United States Special Operations Command
Special Operations Forces
Operating Concept

May 2013
COMMANDER’S FOREWORD

Take pause for a moment and imagine a new era in American history. Fast forward seven years to the year 2020. Like other times in our history following long periods of war, the postwar years once again proved fruitful. Our Nation and Armed Forces underwent a strategic transition while still engaged in an unstable world plagued by enduring conflicts. We seized the opportunity to devise and adopt innovative strategies and operational approaches to assert global leadership as a trusted partner among like-minded nations. As our predecessors did after the two world wars of the 20th Century, we shed our preoccupation with “what once was” -- the international order that served us well in the past. Instead, we became change agents of “what could be” – a new international order that will serve us well into the 21st Century.

To be sure, fiscal realities, budget processes, and congressional pressures remain in 2020. But there is now a broad bipartisan consensus that costly, long-term contingencies are only a last resort. Instead, our Nation decided to pursue innovative, low-cost, and small-footprint approaches to secure national interests and the shared interests of strategic partners. The departments and agencies of the U.S. Government overcame their budget-driven bureaucratic practices and became more collaborative. Now, they work together through a synchronous “web of networks” to achieve strategic outcomes for the greater good of the United States and like-minded nations.

You Can’t Surge Trust. You must build it, slowly and deliberately, before a crisis occurs. Imagine 2020, a time when joint, interagency, intergovernmental, multinational, non-governmental, commercial, and academic partners cooperate, trust each other, and combine their capabilities and authorities to provide National Leadership with innovative strategic options. Imagine interdependent armed forces being structured to implement national security and defense strategies, versus strategies constrained by sub-optimized force structure. Times such as these can originate only from unprecedented levels of mutual trust, confidence, and understanding that recognize no fixed boundaries and foster networking and collaboration.

The Special Operations Forces Operating Concept captures the essence of the SOF heritage as it could be – as it should be in the year 2020 and beyond. The concept moves beyond the first decade of the 21st Century, when SOF primarily supported large-scale contingency operations by conducting counterterrorism operations to find, capture, or kill our adversaries. Although of great value to the Nation, these operations were never intended to be decisive. Operating through the Global SOF Network in support of our Geographic Combatant Commanders and Chiefs of Mission, SOF now have the opportunity to achieve strategic outcomes by working with and through interagency and foreign partners to understand and influence relevant populations. This approach demands imagination, creativity, innovation, and determination – all attributes the Nation expects from our Special Operations Forces.

William H. McRaven
Admiral, U.S. Navy
Commander
What is New and Different about this Operating Concept?

This concept details fresh ideas, strategies and innovations for future operations that provide National Leadership with strategic options for protecting and advancing U.S. national interests. In doing so, the concept emphasizes a resilient, adaptive, well-trained, and professionally educated Special Operations Force focused on enduring engagement with strategic partners to support Geographic Combatant Commanders and Chiefs of Missions. Key tenets of this concept are:

- Networking to build and sustain enduring relationships and partnerships
- Culturally-astute and linguistically-educated SOF Operators who operate in the human domain to understand and influence relevant populations
- Understanding and influencing narratives
- Deliberate theater-level operations linking engagement activities and operational missions in time, space, and purpose
- Enduring versus episodic engagement (multi-year, same region)
- Small-footprint distributed operations by fully enabled SOF teams with no degradation of capabilities or support, regardless of location
- Reduced-signature operations (The Invisible Operator)
- Command, Control, Communications, Computers, and Intelligence for a worldwide network
- Elevating SOF non-lethal skills to the same level of expertise as lethal skills
# TABLE OF CONTENTS

1 INTRODUCTION .......................................................................................................................... 1
2 THE STRATEGIC ENVIRONMENT ................................................................................................. 2
3 THE CONCEPT – Global SOF as a Strategic Option .................................................................. 3
4 KEY ELEMENTS OF THE CENTRAL IDEA .................................................................................. 4
   4.1 Understanding the Human Domain ......................................................................................... 5
   4.2 Understanding and Influencing the Narrative ....................................................................... 5
   4.3 Enduring Engagement through Small-Footprint Distributed Operations ............................. 6
   4.4 Building Sustainable Partner Capacity and Interoperability .............................................. 8
   4.5 Managing the Network .......................................................................................................... 8
   4.6 Building Resiliency into the Force and Families ............................................................... 9
5 CRITICAL CAPABILITY AREAS ............................................................................................... 10
   5.1 Sustaining the Network ......................................................................................................... 10
   5.2 Cultural and Regional Expertise ......................................................................................... 10
   5.3 SOF Information Environment ............................................................................................ 12
   5.4 Invisible Operator ................................................................................................................. 13
   5.5 Expanded Authorities ........................................................................................................... 13
      5.5.1 Operational Authorities ............................................................................................... 14
      5.5.2 Service-like Authorities .............................................................................................. 14
   5.6 SOF Enablers ....................................................................................................................... 15
   5.7 Advanced Technologies ....................................................................................................... 16
      5.7.1 Cyberspace .................................................................................................................. 17
      5.7.2 Space .......................................................................................................................... 17
6 CONCLUSION ............................................................................................................................ 18
7 GLOSSARY .................................................................................................................................. 19
1 INTRODUCTION

Building upon the 2012 Defense Strategic Guidance, SOCOM 2020, SOF 2020, and the Chairman’s Capstone Concept for Joint Operations, this concept provides an unconstrained view of how Special Operations Forces (SOF) operate in the future, with emphasis on the far-term (2020 and beyond).\(^1\) It describes a networked, population-centric approach guided by U.S. national interests. The approach calls for enduring engagement with strategic partners by small, fully enabled SOF teams conducting long-term, small-footprint distributed operations. The ideas affect all SOF activities and drive U.S. Special Operations Command (USSOCOM) capability development, including supporting concepts, wargaming, and capability-based assessments.

**Situation: The year is 2020.** The Global SOF Network described in SOF 2020 – a world-wide human network facilitated by an integrated information and communication system and other enabling forces, capabilities, and infrastructure – is fully operational. SOF are conducting activities in more than 100 countries. Operating through this network, SOF are supporting the Geographic Combatant Commanders and Chiefs of Missions to provide National Leadership with strategic options for protecting and advancing U.S. national interests without committing major combat forces to costly, long-term contingency operations.

Since 2013, the Nation has changed its perception of SOF. For too long, they were inaccurately viewed solely as the world’s premier counterterrorism force. Although counterterrorism remains a critical activity, USSOCOM has re-emphasized mastery of those non-lethal skills rooted deep in their heritage. SOF successes have increased public awareness of their efforts with and through strategic partners to prevent local instability from escalating into conflicts that threaten U.S. national interests. This concept is the story of how forward-postured, fully-enabled SOF build enduring partnerships based on mutual trust and confidence. And how these partnerships enable SOF to understand and influence relevant populations in support of U.S. Government efforts to enhance stability, prevent conflict, and be prepared to fight and defeat adversaries when necessary.

---

\(^1\) SOCOM 2020 provides strategic direction for SOF. SOF 2020 describes the interdependent Global SOF Network, an organizing and operating mechanism for empowering SOF and their strategic partners. This Operating Concept complements these two documents by describing how SOF will operate through the Global SOF Network to support broader efforts by the Geographic Combatant Commanders and Chiefs of Missions to protect and advance U.S. national interests.
2 THE STRATEGIC ENVIRONMENT

The future is impossible to predict. Although the strategic environment remains uncertain, complex, and volatile, trends exist. The following major trends impact SOF and frame their operational challenges in 2020 and beyond.

- **Increased Role of Non-State Actors.** Transnational and trans-regional non-state actors apply power and influence previously available only to nation-states. Some – criminal organizations, violent extremist organizations, local agents of instability, and super-empowered individuals – threaten U.S. national interests.

- **Demographic Shifts.** Urbanization and population shifts to littoral-based environments, combined with increased transparency and access to information, continue to drive socio-cultural changes that shape how SOF operate.

- **Redistribution and Diffusion of Global Power.** Regional powers such as Russia, China, India, Indonesia, Brazil, Nigeria, South Africa, Turkey, and Iran assert growing power and influence. Competing political, social, or economic systems continue to seek a more favorable global balance of power as they adapt and co-evolve. Sub-state actors (e.g., clans, tribes, ethnic and religious minorities) seek greater autonomy from the central government.

- **Globalization.** Global communications, social networking, and other agents of globalization continue to accelerate the speed, scope, scale, and reach of problems. These aspects of globalization fuel resentment and resistance within traditional non-Western societies being assimilated into the new globalized world.

- **Advanced Technologies and Robotics.** The commercialization of space and cyberspace, and evolving technologies continue to alter societies and their security forces in unpredictable ways.

- **Enduring Conflict.** State and non-state adversaries converge and collaborate around shared interests and ideologies to threaten U.S. and foreign partners’ shared interests. They attempt to counter the logic and tempo of how the United States fights, exhaust the collective will of the American people, deplete U.S. national resources, and force the United States to assume a defensive posture.

These trends, combined with fiscal uncertainties, make for an unpredictable world characterized by persistent instability. Regardless of how the future unfolds, SOF will operate effectively – to understand, anticipate, influence, respond, and adapt – in any foreseeable operating environment.
3  THE CONCEPT – Global SOF as a Strategic Option

The challenge facing USSOCOM:

How will USSOCOM optimize and exploit the Global SOF Network to protect and advance U.S. national interests in an unstable, complex, and transparent world?

The year is 2020. USSOCOM is addressing this challenge by conducting enduring and sustainable global engagement focused on U.S. national interests, rather than low-priority threats or opportunities. Strategically, USSOCOM forces are postured forward to engage with their strategic partners and build and sustain enduring partnerships. Operationally, USSOCOM is balancing the application of all SOF core activities in support of the Geographic Combatant Commanders and Chiefs of Missions. Through enduring engagement, SOF assist their partners to become more capable, more interoperable, and more willing to contribute to securing shared interests. By doing so, SOF provides National Leadership with strategic options for protecting and advancing U.S. national interests without committing major combat forces to costly, long-term contingency operations.

SOF conducts their core activities through the Global SOF Network: a globally linked force of SOF and their strategic partners – joint, interagency, intergovernmental, multinational, non-governmental, commercial, and academic. As described in SOF 2020, this network is a “living and learning” system that remains agile, responsive, and adaptable as the strategic environment evolves. It is not a stand-alone or closed system. Rather, it functions within an interdependent web of networks operated by strategic partners.

Therefore, the central idea of this concept is:

SOF conduct core activities with a focused, balanced approach through small-footprint distributed operations to understand and influence relevant populations. USSOCOM optimizes and exploits the Global SOF Network to provide strategic options for National Leadership in support of U.S. Government efforts to enhance stability, prevent conflicts, and when necessary, fight and defeat adversaries.

---

Enduring engagement dictates that small SOF teams conduct long-term distributed operations using focused, task-organized, small-footprint approaches. The idea of enduring engagement follows the successful approach used in El Salvador, Colombia, and the Philippines. In these countries, SOF planned deliberate campaigns that systematically assessed, trained, equipped, advised, and assisted the host government’s security forces. Concurrently, civil-military operations and influence activities addressed host government vulnerabilities to underlying sources of instability and conflict. SOF developed plans in coordination with the host governments and integrated them into the mission strategic plan of the Chief of Mission (“Country Team”) and the theater campaign plan of the Geographic Combatant Commander. In the conduct of these campaigns, small SOF teams and single SOF Operators collocated with their hosts and immersed themselves in the local culture. Slowly and deliberately, they assisted the host government to develop their security force capabilities, address the needs of the people, and build positive civil-military relations. These efforts reinforced host government legitimacy and isolated indigenous sources of instability from the people. The activities of these teams and single operators were low cost, low-visibility and presented a politically acceptable small footprint, in contrast to the overt mode and heavy footprint of large-scale contingency operations.

This approach is a necessary departure from the high-cost, large-scale deployments required of SOF in the early 21st Century. Persistent, small scale deployments, facilitating long-term engagement better serves the shared vital interests of the United States and its partners. Effective, proactive, non-lethal engagements take precedence over reactive, large-scale actions. Over time, this approach patiently informs, influences, and shapes the operating environment thus setting conditions to prevent conflict.

SOF Operators are at the core of this approach. They are professionally-educated with high levels of language proficiency, cultural awareness, and regional expertise. They apply their knowledge and understanding at the local level to influence relevant populations in their operational areas to achieve strategic outcomes.

4 **KEY ELEMENTS OF THE CENTRAL IDEA**

The central idea has six key and interrelated elements that collectively describe how USSOCOM optimizes and exploits the Global SOF Network. These elements describe the ways in which USSOCOM focuses and balances core activities through small-footprint distributed operations to achieve strategic outcomes.

**The SOF Operator** is a vital element of the Global SOF Network but cannot succeed without the enabling forces, capabilities, and infrastructure that also comprise the network.
4.1 Understanding the Human Domain

SOF engage globally with interagency and foreign partners in order to understand and operate in the human domain. SOF identify relevant populations for each problem set, gather deep contextual knowledge concerning them, and understand the human dynamics within and between them.

In 2020, the Global SOF Network plays a major role to enable this approach, slowly and deliberately developing the relationships necessary to enhance stability, prevent conflicts, and respond promptly in crises, particularly where U.S. major combat forces are not appropriate. Under Geographic Combatant Commander authority and in coordination with the Chief of Mission, SOF work with and through the host government to undermine adversary legitimacy and credibility, and isolate their adversaries from relevant populations and their external supporters, physically and psychologically. Concurrently, SOF assist the host government to bolster its own legitimacy and credibility and gain popular support.

4.2 Understanding and Influencing the Narrative

In population-centric operations, the concept of narratives is critical to understanding and influencing human behavior. The ideas, beliefs, and perspectives that compose narratives compete in the local, national, and transnational arenas. They survive, mutate and are passed on according to their cultural appeal or ability to unify groups against competing narratives.

Global communications make the world more transparent as information becomes increasingly ubiquitous. In 2020 and beyond, USSOCOM supports U.S. Government efforts to identify, understand and adapt to major changes in sentiment at the local, regional and international levels. Special operators ensure their messaging is consistent with Geographic Combatant Command theater campaign plans. Then, in close coordination with Chiefs of Mission, and in concert with U.S. Government agencies, USSOCOM assists foreign partners to disseminate their own narrative, diminishing the appeal of adversaries' narratives, making them increasingly irrelevant and eventually supplanting them.

---

3 Human Domain is an emerging idea offered to frame intellectual discussions and aid concept development efforts. The success of unified action depends upon the application of capabilities that influence the perceptions, understanding, and actions of relevant populations and decision makers.
Even with the institution of a methodical approach toward advancing friendly narratives and discrediting hostile ones, actions still speak louder than words. Indigenous groups perceive SOF Operators as “local ambassadors” of the United States. Intentionally or unintentionally, their words and actions can affect many local, regional, and global audiences. SOF actions must support their words to influence local attitudes and beliefs of the United States and advance the local narrative in ways favorable to the interests of the United States and the host government. Local interactions are more influential than any formal messaging, so SOF Operators continually strive to close the “say-do” gap between their actions and words, and influence their interagency and foreign partners to do the same.

4.3 Enduring Engagement through Small-Footprint Distributed Operations

Preventing conflict requires an understanding of its root causes. True understanding is only gained through human interaction, which requires some form of engagement. In the past, many SOF engagements were opportunistic, episodic, and for short periods, with little continuity of effort. In 2020, SOF engagement is more purposeful, more enduring, and more consistent, with the same people and units engaging over time (years, not weeks) in ways that slowly and deliberately build and sustain enduring relationships based on mutual trust and confidence. Every engagement has a greater purpose and contributes to achieving a cumulative operational effect leading to a desired strategic outcome.

The primary way that SOF engages is through Theater Special Operations Commands (TSOCs), subordinate unified commands assigned to USSOCOM but under the operational control of the Geographic Combatant Commanders. Based on the theater strategy and in coordination with the Chief of Mission, the TSOCs conduct a series of interrelated engagement activities and operational missions across time and space to achieve theater strategic objectives. These operations include a focused, task-appropriate mix of interdependent SOF and non-SOF activities. Consistent with U.S. foreign policy and national interests, TSOCs find and cultivate foreign partners with force development potential and similar goals, and then establish long-term engagement programs that develop these forces and their supporting institutions over time. The intent is to use the same personnel over time to build habitual relationships and trust with interagency and foreign partners. Operating through the Global SOF Network, the TSOCs use globally linked and synchronized, regionally aligned, low-cost, and small-footprint approaches to distribute their SOF activities.
teams throughout their regions. These teams engage at the local level with U.S. missions, foreign governments, and populations to build relationships that enable SOF to work with and through partners.

Enduring engagement dictates that small, task-organized SOF teams, empowered by mission command, operate both inside and outside of declared operational areas, often without established conventional force infrastructure. They frequently operate in countries where a large U.S. military presence may be unacceptable or inappropriate. These teams function autonomously in urban environments as well as austere and remote locations, without any degradation in their capabilities or support, regardless of their location. They live and operate with their foreign counterparts. They avoid creating large footprints, disrupting local economic and civil conditions, and causing damage to their partners’ narratives. SOF teams prepare the environment for potential crises and conflicts should they occur. When necessary, they enable the Geographic Combatant Commander to transition into a direct combat role to terminate hostilities on terms favorable to the United States and its foreign partners. While emphasizing the need for operating with and through foreign partners, SOF retain the ability to take direct action when necessary.

The regional alignment of all SOF units to Geographic Combatant Commanders fosters enduring engagement and regional agility, but it may limit global agility when USSOCOM must surge its forces in response to a crisis or contingency operation. For each crisis or contingency, USSOCOM determines the proper balance between enduring engagement and global agility. In 2020, USSOCOM provides each Geographic Combatant Commander a baseline SOF force package for enduring engagement, even if USSOCOM must reallocate its other aligned SOF elements to a contingency operation outside the region. By protecting a baseline force package in each region, USSOCOM decreases the strategic risk associated with the reallocation of conventional forces and SOF to a regional contingency operation.

**Regional alignment** is a dedicated and habitual relationship between a SOF unit and a Geographic Combatant Commander.

**Mission Command** is a decentralized style of military command that promotes freedom and speed of action within certain constraints. It is closely related to the civilian management concept of workplace empowerment. Subordinates, understanding the commander’s intent, their own mission, and the context of that mission, are told what effect they are to achieve and the reason it needs to be achieved. They then use initiative within their delegated freedom of action to determine how best to achieve their mission.
4.4 Building Sustainable Partner Capacity and Interoperability

Building and sustaining partner capacity and interoperability remains critical to mission success. SOF rapidly assess, train, equip, advise, and assist foreign security forces to meet an immediate requirement and then transition to a longer-term development program. The intent of this program is to build more capable and sustainable capacity of partner security forces, as well as the host government agencies and institutions that are responsible for or support such forces. SOF enhance their partners’ civil-military operations and influence activities as well as their combat capabilities, introducing only those capabilities and technologies their partners can sustain over time. The intent is to enable the host government to address its own security problems and eventually to contribute its forces to multinational efforts to secure shared interests.

SOF build sustainable partner capacity and interoperability by focusing on three distinct areas. First, USSOCOM assists partner nations to develop their SOF to help meet the global demand. When foreign SOF are more capable and interoperable, they are able to participate in multinational operations, thus relieving the operational pressure on U.S. SOF units. Blending U.S. and foreign SOF to conduct multinational operations will exploit the comparative strengths of each thus acting as a force multiplier.

Second, in concert with U.S. conventional force efforts, USSOCOM builds sustainable and interoperable capabilities and capacities in foreign conventional armed forces and other security forces so partner nations can secure their own sovereignty.

Third, USSOCOM supports foreign irregular forces, groups, or individuals supporting or facilitating U.S. SOF activities to counter terrorism or insurgency, or conduct unconventional warfare against a hostile government.

4.5 Managing the Network

USSOCOM manages the Global SOF Network across geographic and organizational boundaries. SOF operate in foreign countries under Combatant Commander authority and Chief of Mission approval. SOF teams normally establish transparent liaison with the U.S. mission while reporting to forward-based sub-regional SOF command and control elements that in turn report to the appropriate TSOC. The TSOCs perform as regional hubs in the network to plan and conduct their operations and activities in support of theater campaigns and other nationally-designated priorities.

Operating within a web of networks, USSOCOM now synchronizes and integrates SOF efforts across Geographic Combatant Command boundaries. However, global synchronization remains a collaborative effort because the Geographic Combatant Commanders need the autonomy to conduct decentralized operations in their regions.

One way USSOCOM collaborates with its foreign SOF partners is through the Regional SOF Coordination Centers (RSCCs). Because circumstances vary widely from region
to region, each RSCC was established by its own intergovernmental agreement signed by all participating nations. Working closely with the TSOCs and each other, the RSCCs complement the TSOC role by serving as regional hubs for improving SOF-capable training and education, coordination, information sharing, and interoperability among regional partners. At the country level, USSOCOM assigns SOF Liaison Officers through the TSOCs for duty at the national headquarters of selected foreign SOF partners. SOF Liaison Officers serve as the primary U.S. SOF advisor to the foreign national SOF headquarters. When a foreign national SOF headquarters does not exist, the SOF Liaison Officer is normally assigned for duty at the U.S. Mission.

USSOCOM also collaborates with its interagency partners to leverage their networks and strengthen their interdependence with SOF. Within the National Capital Region, USSOCOM assigns Special Operations Support Teams to every appropriate U.S. Government department and agency to coordinate, collaborate, and synchronize SOF operations and activities with those of the host department or agency. At the country level, USSOCOM assigns SOF Representatives through the TSOCs to every appropriate U.S. mission. SOF Representatives operate under the authority of the Chief of Mission and serve as the primary SOF advisor to the Mission’s Senior Defense Official, Defense Attaché, Security Assistance Organization Chief, host nation SOF leadership, and other designated host nation security forces.

SOF are not a substitute for conventional forces. SOF and conventional force capabilities are complementary. Depending on requirements, SOF operate independently or in concert with conventional forces. The degree of interdependence varies based on specific missions and the operating environment. In some cases, SOF work together with conventional forces in the same battlespace based on the principle of mutual support. When operating with conventional forces, SOF commanders provide a Special Operations Command and Control Element to the conventional force headquarters. One key function of this element is to link the conventional force headquarters into the Global SOF Network and the SOF headquarters into the conventional force network.

4.6 Building Resiliency into the Force and Families

In 2020, the elevated demand for SOF and high operations tempo has not diminished and continues to place an incredible strain on the force and their families. USSOCOM positions forces and families forward for years at a time. SOF families accompany their military spouses and live in the community, sometimes under less-than-optimal conditions, as is the case for diplomats assigned to U.S. missions in remote and austere locations. While assigned overseas on extended tours, SOF Operators and their families now receive the same benefits as U.S. diplomats in addition to their standard military benefits.
In collaboration with the Military Services, USSOCOM cares for SOF Operators and their families by providing scalable and tailored programs and services that meet their physical, mental, and spiritual needs. USSOCOM continues to make great strides in caring for SOF Operators, strengthening their families, and keeping deployed SOF Operators connected to their families.

USSOCOM also continues to lead the way in researching, developing, implementing and assessing innovative programs to optimize the psychological, social, intellectual, and physical performance of SOF.

5 **CRITICAL CAPABILITY AREAS**

The operational approaches envisioned in this concept are enabled by force development in the following critical capability areas:

5.1 **Sustaining the Global SOF Network**

An agile, responsive, and adaptive network is the strategic backbone of SOF. The network continually improves, adapts, and co-evolves so that it does not stagnate or atrophy over time. USSOCOM continues to sustain and enhance the network through ongoing force development and management improvements.

5.2 **Cultural and Regional Expertise**

The SOF Operator is the key and irreplaceable element of the network. Within the Joint Force, they are most capable of achieving the flexibility, adaptability and complex level of cultural understanding to carry out population-centric operations. SOF Operators gain and maintain professional levels of language proficiency, cultural awareness, and regional expertise, which lead to greater understanding of the human domain in countries of strategic interest to the United States. SOF Operators are exceptionally well-educated, expertly trained individuals. They are critical thinkers, eager to embrace new cultures and understand different ways of thinking. They master the interpersonal and social networking skills, knowledge, and understanding that allow them to operate fluidly within diverse non-Western societies. They understand not only the human factors and related second and third order effects, but also the impact and influence that human behavior has across all domains. They understand the influence and consequences that actions in other domains have on human behavior. They train others in these skills and, in the process, convey the U.S. perspective in a favorable manner that influences partners, adversaries, and relevant populations.
Understanding how to build relationships and influence foreign populations requires a pool of SOF cultural and regional experts who spend most of their careers forward, living in foreign societies. As these experts develop their networks, they serve as “human sensors” of the socio-cultural and regional human “weather”, detecting the subtle nuances and shifts within populations and gathering data for analysis. SOF cultural and regional experts spend years, perhaps decades, at a time in one country to obtain this level of expertise in the inner workings of a foreign culture.

In 2020, USSOCOM treats the SOF Operator as “a system” and applies careful and holistic lifecycle management and other systems engineering methods to this critical organic (non-materiel and materiel) system. As part of SOF Operator lifecycle management, USSOCOM collaborates with the Military Departments and Services to establish and sustain non-standard personnel management programs and career paths for developing and managing SOF Operators from recruitment to retirement.

USSOCOM continues to build a resilient, adaptive, well-trained, and professionally educated Special Operation Force through:

- Diverse recruiting, assessment, and selection programs to obtain SOF Operators with the requisite knowledge, skills, and abilities
- Training in advanced operational skills that enable SOF Operators to understand and influence the conditions of their operational environment, and to operate more effectively within that environment
- Education to enable SOF Operators to acquire cultural and regional expertise
- Exploring methods for preserving the physical, mental, and spiritual health of SOF Operators and their families, and for enhancing SOF Operator performance and resiliency without inflicting any long-term physical or mental damage
- Developing SOF leaders skilled in understanding, assembling, directing, and influencing social networks

As an essential component of its lifecycle management, USSOCOM identifies talent proactively to produce SOF Operators with pre-existing language proficiency and cultural and regional expertise. SOF recruiters scout and groom potential candidates not only from the Services but also from exceptionally qualified college and high school students, much like professional sports teams. Recruiters also draw from immigrant communities to create a diverse force of SOF Operators.
5.3 **SOF Information Environment**

The success of the Global SOF Network depends on the SOF Information Environment – an integrated, multi-level, global information technology infrastructure, enterprise services, and security architecture – that serves as its backbone. In 2020, the SOF Information Environment provides customers with on-demand, ultra-high bandwidth, real-time command, control, communications, computers (C4) and intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance (ISR) support anywhere in the world, including denied areas and underground spaces. The Environment securely and promptly responds to operator requests while pushing information to operators before they recognize the need. The Environment assimilates, analyzes, manages, disseminates, and protects enormous amounts of information. The USSOCOM architecture delivers and shares full-motion, three-dimensional holographic imagery via secure and non-deniable data links. Because space assets remain deniable, USSOCOM is championing new technologies that may augment and eventually supplant vulnerable satellite-based systems.

Advanced information technologies enable USSOCOM to distinguish between hierarchical command and control and networked information exchange. USSOCOM adopts innovative systems, processes, and business rules to flatten the organization and facilitate more self-coordinating operations (Figure 5.3).

**Figure 5.3 Adapting Hierarchical Command and Control for Distributed Operations**

Advancing computer, cyber and artificial intelligence technologies enable not only proactive and automatic data analysis and fusion, but also accurate and coherent understanding without human analysis. When other U.S. Government departments and agencies process and manage information in ways better than SOF, USSOCOM adopts those best practices to improve SOF information management systems, processes, and business rules.
5.4 **Invisible Operator**

Reduced-signature operations – operations that are clandestine, covert, or low-visibility (i.e., non-overt) in their mode – are a distinguishing characteristic of SOF. Operators often live and work among non-Western foreign populations. Biometric identification and tracking through advanced data processing and communications technologies have rendered past techniques ineffective leaving SOF Operators vulnerable worldwide. However, USSOCOM continues to improve reduced-signature capabilities so SOF teams can operate less visibly than in years past, without any reduction in capabilities. To accomplish this, USSOCOM continually develops:

- Innovative ways for SOF Operators to use indigenous commercial communication infrastructure securely and clandestinely
- Techniques, technical means and biomedical augmentation capabilities to render SOF Operators and their equipment invisible to adversary tracking
- Capabilities to acquire non-standard, non-attributable materiel so that SOF can operate with minimum signature yet with the same capability they have when operating with their standard equipment
- Innovative, non-standard, reduced-signature mobility capabilities that allow SOF teams to deploy, maneuver, resupply, and reinforce on-demand, anywhere around the globe, even when operating in austere and remote locations

USSOCOM continues to diversify the composition of its forces to reduce visible signature in operational areas. Working through interagency and foreign partners is one way to accomplish this. Additionally, USSOCOM produces a diverse force of SOF Operators of non-Western descent who can interact more effectively with people of similar descent. Additionally, USSOCOM recruits and develops female SOF Operators to create a more diverse force, provide for innovative employment options, and foster more comprehensive approaches for engaging foreign populations.

5.5 **Expanded Authorities**

In 2020, SOF operate under flexible operational authorities that increase the effectiveness and efficiency of its engagement efforts. They also exercise flexible and responsive Service-like authorities that enable USSOCOM to develop and manage SOF talent in innovative ways to meet operational requirements.
### 5.5.1 Operational Authorities

In the past, SOF engagement suffered from the patchwork character and temporary nature of authorities to conduct SOF activities with foreign security forces. Each authority had its own substantive and procedural requirements. USSOCOM often had to combine a collection of disparate authorities, each with its own stakeholders and approval and notification processes, to perform a mission that cut across multiple authorities. USSOCOM now has a coherent, flexible, and responsive set of permanent authorities to enable and leverage willing foreign partners to support U.S. SOF activities and contribute to multinational contingency operations. These authorities allow for multi-year programs enabling long-term relationship-building that encourages foreign partners to share the responsibility for securing shared interests.

With approval of the Chief of Mission and Secretaries of Defense and State, USSOCOM exercises authority to support the rapid assessment and development of partner capabilities to meet immediate requirements. USSOCOM then transitions to a longer-term development program to build sufficient sustainable and interoperable capacity to minimize future U.S. requirements. Such support may include:

- Assessing, training, equipping (including commercial off-the-shelf, non-standard, and foreign manufactured items), advising (non-combat or combat, as directed by the President), and assisting foreign security forces
- Providing incremental logistic support, supplies, and services (reimbursable or non-reimbursable, as directed by the Secretary of Defense)
- Minor military construction of infrastructure and facilities supporting U.S. efforts
- Assisting in the development of the foreign agencies and institutions that are responsible for or support such forces.

### 5.5.2 Service-like Authorities

Section 167 of Title 10, U.S. Code, authorizes the Commander USSOCOM to conduct certain Service-like functions relating to special operations. In the past, the authority of USSOCOM to develop and manage SOF Operators was limited to monitoring the promotions, assignments, retention, training, and professional military education of SOF officers (not SOF enlisted personnel). Standard Service career paths did not enable or facilitate the enduring engagement activities essential to this concept. Personnel management is a statutory and closely guarded function of the Military Departments and Services. They have proved willing to establish non-standard personnel management programs for personnel with specialized skills, experience
and/or potential, who are willing to dedicate their active-duty careers to specialized assignments outside standard Service career paths. USSOCOM and its Service Components collaborate with the Military Departments and Services to establish and sustain such programs for developing and managing SOF talent. In 2020, the Commander USSOCOM and USSOCOM Service Component Commanders exercise authority to develop selected SOF Operators to gain and sustain the cultural and regional expertise described above through operationally-focused, SOF-peculiar Foreign Area Officer and enlisted Foreign Area Specialist programs. They also have the authority to manage the careers of selected SOF Operators to prepare them for specific senior leadership assignments. Appropriate DoD Directives and Instructions direct and institutionalize these SOF career management authorities.

SOF personnel benefit from civil education opportunities designed to foster diverse perspectives and critical thinking, enhance cultural and regional expertise, and improve business practices. In the past, Section 167 of Title 10, U.S. Code, authorized the Commander USSOCOM to conduct “specialized courses of instruction for commissioned and noncommissioned officers”, but not to develop and manage SOF civilian education programs. The Commander now exercises broader statutory authority to educate SOF personnel at civilian institutions as well as at Joint Special Operations University and the Service Component schools. Appropriate DoD Directives and Instructions direct and institutionalize these SOF education authorities.

5.6 **SOF Enablers**

USSOCOM relies on three levels of SOF enablers to ensure that deployed SOF teams are fully enabled for mission success, regardless of their location.

At the lowest tactical level, in 2020 each SOF group, regiment, and brigade has a full set of tactical Combat Support Operators permanently assigned or attached to deploy as part of task-organized, multi-discipline SOF teams. Examples include communications, intelligence, and logistic specialists; explosive ordnance disposal technicians; canine handlers; and tactical cyber operators. SOF teams habitually train, deploy, and operate with the same Combat Support Operators. The USSOCOM Service components provide these operators with basic SOF skills and train them to apply their military occupational specialties to SOF operations and activities. Most of these Combat Support Operators complete an initial extended assignment with a SOF unit and then return to their parent Service before competing for repetitive SOF assignments. When a specific population is large enough to sustain a separate Service “closed loop” career path, SOF Combat Support Operators remain assigned or attached to SOF units for the remainder of their careers.
In 2020, USSOCOM has habitual relationships with the associated conventional force units providing attached or direct-support Service-provided capabilities to deploying Special Operations Task Forces so that they can operate as a cohesive and sustainable force. Examples of Service-provided capabilities include conventional force infantry, engineer, aviation, and logistic elements. The Military Services modify the organization, training, and equipment of these units to meet SOF requirements, with USSOCOM providing SOF-peculiar training and equipment.

The DoD Components and other U.S. Government departments and agencies providing national and theater capabilities to SOF have extended their support down to the SOF team level to the maximum extent possible. Examples of such capabilities may include strategic mobility (air, surface, subsurface), precision strike, ISR, space, and cyber capabilities. The TSOCs leverage U.S. national and theater capabilities to provide their teams with all the protection and support they receive at their home station. The TSOCs may also enable networked foreign SOF or other foreign security forces when they participate in multinational crisis response and contingency operations. By doing so, the TSOCs reduce the operational demand for U.S. SOF.

5.7 Advanced Technologies

Although focused on the human domain, SOF leverage advanced technologies, not only to retain their comparative technological advantage over adversaries, but also to train foreign partners and counter the sophisticated capabilities of technologically astute adversaries. Technologies such as robotics, cybernetics, artificial intelligence, cognitive enhancement, communications and regenerative medicine are evolving quickly and alter the way humans work, interact, and fight. Humans are slowly ‘fusing’ with cybernetic technologies as the far-term future unfolds and the distinctions between human and machine blur. Robotic and cybernetic technologies portend unprecedented change in the battlespace and promise SOF Operators the ability to carry heavier loads, resupply autonomously, deliver superior fires, and learn faster and more deeply than previously thought possible. As drone and other robotic technologies proliferate and advance, SOF core activities are evolving to encompass robotic and artificially intelligent machines that operate alongside or against SOF in all physical domains.

New communications technologies eliminate line-of-sight limitations critical to sub-surface activities and denied regions. On the frontier of medicine, the art of prosthetic limb replacements is gradually transforming into cybernetics – replacement robotic limbs and organs with the potential to match or exceed human capabilities. Regenerative medicine and augmentation restore wounded operators and will eventually allow their bionic enhancement. Cognitive augmentation continues to drive unpredictable capability advancements in the battlespace and in society at large. Cybernetics will eventually allow rapid training and extended memory through “brain co-processors”, possibly empowering SOF Operators with super-human cognition.
Similarly, artificial intelligence is transforming information management systems to allow for information collection, analysis, fusion, and prediction with far greater speed and accuracy exceeding the capacity of the human brain. Directed energy weapons and other new technologies allow SOF to become even more precise in their lethality.

SOF capabilities are evolving to exploit advancing technologies that enable “swarm-like” influence, capacity-building, and kinetic “swarming” operations – amorphous, coordinated, and repeated actions from all directions by many small, dispersed, networked units of action and stand-off capabilities.

All of these promising technologies provide opportunities to enhance human performance and SOF operations in ways still to be determined. Although USSOCOM is not exploiting all of these technologies, it conducts and monitors scientific research and champions those key capabilities that have the potential to greatly improve SOF performance.

### 5.7.1 Cyberspace

USSOCOM provides access to national-level offensive and defensive cyber capabilities down to the lowest tactical level. The U.S. Cyber Command (USCYBERCOM) remains the U.S. Government’s preeminent cyber operations force. USSOCOM incorporates USCYBERCOM forces and capabilities into the Global SOF Network to assure communications that facilitate operations and activities. USSOCOM also recruits and develops SOF Cyber Operators who leverage and integrate national-level cyber capabilities down to the team level. Despite its growing reliance on cyberspace, USSOCOM retains the ability to operate in cyber-degraded operating environments where access to cyberspace is limited or disrupted.

Cyberspace communications continue to grow worldwide as a facet of peoples’ lives and offer the possibility for contact and influence with many diverse societies. New communications technologies, three-dimensional cyberspace and augmented reality allow for the “virtualization of SOF.” USSOCOM continues to partner with other U.S. Government departments and agencies to develop and leverage these technologies.

### 5.7.2 Space

Space allows SOF to operate globally and potentially to increase the speed of operational and strategic mobility. Space assets provide critical C4 and ISR capabilities for the SOF Information Environment. Space and sub-space mobility assets may offer rational and cost-effective options for overcoming the tyranny of distance in time-sensitive missions. USSOCOM incorporates Intelligence Community and U.S. Strategic Command forces and capabilities into the Global SOF Network to assure access to the space domain and integrate space-based capabilities into operations and activities. For example, USSOCOM employs an integrated space support capability that combines survivable position, navigation and timing information with space-based imaging and
targeting capabilities. The system extends down to the lowest tactical level without regard to their location. Despite its reliance on space-based capabilities, USSOCOM retains the ability to operate in space-degraded operating environments where access to space capabilities is denied or disrupted.

6 CONCLUSION

Enhancing stability and preventing conflict are more cost-effective than fighting wars. Looking back to 2013, USSOCOM recognizes the wisdom of the National Leadership who approved, funded, and provided the capabilities and authorities required to implement this concept. Elements of this operating concept must have seemed distant and inconceivable to the national security bureaucracy at that time. Nevertheless, leadership found ways to overcome that bureaucracy in response to the “new normal” environment. This enabled USSOCOM to adapt to overcome, innovate to avoid predictability, build trust to increase speed, and pursue technologies to maintain its comparative advantage. Operating through the interdependent Global SOF Network, USSOCOM has been able to posture its forces forward and engage with strategic partners to understand and influence relevant populations. SOF conducted core activities with a focused, balanced approach through small-footprint distributed operations. While maintaining their combat expertise, SOF adapted and refocused on mastery of those unique skills rooted deep in their heritage – skills that enhance development, positively influence populations, and contribute to long-term stability through mutual trust, confidence, and understanding. They built sustainable foreign partner capacity and interoperability that enabled those partners to secure their own sovereignty and eventually share in the responsibility to secure shared interests. In doing so, SOF provided National Leadership with strategic options for protecting and advancing U.S. national interests without resorting to costly, long-term contingency operations. As a result, despite continued instability and conflict, the world has moved closer to becoming a safer and more stable place.
7 GLOSSARY

Collaboration: An act of cooperation between two or more parties who agree to work together to achieve a common goal or objective. See also Coordination.

Coordination: An act of consultation between two or more parties regarding a subject of mutual interest, with no obligation to agree. See also Collaboration.

Distributed operations: Operations conducted by small teams that are geographically dispersed and operating autonomously to achieve a common objective, aggregating and disaggregating as required when conditions change in the operational area.

Engagement: Routine contact and interaction between individuals or elements of the armed forces and civilian authorities and agencies of one nation and those of a host government, to build mutual trust and confidence, share information, coordinate mutual activities, build partner capabilities and capacity, and maintain influence to protect and advance mutual interests. (Modified from Joint Publication 1-02 definition of “military engagement” and discussion in Capstone Concept for Joint Operations and Joint Engagement Concept to broaden the current definition)

Exploit: 1. To make maximum use of. 2. To use productively.

Government: By “government” this concept means not only the central government of a state, but also sub-state provincial, district, and local governments; state and local governments within the United States; transitional authorities and military governments established by occupying powers under international law; United Nations trusteeships and other forms of government established by intergovernmental organizations; trial assemblies and other traditional forms of governance that supplement or substitute for central governance; and clandestine (“shadow”) governments established by insurgent groups or resistance movements. (U.S. Joint Forces Command Capstone Concept for Joint Operations Activity Concepts, Version 1.0, 8 November 2010)

Influence: The act or power of producing an effect, indirectly, on the character, development, opinions, decisions or behavior of populations, governments, organizations, groups, and/or individuals.

Integration: The arrangement of organizational elements and their actions to create an organization that operates by engaging as a whole. (Modified from Joint Publication 1-02 definition to include non-defense strategic partners as well as military forces)

Interdependence: The deliberate and mutual reliance by one force on another’s inherent capabilities designed to provide complementary and reinforcing effects. Integration and interoperability are subsets of interdependence.

Interoperability: The ability to operate in synergy in the execution of assigned tasks. (Joint Publication 3-0)
**Non-state actor:** An organization or super-empowered individual that participates in or influences international relations but does not belong to any established institution of a state. Examples include non-governmental organizations, multinational corporations, religious advocacy groups, transnational violent extremist organizations, transnational criminal organizations, transnational diaspora communities, and the international media.

**Operational area:** An overarching term encompassing more descriptive terms (such as amphibious objective area, area of operations, area of responsibility, joint operations area, joint special operations area, theater of operations, and theater of war) for geographic areas in which military operations are conducted. (Modified from Joint Publication 1-02 to be more comprehensive in its examples)

**Optimize:** 1. To improve or develop as far as possible. 2. To make the most effective use of.

**Population-centric:** Pertaining to a strategy or operational approach focused on the human dynamics of a conflict and the struggle for legitimacy, credibility, and influence amongst the relevant populations. Defeating an adversary militarily may be essential but is rarely decisive in a population-centric conflict.

**Regional alignment:** A dedicated and habitual relationship between a SOF unit of action and a Geographic Combatant Commander.

**Small-footprint:** Pertaining to activities or operations conducted by small teams, operating with and through foreign partners, and enabled by national and theater forces and capabilities not physically located in the teams’ operational areas.

**SOF Enabler:** A force or capability that allows SOF Operators to perform more efficiently or effectively. SOF Operators depend on three levels of enabling forces and capabilities. At the lowest tactical (team) level, SOF Combat Support Operators are habitually assigned or attached to SOF units and then attached to task-organized SOF teams during operational deployments. Examples of Combat Support Operators include communication, intelligence, and logistic specialists; explosive ordnance disposal technicians; and canine handlers. At the next higher level, Service-provided capabilities are attached or placed in direct support of SOF task forces to enable them to operate as a cohesive and sustainable force. Examples of Service-provided capabilities include conventional force infantry, engineer, aviation, and logistic elements. At the operational level, national or theater-level capabilities are placed in direct or general support of special operations task forces for specific missions. Examples of such national and theater capabilities include strategic mobility (air, surface, subsurface); intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance; space; and cyber capabilities.
The USSOCOM SOF Operating Concept

The Challenge:
How will USSOCOM optimize/exploit the Global SOF Network to protect and advance U.S. national interests in an unstable, complex, and transparent world?

The Ends:
A globally networked force of SOF and their strategic partners – Joint, Interagency, Intergovernmental, Multinational, Non-governmental, and Commercial – able to prevent conflict and prepared to fight in support of U.S. Government efforts to protect and advance U.S. national interests.

- Posture that Enables
- Partnerships that Endure
- Prevent Conflicts
- Prepared to Fight

The Ways:

Central Idea:
SOF conduct core activities with a focused, balanced approach through small-footprint distributed operations to understand and influence relevant populations. USSOCOM optimizes and exploits the Global SOF Network to provide strategic options for National Leadership in support of U.S. Government efforts to enhance stability, prevent conflicts, and when necessary, fight and defeat adversaries.

Key Elements of the Central idea:
- Understanding the Human Domain
- Understanding and Influencing the Narrative
- Enduring Engagement through Small-Footprint Distributed Operations
- Building Sustainable Partner Capacity and Interoperability
- Managing the Network
- Building Resiliency into the Force and Families

The Means:

Critical Capability Areas:
- Sustaining the Global SOF Network
- Cultural and Regional Expertise
- SOF Information Environment
- Invisible Operator
- Expanded Authorities
- SOF Enablers
- Advanced Technologies
Humans are more important than hardware

Quality is better than quantity

SOF cannot be mass produced

Competent SOF cannot be created after emergencies occur

Most Special Operations require non-SOF support