



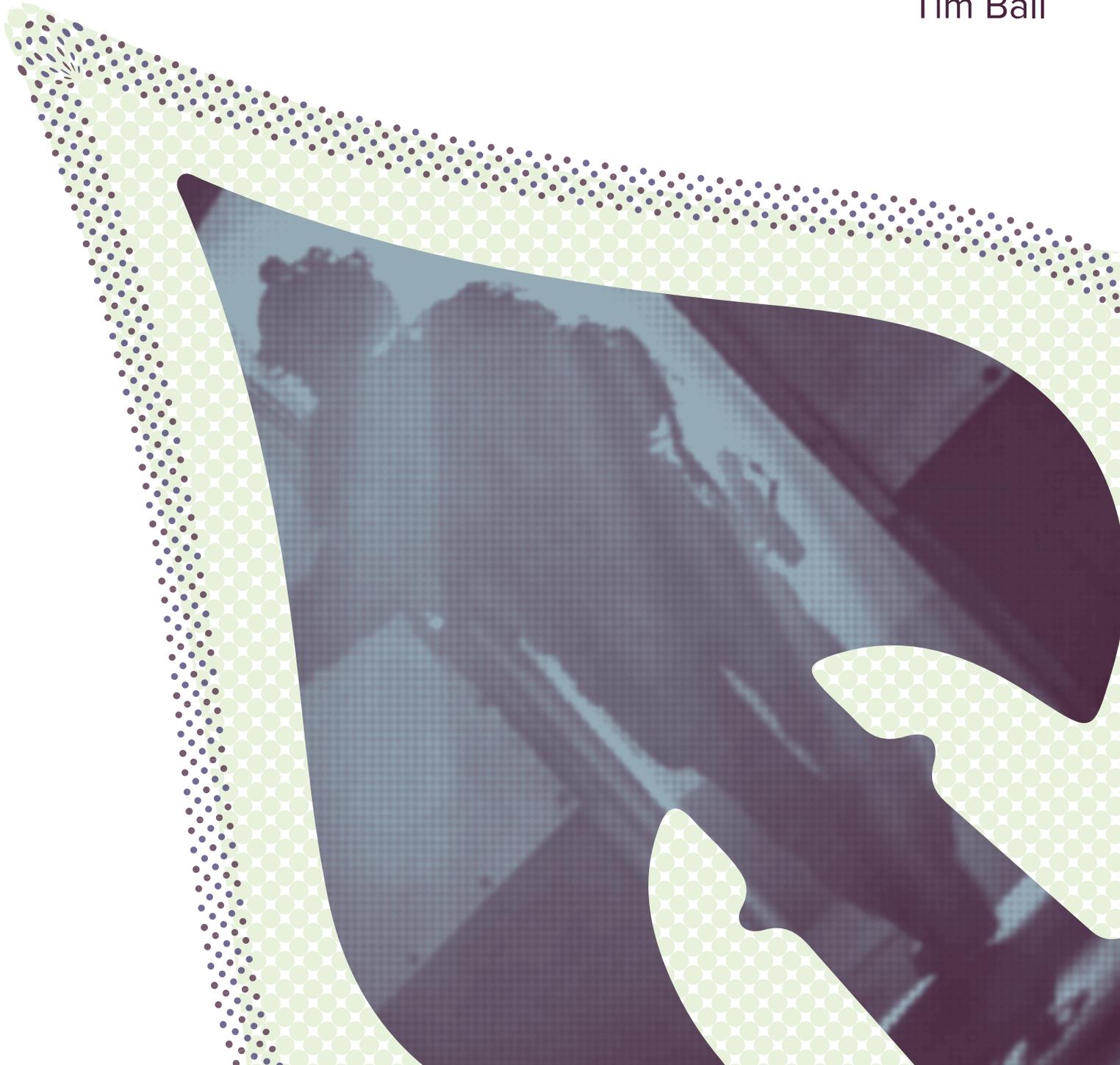
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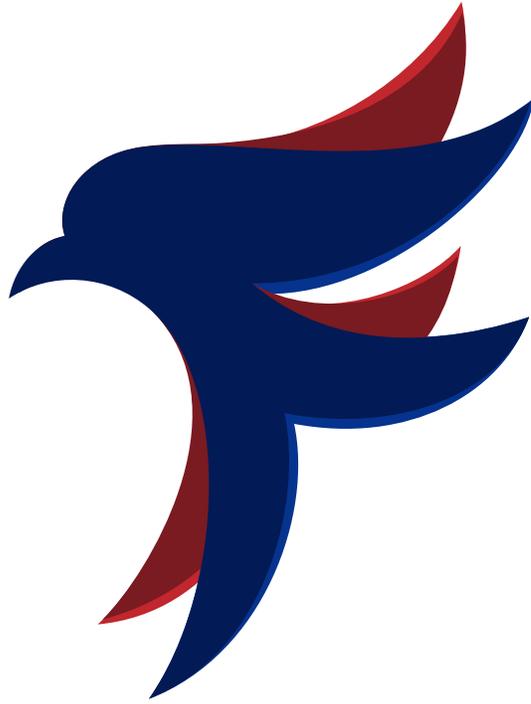
NATIONAL SECURITY PROGRAM

# STILL THE ONE:

## GREAT POWER COMPETITION AND SPECIAL OPERATIONS FORCES

Tim Ball





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Author: Tim Ball

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*A nation must think before it acts*

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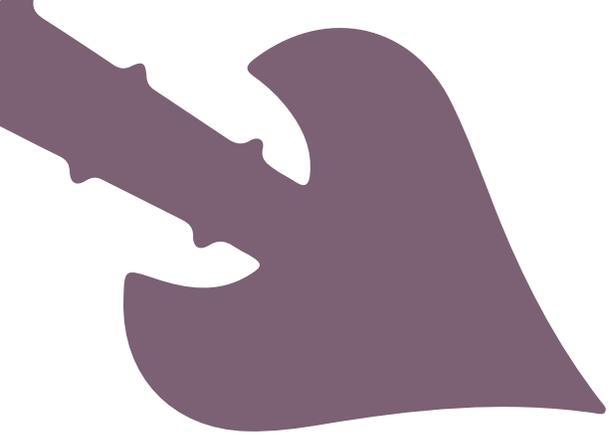
# STILL THE ONE: GREAT POWER COMPETITION AND SPECIAL FORCES

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR



**Major Tim Ball** is a U.S. Army Special Forces officer. He has served in 10<sup>th</sup> Special Forces Group (Airborne) and at NATO Special Operations Headquarters, with multiple tours in Iraq and assignments throughout Europe. Major Ball holds a BA in Political Science from Texas A&M University and an MS in Defense Analysis from the Naval Postgraduate School in Monterey.

The views here do not represent those of the U.S. Army, the U.S. Department of Defense, or any part of the U.S. government.



## WHERE THE CONVENTIONAL APPROACH TO GREAT POWER COMPETITION FALLS SHORT

**W**ith the unveiling of the 2018 National Defense Strategy, then-Secretary of Defense James Mattis announced that great power competition was now the “primary focus of U.S. national security.”<sup>1</sup> After nearly 20 years of muddling through counterinsurgencies in Iraq and Afghanistan and special operations forces conducting counterterrorism operations around the world, the conventional U.S. military is echoing its post-Vietnam days by forgetting its recent conflicts and renewing focus on large-scale combat operations. The irony of this focus is that the day-to-day struggle in great power competition is anything but direct armed conflict. While the conventional military sees it as a scenario in which special operations forces move to a supporting role for conventional forces, great power competition is the type of conflict in which special operations forces are already thriving and where they are needed more than ever. Despite the perception that special operations forces are overly focused on counterterrorism and direct action, the majority of special operators spend their time working with and training partner forces around the world. It is through these partnerships that the United States conducts day-to-day competition with its adversaries by denying them influence and depriving them of potential allies.

Since its reemergence on the national security scene, no one seems to agree upon what great power competition actually means, or more specifically, what it means for the U.S. military.<sup>2</sup> In the absence of a precise definition of great power competition, the conventional military has interpreted it as a return to what they always want to do: maneuver warfare and large-scale combat operations. This interpretation has shaped military decision-making about how to implement the National Security Strategy (NSS), leading to the production of new doctrine that attempts to refocus the military on conventional warfare and combined arms maneuver.

In 2018, the U.S. Army produced TRADOC Pamphlet 525-3-1, “The U.S. Army in Multi-Domain Operations 2028.” The pamphlet is meant to describe “how the Army contributes to the Joint Force’s principal task as defined in the unclassified *Summary of the National Defense Strategy*: deter and defeat Chinese and Russian aggression in both competition and conflict.”<sup>3</sup> The first implication listed for the Army is “enhanced and broader need for combined arms maneuver.”<sup>4</sup> At the 2019

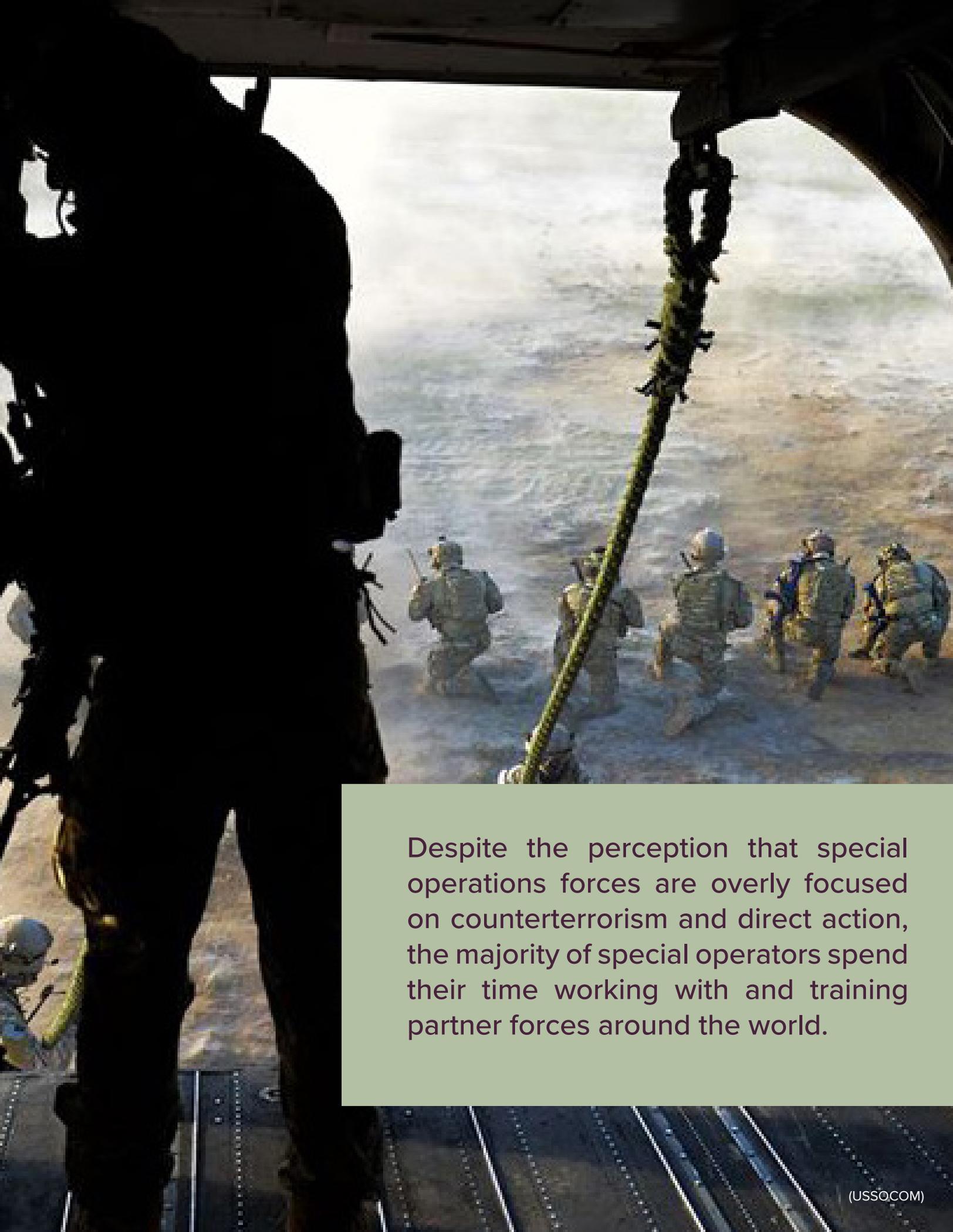
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1 Idrees Ali, “U.S. military puts ‘great power competition’ at heart of strategy: Mattis,” *Reuters*, January 19, 2018, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-usa-military-china-russia/u-s-military-puts-great-power-competition-at-heart-of-strategy-mattis-idUSKBN1F81TR>.

2 Alexander Boroff, “What is great-power competition, anyway?” Modern War Institute at West Point, April 17, 2020, <https://mwi.usma.edu/great-power-competition-anyway/>.

3 Stephen Townsend, “TRADOC Pamphlet 525-3-1: The U.S. Army in Multi-Domain Operations 2028,” December 6, 2018, [https://www.tradoc.army.mil/Portals/14/Documents/MDO/TP525-3-1\\_30Nov2018.pdf](https://www.tradoc.army.mil/Portals/14/Documents/MDO/TP525-3-1_30Nov2018.pdf), p. vi.

4 Townsend, “TRADOC Pamphlet 525-3-1: The U.S. Army in Multi-Domain Operations 2028,” U.S. Army, [https://www.tradoc.army.mil/Portals/14/Documents/MDO/TP525-3-1\\_30Nov2018.pdf](https://www.tradoc.army.mil/Portals/14/Documents/MDO/TP525-3-1_30Nov2018.pdf), p. ix.



Despite the perception that special operations forces are overly focused on counterterrorism and direct action, the majority of special operators spend their time working with and training partner forces around the world.

Maneuver Warfighter Conference, senior Army leaders emphasized moving away from many of the missions executed by the force over the last two decades and renewing focus on large-scale combat operations.<sup>5</sup> As part of this shift to maneuver warfare, the Army continues to modify its brigade combat team composition in preparation for a near-peer fight.<sup>6</sup>

These actions make sense when looking at isolated parts of the 2018 National Security Strategy. The NSS declares, “The United States must retain overmatch - the combination of capabilities in sufficient scale to prevent enemy success and to ensure that America’s sons and daughters will never be in a fair fight.”<sup>7</sup> Put simply, overmatch involves making the U.S. military so big and technologically advanced that there is no chance of success for an adversary that chooses to go to war with the United States, thus deterring an adversary from choosing large-scale combat. Preparing for maneuver warfare inherently contributes to achieving overmatch because it ensures that American ground forces will retain a technological and tactical advantage over its adversaries.

However, great power competition cannot be distilled to preparing for large-scale combat operations. Dr. Jack MacLennan notes that “military technology and tactical success cannot be assumed to equate to advantages in great power competition” and that “strategic planners should be skeptical . . . that large-scale combat operations are a sufficient means for engaging in a world of great power competition.”<sup>8</sup> The U.S. Army can

get as big and as powerful as it wants, but the scenarios and assumptions that inform thinking about the need for overmatch are unlikely to come to fruition. While achieving deterrence through overmatch may be useful in preventing the very conflict that it is preparing for, overmatch does nothing to change the everyday behavior of the People’s Republic of China and the Russian Federation as they seek to expand their influence. The National Security Strategy even discusses in some detail how China and Russia compete on a day-to-day basis with the United States, without resorting to armed conflict:

Operating below the threshold of military conflict and at the edges of international law... They employ sophisticated political, economic, and military campaigns that combine discrete actions. They are patient and content to accrue strategic gains over time – making it harder for the United States and our allies to respond. Such actions are calculated to achieve maximum effect without provoking a direct military response from the United States.<sup>9</sup>

If China and Russia are content with the current state of competition without any desire for escalation, then achieving overmatch is not likely to deter them from their current

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5 Todd South, “Army’s maneuver force is retooling for large-scale combat operations from top to bottom,” *Army Times*, October 17, 2019, <https://www.armytimes.com/news/your-army/2019/10/17/armys-maneuver-force-is-retooling-for-large-scale-combat-operations-from-top-to-bottom/>.

6 Todd South, “Stryker brigade will convert to armor this month as Army goes heavy for near-peer battle,” *Army Times*, June 3, 2019, <https://www.armytimes.com/news/your-army/2019/06/03/stryker-brigade-will-convert-to-armor-this-month-as-army-goes-heavy-for-near-peer-battle/>.

7 Donald Trump, “National Security Strategy of the United States of America,” Office of the President of the United States, December 2017, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/wp-content/uploads/2017/12/NSS-Final-12-18-2017-0905.pdf>, p. 28.

8 Jack MacLennan, “The problem with great-power competition,” Modern War Institute at West Point, May 1, 2020, <https://mwi.usma.edu/problem-great-power-competition/>

9 Trump, “National Security Strategy of the United States of America,” pp. 27-28.

behavior. Fortunately for the United States, it has seen this competition before, and won. While there are significant differences between the Cold War and 21<sup>st</sup>-century great power competition against China and Russia, there are important parallels, including where the main competition is taking place. The Cold War was marked by the lack of direct conflict between the United States and the Soviet Union. Instead, competition between the two countries was conducted in the peripheries, with both nations vying for influence around the world. That same type of competition—one short of direct conflict—is playing out today.

## **HISTORY DOESN'T REPEAT ITSELF... BUT IT OFTEN RHYMES**

In 1962, President John F. Kennedy delivered the commencement speech for the graduating class of the United States Military Academy. The speech is well-known in the special operations community due to Kennedy's reference to "another type of war, new in its intensity, ancient in its origins" and his description of special operations forces as "forces which are growing in number and importance and significance."<sup>10</sup> While Kennedy was an early advocate of special operations, his words were meant for an entire commissioning class of U.S. Army officers, the majority of which would never serve in special operations units. The commencement address served as the Commander-in-Chief's guidance for what he expected from the military in a great power competition.

<sup>10</sup> John F. Kennedy, "United States Military Academy Commencement Address," *American Rhetoric*, June 6, 1962, <https://www.americanrhetoric.com/speeches/jfkwestpointcommencementspeech.htm>.

<sup>11</sup> Kennedy, "United States Military Academy Commencement Address."

**“OUR FORCES . . . MUST  
FULFILL A BROADER  
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SYMBOL TO OUR ALLIES  
OF OUR DETERMINATION  
TO SUPPORT THEM.”**

- President John F. Kennedy, 1962

Instead of describing large-scale combat operations across Eastern Europe, Kennedy spent the duration of his speech describing multiple complex challenges that mostly stopped short of armed conflict. He told the new lieutenants that they would serve as advisors and be required to give orders in different languages. He described command posts that would be international in nature, with army officers making foreign policy decisions and economic judgments in the far corners of the world. Above all, Kennedy emphasized, "Our forces . . . must fulfill a broader role as a complement to our diplomacy, as an arm of our diplomacy, as a deterrent to our adversaries, and as a symbol to our allies of our determination to support them."<sup>11</sup>



President Kennedy delivers the commencement address at West Point, 1962. (History Central)

Nearly 60 years later, former Secretary of Defense Robert Gates looked to the Cold War to help determine how to compete today:

What is so striking about the over-militarization of the period following the Cold War is just how much U.S. policymakers failed to learn the lessons of the seven previous decades. One of the United States' greatest victories of the twentieth century relied not on military might but on subtler tools of power. The Cold War took place against the backdrop of the greatest arms race in history, but there was never actually a significant direct military clash between the two superpowers — despite proxy wars in Korea, Vietnam, and elsewhere. Indeed, most historians calculate that fewer than 200 U.S. troops died due to direct Soviet action. Because nuclear weapons would have made any war between the two

countries catastrophic for both sides, the U.S.-Soviet contest was waged through surrogates and, crucially, through the use of nonmilitary instruments of power.<sup>12</sup>

Kennedy understood that the ability to dominate a conventional battle would not be enough to win the Cold War and that the primary competition would be in the peripheries, short of direct conflict with the Soviets. Gates clearly saw the parallels between what Kennedy understood during the Cold War and today's competition—and comes to similar conclusions. While Gates is correct in his assertion that the United States must rely more on non-military instruments of power, that does not mean that there is not a role for military forces. Kennedy envisioned the entire military helping to fill that role, which he urged the graduates to do in his commencement address. But no matter how many Vietnams, Iraqs, or Afghanistans that the U.S. military fights, it always tries to go back to preparing for the conventional war that never seems to come. The gap in

<sup>12</sup> Robert M. Gates, "The Overmilitarization of American Foreign Policy: The United States Must Recover the Full Range of Its Power," *Foreign Affairs*, July/August 2020, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/united-states/2020-06-02/robert-gates-overmilitarization-american-foreign-policy>.

great power competition—the one between diplomacy and all-out war—still has to be filled, and special operations forces are the ones already doing it.

## THE SOF MODEL FOR GREAT POWER COMPETITION

A major misconception about special operations forces is that they are overly committed to direct action and counterterrorism. This misconception has made its way into think tank studies,<sup>13</sup> with one from the Center for Strategic and International Studies claiming, “SOCOM’s [Special Operations Command] current operations focus on terrorism . . . and demand all of its attention. There is little bandwidth available to think about or prepare for the kind of great power conflicts that the new strategy gives priority to.”<sup>14</sup> Nothing could be further from the truth. According to *Joint Publication 3-05: Special Operations*, counterterrorism and direct action are only two of twelve core activities for special operations forces.<sup>15</sup> The majority of the remaining activities involve working with partner forces to help provide

stability around the world. As Special Operations Command has proven over the past 18 years, it is capable of walking and chewing gum at the same time.

In Eastern Europe, Green Berets are training with partner forces from former Soviet-bloc countries and are helping them to prepare in the event of a small- or large-scale Russian incursion.<sup>16</sup> The same is happening in Southeast Asia with partner forces in China’s backyard.<sup>17</sup> Navy SEALs, units designed for unilateral maritime operations, train habitually with partner forces around the globe. Marine Raiders do the same, and both the SEALs and Raiders contributed significantly in training Iraqi forces and building partner capacity during the fight against the Islamic State. This training provided an alternative to the Iranian forces that worked through their own Iraqi partners, seeking to expand Iranian influence across the Iraqi military and government. The Army’s 1<sup>st</sup> Special Forces Command, known primarily for its Green Berets, also includes two Psychological Operations Groups and a Civil Affairs Brigade. Civil Affairs teams, some of the most deployed units in special operations, are not kicking down doors or conducting direct action raids when they deploy, and neither are most Green Berets.<sup>18</sup>

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13 S. Rebecca Zimmerman, Kimberly Jackson, Natasha Lander, Colin Roberts, Dan Madden, and Rebeca Orrie, “Movement and Maneuver: Culture and the Competition for Influence Among the U.S. Military Services,” RAND Corporation, 2019, [https://www.rand.org/pubs/research\\_reports/RR2270.html](https://www.rand.org/pubs/research_reports/RR2270.html), p. 132. This study extensively quotes unnamed sources from within USSOCOM that make claims such as “SOCOM is quick to go to the unilateral solution as opposed to the indigenous solution. Their dominant side is on the use of strikes and drones and raids and so forth.” The authors go on to claim, “SOF operators are perhaps best known for their direct action capabilities,” and that counterterrorism takes up most of the attention of USSOCOM.

14 Mark Cancian, “U.S. Military Forces in FY 2020: SOF, Civilians, Contractors, and Nukes,” Center for Strategic and International Studies, October 24, 2019, <https://www.csis.org/analysis/us-military-forces-fy-2020-sof-civilians-contractors-and-nukes>.

15 The Joint Staff, “Joint Publication 3-05: Special Operations,” July 16, 2014, [https://www.jcs.mil/Portals/36/Documents/Doctrine/pubs/jp3\\_05.pdf](https://www.jcs.mil/Portals/36/Documents/Doctrine/pubs/jp3_05.pdf), pp. II-3.

16 Kyle Rempfer, “Green Berets train Polish, Latvian resistance units in West Virginia,” *Army Times*, July 8, 2019, <https://www.armytimes.com/news/your-army/2019/07/08/green-berets-train-polish-latvian-resistance-units-in-west-virginia/>.

17 Kyle Rempfer, “Looking for friends: Green Berets are busy in China’s backyard,” *Army Times*, July 12, 2019, <https://www.armytimes.com/news/your-army/2019/07/12/looking-for-friends-green-berets-are-busy-in-chinas-backyard/>.

18 The 1<sup>st</sup> Special Forces Command Twitter account consistently broadcasts the message that its forces do more than direct action and are focused on partnerships and relationships. See, @1st\_SF\_Command, Twitter, [https://twitter.com/1st\\_SF\\_Command/status/1268515835783589888?s=20](https://twitter.com/1st_SF_Command/status/1268515835783589888?s=20).

# SPECIAL OPERATIONS CORE ACTIVITIES

- ➔ Direct Action
- ➔ Special Reconnaissance
- ➔ Countering Weapons of Mass Destruction
- ➔ Counterterrorism
- ➔ Unconventional Warfare
- ➔ Foreign internal defense
- ➔ Security force assistance
- ➔ Hostage rescue and recovery
- ➔ Counterinsurgency
- ➔ Foreign humanitarian assistance
- ➔ Military information support activities
- ➔ Civil affairs operations

Source: JP 3-05: Special Operations

With the exception of forces deployed to Afghanistan and a very small amount of other special operations units, the majority of special operations forces are not performing direct action or focusing on counterterrorism in day-to-day operations. What they are doing is working with partner forces to build capacity, increase security and stability, and deny access to China or Russia through their presence and partnerships. This denial of access limits the expansion of adversary spheres of influence, and it is done without firing a single shot. The National Security Strategy and the National Defense Strategy consistently discuss the importance of strengthening existing alliances and attracting new partners, with the NSS declaring, “Sustaining favorable balances of power will require a strong commitment and close cooperation with allies and partners because allies and partners magnify U.S. power

and extend U.S. influence.”<sup>19</sup> Partnerships are a key part of great power competition. Former Undersecretary of Defense for Intelligence Michael Vickers summed it up by saying, “Great power *direct* conflict shouldn’t dominate the force. I want as much influence around the world as I can; the main competition is where SOF lives.”<sup>20</sup>

Africa provides a perfect example. In a recent article for *War on the Rocks*, Ambassador Herman Cohen pointed out, “African allies are actively being courted” by China and Russia, with those countries offering military support and investments in infrastructure and development.<sup>21</sup> And while conventional troops are part of the force structure in Africa to provide force protection and security, the majority of the work being done by, with, and through local partners is conducted by special operators. When they work with partners in

<sup>19</sup> Trump, “National Security Strategy of the United States of America,” p. 46.

<sup>20</sup> John Taft, Liz Gormisky, and Joe Mariani, “Special operations forces and great power competition: Talent, technology, and organizational change in the new threat environment,” Deloitte Insights, 2019, [https://www2.deloitte.com/content/dam/insights/us/articles/4980\\_special-operations-forces/DI\\_special-operations-forces.pdf](https://www2.deloitte.com/content/dam/insights/us/articles/4980_special-operations-forces/DI_special-operations-forces.pdf), p. 7. (Emphasis added)

<sup>21</sup> Herman J. Cohen, “Pulling troops out of Africa could mean another endless war,” *War on the Rocks*, May 13, 2020, <https://warontherocks.com/2020/05/pulling-troops-out-of-africa-could-mean-another-endless-war/>.



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Africa and establish an enduring relationship, it means that the Russians and Chinese are not. The work done by special operators with African partners contributes to stability and results in those partners cooperating with the United States to achieve mutually beneficial counterterrorism objectives.<sup>22</sup> As Ambassador Cohen notes in his article, this is why it makes no sense to scale back the U.S. presence in Africa for the sake of great power competition.<sup>23</sup> The competition plays out there daily, with special operators convincing their African partners that the United States should be their partner of choice, not the Chinese or Russians.

This work through indigenous populations is a hallmark of special operations. Lieutenant General (Retired) Ken Tovo, a former commander of United States Army Special Operations Command, said, “Special operators are the premier practitioners of the indigenous approach to warfare. We’re the guys who actually like working with foreign partners, foreign militaries, and foreign populations . . . And that’s an enduring SOF mission that will still be around even when we have high-end conflict with autonomous swarms and AI.”<sup>24</sup> Those relationships matter when you’re trying to convince a country that it’s better to do business with the United States instead of Russia.

**EVERY DEPLOYED  
SPECIAL OPERATOR  
ACTS AS A “SENSOR,”  
PROVIDING VALUABLE  
INFORMATION TO  
DECISION-MAKERS  
TO ASSIST THEM IN  
CRAFTING THEIR  
STRATEGY FOR  
COMPETITION.**

Special operations forces also act as global scouts for the United States. When they deploy somewhere, their training enables them to work with partner forces to develop intelligence that feeds into a Geographic Combatant Command. Dr. Vickers notes, “In a proxy competition between great powers, there is a key role for SOF to develop an intelligence capability to report on how you win such a competition. . . . That’s where the fight is—it’s not just a kinetic fight, it’s an intellectual fight.”<sup>25</sup> Every deployed special operator acts as a “sensor,” providing valuable information to decision-makers to assist them in crafting their strategy for competition.

22 John Vandiver, “U.S. Special Operations soldiers, African partners wrap up Flintlock exercise,” *Stars and Stripes*, April 20, 2018, <https://www.stripes.com/us-special-operations-soldiers-african-partners-wrap-up-flintlock-exercise-1.523023>.

23 Cohen, “Pulling troops out of Africa could mean another endless war,” *War on the Rocks*.

24 Taft, Gormisky, and Mariani, “Special operations forces and great power competition: Talent, technology, and organizational change in the new threat environment,” Deloitte Insights, 2019, p. 6.

25 Taft, Gormisky, and Mariani, “Special operations forces and great power competition: Talent, technology, and organizational change in the new threat environment,” Deloitte Insights, 2019, p. 10.

# GREAT POWER COMPETITION AND THE BLENDING OF MISSION SETS

Beyond the need to work with partner forces on a daily basis, the complexity of great power competition also requires the flexibility and adaptability inherent in special operations forces. Clearly defined missions are highly desired by military commanders, but rarely, if ever, found in real life. Instead, just as Kennedy told West Point's graduating class in 1962, great power competition involves a variety of missions that extend beyond maneuver warfare, and often intertwine with each other in varying levels of support.

*Joint Publication 3-05: Special Operations* neatly captures the breadth of these missions as it defines and describes the 12 core activities of special operations forces. The publication also provides concrete examples of these activities. And while the manual was published in 2014, before great power competition had reemerged in the national security dialogue, the vignettes within the publication make it hard to miss how special operations forces have been conducting this competition for years, even at the height of the global war on terrorism.

One of the best examples provided is Plan Colombia, an interagency effort in which special operations forces conducted elements of counterinsurgency, security force assistance, civil affairs operations, foreign

internal defense, military information and support operations, and foreign humanitarian assistance.<sup>26</sup> While initially focused on counternarcotics, the program was key to assisting the government of Colombia in defeating the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC), an insurgent group that threatened the stability and security of Colombia.<sup>27</sup> As a result of this effort, Colombia has become one of the most reliable and consistent partners in the Western hemisphere for the United States.

Plan Colombia was a multi-year, multi-billion-dollar investment by the United States, with special operations forces playing a key role. Army Special Forces advisors worked with Colombian military units, while "U.S. civil affairs and military information support personnel worked closely with their Colombian counterparts, US Government departments and agencies, and other nongovernmental organizations to bring humanitarian assistance and economic development into the contested areas."<sup>28</sup> Special operations forces helped serve as the linkage between U.S. diplomatic and military efforts, a role that is increasingly important today, given the continued degradation of the U.S. State Department.

Unlike counterterrorism, where a dead terrorist provides instant gratification, the benefits of a long-term effort like Plan Colombia might not be immediately seen. But great power competition is a lengthy chess match. Russia has continued to attempt to assert influence in South America, "working to expand its presence . . . largely at Washington's expense."<sup>29</sup> To counter that move, it pays to have a valued partner in the region, willing to push back on those

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26 Joint Staff, "Joint Publication 3-05: Special Operations," pp. II-4.

27 Nick Miroff, "'Plan Colombia': How Washington learned to love Latin American intervention again," *Washington Post*, September 18, 2016, [https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/the\\_americas/plan-colombia-how-washington-learned-to-love-latin-american-intervention-again/2016/09/18/ddaeae1c-3199-4ea3-8d0f-69ee1cbda589\\_story.html](https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/the_americas/plan-colombia-how-washington-learned-to-love-latin-american-intervention-again/2016/09/18/ddaeae1c-3199-4ea3-8d0f-69ee1cbda589_story.html).

28 Joint Staff, "Joint Publication 3-05: Special Operations," pp. II-4.

29 Julia Gurganus, "Russia: Playing a Geopolitical Game in Latin America," Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, May 3, 2018, <https://carnegieendowment.org/2018/05/03/russia-playing-geopolitical-game-in-latin-america-pub-76228>.



Special operations forces by themselves are not a solution to great power competition, but they are an integral part of the day-to-day chess match occurring between the United States and its adversaries, and arguably the primary player for the U.S. military.

efforts. Colombia has proven willing to do so, rejecting Russian attempts to assert itself in Venezuela. The results of Plan Colombia have provided the United States with a regional ally helping to promote U.S. interests over Russian interests.<sup>30</sup> These examples define day-to-day great power competition: Special operations forces and interagency partners working quietly, without fanfare, producing enduring partnerships that help deny adversaries access and influence in a region.

Another example can be found in the Philippines, where special operations forces have been working steadily with Filipino forces since 2001, enabling mutually beneficial counterterrorism and counterinsurgency operations. The resulting partnership between the United States and the Philippines proved so strong and valuable that Filipino President Rodrigo Duterte recently reversed his decision to break from a troop deployment agreement with the United States.<sup>31</sup> The continuation of this partnership seems even more important for the United States in light of a recent bipartisan proposal calling for a “Pacific Deterrence Initiative.”<sup>32</sup> The initiative seeks to deter China from direct conflict through the overmatch strategy discussed in the National Security Strategy, requiring willing partners across Southeast Asia to allow for basing and logistics hubs for U.S. forces. To even begin preparing for the large-scale combat operations envisioned by the conventional military, the United States requires the partnerships enabled by its special operations forces on a daily basis.

## STILL THE TIP OF THE SPEAR

Special operations forces by themselves are not a solution to great power competition, but they are an integral part of the day-to-day chess match occurring between the United States and its adversaries, and arguably the primary player for the U.S. military. The conventional military is planning for large-scale maneuver warfare, which may never come. That preparation may provide some level of deterrence, but does little to change an adversary’s behavior that is focused on actions short of conflict. Special operations forces fill that gap through their partnerships by building networks and maintaining American influence to deny those adversaries operating space around the world. This is where great power competition takes place every day: on the peripheries and in the shadows. And it is where special operations forces thrive.

While counterterrorism and direct action missions will continue to receive the majority of the accolades and media coverage, special operations forces will continue to quietly execute their other core activities—building and sustaining partnerships, and helping to deny influence to China and Russia around the globe. Their ability to do so makes them more relevant now than they ever were. And until a shot is actually fired, special operations forces will remain the tip of the spear for the nation’s military contribution to this latest iteration of great power competition. 

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