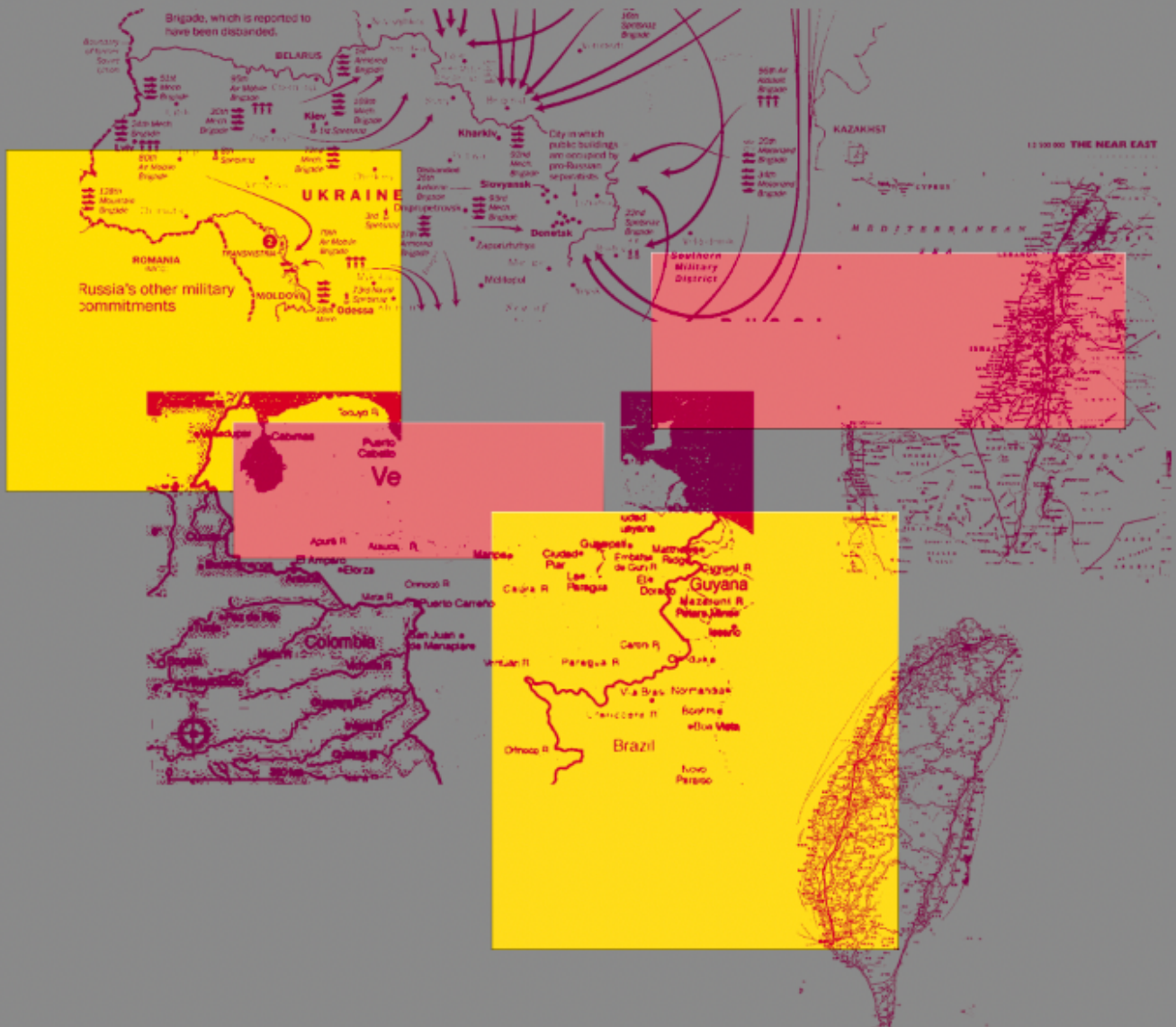


THE EVOLVING MISSION OF US SPECIAL OPERATIONS FORCES:

COMMENTARY AND SUMMARY OF HOUSE ARMED SERVICES SUBCOMMITTEE
ON INTELLIGENCE AND SPECIAL OPERATIONS
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BY: DAVID COOK

The Evolving Mission of U.S. Special Operations Forces

There is a narrative that SOF is at a crossroad – finding its identity after more than twenty years of counterterrorism. There is a pivot happening, without a doubt, but SOF never took their eye off state-actors’ subversive action.

The growing influence of China in Africa and the Middle East, Russia’s state-sponsored support to cyber operations and sabotage, and Iranian IRGC and Quds Force attacks on US service members has all been well documented by US SOF *while* engaged in counterterrorism missions. The mission may have shifted focus from non-state to state actors, but the nature and character of SOF has not changed. SOF, above all else, is able to adapt, comprehend, and execute on the battlefield far beyond traditional military activities. SOF operates in the human domain – a space that is far more complex than any battle drill or military maneuver. In the future, there will be a growing role among private sector and non-governmental organizations to assist in illuminating both kinetic and non-kinetic actions taken by adversaries, state or non-state, alike.

As SOF overtly takes a broader view of adversarial actions to the US and her allies, the same broad engagement will be necessary to identify and elevate capabilities from partners and allies. The same can be said for greater civilian-military fusion. If the private sector is going to take a front seat on supplying SOF with the capabilities, they are also going to sense adversarial actions, sometimes, before the military or intelligence community – especially in the cyber and information domain.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'David Cook', is written over a solid horizontal line.

David Cook

Executive Director

Special Operations Association of America

In a congressional hearing on February 26th, U.S. Special Operations Forces (SOF) Component Commanders came together to testify before the House Armed Services Committee’s Subcommittee on Intelligence and Special Operations. The discussion focused on how each Special Operations component—Army, Navy, Air Force, and Marine Corps—intends to adapt to a rapidly shifting geopolitical landscape, especially given the return of great power competition with nations like China and Russia. Below is a synthesis of the key themes and insights gleaned from the transcript.

1. Opening Remarks: A New Era of Competition

Subcommittee Chair’s Perspective

The subcommittee chair opened the session by highlighting the dramatically different security environment the U.S. faces today compared to the post-9/11 era. While counterterrorism (CT) and the global war on terror once dominated U.S. defense strategy, the focus is shifting toward challenges posed by major state actors—China and Russia—and their partners such as Iran and North Korea. Special Operations Forces, with deep regional expertise and agile deployment capabilities, play a crucial role in meeting these new challenges.

“US Special Operations forces are ideally suited and organized for great power competition.”
— *Congressman Ronny Jackson, Subcommittee Chair*

Ranking Member’s Emphasis on Partnerships

Echoing these sentiments, the ranking member underscored how vital partnerships and alliances remain. SOF’s longstanding relationships around the globe—built through training, foreign internal defense missions, and counterterrorism efforts—help create a “generational network” of trust. This network is invaluable in deterring and countering malign activities by near-peer competitors.

2. The Role of U.S. Army Special Operations Command

Lieutenant General Jonathan Braga (USASOC)

“The future of conflict will find our forces operating in the contested, the deep, and the denied areas supporting the Joint Force.”

— *Lt. Gen. Jonathan Braga, U.S. Army Special Operations Command*

- Core Capabilities: Green Berets (Special Forces), Rangers, Special Operations Aviation, Civil Affairs, and Psychological Operations (PSYOP).
- Global Footprint: Over 3,000 soldiers deploy daily across roughly 80 countries. This persistent presence helps shape the environment, build partner capacity, and respond quickly to emerging crises.

- Transformation for the Future: USASOC is updating Doctrine, reorganizing for multi-domain operations, and establishing new occupational specialties focused on technology (especially unmanned systems).
 - Challenges: While Army Special Operations enjoys robust support from the larger Army, acquisition and modernization processes can lag behind the speed of real-world threats. Additionally, balancing immediate readiness with long-term modernization remains a constant challenge.
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3. Air Force Special Operations Command's High-Tech Reach

Lieutenant General Michael Conley (AFSOC)

“AFSOC provides a high return on investment, accounting for less than one-half of one percent of the Air Force’s budget but delivering global access and precision.”

— *Lt. Gen. Michael Conley, Air Force Special Operations Command*

- 35 Years of Adaptation: AFSOC was born out of an era demanding long-range infiltration and airborne refueling. Post-9/11, the command expanded its fleet of intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance (ISR) platforms and refined its precision-strike capabilities.
 - Global Engagement: Air Commandos remain in high demand, from Europe—where they train alongside NATO allies to deter Russian aggression—to the Indo-Pacific region, where they maintain a forward-based wing crucial for building alliances and countering China’s influence.
 - Challenges and Opportunities:
 - Demand vs. Resources: AFSOC sees increased taskings even as budgets remain flat.
 - Innovation Speed: Integrating technology—especially in aircraft upgrades—can take too long. Tactics, training, and procedures sometimes move more quickly than acquisition cycles allow.
 - Retention: Like other SOF units, AFSOC relies on the allure of a high-impact, mission-focused environment. While retention remains strong, competition with the private sector (e.g., airlines) can be a future concern.
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4. Naval Special Warfare Command's Maritime Focus

Rear Admiral Milton Sands (Naval Special Warfare Command)

“As the nation’s maritime special operations force, Naval Special Warfare owns the water and executes the nation’s most challenging and decisive operations.”

— *Rear Adm. Milton Sands, Naval Special Warfare Command*

- Maritime Access as a Competitive Advantage: SEALs and Special Warfare Combatant-Craft Crewmen (SWCC) bring unique value to U.S. maritime strategy. They can operate above, on, or below the waterline, where conventional forces may be limited or where stealth is paramount.
 - Kinetic and Non-Kinetic Effects:
 - Kinetic: The classic image of a SEAL team inserting onto a beach or a SWCC crew interdicting enemy vessels.
 - Non-Kinetic: Growing emphasis on intelligence gathering, cyber, electronic warfare, and enabling broader naval and joint force operations.
 - Continued Investment: With less than 1% of the Navy’s budget (and roughly 14% of U.S. Special Operations Command’s overall budget), Naval Special Warfare provides significant return on investment. The challenge lies in maintaining readiness and modernization (especially in unmanned systems) under constrained funding.
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5. Marine Forces Special Operations Command: Versatility Forward

Major General Peter Huntley (MARSOC)

“Our Raiders thrive in contested and denied spaces. We must ensure we can not only sense the threat, but strike it accurately with lethal effect.”

— *Maj. Gen. Peter Huntley, Marine Forces Special Operations Command*

- Persistent Presence: Marine Raiders operate in critical locations worldwide, often in contested or denied environments, to build security capacity and respond to crises.
 - Focus Areas:
 1. Advanced Technologies: Integrating AI, advanced robotics, and networked sensors for real-time intelligence.
 2. Precision Strike: Expanding the ability to strike independently or coordinate fires with joint forces.
 3. People First: MARSOC’s small-unit ethos thrives on a rigorous pipeline that emphasizes quality, leadership, and mission-first mindset.
 - Support from the Larger Marine Corps: MARSOC recruits experienced Marines and has strong backing from the Commandant and the broader Marine Corps. This synergy ensures that Raiders remain aligned with Marine Corps’ modernization (Force Design) while maintaining the unique capabilities of SOF.
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The Central Importance of People and Partnerships

One resounding takeaway from the hearing was that people remain the “secret sauce” of the SOF community. Each commander underscored that the dedication, skill, and ingenuity of their operators set them apart. Whether in a crisis response, a training mission, or a high-risk combat

operation, these personnel consistently demonstrate an unwavering commitment to mission success. In parallel, partnerships were identified as crucial enablers of SOF operations. Collaborative efforts with foreign allies—built through training programs, shared deployments, and robust interagency cooperation—foster deeper trust and pave the way for coordinated strategies against common threats.

Balancing Readiness and Modernization

Despite their central role in deterring adversaries and countering emergent threats, SOF units face a delicate balancing act. On one hand, they must sustain high levels of readiness to respond swiftly to crises anywhere in the world. On the other, they are compelled to modernize continually, embracing the latest technologies in areas such as cyber operations, space-based capabilities, unmanned platforms, software acquisition and training, and electronic warfare. Funding constraints and the complexities of the acquisition process can slow the introduction of cutting-edge equipment, underscoring the need for streamlined mechanisms that keep SOF ahead of rapidly evolving adversaries.

Navigating the Information Environment

Throughout the hearing, commanders stressed that the information environment has become a critical battleground. LTG Braga put it bluntly: “We cede the information environment at our own peril.” Whether through the manipulation of social media or advanced psychological operations, adversaries can now challenge U.S. interests without firing a single shot. This reality demands that SOF be equipped with the tools and authorities to operate just as effectively in the digital domain as they do in the physical realm. Failing to match this speed of adaptation could compromise the ability to shape perceptions, protect U.S. forces, and safeguard national interests.

Expanding Authorities for Greater Flexibility

An equally pressing need centers on expanding the legal and funding authorities that govern special operations missions. The hearing revealed numerous references to statutes like 127E and Section 333, as well as Title 10 authorities, which can be complex to harmonize. Commanders expressed a desire to blend these authorities more seamlessly—thereby reducing delays and allowing SOF to address threats in the “gray zone,” where conventional forces may be less effective. Furthermore, operating in denied environments often requires rapid, decentralized decision-making; updated authorities would help clarify the boundaries of responsibility and ensure SOF components can act promptly.

Recruitment and Retention Successes

Another striking point from the hearing was SOF’s high rate of retention despite broader recruiting challenges across the military. A strong sense of mission, a dedicated community, and opportunities to undertake meaningful operations all contribute to why so many stay in the force. However, competition from private-sector employers—who increasingly value the skill sets that SOF personnel bring—could create new obstacles. It is evident that preserving a strong SOF workforce will require ongoing attention to career pathways, compensation, and support for military families.

A Strategic Inflection Point

In their concluding remarks, senior SOF leaders observed **that** the world is entering a more complex strategic era characterized by rival great powers, persistent regional conflicts, and fast-evolving technology. Special Operations Forces stand out as both highly adaptable and indispensable. Whether deterring hostile nation-states, conducting counterterrorism missions, or supporting allies in crisis situations, SOF can rapidly shift focus and resources to meet unpredictable challenges. However, commanders emphasized that fulfilling these roles hinges on continuous adaptation—finding the right balance between immediate operational demands and long-term modernization.

“The future of conflict will find our forces operating in the contested, the deep, and the denied areas supporting the Joint Force.”

— *Lt. Gen. Jonathan Braga, U.S. Army Special Operations Command*

“Today’s air Commandos repeatedly demonstrate their ability to become what the nation needs at that time, in that place.”

— *Lt. Gen. Michael Conley, Air Force Special Operations Command*

These words encapsulate the essence of SOF in this era: agile, forward-thinking, and unwaveringly committed to the defense of American interests.

Key Themes Driving SOF Forward

The testimony pointed to **five main themes** that will shape future SOF operations:

1. **Transformation for Strategic Competition**
 - Updating doctrine, reorganizing forces, and investing in technologies (cyber, AI, unmanned systems) are all critical for countering advanced adversaries.
2. **Ongoing Global Presence**
 - From Europe to the Indo-Pacific, SOF works with partners and addresses both state and non-state threats.
3. **Balancing Current Operations and Future Readiness**

- High operational tempos contrast with the need to adopt new tools, tactics, and authorities—a tension that demands thoughtful budget priorities and acquisition reforms.
4. **Importance of Relationships**
 - Long-term success often depends on partnerships forged through shared training and deployments, enabling a network of reliable allies.
 5. **Recruitment and Retention**
 - While SOF remains attractive to motivated individuals, the demands of a competitive marketplace mean continuous effort to sustain a quality force.
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Recommendations for Congress

To ensure the continued vitality of SOF, congressional support remains crucial:

1. **Enhance Funding Flexibility**
 - *Streamline Acquisition*: Empower SOCOM to acquire emerging technologies at the “speed of relevance.”
 - *Consolidate Authorities*: Simplify funding lines (e.g., 127E, Section 333, Title 10) so that SOF can respond to threats more nimbly.
 2. **Expand Support for Irregular Warfare**
 - *Information Operations*: Modernize and clarify authorities for agile, real-time counter-propaganda measures.
 - *Cross-Agency Coordination*: Encourage collaboration among the State Department, and DoD in contested environments.
 3. **Prioritize Partner-Nation Training**
 - *Revitalize IMET*: Sustain robust programs that build lasting defense partnerships.
 - *Micro-Project Funding*: Enable small-scale civil-affairs initiatives to bolster goodwill, especially in regions where adversaries exert influence.
 4. **Sustain SOF Personnel and Families**
 - *Quality of Life*: Invest in housing, healthcare, and family programs to reduce attrition.
 - *Talent Management*: Offer targeted incentives and clear career pathways for specialized skill sets.
 5. **Promote Continuous Innovation**
 - *Funding for Experimentation*: Support rapid testing and development under each SOF component.
 - *Lessons Learned Mechanisms*: Strengthen the channels that integrate real-world insights—like those from Ukraine—into U.S. training pipelines.
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Conclusion

SOF forces retain a decisive advantage born of unparalleled training, forward presence, and an unmatched culture of adaptability. In the face of mounting complexities—from gray-zone

conflicts to contested information spaces—SOF offers policymakers agile, impactful solutions. By providing flexible funding, streamlined authorities, and targeted programs to keep personnel motivated and equipped, Congress can ensure that America’s SOF community remains at the forefront of national defense. Embracing both tradition and innovation, these elite units are poised to protect U.S. interests around the globe for decades to come. No matter what the future or character of warfare holds, SOF is a vital capability not because they are faster or stronger, but because they are unmatched critical thinkers that face enemies with an entirely different set of tools and skills. That set of skills carries over into the civilian world and is more important than ever hardened veterans of the last conflict hang up the uniform and prepare to compete the same sponsors of nefarious actions in entirely different ways.

Watch the entire House Armed Services Testimony here:

https://www.youtube.com/live/MiTe9nd_2eI?si=s11mK8yzI8J2yt1H