

Thinking Dangerously

Imagining United States Special Operations Command in the Post-CT World

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Imagine if there were no United States Special Operations Command (SOCOM) and the Department of Defense (DOD) needed to create a new military entity to provide non-traditional military capability to support U.S. national security interests now and into the future. Escaping from the bonds of past experience and organizational identity, would today's SOCOM be envisioned or would it be something much different in terms of mission space, operational approach, organization, and culture?

The thought exercise above is intended to be provocative and uncomfortable for a command still actively fighting on multiple fronts. History, with all its successes, is not a predictor of future success and is but one factor to inform judgments about the future. A journey of innovation to keep pace with change is easily sidetracked with too much emphasis on past events.

This article addresses the possibility—indeed likelihood—that a rebalancing of direct and indirect special operations forces (SOF) approaches¹ and supporting core activities is essential for improving SOCOM's resiliency against unpredictable, black swan² events and for preventing it from becoming a "fragile" organization. Because the active fight continues and the command's bureaucratic machine still churns on the direct counterterrorism (CT) mission, concerns are here raised about how SOCOM sees itself and its strategic role in protecting national interests now and tomorrow.

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There is justifiably great pride in the extraordinary capabilities and skills SOCOM assembled to transform the nation's SOF enterprise to confront the terrorism threat. There is also a quiet acknowledgement that crucial SOF core activity skills³ are in some cases atrophying while the bulk of the force is applied against enemy terrorist networks.⁴ This perspective is best described as the little voice on the shoulder, the Jiminy Cricket, warning SOCOM that it could be poised for a substantial surprise unless it proactively takes steps to appreciate the emerging international system as it is, rather than how the bureaucracy wants the system to be.

The article proceeds in five parts. First, it briefly describes how SOCOM transformed from a "service-like" combatant command to become the spearhead of counterterrorism operations around the globe. Second, it provides an overview of the emerging international system to evaluate the nature of future mission requirements for SOF over the coming decades. Third, the "antifragile" and "Cynefin" models are offered as sense-making frames for imagining SOCOM's current vulnerability to future, unexpected shocks. Fourth, suggestions to help SOCOM become an antifragile organization are proposed. Finally, SOCOM Design Thinking is presented as a process for empowering creativity throughout the SOF enterprise to move toward antifragile structures and force preparation.

The Dangers of Success

SOCOM on September 10, 2001

On September 10, 2001, U.S. Special Operations Command was only 14 years old, and its primary responsibilities as a combatant command (COCOM) under Title 10 were to

man, train, and equip SOF.⁵ It was relatively young as an organization, it owned no authorities to command deployed forces, and its mission was to ensure the components cultivated the forces for other COCOMs to employ. In many ways, the organization recognized that it was not perceived as a peer to the other COCOMs or services.⁶

While clearly necessary to overcome deficiencies exposed by operations in Iran and Granada, this SOCOM was not the dream duty station of most SOF personnel. Outside of tactical units, SOF personnel often were incentivized to serve on their respective service component staffs as their staff assignment. Contrarily, SOCOM was and remains very much a joint force with all the entrapments of inter-service rivalry and conflicting cultures and doctrine. The Theater Special Operations Commands (TSOCs) were not the responsibility of SOCOM and were themselves less than peer to fellow service components within each Geographic Combatant Command (GCC).

On that Monday morning in 2001, there were an average of 2,900 SOF personnel deployed across the world based on the requirements established and planned for by the GCCs.⁷ Combined forward and support SOF elements totaled 44,600 personnel and deployment to dwell time averaged above a 1:1 ratio.⁸ There were no true geostrategic threats that could credibly tax the military power of the United States outside the potential nexus of weapons of mass destruction and terrorist organizations committed to attacking it.⁹ SOCOM consequently focused its efforts on foreign internal defense (FID), counterterrorism (CT), counterproliferation, and humanitarian assistance.¹⁰ While reliance on SOF increased steadily throughout SOCOM's first

14 years, the demands were certainly manageable.

Responding to 9/11

September 11, 2001 forever altered SOCOM's future. Counterterrorism suddenly elevated in priority, scope, and scale from a niche, crisis response, and episodic capability to the center of foreign policy in a few short months.¹¹ A silent transformation¹² occurred at the headquarters in response to policy guidance combined with time-constrained military decisions focused on effective counterterrorism operations. This transformation reflected purposeful decisions in the prosecution of the Global War on Terror (GWOT) with unknowable consequences to the organization, its culture, and capability.

First among these decisions was the use of SOF to topple the Taliban regime in Afghanistan through a series of operations predominately led by special forces with close air support by the Joint Force Air Component Command.¹³ Second was the need to unexpectedly employ SOF in Iraq's north working with Kurdish Peshmerga to support regime change operations in Iraq.¹⁴ Third was the near immediate spike in counterterrorism operations in Iraq and later Yemen and Afghanistan. Consequently, fourth was the decision to have SOCOM lead the GWOT per the 2004 Unified Command Plan signed in early 2005.

By 2006, 85 percent of deployed SOF personnel were sent to U.S. Central Command's (CENTCOM) Area of Responsibility (AOR), primarily Iraq. By 2010, SOCOM was forced to manage an average of 8,700 SOF deployed per week, with approximately 81 percent deployed to the CENTCOM AOR.¹⁵

Throughout the majority of this period, the main role for SOF in the GWOT was

counter-network/counterterrorism activities, especially the "man hunting" mission.¹⁶ The theory asserted that destroying enemy terrorist networks from the leadership down would provide national government allies the political space to reassert sovereign control over their populations and territories. The all-present metaphor was to "cut off the head of the snake" to neutralize the body. Even when counterinsurgency (COIN) became the main strategy, circa 2007, SOF predominantly emphasized FID/security force assistance (SFA) activities, especially cultivating indigenous special forces who could take over the counter-network operations—teaching partner forces the direct approach.

While the mission and operational employment have changed over time—from unconventional warfare (UW) and CT in Afghanistan, to a robust man-hunting centric apparatus (direct approach) in Iraq, to COIN in Iraq and Afghanistan, and back currently to a combination of FID and UW—there has been a consistency across all the missions. The preponderance of SOF effort has been either in the unilateral direct approach or training partner forces in the application of kinetic techniques. For SOCOM, counter-network/counterterrorism is a new core identity, or at least has been since taking the DOD lead for the CT fight. Moreover, the CT fight has never truly abated, ensuring that it stays elevated above other core activities as a relative matter.

Indirect and Dependent Core Activities Atrophying

Army Lieutenant General H.R. McMaster argues that the Revolution in Military Affairs¹⁷ perspective of the early-1990s led many in the U.S. military to conflate targeting and raiding with strategy, consequently obscuring the fact

that war is political, human, and a test of wills.¹⁸ Certainly the indirect approach envisioned in the early stages of the GWOT was rapidly eclipsed by the demand to disrupt the enemy networks in Afghanistan and Iraq using the direct approach. The decisive long-term success promised by indirect approaches was a casualty of political impatience and a desire for visible results.

COIN, FID, and SFA missions during the GWOT certainly relied heavily on military information support operations (MISO) and civil affairs (CA) capabilities, but they were in support of kinetic operations to enable governments to assert control over their populations. In other words, CA and MISO were secondary to operations rather than the center of operational design with kinetic activities tasked to support them.

For a short period during 2010-2012 in Afghanistan, Village Stability Operations (VSO) attempted to leverage the indirect approach as a primary SOF strategy. Kinetic operations shaped the environment to allow strategic relationships with anti-Taliban villagers to take root. Even this effort ultimately became reduced to local police numbers rather than the relationships Green Berets and even SEALs attempted to foster with suspicious, but hopeful local Afghans.¹⁹

Correcting Courses—Voluntarily or through Tragedy

Unfortunately the stress on the force has not abated. Even as of 2014, 7,200 SOF were deployed as a weekly average with 69 percent still supporting CENTCOM. Between 2006 and 2014, there was an increase in support to U.S. Africa Command from 1 to 10 percent, U.S.



PHI Tim Turner, U.S. Navy

U.S. Navy Seal's search for al-Qaida and Taliban while conducting a Sensitive Site Exploitation mission in the Jaji Mountains, Jan. 12, 2002.

European Command doubled from 3 to 6 percent, and U.S. Pacific Command increased from 7 to 10 percent, but U.S. Southern Command remained relatively stable at 3 to 4 percent over the period.²⁰ With the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL) seizing vast tracts of Syria and Iraq in 2014, the stress on the force has only worsened with a steady increase in SOF deployments to once again advise and assist U.S. partners in the direct approach.

Army General (Ret.) Raymond Odierno recently invoked Francis Bacon's caution that "things alter for the worse spontaneously, if they be not altered for the better designedly."²¹ There is fortunately a robust discussion regarding the need to build flexible forces to meet emerging challenges.²² Yet even these discussions occur within the frame of existing SOF core activities, brigade structures, and doctrinal activities. The overwhelming majority of these ideas and concepts were conceived and established under the conditions of the state-centric Cold War model and then amended haphazardly to deal with the fallout from its expiration. Designing a change strategy designedly first requires a concept of the impending requirements, but the characteristics of the future international system are likely to be far different than the mental models applied from past experience.

Imagining the Post-CT Future

Characteristics of the Emerging International System

Much of the reason SOCOM confidently focused on the direct action mission over the past 15 years was due to the nature of the international system. On September 11, 2001, the United States was still in the midst of its

"unipolar moment."²³ Russia was struggling to chart an economic and political course, China was growing but unwilling to seriously challenge the nature of the international order, and Western Europe was still comfortably enjoying NATO protection and an expanding European Union.²⁴ Now the situation is substantially different. The world is trending toward a multipolar international system with a wicked mixture of state-sponsored proxy, nonstate actor fomented, and cyber-oriented low-level conflicts.²⁵

In other words, the emerging international context over the coming decades is expected to require a combination of allied deterrence and population-centric, relationship-based activities across regions, domains, and functions.²⁶ In his assessment, Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff General Joseph Dunford concluded, "...I don't find the current phrasing construct for operational plans particularly useful right now...I call it competition with a military dimension short of a Phase 3 or traditional conflict, but the activities that they're taking with regard to employment of cyber, unconventional capability, space capabilities [and] information operations are absolutely not associated with what we would call Phase Zero shaping..."²⁷ Stated differently, the linear concept of operational doctrine is decaying under the stresses of the emerging international context.

In SOCOM's view, the future of conflict revolves around what it dubs "the gray zone,"²⁸ which consists of "competitive interactions among and within state and nonstate actors that fall between the traditional war and peace duality. They are characterized by ambiguity about the nature of the conflict, opacity of the parties involved, or uncertainty about the relevant policy and legal frameworks...Overall,

gray zone challenges rise above normal, everyday peacetime geopolitical competition and are aggressive, perspective-dependent and ambiguous.”²⁹

What makes the gray zone so complex from a SOCOM perspective is the multiplicity of national, sub-national, and nonstate actors operating within the international system, each with different interests, techniques, strategies, and capacities to subvert or operate on the margins of international law and institutions. The binding element for most of the main U.S. competitors is the desire to challenge the established Western-dominated international order or replace it altogether with new ordering values.³⁰

Secretary of Defense Ashton Carter³¹ identified current defense challenges as Russia, China, North Korea, Iran, and terrorism.³² While it is unlikely that these challenges will be identical in the world 20 years hence, they are instructive as examples of how to think about and organize for the allied deterrence and population-centric activities that will be required of SOF and conventional forces (CF) to inoculate populations from malign actors in the coming years.

China

For decades, China followed a tradition of respecting non-interference norms adopted by the government in the late-1970s.³³ It recognized that internal economic development required relative regional stability and it quietly opted to support the status quo of the international order while steadily improving its economic and political capacity.³⁴ China currently boasts the world’s largest population and second largest economy.³⁵ However, this growth has come with consequences. It now must import approximately 60 percent of its

oil, it relies on shipping lanes with vulnerable choke points, and it has significant interests susceptible to regional instability in the Middle East and Africa.³⁶

Consequently, China is now strategically dependent upon raw materials from Africa and Latin America and considers regional and sub-regional multilateral institutions as an important component of foreign policy.³⁷ Weak and failing states in Africa are prompting China to invest more heavily in bilateral development assistance to build relationships with African governments.³⁸ This aspect of foreign policy is dubbed “responsible protection” with Chinese participation devoted to facilitating reconciliation and infrastructure development.³⁹

China has announced that it will begin to shape international norms and agendas, not just passively accept those asserted by previously dominant Western states.⁴⁰ In short, subversion of governments has no place in the present or future geostrategic interests of China since its overriding goal is stability to accelerate its gains in national power and to improve its military deterrence capability.⁴¹

China’s government-centric foreign policy and increased exposure presents opportunities as well as risks. For instance, its development practices mirror those of the West from the 1950s-1980s, which resulted in significant critique and blowback from local populations. Rather than signifying a calculated conventional threat abroad, China’s activities could inadvertently promote instability within countries and exacerbate regional tensions. China’s actions could therefore alienate various populations across Africa, Latin America, Southeast Asia, and Central Asia and prompt a preference for Western engagement if relationships are nurtured over time. Conventional forces will certainly lead the majority of allied deterrence

requirements, but SOF could play an important role in strategic probing and population-centric activities.

Russia

Russia represents a revisionist power that consciously employs conventional, unconventional, and cyber warfare approaches. Called “New Generation Warfare,” Russian foreign and military policy seeks to influence populations in the historical Russian sphere of influence by navigating between the lines of international law and along the seams of Western alliances to achieve piecemeal operational gains with overall strategic effect. As Bērziņš explains,

Thus, the Russian view of modern warfare is based on the idea that the main battlespace is the mind and, as a result, new-generation wars are to be dominated by information and psychological warfare... The main objective is to reduce the necessity for deploying hard military power to the minimum necessary, making the opponent's military and civil population support the attacker to the detriment of their own government and country. It is interesting to note the notion of permanent war, since it denotes a permanent enemy. In the current geopolitical structure, the clear enemy is Western civilization, its values, culture, political system, and ideology.⁴²

New Generation Warfare seeks to exploit the seams of allied deterrence through asymmetric, gray zone operations to avoid activating NATO's mandatory military response under Article 5.⁴³ Russia also seeks to expand its geopolitical influence beyond its own natural endowments through engagement abroad,

such as with its own pivot to Asia and Southeast Asia.⁴⁴

Russia's asymmetric approach can be balanced and deterred effectively with a mixture of both SOF and CF. Russia faces serious challenges to growth, such as a declining population and stress on its oil sector, and has a relatively small number of military-ready males.⁴⁵ When and where to deploy SOF and CF to stretch Russia's limited resources and increase its risk will be context dependent, but indirect action activities will probably have greater utility in this context.

Iran

Whereas in 2001 Iran had active proxies in only Lebanon and the Gaza Strip, it now appears to be consolidating its influence regionally with active proxy forces in Iraq, Syria, Lebanon, the Gaza Strip, and possibly Yemen.⁴⁶ Iran has deftly maneuvered through the Arab Spring dynamics to expand its reach across the Middle East through Shia communities and Palestinian militants disaffected by perceived Sunni Arab capitulation to Israel and the United States.⁴⁷ So concerning is this development that geostrategic discussions have reportedly occurred between Israel and Saudi Arabia.⁴⁸

For a host of historical, religious, and ideological reasons, the Iranian regime believes it has the right and ability to become a regional power, if not a regional hegemon.⁴⁹ With extensive energy resources and sitting astride some of the most important international waterways, Iran is well positioned to influence international politics well beyond its immediate borders. Direct Russian military intervention in Syria supporting Iran, along with Chinese economic and geostrategic political support for Iran, indicate a significant setback

in U.S. influence in the region. The Middle East is now a mixture of unconventional warfare, irregular warfare, conventional warfare, and proxy warfare all wrapped in a cyber battle the United States appears unable to dominate.

ISIL

At the time of this writing, ISIL presents the clearest Sunni Salafi jihadist challenge to Western interests and potentially the basis of the international system. As a “global caliphate” with multiple “emirates,” ISIL represents a nonstate revisionist actor that could potentially displace the borders of states whose populations have long-standing grievances with their governments.⁵⁰

In terms of international politics, ISIL rejects the distinction between domestic and international politics, and, instead of sovereign states, it views territory as divided among believers in a state of peace and infidels in a

state of war.⁵¹ Turkish scholars Murat Yesiltas and Tuncay Kardas explain, “In short, ISIL challenges almost all of the ‘primary institutions’ of international society that incorporate the classical ‘Westphalian set,’ such as sovereignty, territoriality, war, international law and great power management, nationalism, and human equality.”⁵²

Importantly, ISIL is representative of a wider crisis of national identity across the Middle East and North Africa.⁵³ The wave of decolonization in the 1950s and 1960s resulted in new states, but failed to create viable nations. The collapse of authoritarian regimes during the Arab Spring and new international norms stressing democratic political systems have enabled ethnic, sectarian, and tribal identities to tear at the fabric of the traditional state system.⁵⁴

After years of conflict and sharpening ethno-sectarian rage, even the basic



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Armed Islamic State

assumptions about the desirability of current international borders can no longer be taken for granted. Historical ethnic, sectarian, and trade zones are being drawn upon to re-conceptualize potential national borders.⁵⁵ Similar patterns have been underway for a long time across Northern Africa. Again, Yesiltas and Kardas cogently summarize the situation:

Under the contemporary experiments, however, state structures tend to stumble and anarchy prevails as the new normal, producing failed states such as Syria, Iraq, Libya and Yemen...Such transformations turn states away from security provision as they become instead a source of insecurity, pushing sub-national ethnic and religious groups to form their own security architecture (i.e. Syria, Iraq and Libya). The resulting struggle of non-state armed groups for control over territory confronts states with a deep ISIL [sic] of security and identity...Syria, Libya, Iraq and Yemen are almost a microcosm of the emerging new micro-geopolitical mechanism of survival engaging major actors as well as violent non-state armed actors.⁵⁶

In countries where identity politics and fear of government security services undermine the state system, FID and SFA engagement with a direct action orientation could actually aggravate the tensions that make revisionist nonstate actors attractive to aggrieved populations. Sensitivity to such environments requires a higher degree of intelligence and placement than SOF enjoys today.

Rebalancing SOF Core Activities Given the Emergent International System

If the trends above are accurate and likely to persist, then the concept of “stability” in the

international system becomes an illusory and reactive position. Multipolar and gray zone dynamics in the 21st century will be inherently unstable and require constant probing. Strategic opportunities will need to be sensed and seized upon through established access, placement, and relationships with allies and proxies.⁵⁷ The emerging international context will require accepting change over stability and being proactive, experimental, and creative to inoculate populations from the influence of U.S. competitors and enemies.

In other words, there is a potentially high opportunity cost to SOCOM if it continues to emphasize direct over indirect action. SOF cannot be everywhere and it will have to coordinate with the CF to apply the right allied deterrence or relationship-building effect. The majority of U.S. challengers are playing for the long game— influencing populations, changing mindsets, using force to creatively create space where populations currently challenge their own governments. An appropriate strategic response is to play in the same realm, which means that relationships and deep cultural appreciation will become strategic multipliers for national security.

Anti-Fragile and Cynefin as Concepts for the Emerging International System

To say the world is becoming more “complex” is so cliché as to have little meaning. Yet thinking in terms of complexity does have value for conceptualizing how SOCOM repositions itself relative to its potential Title 10 responsibilities and its current role as synchronizing the Department’s efforts against transregional threats. As the international system moves toward multipolar and gray zone characteristics, a bureaucracy that has incentivized direct approaches could be setting itself up for

strategic failure. Ironically, the world's fiercest special operations enterprise could be considered a "fragile" one nonetheless.

Fragile and Antifragile Organization Characteristics

Nassim Nicholas Taleb argues in a series of books that improbable events are highly probable despite being rare. Black swan events are only injurious because organizations do not anticipate them and leave themselves open to risk. Positive black swans also occur, but can be easily missed if organizations fail to "tinker" with and "collect" them due to a lack of exposure and flexibility.⁵⁸ Organizations that assume the future operating context will resemble the current one become dependent upon that key assumption. In turn, they become highly vulnerable—or fragile—to shocks in the system.⁵⁹

"Antifragile" organizations, on the other hand, are those that best position themselves to absorb shocks and emerge stronger from the experience.⁶⁰ In between the fragile – anti-fragile spectrum is "robustness," which Taleb views as the ability to survive a shock and rebound over time.⁶¹ There is, thus, an important distinction between antifragile and robust organizations, and Taleb recommends striving for antifragility as much as possible to mitigate the costs of black swan events.⁶²

Imagining SOCOM as a "fragile" organization is surely hard for many. In truth, SOCOM will not fold if another black swan of the magnitude of 9/11 hits the United States; it will persist. The concept of fragility relates more to the less obvious opportunity costs associated with forfeited (a) influence with allies, (b) balancing options against aggressive competitors,

(c) critical ground intelligence or situational awareness, (d) potential loss of funding and readiness, and—most importantly—(e) lives lost responding to crises rather than being proactively positioned to influence them before the event or prevent them altogether.

Strategic failure to appropriately fulfill its responsibilities is the fragility SOCOM faces. As it currently stands, a SOCOM bureaucracy rooted in a CT-centric identity believes it *should* provide appropriately trained SOF to meet a relatively restricted range of SOF missions with an emphasis on providing the best equipped man hunters in the world to defeat terrorist networks—or it will train partners to do the same. Although the other core activities are not consciously ignored, by default they receive less attention in both the resourcing and operational arenas. SOCOM's emphasis on direct action could be too "simple" a solution for the political complexity facing SOCOM as a strategic foreign policy asset.

Complexity and Cynefin Framework

To be clear, nothing about SOF counterterrorism and direct action capabilities is simple. In fact, the very creation and sustainment of an agile, man hunting enterprise is unprecedented and, quite frankly, remarkable. Yet how SOCOM and its bureaucracy make sense of their contributions to U.S. national security interests could be moving in the "simple" direction. The terms "simple, complicated, complex, and chaos" are derived from a highly instructive sense-making model, called the Cynefin Framework (Figure 1).⁶³ The framework is designed to aid conceptual exploration and explain where one sits during a period of change.

When the operating environment is perceived to be static, or in a frame "understood,"

based upon years of experience, then it is normal to interpret activities within an ordered system. In Cynefin, ordered systems can be divided into “simple” and “complicated” domains. Simple domains are well known, cause and effect are easily understood, and best practices are applied against criteria to determine appropriate responses. The tasks are to sense, categorize, and respond. Complicated domains are still ordered, but require specialized or expert knowledge to make sense of cause and effect. The tasks are to sense, analyze, and respond, and, since there might be multiple interpretations of the specialized analysis, response activities fall along a range of good practices.⁶⁴

When organizations enter the complex domain, cause and effect are unknowable and interactions lack clear order despite what our

eyes and minds might deceive us into believing. Complex domains are typically fluid, open systems, meaning the number of variables influencing events are too numerous or hidden to truly grasp or measure. Most social interactions fall into this category,⁶⁵ and the tasks are to probe, sense, and respond to learn how populations and social structures operate. There are no best or even good practices to rely upon because every situation is unique. The only option is failsafe experimentation or “emergent practice.”⁶⁶ Emergent practice means trial and error, intervening in the system without prediction or certainty. This is not a routinely accepted approach to military operations.

Familiarity with the culture and politics of one’s domestic social environment offers at least a starting point for investigations and



Figure 1. The Cynefin Framework. Adapted from Brougham 2015, 8-9.

research. Entering a completely foreign social environment with radically different cultural and normative underpinnings magnifies the degree of the situation's complexity. The more the military is required to work with foreign partners and populations, the more first-hand experience it will require to avoid alienating vital populations.

In the final domain, chaos, no order or possibility of deciphering meaning exists. The tasks are to act, sense, and respond to stabilize the situation, sense outcomes to the stabilization effort, and adapt as much as possible with novel practice. There is high probability for error, but effort must start somewhere.⁶⁷

Improving one's sense of a situation can lead to crossing borders, such as from chaos to complex, complex to complicated, or complicated to simple. In some Cynefin models, the simple domain is depicted as having a precipice over which organizations can fall into the chaos domain. It is the only border where this exists, and it is meant to demonstrate that an organization's own sense of order is inherently perilous should a black swan occur.⁶⁸ Depending on the domain one is in, the thinking and behaviors should be different. An organization wrapped up in its current operating environment becomes fragile to black swans because it believes it is acting in a world of best practices—everything can be fit into the sense of mission...until it suddenly cannot.

From a sense-making perspective, SOCOM has transformed its own sense of self from one distributed across a range of components with a range of capabilities to meet a range of equally specialized missions to one narrowly focused on a particular specialized capability. In effect, SOCOM has transformed from a heterogeneous confederation able to adapt to complexity to a more homogeneous enterprise

focused on a much more narrow perception of its place in the active fight.

Avoiding a "Fragile" SOCOM on the Cliff's Edge

As the international system evolves with a wider range of potential threats and strategic initiatives by competitors, the "simple" assumptions of the value of SOF as a strategic national asset deserve reconsidering. Direct action and its associated partner capacity missions could very well exacerbate many of the dynamics working against U.S. national interests. Growing systemic complexity consequently demands questioning the very foundations of SOCOM identity and strategic posturing for emerging global politics.

Prevalent within SOF is the no fail attitude: "just give me the authorities and I'll get it done." While critical to SOF direct action and counterterrorism success at the tactical and operational levels, this attitude does not help inform the strategic issues of what should be done and where because it implicitly relates to the many current kinetically-oriented SOF missions. In other words, there is a strong chance of groupthink pervading the bureaucracy with a "simple" sense-making perspective of SOCOM's singular role in the contemporary environment.

The prevalent organizational identity and bias reduces the divergent thinking necessary to question the initial and continued emphasis on counterterrorism missions given the changes in the international context. Concentrating force development and capabilities to fuel the man hunting enterprise could leave SOCOM "fragile" to a black swan event. SOCOM could be swept over the precipice into the "chaos" of the new international order. SOCOM would likely rise once again,

but it would be extraordinarily costly in lives, treasure, and strategic influence.

Clearly, there has been some self-reflection within SOF as evidenced by the Army Special Operations Forces (ARSOF) 2022 vision. Specifically that vision has since manifested in organizational changes with the creation of the Office of Special Warfare, 1st Special Forces Command, and new 4th Battalions for each group. This is but a single step; one that might be an attempt to “return to history” by building what we wish special forces possessed on 9/11. Is it informed by lessons learned about the past or informed by judgment about the future?

The current and emerging strategic and operational requirements ought to shape and inform capability development. Too often the military creates capabilities agnostic of the environment then seeks a mission. This approach will not suffice to meet the challenges SOF will face in the future. The enterprise must retain a diverse set of capabilities to meet an equally diverse set of known and unknown threats. While ARSOF 2022 is a good starting point for discussion and useful for U.S. Army Special Operations Command, it is not a joint vision for the SOF enterprise and its place and role in the emergent future. SOCOM must chart a course that unifies the “tribes” and enables the maturation of SOCOM into a true SOF enterprise. The critical question is whether the SOCOM vision is aligned with the emergent future and role of SOF within that world.

Anti-Fragile SOCOM Principles

Reframe SOCOM's Role

Unless SOCOM purposefully changes its frame of the situation, it will not recognize its

problem or acknowledge a need to change until it is confronted by surprise and failure. Protecting or codifying what was built during the CT war is no guarantee against strategic failure and is more likely to contribute to strategic surprise and organizational failure in the future.

The exploitation of the gray zone by our traditional and newly emerging competitors, adversaries, and enemies demands a shift in our thinking about the evolving role of SOF. The United States has a reactive, contingency approach to the use of military forces. As such, politicians provide guidance and the military develops a range of plans to employ military power to address what we anticipate—crisis and war. This approach may have been appropriate in the more predictable and less dynamic Cold War era, but is untenable in the modern era.

Proactive SOF actions today—informed by a desire to prevent war—would manifest operations differently. Often no less operationally risky, these precisely crafted operations would nest within the gray zone predominated by indirect approaches. A change in thinking would lead to changes in the ways SOF organizes (perhaps less rigid and permanent), procures, trains, and operates to accomplish its role in the continuously evolving world. The nuanced and often subtle application of the full range of current and yet-to-be-developed SOF capabilities will be required for success.

Relationship Entrepreneur Vision

Building relationships for both allied deterrence and inoculating populations from malign actors is clearly a growing strategic requirement. For SOCOM, this means appreciating the world through the lens of U.S. competitors and enemies, forecasting the

populations they are likely to target for expansion 5 to 10 years from the present, acquiring relevant population-centric analysis and intelligence, and preparing SOF personnel for engagement. Doing so proactively instead of waiting for a crisis can greatly reduce the cost of gathering information and allow the United States to proactively deny the enemy operating space.⁶⁹

Reframe the 21st Century Operator

The Future SOF operator may not be recognizable to those in the force today. SOF has established tests of physical prowess, mental endurance, and intellect, and these attributes might well remain valid for certain SOF tribes. Tomorrow might require the addition or evolution of the operator with different skills and characteristics beyond those needed today. There are already fragments within the enterprise that recognize the need for change, and the deeply-seated bias of current selection criteria is an obstacle to change.

Moreover, it might be the case that SOCOM will require all SOF to focus on building relationships for strategic effect. What would SOF hypothetically look like if there were a merging of Civil Affairs, Cyber, and MISO that constituted the core SOF identity while kinetic operators settled into a less forward role to create the operating space to amplify their effects?

At a minimum, the debate should raise some interesting issues about organizational structure, identity, recruitment, and training. Could it be, for instance, that the line between enabler and operator of today will erode, blur, and become contextually dependent upon the mission? Could it be, as with Russian New Generation Warfare, the preponderance of the force might need to be experts in influence

operations, but more fluent in cyber, MISO, and other technologies not yet fielded? Is it possible that an entirely new tribe of operator needs to evolve to give added diversity in times of dynamic change?

To encourage divergent ideas and probe the complexity, SOCOM must protect the diversity of the SOF tribes and reduce any unintended trend toward creating homogeneity. An Operational Detachment Alpha is not analogous to a SEAL Platoon, nor is a Marine Raider Team the same as a Ranger Platoon. They each are drawn from a different service and pool of candidates and are screened, selected, and trained for a range of missions. SOF's strength remains its diversity and agility of thinking and force capability. This key attribute must be guarded even at the expense of limiting capacity in certain mission areas.

Choose Missions Wisely—Forces are not Fungible

With this diversity comes limited capacity whereby military and political leaders must selectively employ SOF for the most critical missions and not those that can be accomplished by CF who in their own right have gained much during this war. Given the rate of deployment, SOCOM should reconsider the core activities and whether under future conditions it is even wise for SOF to undertake them. For instance, during the height of the SOF deployments, CF assumed many FID and SFA responsibilities.

To preserve the military's most precious forces, SOCOM should reserve SOF capabilities for the highest payoff and most difficult problems that cannot be addressed through other military options. SOCOM must guard against SOF's trend toward becoming a hyper-conventional force typical of the operator

mentality, “We can do it better or faster!” While it might be true in many cases, it does not mean SOF should be the force employed. This also means a much smaller SOF formation must rely on its relationship with the CF and be more fully integrated. Certainly these lessons have been learned in mature theaters, but this applies in time of crisis as well.

Bureaucracy that Encourages Creativity

Bernard Shaw once said, “Progress is impossible without change, and those who can’t change their minds can’t change anything.” Although the conditions that sustain extremism are far from gone, SOCOM has a responsibility to offer the nation alternative solutions to a myriad of challenges beyond counterterrorism. SOF’s alternative thinking about military problems is in essence an unstated core activity that has and will continue to contribute to U.S. national security.

If SOCOM is indeed fragile to black swan events, it is because the bureaucracy—like in most organizations—becomes entranced with its own process based on an unchanging identity. As military personnel rotate in and out and government civilians hesitantly implement fleeting orders, creativity, innovation, and agility are lost if not rejected. To avoid fragility, leadership, particularly at the action officer and O-6 and GS-14/15 levels, must encourage creative thinking; of course, this goes against hierarchical bureaucratic traditions. They should ask, “Have we become rigid in our thinking about ourselves, the world, and our role within it?” More importantly, they should encourage their personnel to do so on a regular basis and be open to thoughtful conclusions from their staffs when such answers arise.

Conclusion: Thinking is Dangerous—Imagining Change

The implications are potentially unsettling for many in the SOF enterprise

Many in the SOF enterprise have identities shaped by their experiences and successes in the CT arena. For many mid-grade and senior leaders, the CT era is all they know. Questioning the efficacy of the current “way of doing business” can be seen as a direct challenge to the very heart of the operator and the force. SOF are certainly creative within the tactical box. But SOCOM as an enterprise must be ready to remove the box and question whether the core activities themselves are valid, invalid, incomplete, or in need of redefining to align with the evolving world.

There have been internal initiatives to reemphasize the need for indirect approaches and a return to core with UW or its new stepbrother, counter-UW or “support to resistance.” The likely shift to operations in the gray zone will offer legal challenges for traditional military activities that are normally more precisely recognized and defined. In such circumstances, direct action teams and even FID/SEA might be the wrong types of SOF to employ since they will not be activated. SOF for the gray zone will take some time to train and prepare, so the hard questions must be posed now while there is still time to realign.

Design Thinking as one component

SOCOM Design Thinking is a powerful tool to help individuals and the enterprise as a whole successfully navigate complexity. In 2015, former SOCOM commander General Joseph Votel, voiced concern that the organization might have become too rigid in its

imagination and identity. He tasked the Joint Special Operations University (JSOU) to develop a SOCOM Design Thinking approach to unleash the store of creativity shuffling through its halls.⁷⁰ General Votel intuited that the key to becoming an antifragile organization was to energize the 69,000 minds across the SOF enterprise to crunch on the challenges ahead.

The SOCOM Design Thinking approach can help the command adapt to a non-linear, complex world in a number of areas. First, it can promote creative SOF thinking about how to proactively navigate emerging opportunities while critically deconstructing the emphasis on the inherently reactive concept of stability. Doing so better positions SOF for positive black swan events whether through cultivated relationships or mistakes by challengers. Second, it can empower essential questioning on whether SOF should be deployed to take on missions CF can effectively handle. SOF are on a path for becoming expended, especially in light of conventional force reductions which will inevitably reduce the size of SOF in the coming years. Third, it can inform the professional, language, and cultural training of the force for engaging populations before competitors seize the initiative. Fourth, it can assist creative thinking outside the direct action lens through which the majority of mid-grade and senior leaders have experienced SOF over the last 15 years of conflict. Their experiences and expectations of what it means to be SOF will likely require adaptation to the emerging international context and new technology.

It is certainly possible that the emerging international context described above is missing important nuance and other critical variables. The purpose in writing this article is less about the vision of the future and more about

the process of unleashing creativity. If the future envisioned here is wrong or incomplete, it is hoped that superior ones appear. The key is for leadership within SOCOM to encourage critical introspection, accept the discomfort of the process, improve SOCOM's ability to respond to emerging challenges and inevitable black swan events, and to restore SOCOM as an antifragile organization for a very complex world. **PRISM**

Notes

¹ For the purposes of discussion, this article defines direct and indirect approaches broadly according to the application of force whether by US or partner military and police forces. The authors fully recognize that direct action has a specific mission connotation. ARSOF 2022 recommends using the terms Surgical Strike and Special Warfare, respectively, but the authors are writing for the broader SOF enterprise inclusive of components' contributions vice exclusively the Army SOF component specifically (US Army Special Operations Command 2013).

² Black Swan events are very rare, high impact, and predictable only in retrospect. They can be good or bad, but most analysts tend to focus on the negative Black Swan events due to the harm they cause those oblivious to the probability (Taleb 2010, xxii).

³ SOF core activities include a range of direct and indirect approaches; each designed to achieve different though often complementary strategic, political effects. Capabilities with a kinetic character include direct action (DA), counterterrorism (CT), foreign internal defense (FID), security force assistance (SFA), and hostage rescue and recovery. Capabilities with a non-kinetic character include military information support systems (MISO), civil affairs operations (CAO), and foreign humanitarian assistance. Of course, many of these activities blend in practice or are specifically required to work in concert such as during unconventional warfare (UW), irregular warfare (IW), counterinsurgency (COIN), and counter-proliferation of Weapons of Mass Destruction (CWMD) operations.

⁴ Joseph L. Votel, Charles T. Cleveland, Charles T. Connett, and Will Irwin. "Unconventional Warfare in the Gray Zone." *Joint Forces Quarterly* 80, no. 1st Qtr (2016): 102; David Scott Mann. *Game Changers: Going Local to Defeat Violent Extremists*. Leesburg, VA: Tribal Analysis Center, 2015.

⁵ USSOCOM/SOCS-HO. *United States Special Operations Command History, 6th Edition*. 6th. MacDill AFB, FL: United States Special Operations Command, 2008, 8.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 12-18.

⁷ United States Government Accountability Office. *Special Operations Forces: Opportunities Exist to Improve Transparency of Funding and Assess Potential to Lessen Some Deployments*. Congressional Committees,

United States Government Accountability Office, Washington, DC: US GAO, 2015, 23.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 9 & 26.

⁹ Charles Krauthammer. "The Unipolar Moment Revisited." *The National Interest*, Winter 2002/03: 9.

¹⁰ USSOCOM/SOCS-HO, *SOCOM History*, 6th ed., 9-10.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 14-17.

¹² (Jullien 2011)

¹³ 13 USSOCOM/SOCS-HO, 91-107.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 121-137.

¹⁵ USGAO, *Opportunities Exist to Improve Transparency of Funding*, 23-24.

¹⁶ Linda Robinson. "The Future of Special Operations: Beyond Kill and Capture." *Foreign Affairs* 91, no. 6 (November/December 2012): 112.

¹⁷ The idea of a Revolution in Military Affairs evolved from the merging technological revolutions in communications, surveillance, precision munitions, and information technology. It posited that enemy forces could be quickly overwhelmed thereby reducing the cost and duration of conflict.

¹⁸ H.R. McMaster. "Continuity and Change: The Army Operating Concept and Clear Thinking About Future War." *Military Review*, March-April 2015: 6-20

¹⁹ Mann, *Game Changers*, 61-77.

²⁰ USGAO, *Opportunities Exist to Improve Transparency of Funding*, 23-24.

²¹ Raymond T. Odierno. "The U.S. Army in a Time of Transition: Building a Flexible Force." *Foreign Affairs* 91, no. 3 (May/June 2012): 11.

²² Odierno, "Time of Transition," 7-11; Votel et al, "Gray Zone," 101-109; US Army Special Operations Command. "ARSOF 2022." Edited by Janice Burton. *Special Warfare* (Headquarters, Department of the Army) 26, no. 2 (Apr-Jun 2013): 17-48.

²³ Charles Krauthammer. "The Unipolar Moment." *Foreign Affairs* (Council on Foreign Relations), 1990.

²⁴ Krauthammer, "Unipolar Moment Revisited," 3.

²⁵ National Intelligence Council. *Global Trends 2025: A Transformed World*. Analysis, Office of the Director of National Intelligence, Washington, DC: National Intelligence Council, 2008; National Intelligence Council. *Global Trends 2030: Antennae Worlds*. Analysis, Office of the Director of National Intelligence, Washington, DC: National Intelligence Council, 2012; Sadik Ünay. "Reality or Mirage?: BRICS and the Making of Multipolarity in the Global Political Economy." *Insight Turkey*, 2013: 77.

²⁶ Jim Garamone. *Dunford Discusses Challenges to the Joint Force, Need for Defense Reform*. March 29, 2016. www.defense.gov/News-Article-View/Article/707639/dunford-discusses-challenges-to-the-joint-force-need-for-defense-reform (accessed July 16, 2016).

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ Another common, related term is “hybrid warfare” which includes environments where regular and irregular forces operate with or among civilians and where the opportunity for crime and terrorism complicate stabilization operations (Odierno 2012, 10).

²⁹ Philip Kapusta. “The Gray Zone.” *Special Warfare*, Oct-Dec 2015: 20.

³⁰ Murat Yesiltas and Tuncay Kardas. “The New Middle East, ISIL and the 6th Revolt Against the West.” *Insight Turkey*, 2015: 68-69 & 72; Serafettin Yilmaz. “The Iranian Nuclear Dilemma: A Comparative Analysis of Chinese and US Strategy.” *International Journal of China Studies* 6, no. 1 (April 2015): 45.

³¹ See also Votel et al, “Gray Zone” 2016.

³² Lisa Ferdinando. *Carter Outlines Security Challenges, Warns Against Sequestration*. March 17, 2016. www.defense.gov/News-Article-View/Article/696449/carter-outlines-security-challenges-warns-against-sequestration (accessed July 16, 2016).

³³ Ren Xiao. “Idea Change Matters: China’s Practices and the East Asian Peace.” *Asian Perspective* 40 (2016): 343-345.

³⁴ Ibid., 349.

³⁵ The World Bank. *World Bank: China*. April 6, 2016. <http://www.worldbank.org/en/country/china/overview> (accessed June 28, 2016).

³⁶ Keith Johnson. “China’s Thirst Oil is transforming the country’s foreign policy. Can the United States handle the consequences?” *Foreign Policy*, March/April 2015: 76-77; Yilmaz, “Iranian Nuclear Dilemma,” 54.

³⁷ Chris Alden and Daniel Large. “On Becoming a Norms Maker: Chinese Foreign Policy, Norms Evolution and the Challenges of Security in Africa.” *The China Quarterly* 221 (March 2015): 128; Bernadett Lehoczki. “Relations Between China and Latin America: Inter-regionalism Beyond the Triad.” *Society and Economy* 37, no. 3 (2015): 391 & 399-400.

³⁸ Alden and Large, “Becoming a Norms Maker,” 128.

³⁹ Ibid., 135.

⁴⁰ Alden and Large, “Becoming a Norms Maker,” 133; Johnson, “China’s Thirst,” 77.

⁴¹ Xiao, “Idea Change Matters,” 349; Monika Chansoria. “Rising Dragon: Military Modernization of China’s PLA in the 21st Century.” *The Journal of East Asian Affairs* 25, no. 1 (Spring/Summer 2011): 15-58.

⁴² Jānis Bērziņš. *Russia’s New Generation Warfare in Ukraine: Implications for Latvian Defense Policy*. Policy Paper, Center for Security and Strategic Research, National Defence Academy of Latvia, Riga: National Defence Academy of Latvia (2014) 5.

⁴³ Ibid., 8 & 12.

⁴⁴ Anton Tsvetov. “After Crimea: Southeast Asia in Russia’s Foreign Policy Narrative.” *Contemporary Southeast Asia* 38, no. 1 (2016): 58-64; Paradorn Rangsimaporn. “Russia’s Search for Influence in Southeast Asia.” *Asian Survey* 49, no. 5 (September/October 2009): 792-795.

⁴⁵ United Nations Development Programme. *Russia Facing Demographic Challenges*. National Human Development Report, Moscow: UNDP, 2008.

⁴⁶ Frederick W. Kagan, Ahmad K. Majidyar, Danielle Pletka, and Marisa Cochrane Sullivan. *Iranian Influence in the Levant, Egypt, Iraq, and Afghanistan*. Institute for the Study of War and American Enterprise Institute, Washington, DC: Institute for the Study of War and American Enterprise Institute, 2012; Henry Johnson. *This Map Explains the Saudi-Iran Proxy War*. January 6, 2016. <http://foreignpolicy.com/2016/01/06/this-map-explains-the-saudi-iran-proxy-war/> (accessed July 16, 2016).

⁴⁷ Elizabeth Monier. “Egypt, Iran, and the Hizbullah Cell: Using Sectarianism to “De-Arabize” and Regionalize Threats to National Interests.” *Middle East Journal* 69, no. 3 (Summer 2015): 348-349-354.

⁴⁸ Haaretz. *Haaretz: Sunday Times: Israel, Saudi Arabia Cooperating to Plan Possible Iran Attack*. 11 17, 2013. <http://www.haaretz.com/israel-news/1.558512> (accessed 6 28, 2016).

⁴⁹ Yilmaz, “Iranian Nuclear Dilemma,” 50-51.

⁵⁰ Yesiltas and Kardas, “New Middle East,” 72.

⁵¹ Ibid., 75.

⁵² Ibid., 78.

⁵³ Ibid., 72.

⁵⁴ Ibid., 66-70.

⁵⁵ Ibid., 79.

⁵⁶ Ibid., 80.

⁵⁷ Odierno, “Time of Transition,” 7-11; Kapusta, “Gray Zone,” 19-25.

⁵⁸ Nassim Nicholas Taleb. *The Black Swan: The Impact of the Highly Improbable*. New York: Random House Trade Paperbacks, 2010, xxv.

⁵⁹ Nassim Nicholas Taleb. *Antifragile: Things that Gain from Disorder*. New York: Random House Trade Paperbacks, 2014, 46.

⁶⁰ Taleb, *Antifragile*, 31-53.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, 8.

⁶² *Ibid.*, 22.

⁶³ Greg Brougham. *The Cynefin Mini-Book: An Introduction to Complexity and the Cynefin Framework*. Middletown: InfoQ.com, 2015.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, 6-8.

⁶⁵ Horst W.J. Rittel and Melvin M. Webber. "Dilemmas in a General Theory of Planning." *Policy Sciences* 4 (1973): 155-169.

⁶⁶ Brougham, *The Cynefin Mini-Book*, 9.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*

⁶⁸ Bob Williams and Richard Hummelbrunner. *Systems Concepts in Action: A Practitioner's Toolkit*. Stanford: Stanford Business Books, 2009, 172.

⁶⁹ LTG Michael Flynn, James Sisco, and David C. Ellis. "Left of Bang: The Value of Sociocultural Analysis in Today's Environment." *PRISM* 3, no. 4 (2012): 3-21.

⁷⁰ Charles Black, Tracy Moss, Richard Newton, and Christopher Phelps. *White Paper: Design Thinking for the SOF Enterprise*. White Paper, SOCOM. Tampa: SOCOM 2016.

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