerless in the arena of conventional warfare. As a result, nations and non-state actors that have engaged in open conflict have done so through asymmetric means (e.g., insurgency, terrorism) in order to avoid head-on-head conventional warfare. In 2007, then secretary of defense Robert Gates, noted, “We can expect that asymmetric warfare will remain the mainstay of the contemporary battlefield for some time” [13].

Some nations, however, have taken the asymmetric approach a step further and have sought ways to achieve warfare objectives without ever entering into open conflict. As McDonald, Jones, and Frazee explain, these countries have focused on winning today, before conflict begins, and in fact, they actively avoid open conflict in order to prevent a likely loss in Phases I-V [2]. In such an environment, the United States instead focuses on shaping actions toward Phases I-V and on preparing for an open conflict; adversaries are, however, acting to win before that open conflict can ever occur. As a result, the United States is stuck preparing for *future* operations that will never come, while the adversaries act to their advantage *today*. The next two sections describe examples of such conflict-avoiding approaches.

## Ambiguous warfare

Ambiguous warfare provides another way to describe an environment before open conflict occurs. Perhaps appropriately, “ambiguous warfare” has no formal definition, and, although the term has been around since at least the 1980s, it has seen a recent increase largely due to Russia’s actions in Crimea and Ukraine.

The proceedings of a recent CNA conference describe ambiguous warfare as applicable “in situations in which a state or non-state belligerent actor deploys troops and proxies in a deceptive and confusing manner—with the intent of achieving political and military effects while obscuring the belligerent’s direct participation” [14]. Similarly, a Russian formulation of this ambiguous approach described an intentional blurring between war and peace, and a waging of undeclared wars that progress along new and unfamiliar paths, with the open use of forces under the guise of peacekeeping or crisis management [15].

Experts have suggested that Russia chose this ambiguous path in Crimea out of necessity, because it acted from a position of vulnerability, rather than from a position of strength [14]. This observation fits into the aforementioned idea of adversaries avoiding open conflict (actions that would lead to Phases I-V of contingency operations), by seeking political and strategic goals through efforts short of open conflict. Even when other nations suspect deceptive activity, the ambiguous cloak makes it more difficult to formulate a response [16], and sometimes a delayed response is enough for an adversary to achieve its objectives.

## Gray Zone and competition short of armed conflict

The concept of a *gray* area between peace and war has existed for some time. For example, the 2010 Quadrennial Defense Review mentioned challenges “in the ambiguous gray area that is neither fully war nor fully peace” [17]. More recently, this idea has coalesced into the more formal concept of the Gray Zone, first formally expressed in a white paper at United States Special Operations Command in 2015 [18] and then used in subsequent publications [19-20]. In support of developing this concept, the Joint Staff’s Strategic Multi-Layer Assessment (SMA) Branch has embarked on a variety of initiatives to define this gray strategic environment better, and to identify ways to regain the initiative [21].

The Gray Zone hits on many of the same ideas as ambiguous warfare: it is between war and peace, it avoids triggers to military response or diplomatic intervention, and it involves “intense competition” that avoids a conventional military response [19]. In fact, we will see in the section on the “spectrum of conflict” that Hoffman treats the two ideas interchangeably, and places both Russia’s activities in Crimea and China’s approach to the South China Sea into this combined category.

As an example of the continued evolution of these ideas and terminology, in early 2017, SOCOM began to use the phrase “competition short of armed conflict” (CSAC) in conjunction with the Gray Zone [22]. Whereas the Gray Zone tends to focus on ambiguous situations, CSAC situations can be overtly aggressive. The term appears to come from comments of the chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, who noted that the current reality is “an adversarial competition with a military dimension short of armed conflict” [23]. This recent introduction of new terminology also highlights the continuing discussions and evolving ideas in this area.

## Other concepts: MOOTW, political warfare

In the introduction to this section, we mentioned the ongoing evolution of concepts for thinking about conflict and the global environment. To give some insight into the history of this evolution, we briefly mention two other, older concepts. One concept touches on similar ways of thinking about the military role in the non-war global environment, while the other concept reaches far back into the history of the conflict of nations.

In the mid-1990s, before the rise of Phase 0, the term “**military operations other than war**” (MOOTW) described a place for military capabilities in areas short of war. This idea focused on “detering war, resolving conflict, promoting peace, and supporting civil authorities” [24]. Specific operations included arms control, counterterrorism, humanitarian assistance, peace operations, and show-of-force operations. While not describing anything new, MOOTW brought a new way to think

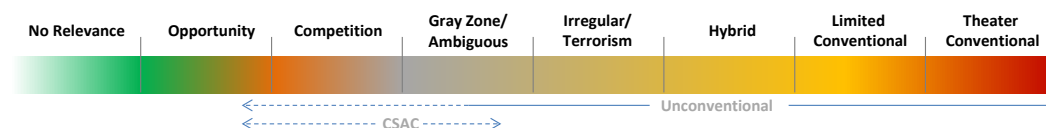
about the application of military power, particularly when combined with *other* instruments of national power (DI(M)E-FIL), and the context of political objectives. The term has since fallen out of common usage.

Long before MOOTW, the concept of **political warfare** described ways for a nation to achieve its objectives without resorting to war, or without using military action at all [25]. Political warfare covers peaceful activities such as persuasion and propaganda, as well as more aggressive activities such as sabotage, assassination, and insurgency. The idea still exists, but discussions tend to focus on certain aspects of it, such as psychological operations and propaganda.

## Spectrum of conflict

The previous section identified different ways of thinking about activities occurring in today's global environment. In the 2016 Index of U.S. Military Strength, Frank Hoffman laid out a "spectrum of conflict." In this spectrum, he combined the Gray Zone and ambiguous warfare into one general category, and he extended the spectrum through greater open conflict to theater conventional warfare, as shown in the right part of Figure 4 below (with unconventional warfare possible throughout) [26]. In a 2016 paper on the Gray Zone, Belinda Bragg described a spectrum of relevance to U.S. interests, which passed from No Relevance, through Opportunity, Competition and "possible grey action," to Direct Military Threat [27]. We overlaid this spectrum with Hoffman's spectrum to create the combined spectrum in Figure 4. We further modified the spectrum by extending unconventional warfare into the competition region; we also added a potential region for CSAC, which presumably finds prominence in the competition region and the areas around it.

Figure 4. Modified spectrum of conflict



Source: merged from [26] and [27].

This modified spectrum of conflict represents a way to think about the different global environments that we might encounter. This representation is not the only way of thinking about conflict, whether on a global or regional scale, but it provides a useful foundation for our discussion about the role of SOF.<sup>3</sup>

## Other notable concepts

We discussed the “newer” concepts of Phase 0, ambiguous warfare, and the Gray Zone in the previous section. Other ideas have also gained traction and attention, but they do not fit well into the spectrum in Figure 4. Here, we briefly discuss some of these concepts and how they fit into the broader discussion.

### *Anti-access and area denial*

The phrase “anti-access and area denial” (A2/AD) has grown into a generic catch-all term that encompasses a number of ideas—which then incurs the risk that two people discussing A2/AD may actually be discussing completely different things [4]. In its most general form, “A2/AD” refers to preventing or constraining the deployment of opposing military forces, or reducing their freedom of maneuver (usually through one’s own high-end capabilities) [8]. But as Tangredi has explained, A2/AD actually represents two different ideas. “Anti-access warfare” refers to a strategy for keeping a superior military away from a region (and does so through means that include, but are not limited to, military capabilities), and “area denial” refers to “standard” land or sea denial operations (and such tactics can support an anti-access strategy, or they can support another strategy) [7].

An anti-access strategy can work across the spectrum of conflict, but it plays a strong role before open conflict has occurred. In these situations, an anti-access strategy seeks to convince the outside group to stay away and not even try to interfere. This approach harkens back to McDonald et al., who noted that China’s historical strategy has focused on winning before conflict arises [2].

### *Contested and disordered*

Over the last decade, the Joint Staff has published a series of assessments on the future operating environment, with the running title of “Joint Operating Environment” [28-30]. The most recent iteration, Joint Operating Environment 2035, identifies two main challenges in the evolving global security environment: “contested norms,” which refers to nation states and non-state actors attempting to

---

<sup>3</sup> Note that “Phase 0” does not appear on the modified spectrum of conflict. We will discuss its role at the end of this section when we summarize the themes.

create new sets of rules that are unfavorable to the United States and its interests; and “persistent disorder,” which refers to an increasing inability of (weak) states to maintain domestic order and good governance. Both of these ideas represent types of outcomes (which we will discuss in the next section), rather than forms of conflict.

### *Low-intensity conflict*

The National Defense Authorization Act for Fiscal Year 1987 established the position of the assistant secretary of defense for special operations and low-intensity conflict (ASD SOLIC) [31]. “Low-intensity conflict” refers to “a political-military confrontation between contending states or groups below conventional warfare and above the routine, peaceful competition among states,” and doctrine identifies LIC as employing a combination of the DIME elements of national power [32]. On the spectrum in Figure 4, low-intensity conflict falls into the unconventional, irregular, and terrorism areas.

### *Hybrid warfare*

Finally, we want to comment on hybrid warfare, which falls explicitly on the spectrum of conflict in Figure 4. “Hybrid warfare” refers to the blending of methods of war, such as a “fused mix of conventional weapons, irregular tactics, catastrophic terrorism, and criminal behavior” [33]. Due to the general utility of the term “hybrid,” however, some analysts have applied the term to approaches that stay below the threshold for intervention. As we have discussed, such approaches currently fall best into the ambiguous warfare or Gray Zone category, while hybrid warfare involves open conflict and bloodshed [26].

## Summary of global environment themes

In this section, we described ways of thinking about today’s global operating environments, as well as ways of describing forms of competition and conflict. We noted numerous ways to describe environments that fall short of traditional conflict and that rely on more than military activities alone.

Instead of attempting to define or refine these evolving ideas, we took a step back to identify the general themes, which we will use to inform our discussion on the role of SOF in operations today. In our discussion on the ways of thinking about today’s global operating environments, we observed that:

- **Adversaries are acting to win today, without conflict.** Adversaries have found methods to win while remaining in Phase 0, and they enact these methods so that the United States remains in Phase 0 (pre-conflict) and never enters the open conflict for which it is preparing. The United States has

invested heavily in ensuring dominance in Phases I-V, but U.S. adversaries have been investing in achieving dominance in Phase 0. Examples of this approach have garnered the terms “ambiguous warfare,” the “Gray Zone,” or “competition short of armed conflict.” These approaches would be less challenging if the United States were willing to go to war against adversaries who are seeking to “win Phase 0.” The United States, however, does not want to go to war; adversaries know this, and that knowledge gives them a competitive edge.

- **The traditional approach to Phase 0 does not address challenges occurring today.** For the United States, Phase 0 activities focus on *future* conflict and on shaping and preparing a future battlespace. The portion of U.S. Phase 0 activities that address issues *today* focus more on building partnership capacity, and less on the adversary. For example, even Phase 0 counterterrorism efforts focus on building the support of the people, and not on attacking the adversary’s *will*.
- **Global competition is shifting.** Nation states and non-state actors are increasingly challenging the global hegemony of the United States and its Western allies. Due to U.S. dominance in conventional warfare, these challenges come through asymmetric or competitive (non-conflict) means. Approaches such as ambiguous warfare purposely straddle competition and conflict. **We use the term “global competition” as an umbrella to encompass these non-conventional conflicts that do not fit the traditional model.**
- **Approaches must be tailorable, not universally prescriptive.** Due to the evolving nature of ideas and the shifting environments themselves, approaches need enough flexibility to meet the particular situation. Universally prescriptive approaches will become quickly obsolete [34].
  - **The ideas and terminology for describing the global environment continue to evolve.** We described some of the historical concepts, such as MOOTW, and we provided an overview of the current ideas, such as ambiguous warfare and the Gray Zone.

For the framework of thinking about linking actions to objectives, this discussion on environments suggests that we must recognize and account for the non-traditional environments that our adversaries are creating, and that we must identify ways to act in these non-traditional environments.



## Views on Outcomes and Objectives

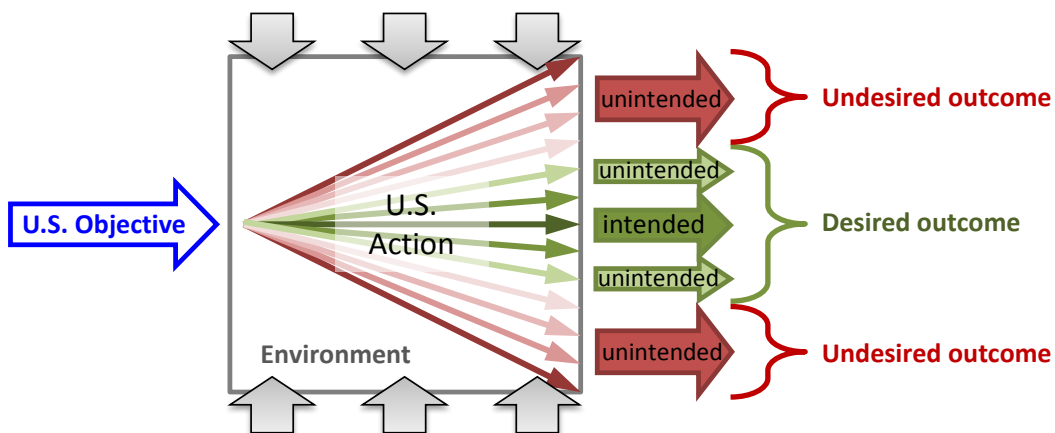
Having examined different ways of thinking about today's global environments and about the spectrum of conflict in general, we now consider the topic of understanding the objectives that we are trying to achieve (Figure 1). This section will explore:

- How can we think about outcomes, in general?
- What objectives can we identify in today's global environments?

### Types of outcomes

We noted that the outcome of actions (Figure 1) may or may not match the objective, because operations do not always go according to the plan or the intent, whether due to our own failures or due to the impact of the environment. Figure 5 expands on that idea to show a variety of potential outcomes; the silver arrows at the top and bottom of the figure represent the influences of the environment upon the action occurring. The red and green arrows on the right of the figure represent the different outcomes that can occur, which we describe next.

Figure 5. Examples of different outcomes



When thinking about these types of outcomes, we make the following observations:

- **Intended, desired.** We want these outcomes to occur, and we want to act to achieve them. These outcomes match our “objectives,” or “goals,” and we want to maximize their occurrence.
- **Unintended, desired.** We get an outcome that we wanted, but not how we expected. This outcome matches our “objective,” but it equates to “the right answer for the wrong reason,” and it suggests that we do not understand the environment or know how our actions will play out.
- **Unintended, undesired.** We get an outcome that we did not want, and our actions inadvertently cause it to happen. This outcome occurs when we do not understand the environment, or the environment (or adversary) responds in a way that we do not expect.
- **Intended, undesired.** We get an outcome that we did not want, and we chose to make it happen. We did not include this result because we assume that we will not act to cause something that we do not want.

The idea of “intent” indicates that actions may not proceed according to the plan—the unintended outcomes. There are three primary factors why unintended outcomes might occur. First, our own actions may be inadequate for the task (e.g., our forces lack a necessary capability or our equipment fails). Second, the physical environment may thwart our actions (e.g., the weather is unfavorable or the terrain is not what was expected). Third, the political environment reacts in a way that we did not expect (e.g., the adversary reacts with political reprisals or military intervention).

We have the most control over the first two factors (although we do not control the physical environment, we often have some control over when and where we act); however, we have little control over the last factor, the political environment. This factor equates to “the adversary gets a vote.” We can, however, attempt to understand how the adversary will react, and we can adjust our actions accordingly.

In essence, this political environment factor is a key tenet of ambiguous warfare and political warfare. Our adversaries have desired outcomes they want to achieve in a region of the world. They understand that certain actions will evoke a response from the United States, which will result in undesired and unintended outcomes for them. As a result, they have adjusted their actions to achieve their desired outcomes.

Given that we want to maximize the desired and intended outcomes—our objectives—we next discuss ways to think about and identify them.

## Challenges of defining outcomes

Three observations suggest that defining objectives may not be a simple task. First, we face an infinite number of potential outcomes, which we must winnow to a smaller, finite number. Ongoing debates on policy and strategy help us define desired outcomes, but we still have a theoretically infinite set from which to choose.

Second, we noted a number of reports that recommend a need to define or to improve objectives, or studies that mention objectives without articulating any detail about them [21, 35]. Even in the current Gray Zone white paper, its first recommendation is to “synchronize U.S. government policies and objectives,” without specifying any way to accomplish that task [19].

Third, U.S. strategic objectives are likely to change in the short term. In January 2015, General James N. Mattis (then retired) spoke before the Senate Armed Services Committee, and he noted that “we have lived too long now in a strategy-free mode.” He further stated, “Are the political objectives clearly defined and achievable? Murky or quixotic political end states can condemn us to entering wars we don’t know how to end” [36]. General Mattis made these comments two years before becoming secretary of defense in 2017. Given his statements, he will likely attempt to change the current state of U.S. strategy.

## Approaches to defining outcomes

For the purposes of linking SOF roles to desired outcomes, we would ideally have some concrete examples of outcomes, instead of notional ones. Given the aforementioned observations on the state of strategic outcomes, however, we run the risk of discussing outcomes that may soon become irrelevant. As a result, we take two approaches to discussing strategic outcomes. First, we examine current strategic documents and identify key objectives that we can use as examples for our discussion of linking SOF actions to outcomes (with the understanding that these objectives might change). Second, we discuss a general approach to objectives that includes how to think about those objectives in terms of employment (in this case, we discuss escalatory and de-escalatory methods), such that we focus on the *mode* of employment, rather than the specific end-state. In this way, we follow the implication from the previous section and identify tailorable approaches, rather than prescriptive approaches.

## Objectives from current guidance

We examined a number of documents that describe U.S. strategic objectives, such as the **National Security Strategy** (NSS) [37], the **National Military Strategy** (NMS) [38], and the **Strategic Goals of the U.S. Department of State and USAID** [39]. We concluded that these objectives were too broad for our purposes (for example, “build capacity to prevent conflict,” or “deter, deny, and defeat state adversaries”).

The NMS informs the Global Employment of the Force (GEF), which provides further guidance on the use of U.S. military forces around the globe. This document in turn informs the geographic combatant commander’s theater campaign plans and operational plans. Not surprisingly, these documents are classified. As a result, we turned our attention to other ways of thinking about global objectives.

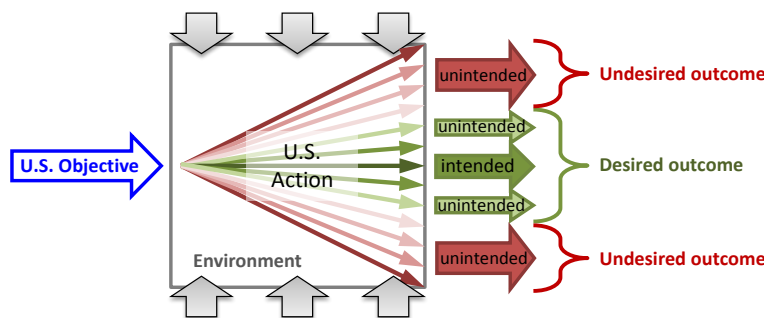
## Objectives from a general approach

Given the broadness of the strategic guidance and our earlier observations that strategic objectives are likely to shift in the short term, we next examine general approaches to thinking about objectives, so that we can apply these approaches in any situation. We identify two ways of thinking generally about objectives: a proactive approach, and a counteractive approach.

### *Proactive approach*

In a proactive approach, the United States identifies independent objectives and views the adversary’s actions as an influencing element in the environment. Figure 6 demonstrates this proactive approach. The figure shows the stated U.S. objective and the actions taken within an environment. The environment, which includes the adversary’s actions, influences the U.S. actions, and a variety of outcomes are possible, depending on the details of the situation.

Figure 6. A proactive approach



## Counteractive approach

Another general way to think about objectives is through countering or shifting an adversary's actions to an outcome more preferable to the United States. The U.S. can achieve such an outcome by:

- **De-escalating adversary efforts.** Actions can **de-escalate** the situation and attempt to keep it from open conflict. These activities will tend toward those that resolve sources of friction.
- **Neutralizing adversary efforts.** Actions can **halt** adversary activity. These activities will tend to be subversive and clandestine (either not discovered, or not attributable to United States involvement); destructive activities will require misattribution in order to avoid provoking a response.
- **Escalating adversary efforts.** Actions can **escalate** the situation and attempt to force it into open conflict. These activities will tend to be provocative, openly aggressive, and more destructive.

Figure 7 demonstrates this counteractive approach using the same framework, but from the perspective of the adversary's objective and action. In this approach, the United States acts with a counter-objective to influence the environment and shift the outcome, preferably toward a result that the U.S. desires (top) and away from the result the adversary desires (middle), while hopefully avoiding an outcome that neither want (bottom).

Figure 7. A counteractive approach

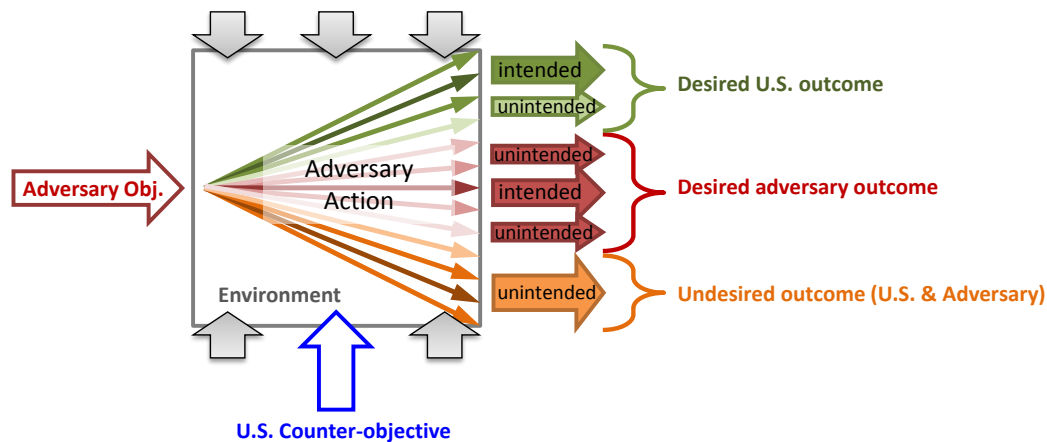
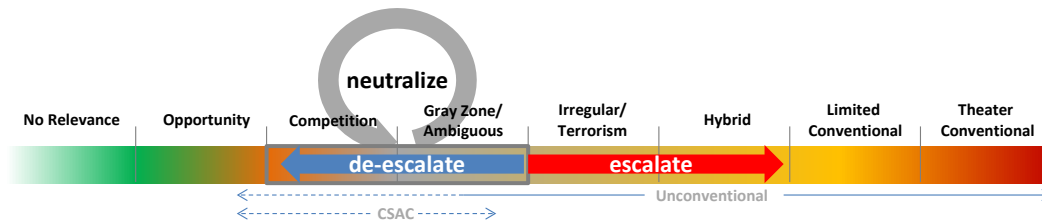


Figure 8 shows a simple way to think about the counteractive approaches in the context of the spectrum of conflict that we described previously. This approach is a **non-traditional** way of thinking about Phase 0 or the other global environments. Neither of these approaches, however, is a true objective, and we must still define “win conditions.” Even so, this organization can help us to think about *why* we might choose to take certain actions over others. The next section will explore those possible actions in further detail.

Figure 8. A counteractive approach in the spectrum of conflict



## Summary of outcomes and objectives

In this section, we explored general ways to think about outcomes, and we identified two different approaches to objectives. The general themes that we draw from this discussion include:

- **Guidance on objectives tends to be broad and may change.** We observed that, at the unclassified level, guidance on U.S. objectives tends to be too generic to link specific actions. Further, we noted that guidance is likely to change. As a result, we identified other ways to think about objectives.
- **Proactive approach to objectives.** We described a approach to achieving objectives that identifies independent objectives and views the adversary’s actions as an influencing element in the environment. This approach tends to represent the traditional U.S. approach to identifying objectives, particularly in Phase 0 and today’s global environments.
- **Counteractive approach to objectives.** We described an approach to achieving objectives that focuses on countering or shifting an adversary’s actions to an outcome more preferable to the United States, either through de-escalating, neutralizing, or escalating activities.
  - **This idea represents a “non-traditional” approach to Phase 0.** As we described in the previous section, the traditional U.S. approach to

Phase 0 focuses on preparing for future conflict. The counteractive approach provides a different way to think about having an impact in Phase 0 itself.

- **Knowledge of the adversary's political dynamics plays a critical role in achieving desired outcomes.** We want to maximize the achievement of desired, intended outcomes. To do so, we need actions to have their intended effects. The adversary, however, can thwart our efforts. We need to understand the adversary's political calculus and strategic decision-making processes in order to maximize the impact that our actions can have.

## Actions

Having identified different ways of thinking about objectives and approaches to achieving desired outcomes, we next explore the topic of actions and identify the types of activities that we might consider using (Figure 1). This section will explore:

- What types of actions can we identify for today's global environments?
- How can we think about these actions in the context of the global environments and outcomes that we described previously?

### Actions in today's global environments

In the sections on environments and outcomes, we described the U.S. "traditional" proactive approach to Phase 0 activities, and we identified a possible "non-traditional" Phase 0 approach that would involve de-escalating, neutralizing, or escalating actions. The traditional U.S. approach to Phase 0 activities focuses on winning a future conflict, with actions intended to **shape** and **prepare**. These actions include building partnership capacity, building relationships, undertaking physical construction, winning hearts and minds, and assuring allies.

- **De-escalating adversary efforts.** Actions can **de-escalate** the situation and attempt to keep it from open conflict. These activities will tend toward those that resolve sources of friction.
- **Neutralizing adversary efforts.** Actions can **halt** adversary activity. These activities will tend to be subversive and clandestine (either not discovered, or not attributable to United States involvement); destructive activities will require misattribution in order to avoid provoking a response.
- **Escalating adversary efforts.** Actions can **escalate** the situation and attempt to force it into open conflict. These activities will tend to be provocative, openly aggressive, and more destructive.

A non-traditional counteractive approach to Phase 0 activities focuses on winning *in* Phase 0, with actions intended to **de-escalate**, **neutralize**, or **escalate**. De-escalating



actions attempt to resolve sources of friction. For example, co-opting adversary interests and shows of force can de-escalate situations.

Neutralizing actions attempt to keep the situation from open conflict and to halt adversary activity. Such actions often require clandestine or deceptive means, meaning that the activity should never be discovered, or should not be attributable to United States involvement.

In contrast, escalating actions attempt to shift the environment into open conflict. Such actions often include overt or covert means, but they can also include clandestine misattribution. Escalatory actions tend to be aggressive and destructive, but they can also include shaping and facilitating activities that prepare the environment for open conflict. Examples are the construction of a military airfield or the staging of military weapons in a nearby region.

Table 1. Examples of de-escalating, neutralizing, and escalating actions

De-escalating	Neutralizing	Escalating
Co-opt interests	Clandestine degradation	Covert or overt degradation
Shows of force	Undermine adversary authority, relationships	Undermine adversary authority, relationships
Distractions, deception	Clandestine harassment	Covert or overt harassment
Degrade adversary will	Distractions, deception	Distractions
	Degrade adversary will	(Shaping or facilitating)
		Shows of force

Table 1 provides examples of de-escalating, neutralizing, and escalating actions. We describe briefly some of the terms:

- **Degradation.** Actions that involve the destruction or impairment of adversary resources or capabilities.
- **Undermine authorities, relationships.** Actions, such as subversion, that discredit the adversary as a capable entity with the region of interest, or that poison relationships with the adversary's partners.
- **Harassment.** Actions that cause the adversary to expend limited resources (e.g., on riots, spills, or refugees).
- **Distractions and deception.** Actions that cause the adversary to divert focus from other friendly force actions or objectives, or that send false signals to the adversary (e.g., misattribution).

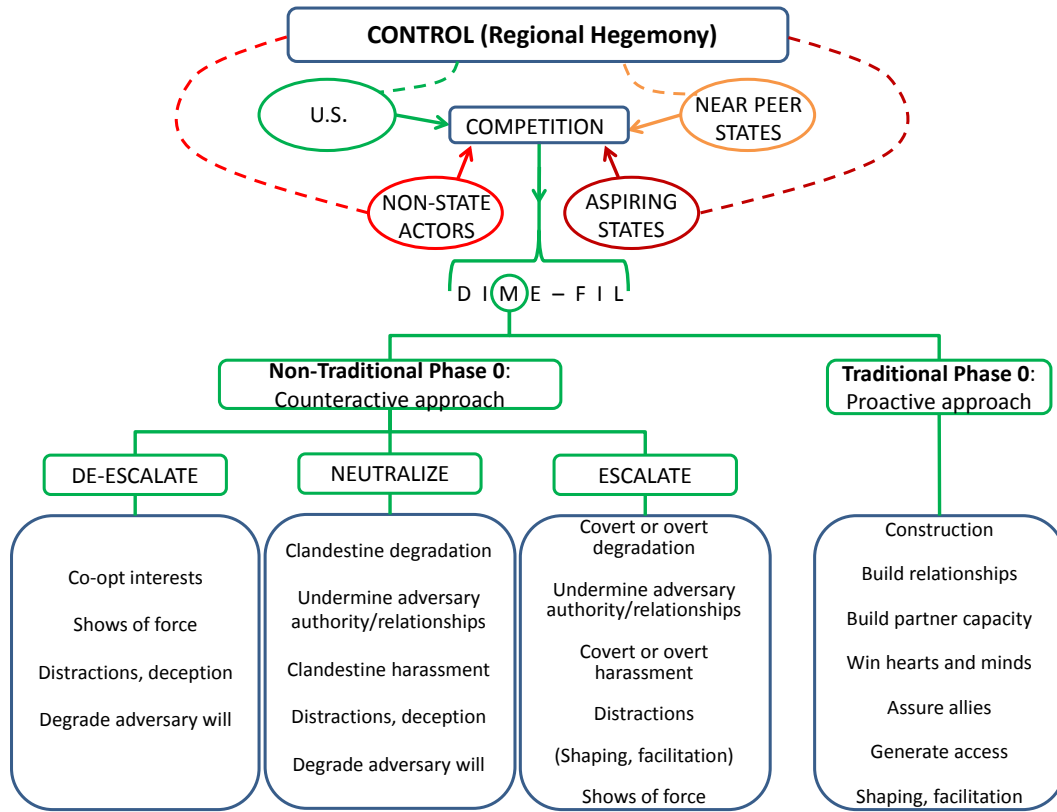
- **Degrade adversary's will.** Actions that lessen the adversary's confidence and desire to continue with current activities. Propaganda and psychological operations typically fall into this category.
- **Co-opt interests.** Actions that remove sources of conflict and create unity of purpose and resolve.

The actions in Table 1 are meant to be demonstrative and not exhaustive. Further, the “intent” of the action and the “perception” of the adversary ultimately determine whether that action de-escalates, neutralizes, or escalates the situation. For example, a show of force may help disperse a rioting crowd and de-escalate a situation; but the same show of force could also incite more rioting. Additionally, one action may fall into several categories. For example, a missile strike may degrade and distract, or a prolific arsonist in a region may achieve all of the escalatory objectives.

## Summary of actions: global competition options

For the action framework, we discussed ways of thinking about different global environments, outcomes, and actions. We combined these ideas into the graphic in Figure 9. The upper portion of the figure shows different actors engaged in competition for control of a region. From this mélange of actors, the normal U.S. military approach heads down the path of “traditional” Phase 0, in preparation for war. As described in the section on environments, adversaries have chosen to operate down the” path of ambiguous activity, on the more aggressive side of competition. In this operational space, which we call “non-traditional,” we identified a counteractive approach, with actions that we described as de-escalating, neutralizing, or escalating. With the action framework defined, we now examine how SOF capabilities fit into this picture.

Figure 9. An overview of options in global competition



# SOF Capabilities in Global Competition

The previous sections described ways of thinking about different global environments, and possible outcomes and actions within those environments. Figure 9 combines all of those discussions into one graphic, and highlights the difference between the traditional and non-traditional approaches to non-conflict activities. Now we examine SOF capabilities and how they relate to this framework. This section will explore:

- What are SOF activities?
- What are attributes of SOF activities?
- How can we think about SOF activities in the de-escalating, neutralizing, and escalatory actions that we identified for “non-traditional” Phase 0 environments?
- How can we think about SOF capabilities in the context of the other elements of national power?

## SOF activities and attributes

Joint Publication 3-05 on Special Operations lists the core activities of Special Operations Forces as shown in Table 2. As we mentioned in the introduction, although SOF have been performing all of these missions, the focus of the past decade has been more on the activities in gray: direct action, counterinsurgency, hostage rescue and recovery, counterterrorism, and countering weapons of mass destruction. For reference, Appendix A provides a brief overview of SOF in each service.

Table 2. Special Operations Forces' core activities

Core Activities	Short Description <sup>a</sup>
Preparation of the environment	"take actions to prepare the operational environment for potential operations... [may include] close-target recon; tagging, tracking, and locating; RSOI of forces; infrastructure development; and terminal guidance."
Special reconnaissance	"reconnaissance and surveillance actions normally conducted in a clandestine or covert manner to collect or verify information of strategic or operational significance"
Foreign internal defense	"support a host nation's internal defense and development strategy and program"
Unconventional warfare	"enable a resistance movement or insurgency"
Military information support operations	"convey selected information and indicators to foreign audiences to influence their emotions, motives, objective reasoning"
Civil affairs operations	"enhance the operational environment; identify and mitigate underlying causes of instability with civil society; or involve the application of functional specialty skills normally the responsibility of civil government"
Foreign humanitarian assistance	"relieve or reduce human suffering, disease, hunger, or privation" outside the U.S. and its territories
Security force assistance	"support the reform, restructure, or reestablishment of the host nation armed forces and the defense aspect of the security sector"
Direct action	"short-duration strikes and other small-scale offensive actions"
Counterinsurgency	"simultaneously defeat and contain insurgency and address its root causes"
Hostage rescue and recovery	in addition to hostages, "can include the recapture of US facilities, installations, and sensitive material overseas"
Counterterrorism	"operations taken to neutralize terrorists and their networks"
Countering weapons of mass destruction	"curtail the development, possessions, use, and effects of weapons of mass destruction... by state and non-state actors"

Source: adapted from [40].

<sup>a</sup>. These special operations core activities directly state or imply that they employ capabilities not normally found in the conventional forces.

Special operations forces typically operate with a low profile and in small numbers, and can operate in areas that might normally elicit public or media outcry [41]. As a result, they can execute operations that have the following attributes:

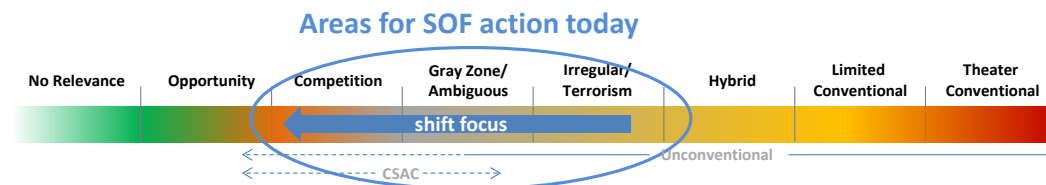
- **Politically sensitive environments**
- **Time sensitive, high risk**
- **Clandestine, covert, low visibility**
- **Working with or through indigenous forces; regional & cultural expertise**
- **Rapidly flexible, adaptable, tailorable.**

## Relevance of SOF activities to de-escalating, neutralizing, and escalating actions

The SOF attributes mesh well with the de-escalating, neutralizing, and escalating actions that we described in Figure 9 and Table 1. Most of these actions (e.g., degradation, deception, harassment, etc.) require some or all of the above attributes. In fact, we already labeled many of them clandestine or covert. Based on the previous discussion, we draw two conclusions:

- **Special Operations Forces have a natural role to play in countering adversary actions today.** We identified a spectrum of activity, extending from peace to full-scale war, and we noted that adversaries are purposely acting in an ambiguous region. Figure 10 shows where SOF can act today, in the region from competition through low-end hybrid warfare.<sup>4</sup> As we previously noted, SOF have focused on counterterrorism in the past decade, and a shift must occur in order for them to focus more to the left of the spectrum in Figure 10.

Figure 10. Areas where SOF can act in today's global environments



Source: merged from [26] and [27].

- **De-escalating, neutralizing, and escalatory actions largely align with SOF competencies.** We identified a variety of actions that can occur in competitive or ambiguous situations, including degradation, undermining authorities, harassment, distractions, and deceptions. These actions align with SOF competencies, requiring clandestine, covert, or sometimes overt actions (the overt ones tend to be high risk), which we will discuss further in the next section.

<sup>4</sup> SOF can have a role throughout the spectrum, as Lohaus discusses, but they have the greatest alignment in pre-conflict engagements [42].

A qualitative assessment of SOF core activities suggests a generally high degree of relevance to the counteractive actions that we identified for use in non-traditional Phase 0 situations, or global competition. For example, preparation of the environment and special reconnaissance can strongly support all of the de-escalating, neutralizing, and escalating actions due to their purpose of gathering information. Similarly, unconventional warfare and military information support operations (formerly psychological operations) have high relevance to all of the actions.

Core activities that focus on partner nations and their capabilities, such as foreign internal defense, foreign humanitarian assistance, and security force assistance, tend to have less relevance to the more destructive actions (such as overt degradation). But they still have relevance in actions that degrade adversary will, and sometimes in co-opting interests. For example, SOF may have less opportunity in which to perform clandestine degradation against an adversary when they are conducting foreign internal defense with a partner nation, but the very presence of those forces can cause an adversary to reconsider actions against the partner nation (effectively degrading adversary will).

We note that even activities such as hostage rescue and recovery can aid in degrading adversary will, because they can demonstrate the ability of U.S. forces to act at times and places of their choosing. Such demonstrations may also have a mild effect of co-opting interests (in essence, “if you can’t beat ’em, join ’em”).

It is worth noting that conventional forces also have the ability to perform some of these activities, such as the ones under the “traditional” Phase 0. The difference is that SOF are trained, are equipped, and have the authorities to perform the missions listed under the “non-traditional” Phase 0, particularly the clandestine and covert activities. For example, a civil affairs operation meant to assure allies might best fall to conventional forces, while a civil affairs operation meant to provide a distraction might best fall to SOF. In a sense, the activities to the left side of Figure 9 lean more on SOF’s strengths, while the activities on the right side lean more on conventional forces’ strengths.

## Conclusion

We wanted to describe the role that SOF can serve today in global operations. To do so, we created a simple framework to link objectives to actions. We then discussed each component of the framework, and we described how the capabilities of SOF fit into that framework. During the discussion, we identified a number of issues that influence how we decide to use SOF:

- **We want to use SOF in global competition today.** In the section on environments, we said that much of the global security activity occurring

today takes place in an ambiguous area between friendly competition and open conflict. We noted that the terminology of this ambiguous area continues to evolve, but we identified a key theme—namely, that adversaries have shifted to a “non-traditional” Phase 0 where they are acting to win today, but the United States has remained in “traditional” Phase 0 where it acts to win in a future conflict. We referred to this idea as “global competition,” and noted that SOF have high relevance in this arena (Figure 10). Regardless of terminology, our look at the environment clearly indicated a need to act *today* to win *today*.

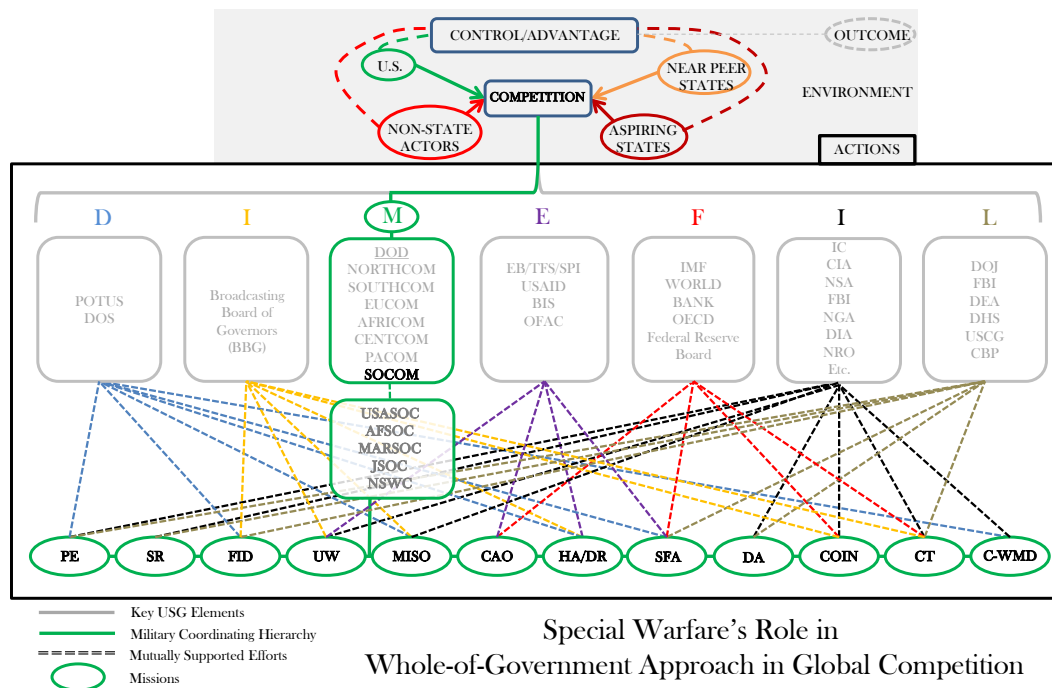
- **We want to use SOF to achieve desired outcomes.** In the section on outcomes and objectives, we described the challenges inherent in defining objectives (desired outcomes). Given the environment of global competition, we identified a counteractive approach to thinking about objectives, with de-escalating actions that keep the situation from entering open conflict, neutralizing actions that attempt to halt adversary activity, and escalating actions that propel the situation toward open conflict. For these approaches, we identified various actions, such as degradation, deception, and undermining authority, and we described how the attributes of SOF make them well suited for such actions.
- **We want to use the entire SOF skill set.** In the section on actions, we provided an overview of SOF core activities, and we described the capabilities of SOF. These forces have access to the full range of special operations core capabilities, even though the focus of the past decade has been on direct action types of missions. The attributes of SOF enable us to achieve desired outcomes in environments that are politically sensitive; are time sensitive or high risk; require clandestine, covert, or low-visibility capabilities; require work with or through indigenous forces; and require rapidly flexible, adaptable, and tailorable forces. This information, in combination with the previous two points, suggests a greater role for SOF today in the area of global competition.
- **We want to use SOF as part of a larger, holistic approach.** SOF represent a part of “M” in DIME-FIL, the elements of national power. We should think of using SOF in the context of the other elements of national power in order to achieve objectives.

This last point, that the use of SOF must be considered as part of a larger approach, requires more comment. SOF have several advantages over other military forces in this regard. They have existing relationships with and work across other organizations (the intelligence community, the embassies, etc.). In addition, their small, often negligible, footprint and their ability to operate in politically sensitive areas, make them easier to employ, especially when compared to the large footprints of other military forces.



In order to demonstrate how SOF fit into this larger approach picture, Figure 11 shows the array of SOF capabilities (in green at the bottom) and the links between other aspects of DIME-FIL. These links show one interpretation, and other individuals may create different links for different reasons—such differences underscore the flexibility of the capabilities in achieving desired outcomes. The figure also shows how the suite of SOF capabilities feeds into the complex environment of competing interests, where various entities are vying for control or advantage in a region.

Figure 11. The action framework in the context of DIME-FIL



Special operations forces have a greater role to play in today's global competition through a counteractive approach to adversary maneuvers. SOF have been doing some of these activities, but the United States has only recently recognized that adversaries are exploiting the U.S. view of Phase 0 as "preparing for future war" vice "competing in the here and now." As a result, the United States should aggressively explore the detailed actions that SOF can execute through a counteractive approach in the regions that matter for global competition taking place today.

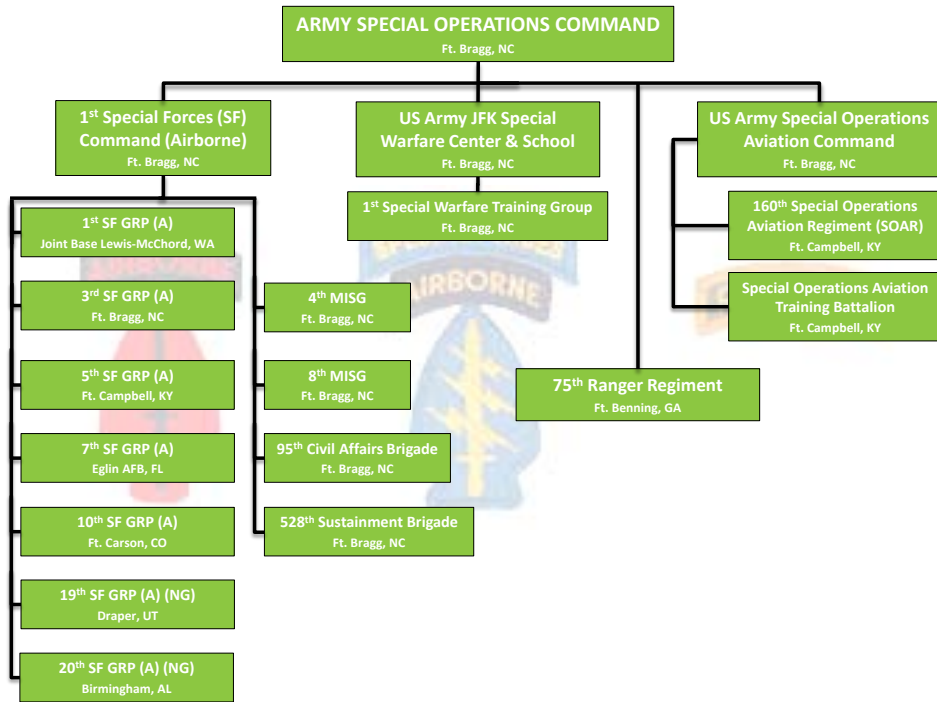
## Appendix A. Overview of Special Operations Forces

This appendix provides a very brief introduction and overview to U.S. military Special Operations Forces. More detailed information may be found through sources such as the U.S. SOCOM Fact Book [43], or in documents at higher classification levels.

### Army Special Forces

The United States Army Special Operations Command (USASOC) oversees the Army Special Forces—also known as the Green Berets, the Rangers, the Army Special Operations Aviators—and a training cadre, as shown in Figure 12. These forces conduct the full range of SOF activities, to include civil affairs and military information support operations, air assault, and direct action.

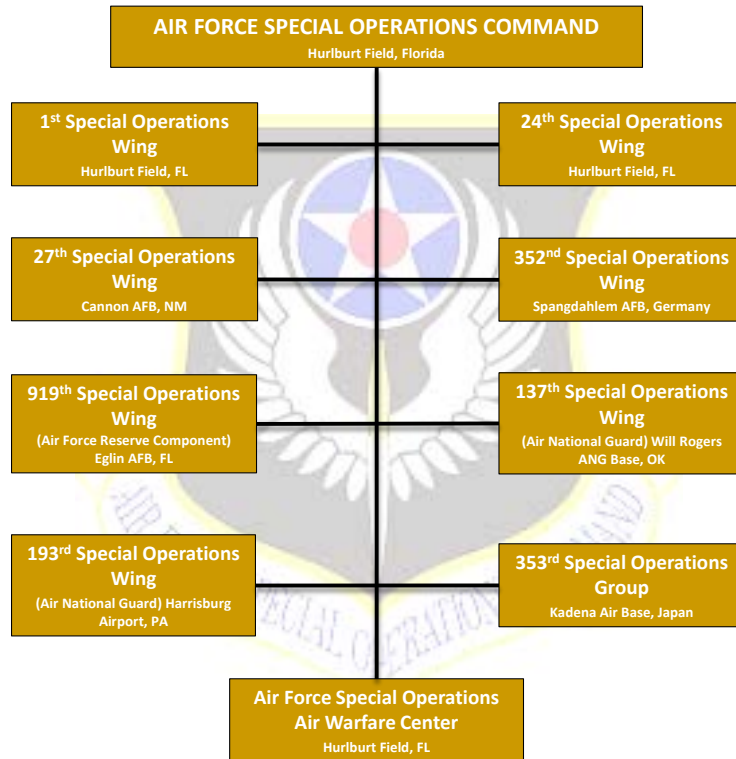
Figure 12. Organization of Army Special Operations Forces



## Air Force Special Operations Wings

The Air Force Special Operations Command (AFSOC) oversees the Special Operations Wings, which employ combat controllers, pararescuemen, special operations weather teams, tactical air control parties, and special operations surgical teams, as shown in Figure 13. These forces specialize in infiltrating into hostile environments and establishing airfields, in addition to conducting the range of special operations activities.

Figure 13. Organization of Air Force Special Operations Wings



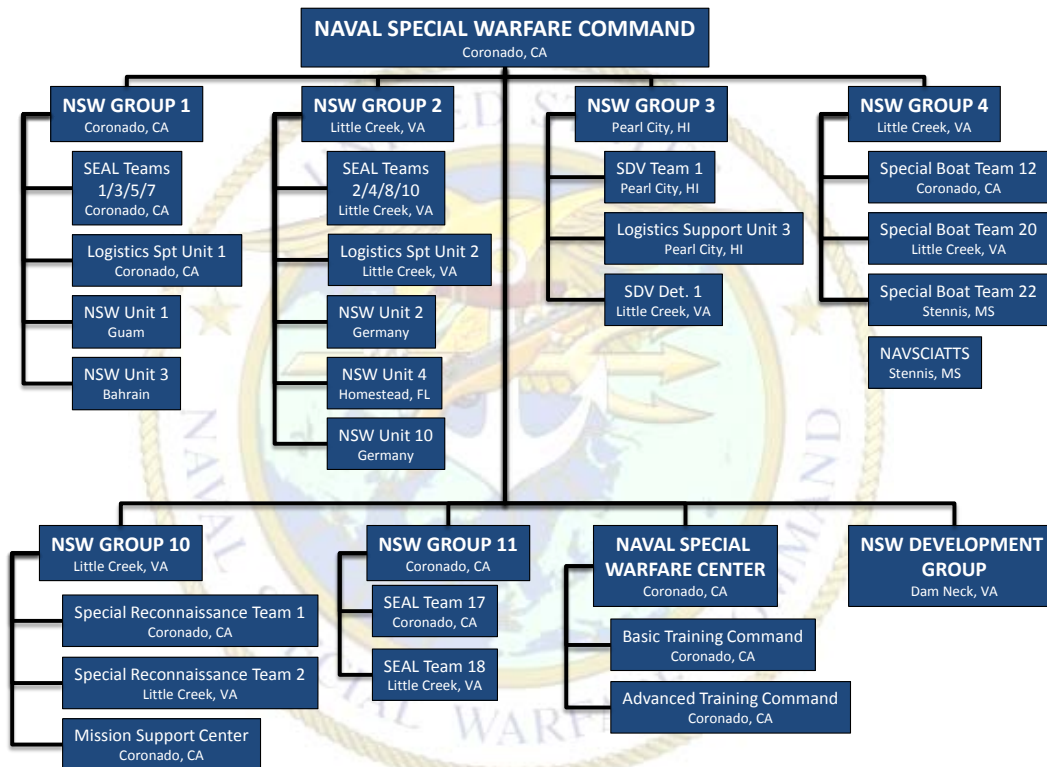
## Naval Special Warfare Groups

The Naval Special Warfare Command (NSWC) oversees six numbered groups, a tactics development group, and a training center. Groups 1 and 2 have an operational role with a geographic focus, but the other groups organize by domain, with Group 3 focusing on undersea, Group 4 on surface, and Group 10 on intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance (ISR); Group 11 serves as the reserve [44]. For reference, Figure 14 shows an overview of the organization structure of the Naval Special Warfare Command and its subordinate units. The groups can act as building blocks and can combine their capabilities (undersea, surface, and ISR) in any combination necessary to achieve the mission.

Group 1 supports U.S. Central Command and U.S. Pacific Command, while Group 2 supports the remaining geographic combatant commands. Each group has four SEAL teams, two or three operational units with geographic focus, and various support units. These forces can execute missions across the core activities found in Table 2.

Group 3 specializes in undersea special operations and mobility involving undersea platforms, primarily through the Seal Delivery Vehicle (SDV) Teams. These forces can conduct special operations that start in the undersea domain and then continue above the waterline and onto land.

Figure 14. Organization of Naval Special Warfare Forces



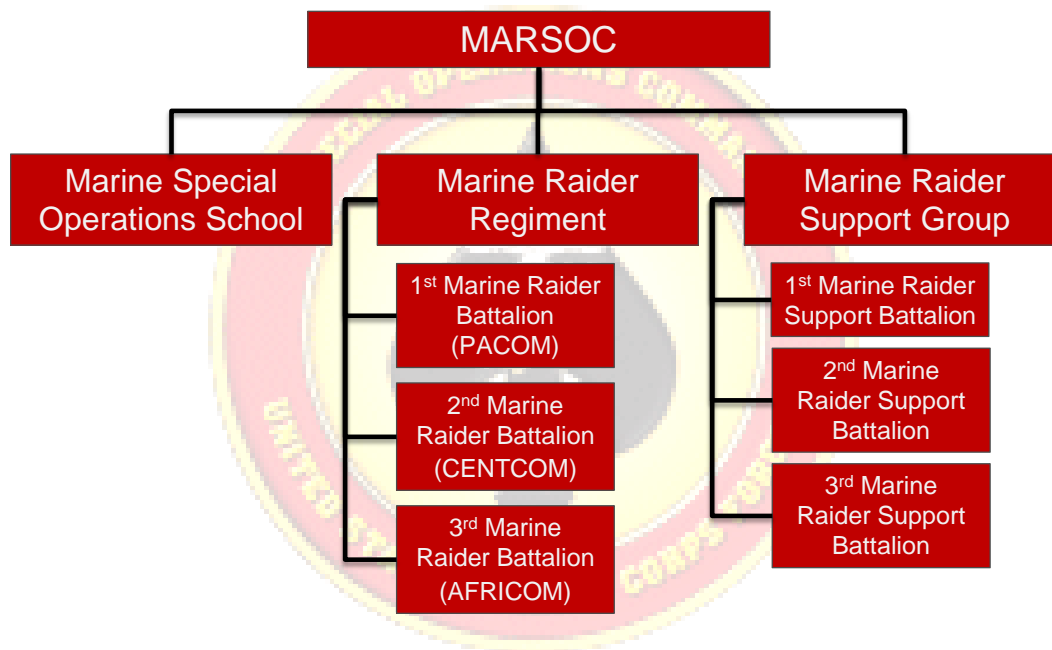
Group 4 specializes in water surface special operations, including riverine, littoral, and open-ocean maritime environments. Its Special Boat Teams (SBTs) employ light, medium, and heavy combatant craft, and they have the ability to conduct operations from non-military craft. The Group also has a technical training school, the Naval Small Craft Instruction and Technical Training School, for small craft, which includes mobile training teams for engagements with partner nations.

Group 10 specializes in ISR and preparation of the environment capabilities, residing primarily in two Special Reconnaissance Teams (SRTs).

## Marine Raider Battalions

The United States Marine Corps Forces Special Operations Command (MARSOC) oversees the Marine Corps' contribution to U.S. Special Operations Forces. MARSOC divides its forces into the operational forces (under a regiment), the support forces, and the training forces, as shown in Figure 15.

Figure 15. Organization of Marine Corps Special Operations Forces



The Marine Raider Battalions (MRBs) have a geographic focus, with 1<sup>st</sup> MRB supporting PACOM, 2<sup>nd</sup> MRB supporting CENTCOM, and 3<sup>rd</sup> MRB supporting AFRICOM. Each battalion has four Marine Special Operations Companies (MSOCs), and each MSOC has four Marine Special Operations Teams (MSOTs). These forces train for “full spectrum” special operations, but they typically perform a subset of the activities. In addition, conventional forces may provide non-organic capability, such as military information support operations.

## References

- [1] Colonel John P. McDonnell, USAF. 2009. "National Strategic Planning: Linking DIMEFIL/PMESII to a Theory of Victory." Masters of Science, Joint Forces Staff College.
- [2] McDonald, LtCol Scott, LtCol Brock Jones, and Maj Jason Frazee. 2012. "Phase Zero: How China Exploits It, Why the United States Does Not." *Naval War College Review* 65 (3): 123-135.
- [3] Alexander Powell. October 2016. *Advice from SOF on the Use of SOF for the Next Administration*. DOP-2016-U-014394-Final.
- [4] Admiral John Richardson, Chief of Naval Operations. "Deconstructing A2AD." *The National Interest*. October 3, 2016.
- [5] B.J. Armstrong. "The Shadow of Air-Sea Battle and the Sinking of A2AD." *War on the Rocks*. October 5, 2016.
- [6] Robert Farley. "A2/AD is Dead, Long Live A2/AD." *The Diplomat*. October 11, 2016.
- [7] Sam J. Tangredi. "CNO vs A2AD: Why Admiral Richardson Is Right about Deconstructing the A2/AD Term." *The Navalist*. January 10, 2017.
- [8] Luis Simón. "Demystifying the A2/AD Buzz." *War on the Rocks*. January 4, 2017.
- [9] Department of Defense. August 11, 2011. *Joint Operations*. Joint Publication 3-0.
- [10] Department of Defense. August 11, 2011. *Joint Operation Planning*. Joint Publication 5-0.
- [11] Charles F. Wald. "The Phase Zero Campaign." *Joint Forces Quarterly* 4th Quarter 2006 (43): 72-75.
- [12] U.S. Africa Command. "United States Africa Command." United States Africa Command. January 15, 2017. Accessed January 15, 2017.
- [13] Robert M. Gates. "Remarks to the Association of the United States Army." Washington, D.C., October 10, 2007.
- [14] Connell, Mary Ellen, and Ryan Evans, eds. 2015. *Russia's "Ambiguous Warfare" and Implications for the U.S. Marine Corps, Arlington, VA, February 25, 2015*. Arlington, VA: CNA. doi: DOP-2015-U-010447-Final.

- [15] Coalson, Robert, and Mark Galeotti. "The 'Gerasimov Doctrine' and Russian Non-Linear War." *In Moscow's Shadows*. July 6, 2014.
- [16] Peter Apps. "'Ambiguous warfare' providing NATO with new challenge." *Reuters*. August 21, 2014.
- [17] Department of Defense. February 2010. *Quadrennial Defense Review Report 2010*.
- [18] CAPT Philip Kapusta. September 9, 2015. *The Gray Zone*. White Paper.
- [19] Bilbao, Adam A., and Lt. Robin R. Mohabir. 2016. *Gray Zone: Understanding the Concept*. Subject: Gray Zone.
- [20] Michael J. Mazarr. December 2, 2015. *Mastering the Gray Zone: Understanding a Changing Era of Conflict*.
- [21] Freier, Nathan P., and *et al.* June 7, 2016. *Outplayed: Regaining Strategic Initiative in the Gray Zone*.
- [22] Miller, William J. A. February 7, 2017. Subject: Competition Short of Armed Conflict Senior Leadership Seminar Invite.
- [23] Clark, Colin. "CJCS Dunford Calls For Strategic Shifts; 'At Peace Or At War Is Insufficient'." *Breaking Defense*. September 21, 2016.
- [24] Department of Defense. June 16, 1995. *Joint Doctrine for Military Operations Other Than War*. Joint Publication 3-07.
- [25] Paul A. Smith. 1989. *On Political War*. Washington: National Defense University Press.
- [26] Frank G. Hoffman. "The Contemporary Spectrum of Conflict; Protracted, Gray Zone, Ambiguous, and Hybrid Modes of War." *The Heritage Foundation* 2016 Index of U.S. Military Strength.
- [27] Belinda Bragg. June 27, 2016. *Specifying & systematizing how we think about the Gray Zone*.
- [28] Department of Defense. July 14, 2016. *Joint Operating Environment 2035: The Joint Force in a Contested and Disordered World*. JOE 2035.
- [29] United States Joint Forces Command. *Joint Operating Environment 2008*. JOE 2008.
- [30] United States Joint Forces Command. *Joint Operating Environment 2010*. JOE 2010.
- [31] 99th Congress. 1986. *National Defense Authorization Act for Fiscal Year 1987*. S. 2638.
- [32] Department of the Army. 1990. *Military Operations in Low Intensity Conflict*. FM 100-20.
- [33] Frank G. Hoffman. "Hybrid vs. Compound War." *Armed Forces Journal*. October 1, 2009.



- [34] Groh, Tyrone L., and Richard J. Bailey Jr. 2015. "Fighting More Fires with Less Water: Phase Zero and Modified Operational Design." *Joint Forces Quarterly* 77 (2nd Quarter): 101-108.
- [35] Robinson, Linda, Paul D. Miller, John Gordon IV, Jeffrey Decker, Michael Schwille, and Raphael S. Cohen. 2014. *Improving Strategic Competence: Lessons from 13 Years of War*. RR-816-A.
- [36] General James N. Mattis, USMC (Ret.). *Global Challenges and U.S. National Security Strategy*. 114th Congress. January 27, 2015.
- [37] The White House. 2015. *National Security Strategy*.
- [38] Department of Defense. 2015. *The National Military Strategy of the United States of America*.
- [39] U.S. Department of State, and USAID. 2014. *U.S. Department of State -- USAID FY2014-2017 Strategic Plan*.
- [40] Department of Defense. July 16, 2014. *Special Operations*. Joint Publication 3-05.
- [41] Colonel Cory M. Peterson. "The Use of Special Operations Forces in Support of American Strategic Security Strategies." In *2014 JSOU and NDIA SO/LIC Essay Contest*.
- [42] Phillip Lohaus. "Special Operations Forces in the Gray Zone." *American Enterprise Institute*. December 2016.
- [43] United States Special Operations Command. *2017 Fact Book*.
- [44] Department of the Navy. 2013. *Naval Special Warfare*. NWP 3-05.

This page intentionally left blank.



## CNA

This report was written by CNA's Strategic Studies (CSS) division.

CSS is CNA's focal point for regional expertise and analyses, political-military studies, and U.S. strategy and force assessments. Its research approach anticipates a broad scope of plausible outcomes assessing today's issues, analyzing trends, and identifying "the issue after next," using the unique operational and policy expertise of its analysts.





CNA is a not-for-profit research organization  
that serves the public interest by providing  
in-depth analysis and result-oriented solutions  
to help government leaders choose  
the best course of action  
in setting policy and managing operations.

*Nobody gets closer—  
to the people, to the data, to the problem.*