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**STRATEGY FOR A NEW ERA:
SOCOM TAKES ON STRATEGIC COMPETITION**

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Strategy for a New Era

In a new era of strategic competition, U.S. Special Operations Command (SOCOM) must identify opportunities to out-compete China and Russia when and where it is most crucial, maintaining the U.S. technical edge and strategic advantage. SOCOM needs a foundation for strategy and policy—and approaches for achieving impact.

The future operating environment will be shaped by expansionist peer and near peer adversaries, greater strategic competition among rival states, and emerging technology. China and Russia are seeking to expand their global influence, transnational terrorist groups continue to maintain a presence in critical regions, and emerging technologies are shaping the operating environment in new ways.

Winning means successfully prevailing in the gray zone—below the level of armed conflict. However, SOCOM's role extends beyond the gray zone; U.S. Special Operations Forces (SOF) must be ready to fight and win in support of partner nations and U.S. interests.

The challenge for U.S. strategists is that maintaining the advantage over America's adversaries will be a costly and complex endeavor. While winning the counterterrorism fight could be done reasonably well with set resources, this is not so for strategic competition, a decades-long competition and defense mobilization potentially on the scale of the Cold War. Strategists should focus on vital U.S. national interests, while identifying the geographic regions and strategic assets that are critical—those that advance progress toward the 'ends' that U.S. strategy seeks to accomplish.

SOCOM can drive up prospects for success. At the very least, SOCOM can:

1. Identify geographic regions and assets of strategic value, and place data in strategic context for leaders
2. Set U.S. policy on gray zone competition and develop expertise
3. Leverage strategic reviews and net assessments

Prioritizing key geographic regions and assets according to their intrinsic strategic value will position SOF to

outcompete China and Russia when and where it is needed most—whether for maintaining a strong posture in the gray zone, successfully deterring the outbreak of armed conflict, supporting U.S. allies, or preparing for future conflict with China and Russia. Strategists will have a clear understanding of where it is most important to fight and win.

Better interpreting and contextualizing data and dashboards on strategic competition is vitally important. At a fundamental level, this means understanding how data and dashboard displays relate to U.S. national interests, grand strategy, and leadership decisions. Ideally, these displays and information feeds will clearly differentiate top priorities from lesser concerns—making it abundantly clear where SOF must confront the adversary and what is at stake.

SOCOM also needs to set policy on strategic competition in the gray zone—further defining acceptable competition for economic influence, natural resources, rare earth reserves, and control of global supply chains. A clear paradigm will better advance U.S. policy, which involves a host of interagency and foreign partners. SOCOM has already taken the initiative to develop expertise on strategic competition and escalation dynamics in the gray zone, improving prospects for success.

Finally, strategic reviews and net assessments will be crucial to success. Within this domain, the concept of return on investment is central—because strategy at a very basic level involves choices about how to apply available resources to achieve desired ends—crucial for a potentially decades-long era of strategic competition that has real potential to draw down resources.

Overall, SOCOM establishes the ends strategy strives to accomplish, characterizes the strategic setting, and selects the means to achieve desired ends. The process remains iterative—with the strategic reviews and net assessments offering the opportunity to adjust the strategy over time.

Finite Resources

America's resources are finite. Absent a focus on key threats and high-value strategic assets, the U.S. will incur high costs in a new era of strategic competition. One can imagine several sub-optimal outcomes:

- In the first scenario, the U.S. maintains the strategic advantage and technical edge, but at far higher cost than necessary.
- In the second scenario, the U.S. again maintains the strategic advantage, but fails to actualize this favorable posture to achieve America's global objectives.
- In the third and final scenario, U.S. resources applied to strategic competition have limited strategic impact—in fact, these resources could have been better applied to rapid acquisition of new technology or technical innovation.

In each scenario, America has limited strategic imagination. The focus is on competing with adversaries across all dimensions of national power rather than taking a transformative approach that leverages known patterns of adversary behavior and strategic culture. Focusing on those dimensions of strategy drives up prospects for success—a reminder that a resource-driven approach can only accomplish so much. Policymakers often assume that by applying resources, a nation state can achieve proportionate strategic impact; however, flawed assumptions can limit prospects for success.

In the gray zone, no intrinsic start or finish exists. This could prompt a baseline level of U.S. expenditure without a guiding strategy—a situation with high potential for wasted resources. Ultimately, a lack of prioritization could mean endless resource drain—perhaps on the scale of the Cold War.

In short, by competing with China and Russia on a global scale without a clear hierarchy of objectives, the U.S. may have a more limited opportunity to apply resources intensively in truly vital geographic regions where “wins” in the gray zone are an imperative—and where the additional resources serve to buy down risk.

National security strategists can benefit from a starting point for crafting strategy in a new era—an era in which counterterrorism remains important to international security but is no longer the principal SOCOM mission, and where the imperative to advance strategic competition takes on primacy.

SOCOM in a New Era

Focusing on first order U.S. national security interests enables strategists to develop useful end states when crafting strategy for the use of SOF. SOCOM leadership has already noted an intention to focus on innovation, strengthen alliances, and win the gray zone.^{1,2} SOCOM will also prepare for the outbreak of conflict, to include aggression against a U.S. ally or international partner, such as Ukraine. SOF's role in deterring great power rivals from initiating armed conflict is growing and will include collecting information in preparation for future conflict, preparing the environment, and building strong partnerships.³

The U.S. will seek to maintain the strategic advantage and technical edge over Russia and China, while establishing integrated deterrence and offering supporting allies. These efforts take place below the level of armed conflict, but also above it, should adversaries seek to initiate hostilities, further escalate, or set the stage for a broader conventional war or nuclear conflict. Ultimately, the development of SOF capability must be in step with the National Security Strategy (NSS), the National Defense Strategy (NDS), and White House policy.^{4,5}

Table 1 (Objectives in a New Era) summarizes the ends U.S. strategy aims to accomplish. These goals are consistent with the NDS. Aligning SOF activities to this structure makes clear the tradeoffs that emerge at the strategic level when choosing different resource allocations, force postures, or SOF capabilities.

These objectives and end states (shown in Table 1) established, strategists will need to consider the relative value of placing emphasis to the left or right of boom—and the risk tolerance associated with any such choice. As SOCOM strives to counter China, strategists must

Table 1. Objectives in a New Era⁶

1. U.S. Advances Vital National Interests

The U.S. secures vital national interests. The U.S. maintains the American way of life, including democratic governance and a free civil society. The U.S. advances national interests and goals as described in the 2018 and 2022 NDS. This includes a commitment to allies and partners, countering rival great powers in critical realms, and maintaining the strategic advantage over adversaries. In addition to deterring the outbreak of armed conflict and building robust integrated deterrence, DoD cultivates capability to prevail in armed conflict with China in the Indo Pacific or with Russia in Europe.

2. U.S. Denies the Adversary

In a new era of strategic competition, the U.S. denies the adversary:

- Victory below the threshold of war (in the gray zone)
- Victory through armed conflict (beyond the gray zone)
- Victory through further escalation to a large-scale conventional war or a conflict involving nuclear arms (beyond the gray zone)

3. U.S. Maintains the Strategic Advantage

The U.S. maintains the strategic advantage around the globe, successfully contesting adversary power projection and securing strategic assets in theater—preserving the action potential to prevail in future eras when and where it is needed most. The U.S. successfully counters rival great powers, limiting Chinese and Russian efforts to project military, political, and economic power globally at the expense of U.S. interests and regional security.

The U.S. prevents adversaries from gaining access to military basing, ports, strategic trade routes, rare earth reserves, or other assets of strategic value.

The U.S. maintains the technical edge over adversaries and successfully counters adversary exploitation of new technology.

4. U.S. Deters the Outbreak of Armed Conflict

The U.S. deters the outbreak of armed conflict, recognizing that this protects U.S. allies and vital interests abroad—but also more importantly recognizes that the outbreak of war among great powers, let alone further escalation, amounts to an unacceptable risk.

5. U.S. Support to Partner Nations Deters Aggression

The U.S. military strength dissuades adversaries from aggression against U.S. allies; with a U.S. commitment to protecting allies and international partners, China and Russia do not resort to conventional or nuclear conflict above the gray zone.

6. U.S. Integrated Deterrence Achieves Results

U.S. integrated deterrence succeeds, precluding the emergence of large-scale conventional war or nuclear conflict. The U.S. limits the development of a nuclear arms race, or the emergence of technology that could radically alter the nuclear balance or incentivize adversaries to consider the use of nuclear weapons.

7. The U.S. Maintains the Technical Edge, Preserving America's Ability to Fight and Win

The U.S. competes with Russia and China in research, development, test & evaluation (RDT&E), authoritatively maintaining the technical edge—ensuring that the U.S. military could prevail in an armed conflict, or other forms of conflict such as cyber war.⁷

consider the balance of resources to devote to gray zone competition, deterring conflict, or fighting a large-scale conventional war—without knowing whether competition will remain in the gray zone indefinitely.

The Future Operating Environment

Strategists must size up the future operating environment—where SOF must fight and win. Understanding regional dimensions of the future operating environment will be particularly important—and identifying U.S. strategic priorities by region is an excellent place to start.^{8,9} The 2022 NDS makes clear that a major U.S. defense priority will be “deterring aggression, while being prepared to prevail in conflict when necessary, prioritizing the PRC challenge in the Indo-Pacific, then the Russia challenge in Europe.”¹⁰

Fundamental shifts are taking place in the structure of the international system, as prospects for a unipolar system guided by U.S. hegemony are diminishing. Some anticipate an increasingly multipolar world order, as Russia and China seek to exert political, military, and economic power and influence globally to attain the strategic and technical edge.^{11,12,13} Changes are overtaking other realms; observers predict large shifts in human geography, including through greater migration, humanitarian crises, and increasing political instability. External trends like climate change will introduce unexpected challenges. Finally, advances in technology will shape the nature of strategic competition among rival great powers, each seeking to develop or maintain the technical edge.

As Russia and China compete with the U.S., they will leverage technologies designed to bolster state security and counter terrorism. Smart Cities and Safe Cities include biometric and identity technologies that impose some limits on U.S. activities, especially in urban areas. Ultimately, SOCOM must grasp how technology will shape the future of war and the nature of strategic competition. Broadly, SOF can expect to operate in denied environments¹⁴ and will likely observe changes in how strategic competition unfolds in the gray zone.¹⁵

Meanwhile, SOCOM also needs to become increasingly integrated with the Joint Force. At the outset of this new era, SOF must ensure interoperability with conventional forces—as well as identify the geographic regions or types of operational environments most likely to require seamless integration with conventional forces to win on the battlefield or in the gray zone. As theorists of special operations point out, concepts of special operations have evolved over time.^{16,17,18,19,20} The present day is a critical time to understand how boundaries between SOF and conventional military forces may be changing—and moreover, what mission, authorities, and capabilities these new challenges demand. SOF’s integration with the Joint Force may also prove helpful for improving joint operational concept development within the Department, a current DoD priority.

The Joint Operating Environment 2035 identifies features of the operating environment that will introduce new challenges for SOF and DoD: violent ideological competition, threatened U.S. territory and sovereignty; antagonistic geopolitical balancing, disrupted global commons; contest for cyberspace; and shattered and re-ordered regions.²¹ To sum up, considerable change is taking place, bringing unpredictable developments in world affairs—Russian military losses in Ukraine, as a recent example. SOF’s shift to strategic competition and the scaled-back counterterrorism (CT) mission are situated within this broader context. New challenges will abound.

Applying SOF Capabilities

SOF dedicated to **Direct Action (DA)** will continue to excel in this role; meanwhile, the enterprise will shift to a new focus on countering Russia and China. While placing renewed emphasis on maritime capabilities and technology, the broader objective would be a full return to the range of capabilities employed before the global war on terror. Ultimately, as the new era unfolds, several SOF core activities may take on a greater role.²²

- **Security Force Assistance, Foreign Internal Defense.** SOCOM continues to emphasize the importance of supporting partner nations and U.S.

allies.^{23,24} Security Force Assistance (SFA) and Foreign Internal Defense (FID) each support allies while helping to maintain U.S. access, placement, and influence.^{25,26} Each core activity plays an important role in developing host nation capability to counter internal threats or defend against rival states. They also demonstrate U.S. resolve in support of allies, deterring adversaries from initiating armed conflict; they may also dissuade rival states from engineering a “fait accompli” in the gray zone.^{27,28,29,30,31,32}

- **Countering Weapons of Mass Destruction (CWMD).** SOCOM should prioritize action to counter state and non-state efforts to acquire, develop, and deploy high-consequence chemical, biological, radiological, and nuclear weapons. Monitoring proliferation by China and Russia may become a greater focus; the U.S. may also seek to limit the diffusion of Chinese and Russian capability to non-weapons states or state sponsors of terrorism.^{33,34} Securing high-risk materials, technologies, and expertise—particularly in regions experiencing high levels of violent extremist activity and accelerated competition with near peer adversaries—would do a great deal to address important challenges. Concerns persist about high-risk material that may exist in Ukraine following the 2022 Russian invasion and passage through Chernobyl and Zaporizhzhia.^{36,37,38,39,40,41,42,43}
- **Civil Affairs.** Special Operations Forces on Civil Affairs teams help build robust civil societies through interaction with community-level organizations and non-governmental groups. With language skills appropriate to their area of expertise, they often operate with considerable freedom of action. In addition to preparing the future operating environment, SOF can build resilience against Russian or Chinese aggression and create friendly networks in advance of anticipated armed conflict. Certain civil affairs initiatives have the capacity to reach key interest groups in critical regions.⁴⁴

- **Military Information Support Operations (MISO).** The U.S. can leverage MISO for strategic effect in priority geographic regions—targeting key populations whose changing perceptions could have a notable impact in altering the operating environment to U.S. advantage.^{45,46,47} With expansive reach across the digital domain and at relatively low cost compared with other core activities, MISO could provide opportunities to counter China and Russia in new ways. Ultimately, the deciding factor for any MISO campaign would naturally be the extent to which it can generate strategic impact.^{48,49}
- **Humanitarian Assistance and Disaster Relief.** U.S. humanitarian assistance and disaster relief (HADR) delivers critical aid to populations worldwide while also advancing U.S. interests, including promoting the rule of law, human rights, and stable democratic governance. Humanitarian assistance is one more realm where the U.S. and SOF can outcompete Chinese and Russian bids for global influence—while also strengthening partnerships with U.S. allies in critical regions or limiting the radicalization of vulnerable populations.
- **Preparing the Environment.** SOCOM’s leadership continues to stress the value of SOF in preparing the environment for future armed conflict—an established role from the early days of the Office of Strategic Services (OSS), America’s effort to stand up a paramilitary force and intelligence agency.⁵⁰ Surveillance and reconnaissance can generate intelligence on the future operating environment—vitaly important in advance of a conflict. Other efforts to prepare the future operating environment might include a cyber component. Finding ways of operating effectively in a new 5G environment will be crucial—not only for countering Violent Extremist Organizations (VEOs), but also for competing with Russia and China. Preparing the environment also adds value for SOCOM’s CWMD mission—for example, through partner capacity building or direct action.⁵¹

- Counter Threat Finance.** The U.S. can also leverage sanctions and trade policy. The efficacy of sanctions in the Ukraine crisis to limit Russian aggression is a useful test case that may galvanize greater global cooperation. Moreover, SOCOM, as the lead DoD component for synchronizing Counter Threat Finance (CTF) activities, is well positioned to bring these capabilities to bear.⁵² SOCOM leadership has alluded to the usefulness of leveraging U.S. CTF capabilities not only as a non-kinetic, finish agnostic CT win, but also in strategic competition with Russia and China.^{53,54} For enforcing sanctions, SOF has had a longstanding role in performing high-risk Visit, Board, Search, and Seizure (VBSS).
- Emerging Technology.** SOCOM proactively identifies and counters technical challenges in the future operating environment.⁵⁵ With a record of success in rapidly fielding technology solutions, SOCOM is well equipped.⁵⁶ SOCOM has already prioritized developing communications technology for austere environments.^{57,58} SOF will also benefit from new approaches and technologies for operating successfully under adversary radars.⁵⁹ Other challenges include developing options for defeating the biometric systems enmeshed with adversary technology for counterterrorism and state security, including Smart Cities. Broader security vulnerabilities associated with the global expansion of 5G technology might also pose a concern. To fully adapt and win in a new era of strategic competition, both DoD and SOCOM must compete with Russia and China across technical domains identified in the 2018 and 2022 NDS.

Key Topics in a New Era

Fortunately, the U.S. can improve prospects for success. At the very least, policymakers can (1) focus on discerning strategic value, (2) set U.S. policy on gray zone competition and develop expertise, and (3) leverage strategic reviews and net assessments.

1. Strategic Value

Regions and Assets. Prioritizing key geographic regions and assets according to their intrinsic strategic value will position SOF to outcompete China and Russia when and where it is needed most—whether for maintaining a robust posture in the gray zone, successfully deterring the outbreak of armed conflict, supporting U.S. allies, or preparing for future conflict with China and Russia. To strategists, this amounts to an opportunity to truly understand where and over which gray zone strategic assets it is most important to “fight and win”.

Data and Dashboards in Strategic Context. Better interpreting and contextualizing data and dashboards on strategic competition is vitally important. Doing so requires an understanding of U.S. national interests, grand strategy, and foreign and defense policy priorities at the regional and country levels—as well as the hierarchical concepts of strategic value just noted. Experts well versed in these concepts can be found across the interagency, to include in the Offices of the Secretary of Defense, the National Security Council, the Department of State, and U.S. embassies overseas. Their joint expertise is rarely leveraged systematically to interpret changing levels of political, economic, and military power in the gray zone as China and Russia expand their global influence. In written form, the NDS, various regional strategies and campaign plans, and embassies’ mission strategic plans each provide invaluable guidance. The more that strategists at all levels of government can develop a common framework to place data in strategic context, the better. Taking this approach synchronizes understanding across the interagency, while enabling strategists at all levels to quickly identify and respond to new trends that pose a serious concern.

2. Gray Zone

Set Policy on Strategic Competition in the Gray Zone.

SOCOM would be wise to further define acceptable competition in the gray zone, particularly related to economic influence, natural resources, rare earth reserves, and control of global supply chains.⁶⁰

Specifically, clarifying the extent of U.S. government activities in this realm, including SOF, would be highly advantageous—and beyond that, clarifying when SOF should or should not take specific action to support U.S. interests. Having a clear guiding vision for top priorities and specific conditions—including adversary advances or economic exploitation—that merit the use of SOF would be useful to leadership, strategists, and operators in country.

Develop Expertise on Strategic Competition and Escalation in the Gray Zone. Better understanding the gray zone already represents a priority for SOCOM and the Joint Special Operations University (JSOU); many scholars are also writing on these topics. SOCOM must develop a better understanding of escalation potential at the limits of the gray zone. SOCOM must also make it a top priority to better evaluate influence and assess victory in an ongoing competition below the threshold of war—a challenging task with no clear start date and end date for analytic assessments. The emphasis on the gray zone has arisen in response to the surprising success that China has had in accumulating influence through a long-term effort to place private citizens, overseas diplomats, and economic interests abroad.

3. Strategic Reviews and Net Assessments

Return on Investment. Success requires analysis of resource allocation and return on investment. This is not pure strategy, but rather strategy translated into resource allocation. Solving or optimizing the resource challenge would go a long way toward achieving success, simply due to the massive resources required to counter both Russia and China on a global scale, over several decades.

Success of the Strategy. Taking a hard look at the strategy's level of success is essential. To foster this, leaders must remove organizational obstacles to sound analytic assessments and provide appropriate settings for innovation—approaches SOF has already established. Even so, an evaluation that poses new questions about strategic impact can add real value.

Evaluating Strategy

When evaluating strategy, the key is to have a broad set of questions that can show how well the strategy is achieving the desired ends—and to course correct as needed.

Key Questions. Policymakers will benefit from developing a robust and varied set of questions that give strategists and practitioners the latitude to directly address uncertainty—taking into account important considerations about which no data is available—but nonetheless regularly factor into leadership decisions.^{61,62}

One starting point for this endeavor would be to consider whether the strategy advanced DoD's effort to achieve NDS-level objectives for strategic competition. These objectives are shown in *Table 3 (Did the Strategy Achieve its Ends?)*. Similarly, strategists might consider the extent to which SOF advanced specific lines of effort called for in the Special Operations Forces Vision and Strategy, while limiting the risks it called on SOCOM to avoid; these considerations are shown in *Table 4 (SOF Vision and Strategy: Evaluation)* and *Table 5 (SOF Vision and Strategy: Risks)*.

Hierarchy of Objectives. Establishing a hierarchy of strategic objectives will be crucial. SOCOM should be able to identify highest-priority “wins” across each combatant command—“no fail” missions that deliver strategic impact, without which U.S. national security at the regional level would suffer critical setbacks. These can be differentiated from objectives of lesser importance. In the gray zone, that means understanding the value of maintaining the strategic advantage across different dimensions of national power—not only identifying highest priorities but also comparing the relative efficacy of wielding each.

Demarcating the Arena for Strategic Competition.

SOCOM will benefit from delineating the key challenges of contesting the adversary (1) in the gray zone, (2) after the outbreak of armed conflict, and (3) after the escalation to large-scale conventional war or nuclear conflict. These zones are shown in *Table 2 (Arena for Strategic Competition)*. Strategists should specify SOF's role in each zone, quickly identify NDS and SOCOM strategic objectives, and choose resources to apply as a means to these ends.

Table 2. Arena for Strategic Competition

Arena for Strategic Competition	Purpose
Gray Zone	Deny adversary victory in the gray zone
After the Outbreak of Armed Conflict	Deny adversary victory after the outbreak of armed conflict
Further escalation to large-scale conventional war or nuclear conflict	Deny adversary victory through further escalation to a large-scale conventional war or a conflict involving nuclear arms

Regional Analysis. Taking the additional step of integrating frameworks and objectives of subsidiary USG strategies and plans at the regional and country levels will also add value—a useful approach to synchronize the wide range of USG and partner nation priorities, a crucial first step for effective cooperation.

To Conclude: Achieving Success in a New Era

To succeed in a new era of strategic competition, SOCOM must establish the ends its strategy will strive to accomplish, characterize the strategic setting, and select the means to achieve desired ends. SOCOM must articulate the strategic value of U.S. access, placement, and influence across geographic regions based on broader U.S. national security priorities in the NDS. Discerning the strategic value different policy options offer for U.S. national security will prove invaluable. For example, as SOCOM seeks to gain the strategic advantage, events will unfold that advance U.S. interests by different degrees and through various forms of national power. These could include gaining access to ports vital to global trade, investing in global markets important to U.S. national security, strengthening diplomatic ties with key partners, or maintaining a productive role in a regional security organization that supports partner nations and advances U.S. interests. Developing a keen ability to compare strategic value across forms of national power will prove especially advantageous.

Even more important, SOCOM must embark on a new effort to place data and dashboards in strategic context, in a way that allows strategists and commanders to weigh all important considerations and make sound decisions that shape the operating environment to their advantage. This involves recognizing that data will not exist for many factors leaders must consider when making vitally important decisions in the gray zone and on the battlefield.

Finally, SOCOM must make it a priority to conduct strategic reviews and net assessments that take a hard look at whether a strategy has achieved its ends.

Evaluating Strategy

Table 3. Did the Strategy Achieve its Ends?

Topics for Strategic Review	Description
Vision: U.S. Advances National Interests	The U.S. secures vital national interests. The U.S. maintains the American way of life, including democratic governance and a free civil society. The U.S. advances national interests and goals as described in the 2018 and 2022 NDS. This includes a commitment to allies and partners; countering rival great powers in critical realms; and maintaining the strategic advantage over adversaries, including in direct conflict with Russia and China
Maintain the Strategic Advantage	<p>The U.S. maintains the strategic advantage around the globe, successfully contesting adversary power projection and securing strategic assets in theater—preserving the action potential to prevail in future eras when and where it is needed most. The U.S. successfully counters rival great powers, limiting Chinese and Russian efforts to project military, political, and economic power globally at the expense of U.S. interests and regional security.</p> <p>The U.S. prevents adversaries from gaining access to military basing, ports, strategic trade routes, or other assets of strategic value.</p> <p>The U.S. maintains the technical edge over adversaries and successfully counters adversary exploitation of new technology.</p>
Deter the Outbreak of Armed Conflict	The U.S. deters the outbreak of armed conflict, recognizing that this protects U.S. allies and vital interests abroad—but also more importantly recognizes that the outbreak of war among great powers, let alone further escalation, amounts to an unacceptable risk.
Offer Support to Partner Nations that Deters Russian or Chinese Aggression	The U.S. commitment to protecting allies and international partners, and its military strength dissuade adversaries from aggression against U.S. allies; China and Russia do not resort to conventional or nuclear conflict above the gray zone.
Successfully establish integrated deterrence to limit escalation to conventional war or nuclear conflict	U.S. integrated deterrence succeeds, precluding the emergence of large-scale conventional war or nuclear conflict. The U.S. limits the development of a nuclear arms race, or the emergence of technology that could radically alter the nuclear balance or incentivize adversaries to consider the use nuclear weapons.
Maintain the technical edge, preserving America’s ability to fight and win	The U.S. competes with Russia and China in research, development, test & evaluation (RDT&E), authoritatively maintaining the technical edge—ensuring that the U.S. military could prevail in an armed conflict, or other forms of conflict such as cyber war. ⁶³

Table 4. SOF Vision and Strategy: Evaluation

To what extent did . . .
SOF support priority missions in critical locations as part of integrated deterrence?
SOF reduce strategic risk?
SOF facilitate integration with conventional forces during high-end conflict?
Changes to concept, capabilities, and doctrine add unique value to integrated deterrence?
A talented workforce enable SOF to innovate, compete, and win?
Newly improved readiness better enable SOF to execute critical missions? (Crisis response missions, Priority CT missions, CWMD missions)
SOF use Information Warfare capabilities in deterrence campaigns?
SOF support the Joint Force in high-end conflict?
New or stronger partnerships increase global understanding? Bolster deterrence? Create opportunities for shared successes?

Table 5. SOF Vision and Strategy: Risks

To what extent did SOF avoid . . . ?
Loss of access, placement, or influence in critical areas of operation or with key partners or organizations?
Budgetary shortfalls that directly affect development or advancement of critical capabilities?
Degradation of agreements and relationships with critical partners that impact our shared strategic awareness and operational effectiveness?
Insufficient investment in force development and design not yielding necessary SOF capabilities?
Authority shortfalls/gaps limiting SOF's ability to support national security interests?
Force structure/posture that is insufficient or misaligned in achieving SOF's strategic aims?
Loss of trust in SOF by decision makers and the American people to manage resources, prepare the environment, or execute priority missions ethically in politically sensitive environments?

Annex

5G in the Future Operating Environment

Cellular 5G networks bring greater access to data and faster browsing—but these 5G networks also pose security concerns in the future operating environment.^{64,65} This occurs partly because more data resides closer to the user; as China and Russia expand to new geographic regions, they will have increasing access to data being transmitted on local 5G networks. The establishment of 5G networks also means that a greater number of users, over a broader geographic area, have access to the digital domain—creating new markets. In fact, in pursuit of these new markets, Chinese giants like Huawei have increased their global market share, power, and influence. China's global infrastructure development campaign extends to its Digital Silk Road Initiative, a relatively recent effort to expand Chinese influence in tandem with greater network connectivity and digital infrastructure.

Finally, while not specific to 5G, it is important to note that both SOF and Russian and Chinese adversaries are equipped to compete in the cyber realm. Russian hacking and cyber operations are expansive—and remain a major concern for NATO countries like Estonia, which suffered a major network outage due to Russian hacktivists. At present, it is not fully known how adversaries are currently—or might in the future—exploit security vulnerabilities in 5G networks. But such activities could limit or shape the way the U.S. operates in the digital domain. Understanding how 5G and the Digital Silk Road will impact SOF remains advantageous.

Safe Cities

With the expansion of the digital domain, 21st century cities are turning to technology solutions to organize and secure their municipalities. Chinese tech giant Huawei is a leading provider of Safe City technology. In Safe Cities, police and other first responders are connected in real time, improving response to emergencies, natural disasters, and crime.⁶⁶

Safe Cities are increasingly including a digital identify dimension—enabled by cameras distributed throughout the streets. The inclusion of biometric technology provides new capability to screen and track citizens.⁶⁷ While reductions in crime are generally welcome, this innovation can be a double-edged sword. Experts in Western countries continue to express concern about the privacy and civil liberties implications, as well as the implications of the growing power of municipal authorities and the nation state.

Biometric technology and next generation technical tracking enable ubiquitous technical surveillance (UTS). This allows states to precisely identify citizens as they move throughout the city.⁶⁸ The technology provides persuasive surveillance of urban environments, an important realm where SOF must operate in the coming decades. Moreover, Chinese tech giants such as Huawei are actively marketing Safe City technology to geographic regions where they are developing a greater diplomatic, military, and economic foothold.

As a result of Safe City technology, SOF will face greater challenges operating clandestinely in urban environments—whether establishing a presence, preparing the environment, or engaging in kinetic operations.

Denied Environments

Fully understanding the future operating environment involves understanding the technical challenges of operating in denied environments. As Russian and Chinese adversaries seek to exert greater influence in new regions, military presence, in particular, produces a more denied environment. Therefore, the U.S. would be wise to identify strategic regions and modes of action it would be beneficial to preserve—well in advance of the Chinese or Russian encroachment.

There are several notable technical features of an adversary-controlled environment. In general, this is likely to mean a future operating environment where the U.S. and its allies must contend with challenges including:

- Radar jamming technology
- GPS denied environments
- Integrated Air Defense Systems (IADs)
- Anti-access/area denial (A2/AD) systems

Developing a robust understanding of the resultant operational constraints, in consultation with technical experts, would be highly advantageous.⁶⁹

The Information Environment

Another way that adversaries define the future operating environment is by controlling or shaping the information environment. This ranges from formal information operations—where China and Russia, as non-democracies, have the advantage—to less formal cultural campaigns or public affairs initiatives. Adversaries may also have the power to curtail the information space, depending on the extent of their control; for example, they may limit access to the open internet or encroach on freedom of the press. Within the broader information environment, adversary MISO are a topic of considerable interest to U.S. strategists. In general, it will be useful to know the adversary's overall strategy for MISO, as well as its practical application by region or by country. The cyber domain, also linked to the broader information environment, may also be contested. In a new era of strategic competition, MISO—especially in the digital realm—has unique reach for targeting adversaries and their proxies anywhere around the globe, often at relatively low cost.

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48. In the regions, the first step toward countering near peer adversaries seeking to bring about a *fait accompli* in the gray zone is to take note of Chinese and Russian attempts to shape the information environment, that is, all adversary MISO. The information environment can be a crucial battleground—because dominating it enables an adversary to shape the perceptions of regional states and can induce them to bandwagon with regional hegemony if they believe that their US ally cannot deter aggression or waver in resolve. Understanding the aim and effectiveness of adversary MISO is crucial; if adversary MISO has the potential for strategic impact, SOF may need to consider developing US MISO initiatives designed to discredit it.
49. Even so, the US as a democracy generally lacks the acumen of its adversaries in conducting information operations—MISO being one way that the US can exert a presence in the information space. Fortunately for the US, sharing accurate openly available information with populations around the globe often adds considerable value—especially when Russian and Chinese adversaries seek to obscure the truth.
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