

# Strategy Research Project

## China's Special Operations Forces Modernization, Professionalization and Regional Implications

by

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## **Abstract**

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## **China's Special Operations Forces Modernization, Professionalization and Regional Implications**

The growth and utilization of special operations forces (SOF) throughout the world by many nations is a clear indication of their value. For over 12 years the United States (US) employed the expertise of these highly trained and skilled warriors with great precision, effectiveness, and success for operations in both Iraq and Afghanistan. The Chinese, throughout their history, have also realized the value and utility of SOF and are investing extensively in the modernization and professionalization of these forces. In *The Art of War*, ancient writings that had a profound effect on Chinese military theory, Sun Tzu placed high enough regard on the value of secret operations that he devoted an entire chapter to the employment of secret agents. Sun Tzu stated that “of all those in the army close to the commander none is more intimate than the secret agent...of all matters none is more confidential than those relating to secret operations.”<sup>1</sup> This ancient theory professes the value a commander should place on SOF and its operations. This value is clearly evident in the modernization and professionalization program the Chinese are executing for their special operations forces.

This paper will look at China's military modernization and its shift from a traditionally large conscript force to one that is smaller, more professionalized, and able to win local wars under high tech conditions. Specifically, the focus will be China's SOF and how modernization and professionalization are affecting them and their capabilities. It will analyze the implications Chinese SOF modernization will have for the region, how they might be employed, and what this will mean for the nations the US has bi-lateral defense agreements with, especially Taiwan. The conclusion will include some

observations and recommendations on how the US might counter these efforts as it develops a strategy to support the policy rebalance to the Pacific.

### Chinese Military Modernization and Professionalization

Beginning in 2000 Congress directed the Department of Defense (DOD) to prepare both classified and unclassified assessments on military and security developments involving the People's Republic of China. The first line of the 2012 report reads: "The People's Republic of China (PRC) is pursuing a long-term, comprehensive military modernization program designed to improve the capacity of China's armed forces to fight and win local wars under conditions of information, or high-intensity, information-centric regional military operations of short duration."<sup>2</sup> This currently describes the approach China is taking to modernize and professionalize every aspect of its military.

Chinese military modernization began in the early 1950s immediately after the Korean War. China realized that despite all its warnings US forces continued to approach and threaten its border with North Korea along the Yalu River. China also perceived the former Soviet Union, a Communist ally, as threatening to Chinese sovereignty. For the next 30 years Chinese modernization would ebb and flow but ultimately depend on mass formations of men and equipment and a military strategy based on the concept of active defense. The origins of active defense started during the Chinese revolutionary war and encompassed a military strategy of offensive defense, or defense through decisive engagements, in which People's Liberation Army (PLA) units would proactively engage the enemy and exploit identified weak points in an attempt to destroy that enemy's capabilities and will.<sup>3</sup> This type of strategy also

required an army force structure of overwhelming size. Not until 1979 would the fallacy of this strategy prove wrong.

Tensions between China and Vietnam heated up in 1978 after Vietnam's invasion of Cambodia, a Chinese ally, Hanoi's signing of a treaty of friendship and cooperation with the Soviet Union, and Vietnam's expulsion of Vietnamese of Chinese descent. The Chinese invaded Vietnam using the same human wave attacks and strategy employed against the US-led United Nations forces during the Korean War. Using well-trained militia with years of combat experience gained from fighting the US, the well dug-in Vietnamese cut down the mass formations of Chinese troops with machine guns, while mines and booby traps did the rest.<sup>4</sup> The Chinese government was horrified by the lack of success, and even though they relieved their generals in charge, it was apparent greater problems existed within the PLA than just poor leadership. The incursion into Vietnam was a wakeup call that large formations of Chinese military manpower could be stopped by highly trained, combat-tested, professional militia and Special Forces. The invasion demonstrated a major concern for the Chinese leadership: "good strategy, bad tactics coupled with a realization of just how outdated its battlefield tactics and weaponry really were" left the PLA perplexed on its overall capability to secure China's borders.<sup>5</sup> This resulted in a program to transform and modernize the four million-plus men of the bloated PLA, which continues even today.

The 1980s were a period of total reform throughout China, from its government to its economy to its military. The realization that the PLA was "swollen, lax, self-conceited, extravagant, and lazy" and that the leading military organizations were "weak, lazy, and loose leading bodies" was captured, as early as 1975, during a speech by Deng

Xiaoping, the principal leader and reformist of the Communist Party throughout the 1980s and 90s.<sup>6</sup> However, he made it extremely clear his major focus was the economy, not the military, as he stated in a 1985 speech:

Only when we have a good economic foundation will it be possible to modernize the army's equipment, so we must be patient for a few years, but I am certain that by the end of the century we can surpass the goal of quadrupling the Gross National Product. That is the most important thing, everything else must be subordinated to it.<sup>7</sup>

So while real military modernization would have to wait, the generals would also have to be patient operating the PLA with a budget of less than 1.5% of Gross Domestic Product.<sup>8</sup>

Even with only a modest budget, the PLA could transform an archaic “mass formation” force into something along the lines of the US’s now decade-old professional volunteer force. The security situation for China in 1985 was changing, as the threat of nuclear war by the super powers continued to subside. Both the US and Soviet Union were engaged in limited wars around the world, increasing China’s sense of security during this time. The US invasions of Grenada and Panama, the British-Argentine war in the Falklands, and the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan showed how the great powers were engaged in geographically localized limited wars. The Central Military Commission declared the most likely military contingency China faced to be “local, limited war” (replacing the threat of the “early, major, and nuclear war” foreseen by Mao Tse-tung).<sup>9</sup> As a result, the Chinese believed they had the time and security to begin a program that would reduce the force structure of the PLA from roughly 4 million in 1979 to a force of about 2.3 million people in 2005.<sup>10</sup> New Chinese force structure eliminated redundancy, reshaped doctrine in order to fight “local, limited wars,” and increased the intensity and difficulty of training. The lack of combat experience of the Chinese soldier and the

tenacity of the battle-hardened veterans from their border war with Vietnam mandated an increased focus for realistic and difficult training. The future Chinese way of war would not rely on the “masses of men” to overcome an enemy; instead, a very modernized, professionalized, disciplined, and smaller PLA would be the force of choice for the future.

Simultaneous with the overall reform and restructure of the PLA, the lessons of the Sino-Vietnam conflict also brought to light its lack of dedicated special operations forces. During World War II and the Korean War China used specially selected personnel from the army to conduct reconnaissance and raids behind enemy lines. However, the effectiveness of the Vietnamese militia and other special units that inflicted so many casualties on the PLA really identified a gap in its existing special operations force structure. As a result the PLA established its first SOF organization in 1988, as a rapid reaction unit, assigned to the Guangzhou Military Region:

The unit, known as Special Reconnaissance Group, was given new weapons and equipment which were not available to regular army units. Its members received specialized training in field survival, swimming with full gear, parachute jumping, and helicopter-borne assault.<sup>11</sup>

From this moment forward the PLA’s transformational direction would also affect the future structure, role, and employment considerations in the growth and professionalization of Chinese SOF.

Before the Chinese could fully implement many of the reforms envisioned in this new “limited war” concept, the US and its Coalition partners engaged Iraqi forces to expel them from Kuwait. Many within the PLA saw this as an amazing display of technology through the use of precision guided munitions:

These weapons impressed PLA strategists with the need to prepare for local wars under high-technology conditions and the 1999 NATO

operations in Kosovo served to reinforce, and even increase, the PLA's sense of urgency to modernize every aspect of its military.<sup>12</sup>

The Chinese saw once again how highly trained special operations forces could be used to support operations, as the US employed these elite small units deep behind Iraqi lines. The coordination of SOF, using their technologically advanced equipment to guide precision bombs accurately onto targets, was just one reminder to the PLA High Command of the many deficiencies that existed throughout their military. The PLA devoted considerable resources throughout the 1990s to the development and expansion of SOF by making them an integral element of ground force modernization.<sup>13</sup> They increased the number of SOF Dadui (unit) from the first one formed in the Guangzhou Military Region to a structure that now consists of one SOF Dadui in each of the seven Military Regions of the PLA.

After the first Gulf War PLA scholars analyzed and translated every aspect of the US interpretation and lessons learned from its victory over Iraq. The obsolescence of Chinese ground forces became clearly evident and required a new approach to dealing with the vast technological advances in weaponry that did not exist in the PLA. The Chinese solution to a technologically superior force for the near future would rely on striking first to offset or negate these advantages.<sup>14</sup> To achieve this new strategic initiative the PLA force structure would have to be even smaller, more agile, and manageable to capitalize on the speed at which a "pre-emptive first strike" attack would have to be executed. To describe how the PLA would build a smaller, more technologically advanced force through mechanization and informationalization, it adopted a concept called Revolution in Military Affairs (RMA), with Chinese characteristics.<sup>15</sup> The key aspect of "with Chinese characteristics" stems from the PLA

realization that its soldiers in the 1990's were still only marginally trained conscripts and lacked the professionalization that existed in other armies similar to the US Armed Forces. The PLA would also have to invest heavily in professionalization of its forces and not just modernization.

Reduction in PLA force structure during this period was just one aspect of reform. The now outdated "defensive" doctrine of Mao Tse-tung and the training and recruitment methodologies associated with it would all have to be changed to support the new military strategy of "local wars under high technology conditions." To create a more professionalized force capable of seizing the initiative and launching "pre-emptive limited war" attacks on an enemy, Chinese doctrinal revisionists would have to rethink the way the PLA recruits, fights, and trains for that fight. Neither of these actions, however, could be undertaken without an experienced cadre of non-commissioned officers (NCOs). The PLA implemented a new NCO system in 1999, expanding their duties and increasing their number while the number of officers and conscripts was reduced.<sup>16</sup> The study of other armies, especially the US, showed clearly that the core of a professionalized force was formed by a well-trained and educated cadre of NCOs.

While the PLA embraces RMA and is striving to integrate this concept throughout its forces, there are several distinct Chinese cultural barriers that prevent its complete integration:

Chinese rigid social and professional hierarchies discourage flexibility and their conservatism in thought and behavioral norms inhibit innovation. Their preference for the status quo and fear of change (fostering risk aversion) adds pressure for conformity to the collective. Societal disincentives to individualism fostered by governmental authoritarianism results in a preference for self-reliance over interdependence.<sup>17</sup>

Each of these cultural barriers is directly opposite the values and norms US SOF pride themselves on and what makes them one of the most capable forces in the world. If Chinese SOF envision rising to the level of the US, they will need to find ways to overcome or work with or through these cultural barriers.

The PLA is certainly a more modernized and somewhat more professionalized force than the Chinese Communist Army the US fought in the Korean War. The PLA is much more capable than the masses of men employed against the highly trained militia and special forces during their incursion into Vietnam. Through force structure changes, doctrinal innovations, an increased emphasis in the professionalization of its NCO cadre, coupled with training at multiple organizational levels, the PLA has achieved a potentially dominant regional status in just 20 years, which is tipping the balance of power in its favor throughout the Asia-Pacific region. However potentially dangerous these capabilities are, they are still not equivalent to US forces.<sup>18</sup> China has made it clear its military modernization is committed to what it calls, in the words of an old slogan, a “peaceful rise” within a rules-based multipolar world and that it has no coercive intentions to the other nations of the region or to the current world order.<sup>19</sup> But its lack of transparency raises real concerns as to China’s true intentions with regard to its military modernization and professionalization.

#### Chinese Special Operations Forces Modernization and Capabilities

The modernization and professionalization of China’s SOF started several years after the PLA’s overall modernization program. The two key drivers that affected this change were lessons learned from Vietnamese special forces encountered during the 1979 war and the US’s successful use of special forces teams deep behind Iraqi lines during Desert Storm. Throughout the 1990s the PLA fielded a “Special Operations



Group” of regiment size (approximately 1000-2000 men) in each of the seven Military Regions.<sup>20</sup> Unlike US SOF, who are under the combatant command of United States Special Operations Command (USSOCOM), these Chinese elements are independently assigned under the command of the Military Regional Commanders. These Military Regional Commanders perform roles and functions like that of the US Theater Special Operations Commands (TSOCs). The PLA does not possess an organization similar to USSOCOM, and there is no indication China moves or augments its SOF from other military regions.

Chinese SOF are certainly benefiting from the PLA’s modernization and professionalization program. Just as US SOF realize the value of an assessment and selection program, the Chinese have established strict standards for these unique forces. Physical and mental toughness, combined with a rigorous training program that results in a dropout rate between 50 and 90 percent, ensures only the most qualified candidates remain for assignment to these units.<sup>21</sup> The emphasis the PLA placed on raising the standard of its NCO corps is also contributing to increasing the overall proficiency of its SOF. However, as previously stated, the PLA must overcome cultural barriers that still exist if it hopes to further advance these smaller elite organizations and make them truly capable of independent action and agile first strike.

Consistent with overall Chinese doctrine and strategy to fight local wars under high-technology conditions, the PLA focuses the roles of its SOF primarily on direct action, special reconnaissance, and counter-terrorism. China does not envision fighting a war similar to the US’s counterinsurgency operations in Afghanistan and therefore does not train its SOF in the tenets of unconventional warfare or foreign internal

defense, which are characterized by long duration and low intensity operations in foreign countries. Chinese special forces warfare doctrine consists primarily of special reconnaissance, attacks and sabotage, integrated land-sea-air-space-electronic combat, asymmetrical combat, large scale night combat, and surgical strikes.<sup>22</sup> While these roles and missions can be employed in an expeditionary manner or in conjunction with a global reach capability, there is currently no indication China intends to use its SOF this way. Their doctrine, training, and organizational structure all lend themselves to a regional employment methodology.

As with other special forces throughout the world, Chinese SOF are trained and equipped to a greater level and standard than PLA conventional forces. The vastness of China's geography lends itself to multi-environmental training opportunities ranging from mountainous terrain to desert to amphibious to riverine challenges. All SOF possess the ability to infiltrate undetected behind enemy lines and maintain a three-dimensional, all-weather infiltration approach capability using sea (submarine, high speed boat, open water swim, and SCUBA), air (airborne, powered parachute, and helicopter), and land (long-distance movement and rock climbing).<sup>23</sup> They are assigned the latest equipment and weapons with which to conduct their training and accomplish their eventual assigned missions. While many indications substantiate the quality of these highly trained Chinese SOF, they currently lack any combat experience except limited employment against terrorist incidents within their own country. This lack of combat experience, while not a substantial factor, must be considered in the context of the extremely complex type of SOF missions that might take place throughout the region, for instance against Taiwan.

## Potential Chinese SOF Regional Missions and US Counter Measures

Even with 25 years of development, modernization, and professionalization Chinese SOF are still a relatively new and untried force. As of now, they lack an adequate deployment capability, inherent in US SOF and many of the special forces from other world powers, needed to be considered a legitimate threat for regional employment. However, the US would accept unnecessary risk by discounting this still very capable force. They currently do not pose the immediate threat that would require a concerted US, United States Pacific Command (USPACOM), or even USSOCOM concentrated counter effort. On the contrary, China is looking to gain greater exposure for its SOF to continue to grow and enhance their capabilities through exercises and partner relationships throughout the region and real world usage. China is a member of and continues to extend its commitments to the Asia Pacific Economic Cooperation's (APEC) Counterterrorist Task Force, and it demonstrated an anti-hijack drill at the first Association of Southeast Asian Nation (ASEAN) Regional Forum (ARF) Security Conference in Beijing in 2004.<sup>24</sup>

US SOF should cultivate these military-to-military engagements at every opportunity by participating in exercises with Chinese SOF and by enhancing personnel exchange programs from operator to leader level, in order to find common ground on which to create a clear mutual objective agreed upon by both nations. Countering terrorism is one of those mutual objectives that clearly impacts both the US and China. Immediately after the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001 the Chinese Foreign Minister commented that this incident "shows that international terrorism has become a serious threat to world peace and stability" and added that "international cooperation is both necessary and pressing....China stands ready to enhance dialogue and

cooperation.”<sup>25</sup> While US concentration since this event has primarily been focused on Iraq and Afghanistan, the recent announcement of our rebalance to the Pacific now allows the US to rekindle previous commitments and foster a positive engagement strategy for the future. The US should leverage its expertise and experience from over 12-plus years of countering terrorism through an offer of assistance. Through consistent open dialogue concerning common goals the US can reaffirm its desire for regional stability and negate the growing perception that our policies are directed solely at China.

Economic growth continues to be in the interest of the majority of the countries of this region and is a driving factor that should be leveraged in reducing the threat of armed conflict by any one particular country. The other focus area of mutual interest that will benefit China and security within the region is the continuous threat from piracy to sea lanes of commerce. Somali pirates are not the only threat impacting the world’s global commerce. Piracy is moving deeper into the Indian Ocean, and the South China Sea has consistently been an area of concern to every country that borders these bodies of water. Economic interests and trade rely on the safe and secure movement of ships and goods throughout this region. Since 2009 PLA naval special operations forces have routinely served aboard Hong Kong-registered ships during China’s anti-piracy convoys around the Horn of Africa.<sup>26</sup> This situation with piracy affecting freedom of navigation is a global concern and should be an issue dealt with on a multi-national level. The US, and in particular SOF, has an opportunity to develop a combined effort that could foster closer relationships, a forum for the exchange of ideas, and even officer liaisons. Establishing a joint combined organization bringing together both

China's and the US naval and special operations forces' expertise could also assist in dealing with a mutual threat.

Many organizations like this exist, but this is an opportunity to join the US and China under a single goal designed to foster mutual security and regional stability. The US would benefit as we strengthen our "rebalancing" policy toward the overall Asia-Pacific region while China, we would hope, would gain the realization that the US shift and pivot to the Pacific is not directed solely at its containment. As USPACOM continues to develop its strategy for the region, this could be one activity toward engaging China. Special Operations Command Pacific (SOCPAC) is a logical choice as the headquarters with the staff and expertise to bring both the naval and special operations forces personnel into such an organization. Beginning as a bi-lateral effort between the US and China, such an organization would be conducive to expanded partnership between the many stakeholders of the region.

A joint combined piracy organization brings together both the military and economic elements of power. Placing armed personnel on commercial vessels is not as legally simplistic as it sounds. Shipping laws may allow a state to provide armed forces personnel on board ships of that flag; however, liability issues may become more complex and expose ship's captains to legalities if they elect to use force to protect their ship and cargo.<sup>27</sup> Much of the commercial shipping industry would rather see greater coordination between countries' navies in dealing with piracy than an escalation of violence on the vessels themselves. This overwhelming position strengthens the argument for a coordinating body that could receive greater support from both the

military and economic agencies of many of the countries who might participate. APEC and ASEAN could also be leveraged to formulate such a security organization.

### Strategic Implications for Taiwan's Security

Current US Taiwan policy is to maintain the status quo between China and Taiwan. The Taiwan Relations Act is the US governing document affirming the position that force shall not be used to change the current political status of Taiwan. Chinese policy and strategy, however, consistently reserve the right to use force to deal with and resolve territorial claims over Taiwan.<sup>28</sup> Even with opposing views and continued tension, there is no immediate concern that a flash point may occur with regard to Taiwan as long as China believes long-term unification remains possible. The recent announcement with regard to the US "shift," "pivot," or "rebalance" to the Pacific presents unique challenges for the employment of US SOF in that area of responsibility. The growing professionalism of Chinese SOF and their emergence beyond the shadows of the past into the light of today's environment guarantee any new or modified US strategy will have to contend with their capabilities and intended use.

Since China still reserves the right to use force, the US must maintain contingency options to deal with a Chinese military solution. Any Chinese military action directed against Taiwan would depend on speed and surprise to quickly resolve the crisis and negate any US ability to respond.<sup>29</sup> The modernization and professionalization of Chinese SOF provide an excellent capability to achieve this speed and surprise. The ability to rapidly infiltrate and conduct the types of direct action operations they have been training for, since their inception, truly make them a force of choice to begin any military incursion against Taiwan. Chinese SOF are capable, although not yet combat proven, to surgically strike key targets and leadership within

Taiwan. The US would be somewhat constrained to respond rapidly to these types of forces because of our limited posturing throughout the USPACOM area of responsibility due to the last 12 years of counter-terrorism and counter insurgency operations focusing primarily in the Middle East.

#### Implications for US Strategy Throughout the Asia-Pacific Region

Any modification to US military strategy in the Asia-Pacific area must also consider a modification to the military forces available, especially SOF that have been oriented toward the Middle East and unavailable for employment consideration in the Pacific. With only one US special forces battalion and supporting assets forward deployed in the Pacific, this commitment is inadequate as a means for truly showing the resolve necessary to realize the current policy of rebalancing. Forward basing of additional SOF in the Pacific will be difficult and even fiscally infeasible in light of almost certain future defense spending cuts. Continued presence throughout the Middle East and Africa will also affect how much SOF capacity will be available to USPACOM to execute its strategy. Without an increase to the number of US SOF forward deployed, we must find a way, similar to the Army's rotational Brigade Combat Team concept, for more of our forces to gain environmental situational awareness to the Pacific and the threats Chinese SOF potentially pose.

If the US hopes to counter the growing military influence of China, especially with regard to Taiwan, our primary means cannot be just military-to-military engagements. Greater efforts must be made to participate in joint combined SOF exercises throughout the entire region and especially those in which Chinese SOF participate. The use of anti-piracy exercises is just one area in which the US can work in a multi-lateral way and which will benefit China and other regional partners. SOF personnel exchanges at

every level, to include the USSOCOM Commander, coupled with the exchange of best practices, could display to the Chinese that our rebalance to the Pacific does not mean animosity between our nations. Allowing some Chinese SOF personnel to attend our less sensitive schools also extends the hand of non-confrontation to the Chinese government.

If we are to be successful in maintaining regional stability throughout the Pacific, our policy, strategy, and engagement must reflect the outcome we hope to achieve. Our greatest challenge in the future will be the lack of means available to support the ways of our strategy and therefore our overall ability to successfully achieve the ends of our policy as stated. Building partner capacity (BPC) is another way to engage China throughout the region. Our close relationship with Thailand is an excellent example of how we can leverage partner nations. In 2008, Thailand and China, as part of a steadily expanding program of military strategic cooperation, conducted a three-week SOF combined training exercise--the Chinese military's first experience of extending training to foreign soil.<sup>30</sup> This represents an opportunity to leverage relations with Thailand in order to engage Chinese leadership during these exercises and communicate the US message of peaceful coexistence throughout the region. Through US-Thai exercises like Cobra Gold we can potentially continue to check this growing Chinese influence, but more importantly we can ensure Thailand, through a joint strategic communication message, signals US intentions of peace and stability throughout the region. The US must foster these partner relationships not only in the traditional bi-lateral approach but in a multi-lateral endeavor that should also include China.



## Recommendations

As the US begins to shape its Pacific rebalance the question will be: What can the US and, maybe more appropriately, what can US SOF do to contribute to this new strategy? How can USPACOM and SOCPAC leverage SOF capabilities to deal with the growing influence China is exerting throughout the region? What must we do as Chinese-US SOF contact is inevitable over the coming years? USSOCOM is currently building a SOF global network to support its current and future operations. This network and the newly established Regional SOF Coordination Centers (RSCC) (USSOCOM has not yet established an RSCC in PACOM) are capable of providing global atmospheric, in addition to their primary role, and if so tasked, on the growing influence and uses of Chinese SOF throughout the region. This information will be necessary for USPACOM to incorporate into its theater engagement plans, theater security cooperation plans, and BPC. Indicators of Chinese SOF employment, received from this network, will allow priorities and resources to be established and will be extremely useful to USPACOM strategic planners during a future with an austere defense budget. Should adequate US SOF be unavailable in the future, partner capabilities, to augment US strategy, will certainly have to be one of the options for consideration.

Allies and partners have been important to the US during the last 12 years of war, but they will be even more important in the future. The ability for the US to act unilaterally in any action in the Pacific will be limited by both a lack of resources and US popular support for overseas endeavors. The nation has grown weary of Iraq and Afghanistan, and most Americans do not see China as a threat. Our Allies in the Asia-Pacific seek the same end state as US policy: a stable economic free trade region and a peaceful rise of China. The US must support its allies through engagement and security

cooperation. Australia possesses SOF capability on par with the US and is China's neighbor. They are the first line for ensuring transparency with China and engaging in military-to-military activities with Chinese SOF, but they also maintain the deterrent capability postured forward should we need to ask for their support. Options for any USPACOM strategy should consider leveraging those nations whose SOF are capable and already work with or have the potential to work with Chinese SOF.

Perhaps the greatest benefit to the region will be building partner capacity. There are many regional nations who have long term border concerns with China or who are currently involved in disputes over China's growing influence. As stated, Chinese SOF provide an excellent capability to leverage and shape China's influence throughout the region. The US, in conjunction with its partners, must seek to offset that influence through development, training, and exercising with partners. Increasing our partners' SOF capabilities must be an expanded focus for any future US Pacific strategy.

There are no longer any local problems! Throughout the Pacific "everything is connected" and as such the US must engage with each and every nation. USSOCOM hosted a very successful international SOF Week in 2012. International SOF Week was a forum hosted by USSOCOM in Tampa, Florida in which 60 countries participated in focused discussions on local and regional security issues. The event also displays the latest special operations weapons, communications equipment, and capabilities being developed and produced by industry. The priority for the 2014 venue should be the Pacific region and all the partners we want to leverage. The real success of a Pacific-oriented SOF Week would be participation by Chinese SOF leadership and personnel. This event allows for the exchange of ideas of value and concern to each nation who

participates. Expanding this type of SOF forum somewhere in the Asia-Pacific, thus removing the overall US influence, would benefit all partners while promoting shared responsibility for regional stability.

These are just several ways to provide strategic options and engagement for US SOF. US SOF, as part of the military, are just one instrument of national power. Any future strategy for the Pacific must be a whole-of-government approach. No SOF operation is conducted without extensive interagency coordination; USSOCOM currently leverages an extensive interagency liaison network. The current SOF network continues to expand, and our presence within the organizational structure of each agency within our government will be a multiplier for the USPACOM staff. This aspect of the SOF relationship brings “smart power” to theater engagement and theater security cooperation.

### Conclusion

The modernization and professionalization of the PLA that started after the 1979 Sino-Vietnamese War also had a profound effect on the development and growth of Chinese SOF. These forces benefited from the philosophical change to smaller well-trained organizations equipped to fight local wars under high technology conditions. The evolution of this modernization continues today as Chinese SOF acquire more advanced equipment and greater technology and gain regional credibility through their exposure. PLA expansion and professionalization of its NCO corps supports the doctrinal concept of revolution in military affairs. The concept of RMA and its reliance on smaller, more agile, technologically capable forces whose speed can be used to achieve strategic initiative during a “pre-emptive first strike” make their SOF a valuable asset to support future Chinese policy or strategy. The Chinese will be capable of

utilizing SOF to shape the region, and as such the US must use all methods available to be ready.

The US should seek transparency, as stated in its policy, and therefore engage openly with China as a contemporary and eventual SOF equal. Through military-to-military cooperation, building partner capacity, and seeking to resolve regional security issues jointly, the US and China are capable of working together to ensure both countries achieve their interests within a stable Asia-Pacific region. US SOF provides USPACOM an excellent full spectrum capability to shape the theater and engage Chinese SOF in the art of soft power to meet strategic ends. However, US SOF also brings the hard power tools of surgical strike direct action capability and combat experience necessary to counter any future Chinese SOF threat. This concept of open engagement while maintaining SOF capability and capacity to hedge against any unforeseen Chinese regional incursion should be incorporated into future modifications of USPACOM strategy. For SOF to be effective throughout the Pacific, a rebalance from our 12 year war in CENTCOM will have to occur if we are to display real credibility in support of this new recent policy “shift,” “pivot,” or “rebalance” to the Pacific.

#### Endnotes

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<sup>15</sup> Dennis J. Blasko, “Chinese Army Modernization: An Overview,” *Military Review* (Sep-Oct 2005): 71

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