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The Implications of Competition Campaigning for US Special Operations Forces²

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In 2018, the Department of Defense (DOD), under the administration of President Donald Trump, published a National Defense Strategy (NDS) that generated headlines for its statement that “inter-state strategic competition, not terrorism, is now the primary concern in US national security.”³ This refocusing of defense priorities marked the end of an era: no longer was the Global War on Terrorism going to dominate DOD’s planning, resourcing, or activities. Instead, DOD would focus on competitors like China and Russia. In keeping with this emphasis, the unclassified summary of the NDS made no mention of special operations, special operations forces (SOF), or irregular warfare—despite the fact that US SOF were still actively engaged in irregular wars in at least half a dozen countries at the time.

In March 2022, the Pentagon released a new NDS for the administration of President Joe Biden that identified China as the “most consequential strategic competitor” of the United States. The 2022 NDS also described two concepts—integrated deterrence and campaigning—as primary means by which DOD will seek to address the challenge posed by China, as well as lesser challenges posed by other actors.⁴ This NDS still does not mention special operations or SOF, but it does include irregular warfare as a means of deterrence by direct and collective cost imposition.⁵ In its discussion of campaigning, it also mentions several mission areas—such as information operations and building foreign military capabilities—that clearly align with SOF’s Title 10 focus areas.⁶ It is thus clear that SOF have at least some role to play in support of the 2022 NDS. As I will show in this written statement, however, SOF can

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² This written statement draws on several of the author’s prior publications, including the following: “(Don’t Fear) Irregular Warfare: Getting IW Right in the Upcoming National Defense Strategy,” Modern War Institute, Mar. 14, 2022, <https://mwi.usma.edu/dont-fear-irregular-warfare-getting-iw-right-in-the-upcoming-national-defense-strategy>; “What the New Vision for US Special Operations Gets Right—and Wrong,” Modern War Institute, Apr. 18, 2022, <https://mwi.usma.edu/what-the-new-vision-for-us-special-operations-gets-right-and-wrong>; “Competition Campaigning: What It Looks Like and Implications for US Special Operations Command,” Modern War Institute, Jan. 20, 2023, <https://mwi.usma.edu/competition-campaigning-what-it-looks-like-and-implications-for-us-special-operations-command>.

³ *Summary of the 2018 National Defense Strategy of the United States of America: Sharpening the American Military’s Competitive Edge*, US Department of Defense, 2018, <https://dod.defense.gov/Portals/1/Documents/pubs/2018-National-Defense-Strategy-Summary.pdf>.

⁴ 2022 National Defense Strategy of the United States of America, US Department of Defense, 2022, <https://media.defense.gov/2022/Oct/27/2003103845/-1/-1/1/2022-NATIONAL-DEFENSE-STRATEGY-NPR-MDR.PDF>.

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 9.

⁶ Section 167, Title 10, US Code, <https://www.govinfo.gov/content/pkg/USCODE-2012-title10/pdf/USCODE-2012-title10-subtitleA-partI-chap6-sec167.pdf>.

make even greater contributions than the NDS suggests if they can overcome certain technical, intellectual, cultural, and structural challenges.

Competition Campaigning

The central concept of the 2022 NDS is *integrated deterrence*, which seeks to combine deterrent effects across warfighting domains, geographic regions, the spectrum of conflict, elements of US national power, and US allies and partners. But the NDS also focuses on the idea of *campaigning*, which it says DOD must conduct to “gain and sustain military advantages, counter acute forms of our competitors’ coercion, and complicate our competitors’ military preparations.”⁷ Although the US military routinely conducts campaigns⁸ in wartime, the NDS emphasizes campaigning in pre-conflict, competitive settings. In this regard, the focus on campaigning in the 2022 NDS is an extension of the focus on strategic competition with adversary states in the 2018 NDS. The ideas in the 2018 and 2022 NDS reset the focus of the US military following the wars of the past 20 years, but they leave significant questions unanswered. For example, what does a competition campaign in support of integrated deterrence look like in practice? What can SOF contribute to such a campaign? And what would it take for SOF to effectively do so? I will address each of these questions in turn.

A Framework for Competition Campaigning

To identify activities the US military should pursue as part of competition campaigning, I examined US government documents that are specific to competition—including Joint Doctrine Note 1-19,⁹ the Joint Concept for Integrated Campaigning,¹⁰ and the Joint Concept for Competing.¹¹ I also reviewed scholarly articles on competition published by CNA, the Center for Strategic and International Studies, the RAND Corporation, and the Center for a New American Security, as well as independent publications by various scholars. By analyzing these sources, I identified the specific military activities and capabilities that the documents described as being necessary for competition, which I organized into the 15 campaign components shown in Figure 1 on the next page.

Some of the components of competition campaigning in this figure will be familiar to those experienced with US military campaigns against terrorist groups. Intelligence operations, information and intelligence sharing, security cooperation, messaging, the use of proxies, interagency coordination, and network building have been key elements of the wars of the past two decades. However, the ways that these activities get applied to competition with state adversaries may look significantly different than their use against terrorist threats. For example, conducting intelligence operations against China or Russia would look qualitatively distinct from conducting such operations against terrorist groups like the Islamic State, which have limited counterintelligence capabilities. Other components of competition campaigns may surprise some readers. Strategic planning, force design and development, posturing, exercises, and strategic assessments have not often been highlighted as part of efforts to counter terrorist groups. As a

⁷ 2022 National Defense Strategy of the United States of America, p. iv.

⁸ In this context, *campaigns* are defined as “the conduct and sequencing of logically-linked military activities,” day after day, “to achieve strategy-aligned objectives over time.” Ibid., p. 12.

⁹ Joint Doctrine Note 1-19: Competition Continuum, Joint Chiefs of Staff, June 3, 2019, https://www.jcs.mil/Portals/36/Documents/Doctrine/jdn_jg/jdn1_19.pdf.

¹⁰ Joint Concept for Integrated Campaigning, Joint Chiefs of Staff, Mar. 16, 2018, https://www.jcs.mil/Portals/36/Documents/Doctrine/concepts/joint_concept_integrated_campaign.pdf?ver=2018-03-28-102833-257.

¹¹ Joint Concept for Competing, Joint Chiefs of Staff, Feb. 10, 2023, <https://www.documentcloud.org/documents/23698400-20230213-joint-concept-for-competing-signed>.

result, the skills and capabilities required to conduct these activities have atrophied across much of DOD, and especially across the SOF enterprise.

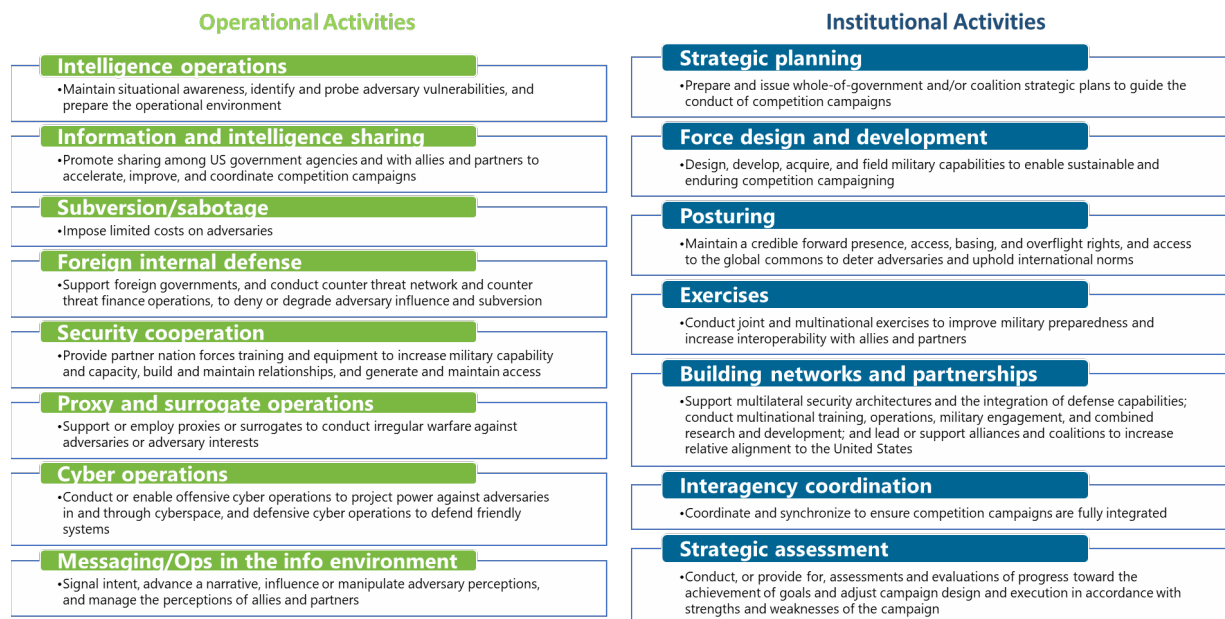


Figure 1: Components of competition campaigns

Interestingly, the 15 components of competition campaigns fall nearly evenly into two categories: **operational activities** (in green) are largely conducted to compete for advantage today, and **institutional activities** (in blue) are largely conducted to compete for advantage in the future. The components in these two categories can be—and often are—in tension with each other. For example, the geographic combatant commands (GCCs) primarily conduct the activities in green, meaning they focus largely (via their theater campaign plans) on competing with US adversaries today and over the next two to three years. The military services conduct many of the activities in blue, which means they are increasingly focusing on designing and generating forces that will have the capabilities and readiness to face challenges in the 2030 to 2040 timeframe. Debates often arise when tensions flare between these two categories; for example, the services might divest of capabilities that could be useful for current competitive activities in favor of investing in capabilities that might not come online for a decade or more. Because of the way DOD and the US government is structured, the only authorities that can effectively resolve these debates are the Secretary of Defense or the US Congress.

SOF Contributions to Competition

As the preceding discussion and Figure 1 make clear, SOF have much to offer in leading and supporting competition campaigns. Specific to the operational (green) components of the campaign framework, SOF have substantial capabilities for intelligence operations, information sharing, foreign internal defense, security cooperation, proxy and surrogate operations, and information operations. Indeed, SOF traditionally played a large role in these areas during prior competitive eras (e.g., the Cold War). As mentioned previously, many of these capabilities are currently aligned to the relatively low abilities of terrorist groups and the relatively permissive environments in which such groups operate. Additionally, SOF currently have less capability in subversion/sabotage (across all domains, including undersea) and cyber than they likely need, though Special Operations Command (SOCOM) and its service components

are actively seeking to develop more.¹² Indeed, the vision and strategy that SOCOM published last year states that the command seeks to evolve and strengthen specific capabilities that it believes will contribute to the 2022 NDS's goal of integrated deterrence. These include capabilities for foreign internal defense, security force assistance, and counter threat finance, as well as electromagnetic warfare and information, cyber, and space operations.¹³ It is easy to look at Figure 1 and see how the various components of a competition campaign align with the notional capabilities of US SOF. It is much harder, however, to identify specifically *which* capabilities should be applied *where*, *when*, *by whom*, and *for what purpose*. In other words, SOF can clearly provide a range of capabilities that support the NDS, but it is hard to determine how those pieces fit together to solve the puzzle that the NDS's central challenge represents.

Issues to Overcome

One major intellectual challenge facing SOCOM and the SOF enterprise is that policy-makers have not clearly articulated the goals for competition and the desired effects they wish to see in competitive settings. In the current situation, we have some strategic guidance and a lot of tactical ideas, but few concrete goals and little operational art to tie tactical actions to strategic effects. The absence of such clarity has left organizations like SOCOM trying to identify what key operational problems they can uniquely solve as part of the joint force of the future. For SOCOM, ideas have included serving as key sensors for the Joint All-Domain Command and Control concept, conducting operational preparation of the environment and information operations, ensuring cross-domain and transregional integration, or imposing costs in other theaters as part of a protracted conflagration or "horizontal escalation" with competitors like China or Russia. At CNA, we have been helping the SOF enterprise think and work through these challenges for the past seven years via studies,¹⁴ events,¹⁵ and wargames such as Para Bellum Horizon.¹⁶ Internally, SOCOM has recently embarked on its own "What Winning Looks Like" effort, which seeks to offer a more concrete set of ideas to policy-makers regarding SOF's potential contributions to campaigning and integrated deterrence. The command's ideas, however, have yet to be turned into an executable competition campaign or be approved by policy-makers as such.

Compounding the challenge of this strategy-to-tactics gap is the fact that additional issues loom over the institutional (blue) components of campaigning for SOCOM and the SOF enterprise. Because Congress endowed SOCOM with both combatant command (via Title 10, US Code, Section 164) and service-like authorities (via Section 167), the SOCOM commander is the only entity in DOD aside from the Secretary of Defense who sits atop both operational and service components. The operational components, in the form of the seven theater special operations commands (TSOCs), center on supporting the priorities of their respective GCCs to compete for today. The service components, in the form of the four special

¹² See, for example, Alexander Powell, Elizabeth Yang, Annaleah Westerhaug, and Kaia Haney, *Maritime Sabotage: Lessons Learned and Implications for Strategic Competition*, CNA, DRM-2021-U-030772-Final, Oct. 2021, <https://www.cna.org/reports/2021/10/Maritime-Sabotage-Lessons-Learned-and-Implications-for-Strategic-Competition.pdf>.

¹³ "Special Operations Forces Vision & Strategy," SOCOM, Apr. 11, 2022, <https://www.socom.mil/Pages/SOF-Vision-and-Strategy.aspx>.

¹⁴ See, for example, David A. Broyles and Brody Blankenship, *The Role of Special Operations Forces in Global Competition*, CNA, DRM-2017-U-015225-1Rev, Apr. 2017, <https://www.cna.org/reports/2017/drm-2017-u-015225-1rev.pdf>.

¹⁵ Claire Graja, *SOF and the Future of Global Competition*, CNA, DCP-2019-U-020033-Final, May 2019, https://www.cna.org/archive/CNA_Files/pdf/dcp-2019-u-020033-final.pdf.

¹⁶ Troy Klabo, "MARSOC Wargame Series: Para Bellum Horizon," *Marine Corps Gazette*, Jan. 2023, 14-16.

operations service components, are increasingly focusing on designing and developing SOF for the future.

This arrangement creates challenges for SOCOM, which must adjudicate tensions that arise between the TSOCs and its service components in the design, allocation, and employment of SOF. But it also creates opportunities for the command to organically manage that tension by identifying and providing guidance for how to integrate and synchronize activities to compete for today with those designed to create future competitive advantages. In short, SOCOM should be able to turn the crank of force design, force development, and force employment faster than any other part of DOD, which should lend it an inherent advantage in generating innovative capabilities and force packages designed for competition today and in the future.

Unfortunately, SOCOM is not currently positioned to fully seize this advantage. Over the past two decades, SOF have enjoyed unparalleled intelligence and operational advantages over their nonstate adversaries. As a result, operations—and procurement to support current operations—have dominated the focus of SOCOM for years. The command’s ability to effectively conduct some of the institutional elements of competition campaigns—most notably, strategic planning, force design and development, and posturing—has atrophied. Anyone familiar with SOCOM headquarters can, for example, appreciate the dominant size and stature that the operations directorate (J3) has over the plans directorate (J5). For SOCOM to reap the advantages of its unique blend of authorities for integrating the operational and institutional components of competition campaigns, it will need to reinvigorate and invest in the people, processes, and priority of its J5 relative to other staff sections.

SOCOM and the SOF enterprise face other challenges because of the tension that exists between the operational and institutional components of campaigning as well. Some of these are cultural issues that will take time and sustained attention to address. An example is the idea of SOF playing a *supporting* role to the joint force, rather than being the *supported* force they have consistently been for the past two decades. To achieve this shift, SOCOM will need to spend some of its Major Force Program-11 funding on capabilities designed to support the joint force, rather than using that funding exclusively for its own needs. Another example is getting past the cultural emphasis on deployments and maximal forward presence that SOF have had for much of the past 15 years. Because of issues identified by its comprehensive cultural review (which came about only because of sustained pressure from Congress),¹⁷ SOCOM has recently begun to change its force management processes and practices. SOCOM is pursuing new ideas that represent major cultural shifts—such as retaining forces to conduct operational experiments, support exercises (including those with conventional forces), and conduct “deploy for purpose” missions. As might be expected, these ideas have not yet been widely accepted across SOF formations, even though they have been articulated in SOCOM’s vision and strategy for over a year.

In addition to these cultural issues, noteworthy structural and process issues internal to the SOF enterprise must also be overcome. One example that has been recognized and mostly unrectified for decades is the structural imbalance between the Assistant Secretary of Defense for Special Operations and Low Intensity Conflict (ASD(SO/LIC)) and SOCOM. Frankly stated, this arrangement by itself does not allow for effective civilian oversight of the SOF enterprise. Such oversight is achievable in the current arrangement only if the Secretary of Defense demands it or if the SOCOM commander allows it—hardly

¹⁷ *United States Special Operations Command Comprehensive Review*, SOCOM, Jan. 23, 2020, <https://sof.news/pubs/USSOCOM-Comprehensive-Ethics-Review-Report-January-2020.pdf>.

the foundation on which such oversight is supposed to reside. ASD(SO/LIC) remains under-empowered and understaffed to effectively perform its mission.

Another structural challenge is determining what role the SOCOM commander should play in future SOF force design. Should the commander act as a director of force design, leading or ordering components to evolve in specific ways derived from strategic guidance? Or should the commander serve as an integrator of components' efforts, ceding the reins to their ability to generate tactical innovations in support of their parent services and the joint force? The latter would currently be an easier role for SOCOM to play, both because of the atrophy of its force design and development capabilities and because its service components are all at least two to three years ahead of the command (e.g., Naval Special Warfare Command¹⁸ and Air Force Special Operations Command¹⁹ have already undertaken major force optimization and reorganization efforts to better align themselves with the NDS and their service priorities). Given SOCOM's institutional preferences, however, its commander will probably want to play a more directive role. Being more than a force integrator will require SOCOM to do more than issue another SOF Operating Concept; rather, the command will need to immediately rebalance its headquarters, quickly develop a substantive and tangible vision for integrated future SOF formations, and engage in a virtuous cycle of force design, analysis, and experimentation that can leapfrog its components' efforts. There are indications that SOCOM is now attempting to do this, but the rapidity of action required for success is not yet evident.

Conclusion

The issuance of the 2018 NDS and the furtherance of its basic concepts by the 2022 NDS marked a true inflection point in the trajectory of the US military, SOF included. In that regard, the current environment surrounding competition campaigning is reminiscent of the immediate aftermath of 9/11. At that time, there was a strong impetus to get after the problem of terrorism, but with minimal strategic guidance. As a result, a few overarching principles and a lot of ideas and activities were generated at the tactical level, with little operational art to translate principles into action. Conversely, there was little understanding and assessment of how tactical actions summed over time to achieve or undermine strategic goals. It took well over a decade of sustained counterterrorism operations before the messy middle between policy and action was cemented in the form of systemic operations orders and associated authorities. (The assessment aspect is something we still have not gotten right, though progress continues to be made.²⁰)

Today, the special operations enterprise—and DOD more broadly—once again needs to translate ideas such as strategic competition and campaigning into tactical actions via a clear framework of activities and associated authorities, policies, permissions, and oversight. The competition campaign framework described above and its application to the SOF enterprise, along with efforts such as SOCOM's "What Winning Looks Like" initiative and some newly created analytic efforts by ASD(SO/LIC), should help considerably in making that connection. Still, a host of additional issues—technical, intellectual, cultural,

¹⁸ Stavros Atlamazoglou, "To Take on Russia and China, the US Navy Is Standing Up a New Unit to Do the Missions That Only SEALs Can Do," *Business Insider*, Sept. 15, 2021, <https://www.businessinsider.com/new-naval-special-warfare-group-created-amid-great-power-competition-2021-9>.

¹⁹ AFSOC Strategic Guidance, 2020, <https://media.defense.gov/2020/May/26/2002305551/-1/-1/1/AFSOC%20STRATEGIC%20GUIDANCE.PDF>.

²⁰ Jonathan Schroden, "Learning from Afghanistan and Beyond: Recent Developments in Operation Assessment," in Adib Farhardi and Anthony Masys (eds.), *The Great Power Competition Volume 4* (Springer, New York, NY: 2023), pp. 445-462.

and structural—remain to be addressed. It took over a decade after Operation Eagle Claw for SOF to become the nation's premier crisis response force, and at least five years after 9/11 for SOF to become the world's premier counterterrorism force. How long it will take SOF to become the nation's premier force for competition campaigning remains to be seen, but one thing is certain: the gauntlet for them to do so has been thrown.