

The Joint Force-SOF Relationship

Support roles in the resurgence of great power competition

by LtCol Brandon Turner & Maj Paul Bailey

Although U.S. adversaries have remained consistent since 1979—with violent extremist organizations (VEOs), Iran, North Korea, Russia, and China—the resurgence of great power competition (GPC) has added new complexities for military and diplomacy practitioners. Strategic analysis by the Director of National Intelligence paints a clear picture of the risk in the future operating environment (FOE) posed by irregular-hybrid and gray zone threats from peer adversaries and VEOs meaning to exploit U.S. vulnerabilities.¹ Documents such as the *2018 National Defense Strategy*, *Defense Planning Guidance*, the *2019 NDS Irregular Warfare Annex*, the *U.S. Special Operations Command Campaign Plan for Global Special Operations Forces (SOF) Operations*, and a myriad of other analysis clearly depict gaps where SOF can counter irregular adversarial strategies.²

Given current capabilities, access, and placement, SOF can enable the joint force, geographic combatant commanders (GCC), and the interagency in GPC activities. SOF and joint force placement are within areas of instability: areas where adversarial great powers seek to influence and undermine U.S. national interests. Within these areas of instability, SOF become a connector for the GCC and a facilitator for the joint force's movement into areas of instability. Additionally, SOF can enable the interagency through not only intelligence gathering but also as an effective and timely link to the joint force on the battlefield. Through three interconnected actions, *connection*, *combined arms*, and *innovation*, SOF can empower the joint force and



Marine Raider photo from WWII. MARSOCs lineage, unconventional force design and capabilities to support the joint force. (Photo provided by author.)

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interagency in great power competition over the coming decade.

SOF are active in areas where its elements must interact and coordinate with U.S. embassies and consulates, the interagency, host-nation and indigenous forces, and other joint forces. Oftentimes, this interaction goes across GCC boundaries and becomes a connecting action between all parties in and outside

of a joint operating area. SOF as a connecting force between the joint force and the interagency provide a critical competitive advantage in GPC to seize opportunity, reduce risk, and disrupt adversarial ambition through the use of allied networks and partners where this competition occurs. As a by-product of this connection, SOF's combined arms approach will enable a faster tempo for

joint force maneuver in the contested environment.³ Lastly, building upon this connection and increased tempo, SOF need to innovate internally as well as drive innovation for the joint force. While doing all three, SOF have the capability to keep potential costs low and provide an immense return on investment for both the GCC and the joint force in the FOE.

SOF's Contribution to the Joint Force Solution

The trans-regional, complex, and adaptive operational environment presents challenges that no single organization or Service can solve unilaterally.⁴ United States Marine Corps Forces Special Operations Command (MARSOC) recognizes its need to establish networks across relevant partners in order to provide options for influencing and solving the FOE's complex challenges.⁵ As stated by the 38th Commandant of the Marine Corps in his *Commandant's Planning Guidance*,

We will fight in defense of our allies and will operate in close alignment with them, from their territories, alongside their ships and aircraft, and in cooperative and even integrated formations on the ground.⁶

Marine Corps Special Operations Forces (MARSOF) as a connector will enable and support these actions for the Navy-Marine Corps Team and the joint force.

Furthermore, the 2018 NDS presents an array of challenges encompassing global, regional, and violent extremist threats that require a networked approach to counter and overcome. The United States' unilateral approaches to irregular and proxy warfare environments are doomed to strategic failure.⁷ The joint force, to include the Marine Corps, recognizes the historical, current, and future imperative to invest in indigenous approaches to national security threats. As part of the joint force, SOF—to include MARSOF—enable joint force approaches in preparing for major combat operations in the FOE.

MARSOF can provide the greatest value to its primary stakeholders (the GCCs) by maintaining itself as spe-

cialists in working with and through partners of all types, including joint forces, intelligence agencies, coalition allies, indigenous partners, and even other national competitors when mutual interests align. Proxy warfare is growing in relative importance and presents GCCs the opportunity to apply SOF for strategic returns. GCCs and the joint force can turn to SOF to focus on trans-regional threats and interests within the competition phase in the near term, thereby enabling the joint force in future actions. In essence, and reinforcing the *Commandant's Planning Guidance*, MARSOF is best utilized forward deployed "to compete against the malign activities of China, Russia, Iran, and their proxies," even while executing the counter client violent extremist organizations (C-VEO) tasks currently assigned to SOF.⁸

The FOE requires new methods that provide long-term perspective and greater integration of forces. SOF are one force of many that can provide a long-term perspective that understands the intricacies of complex operational environments. Additionally, future MARSOF will support and integrate interagency efforts to sustain enduring competitive advantage against protracted threats that span from VEOs to GPC and the connection they hold in-between. MARSOF as a connector

can be the strategic touch point that understands and acts to counter intra-state extremist threats and instability, and also counter peer competitors that often leverage the instability caused by VEOs to gain economic or informational dominance and access in support of adversarial advantage and to deny the United States influence and advantage.

Opportunities for the Future

Since inception, MARSOF have significantly increased its capabilities and made robust contributions to GCCs and the joint force in C-VEO, counter terrorism, and counterinsurgency operations. Although born out of necessity to provide additional SOF capacity to meet immediate demands and to achieve the DOD's desire to transform the military into a more agile and adaptable force, MARSOC has achieved significant gains and developed unique capabilities for GCCs, theater special operations commands (TSOCs), and the joint force. Today, Marine Raiders embrace their Marine Corps heritage and ideals of competence, teamwork, professionalism, lethality, and warfighting philosophy while serving across GCCs.

Cognitive problem-solving capabilities, the ability to adapt and overcome, and a desire to win are some of the core strengths of Marines. The Marine Raider relies upon these core strengths



Marine Raiders act as connectors to joint, interagency, and allied partners. (Photo provided by author.)

while also applying SOF skills honed over years through training, post graduate education, and first hand forward deployed experience to understand and adapt to “wicked” problems, connect to the right partners, and leverage organic and external capabilities to dominate tactically, achieve operational effects, and support strategic outcomes. In essence, Marine Raiders are manned, trained, and equipped for strategic utility that supports the joint force today and in the FOE.

Marine Raiders most often leverage their integrated capabilities to achieve these effects through and with partners. It is no accident that MARSOF thrive with partners in irregular environments. The Marine Corps has a legacy with indigenous partners reaching back to the “small wars,” Marine Corps’ Office of Strategic Services, World War II, Vietnam, and more recent operations. This small wars heritage spans across Central America, the Philippines, the Middle East, South East Asia, North Africa, and China (where Marines advised Chinese regulars and irregulars against the Japanese in GPC): all of which were proxy wars at that time in history. The Marine legacy of thriving in small wars remains a driving force for our Marines today; many of those same skill sets used in small wars can be applied to GPC.

SOF are more than counter terrorism, counterinsurgency, and a direct action (DA) force against VEOs. These are just facets of the many skill sets that SOF bring to the table for the joint force. In addition to DA, MARSOF are trained in the core activities of special reconnaissance (SR), foreign internal defense, and security force assistance.⁹ All of these core activities can directly enable GPC activities. In the future, SOF will not only be a vital contributor to the U.S. Navy’s distributed maritime operations and to the Navy and Marine Corps’ future capstone concepts, but also a vital part to the Marine Corps’ expeditionary advance base operations and littoral operations in the contested environment which are nested within these future capstone concepts.¹⁰

First, MARSOF, under operational control of TSOCs, provide the joint

force access and placement to areas that are vital to the future fight against a peer threat. MARSOF are forward deployed and postured “to operate actively inside contested maritime spaces” in support of joint operations.¹¹ Despite the fact that much of MARSOF’s access and placement today is centered on C-VEO operations, MARSOF are uniquely postured to enable joint force activities against near peer threats.

Although VEOs conjure thoughts of lone terrorist groups on the fringes of society, insular, and displaced from the greater context of GPC, the reality is that our peer threats are on the same battlefields as VEOs. Where there is conflict and instability, peer threats are gaining access by providing train-advise-assist teams, arms, equipment, economic development, and infrastructure.¹² Our adversaries are gaining invaluable expertise, honing their skills for the future fight against our Nation. SOF are now in the GPC fold and has the means to apply SR and other core activities with and without indigenous partners against peer threats and their proxy forces at the strategic level.

SR is not something that always leads to DA. In fact, SR applied by SOF through teams or specialized elements in the competition sphere allows for preparation of the operational environment and sets conditions for potential de-escalation of conflict. The joint force through TSOCs should utilize SOF elements that currently conduct or are prepared to conduct these types of missions to enable their maneuver in the FOE against great powers. For example, MARSOF currently forward deployed can be an aide to the joint force commander to close gaps in intelligence for the joint force’s future fight. Many of the questions we have concerning our adversaries and the operating environment can be answered by MARSOF, and SOF writ-large, in these proxy war areas.

SOF can provide irregular and proxy warfare expertise to the joint force and, as such, MARSOF can be leveraged as that expertise for TSOCs. In a period where the joint force has been refocused on major combat operations against a peer adversary, SOF can make signifi-

cant contributions to GPC activities through foreign internal defense, unconventional warfare, and sensitive activities in the competition layer. MARSOF’s current access and placement will enable the joint force and TSOCs—and our Service—for major combat operations. As articulated by our Commandant, “Success will be defined in terms of finding the smallest, lowest signature options that yield the maximum operational utility.”¹³ MARSOF along with other SOF elements currently deployed can be one facet of many low signature options to yield maximum operational utility for the joint force to include the Navy-Marine Corps Team.

The Joint Force-SOF Connection

The character of warfare continues to evolve to reveal a highly interconnected operational environment. Since at least World War II, the global warfare environment has been dominated by irregular and hybrid warfare blending interstate and sub-state actors which employ a variety of lethal and non-lethal means to achieve political objectives: proxy wars. SOF have a value in these complex, dynamic, and uncertain environments—where the true essence of “wicked problems” emerges as a challenge for the joint force-SOF relationship to discover possible solutions for the GCC. SOF, in close coordination with the rest of the joint force, will find solutions together vice applying niche skill sets, platform centric operations, or overly narrow specialization that fall short of the agility and strategic perspective required for success.

MARSOF’s scalability and “complex problem specialization” will result in increased demand for both direct and indirect approaches to find and defeat violent extremists and counter peer threats trying to exploit in these regions. Marine Raiders have the inherent ability to partner with joint forces, interagency, intergovernmental, and multinational entities while working with indigenous partners to deter, counter, and defeat adversaries along the spectrum of competition and conflict. MARSOF’s value goes beyond typical SOF employment to one that connects the joint force writ large to a network of solutions. As a stra-

tegic force, SOF can naturally connect key partners and stakeholders to build required approaches, thereby securing enduring national interests.

In order for MARSOF, and SOF in general, to be a connector for the GCC and the joint force, SOF must act as a bridge (SOF I3—integration, interoperability, interdependence) between the joint force, indigenous partners, and the interagency for capabilities, authorities, and missions. Up to this point, the force as a whole, to include SOF, has not leveraged I3 to its full potential. The SOF bridge can broaden the entire force perspective toward a more relevant and effective relationship between TSOCs, the joint force, interagency, and other partner force capabilities.

The Joint Force and SOF in Combined Arms for the Connected Arena

Combined arms for the connected arena is a natural by-product of the joint force-SOF connection. SOF who understand their operational environment holistically and are versatile, adaptive, and proactive with their own capabilities or through networks of influence—indigenous partners, interagency, and joint assets—will leverage the right capabilities to enable GCC objective accomplishment and joint force maneuver. As such, combined arms in the connected arena goes beyond maneuver warfare as we know it.

SOF will continue to employ organic and joint fire support to include offensive cyber when required while tapping into the previously mentioned networks. In this sense, combined arms becomes tangible and intangible. Through networks, at speed, Marine Raiders and other SOF elements can leverage knowledge, assets, and capabilities from the indigenous populations, interagency, and the rest of the joint force that can often go unseen or unused.

SOF is “integral to the joint force, providing unique options to dominate in competition short of armed conflict and enabling decisive combat power in war.”¹⁴ Marine Raiders and other SOF elements will have been placed years in advance in areas key to the competition space. SOF will build networks and partnerships that deliver informa-

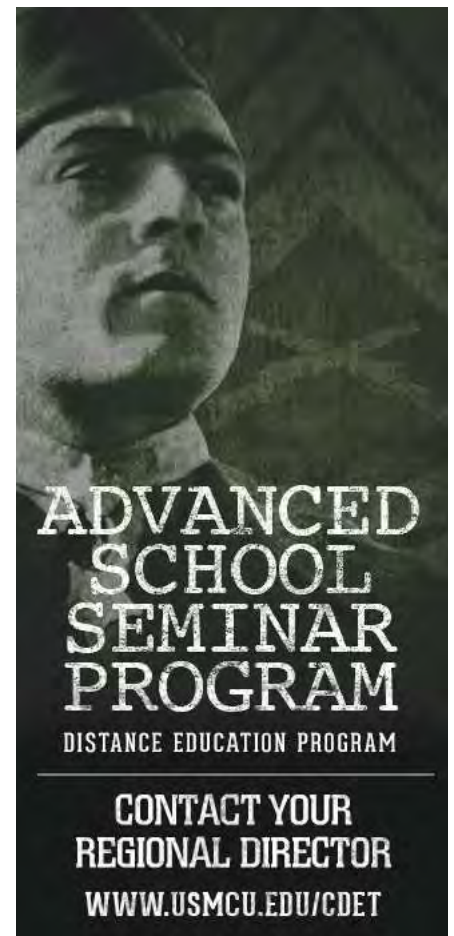
tion and intelligence, providing the joint force commander a much clearer picture of the operating environment in the years of competition for preparation and de-escalation—and if need be, during major combat operations. During the competition phase and beyond, SOF as a connecting force will have the means to rapidly link agencies and act upon unanticipated opportunities, allowing for exploitation by the GCC. Lastly, before major combat operations commence, SOF will enable the joint force to out-cycle adversaries through information dominance before a missile is ever launched. In essence, Marine Raiders as a part of TSOCs will enable a greater tempo for joint force maneuver and the GCC’s decision-making process.

MARSOC as a Part of the Marine Corps’ Innovation Network

Marine Raiders, first and foremost, are Marines and are instilled with the need to innovate, think outside the box, and adapt to any situation. Additionally, SOF—very similar to the Marine Corps—relentlessly innovates and seek to deliver relevant and effective solutions for the entire joint force and international partners.¹⁵ As such, MARSOC looks for new ways to solve problems. The difference lies in where MARSOC can pull ideas, concepts, and technology for solutions. As a component of SOCOM, MARSOC sees firsthand a wide range of technologies being used and developed by Naval Special Warfare Command, Army Special Operations Command, Air Force Special Operations Command, and Joint Special Operations Command. By observing and using these technologies, MARSOC has a means to speed Marine Corps’ innovation, thus bridging the gap between SOCOM and Marine Corps technologies.

In this way, MARSOC serves both SOCOM and the Marine Corps as a laboratory of innovation to test new equipment, tactics, techniques, and procedures, and organizational design constructs to evolve for the FOE. This is occurring now, and MARSOC will be positioned to play a greater role in speeding Service innovation.

Technology is only one facet of innovation. Because MARSOC is not platform centric, Marine Raiders can contribute in the areas of conceptual innovation, organizational design, and new applications of authorities in addition to technology development. In future war games, MARSOC, guided by Navy-Marine Corps capstone concepts underpinning expeditionary advance base operations and littoral operations in the contested environment, can enable and support the joint force—but more importantly the Navy-Marine Corps Team—in their understanding and the potential of SOF employment in the FOE. MARSOC’s inclusion into the Marine Corps Warfighting Lab’s war games is the first step of many that will prove beneficial to the joint force-SOF fight in the future. Additionally, MARSOC enables the Marine Corps in joining SOF concepts, war games, and innovation venues where a knowledge sharing between the Marine Corps and

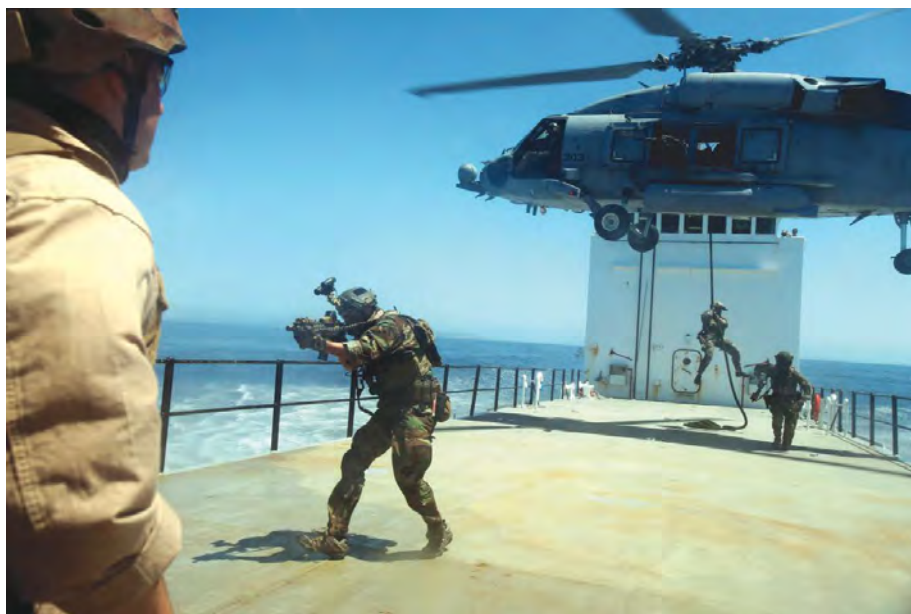


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MARSOC Raiders leverage organic and joint force platforms and capabilities to provide effects on the multi-domain environment. (Photo provided by author.)

SOF will only benefit the joint force as a whole. This relationship with a strong foundation today will provide endless benefits for the future.

Conclusion: The Way Forward with the Joint Force and SOF

SOF, with its access and placement in key regions, is a key actor and force multiplier not just in the ongoing counterterrorism fight but also as a strategic enabler and bridging force in the competition space for the GCCs. In the FOE, SOF can enable the GCCs in their understanding of the operational environment and shape the future environment to deter future conflict or enable the joint force in the event of conflict. SOF's integrated capabilities, distributed nature of the force, and innovation initiatives will provide the GCC and the joint force with a comparative advantage in the decade to come and become a key factor in GPC. Through connection, combined arms in the competition space through conflict, SOF—to include Marine Raiders—have the ability to not only be key enablers for the rest of the joint force but a driving factor for success in the future.

Notes

1. Director of National Intelligence, *National*

Intelligence Strategy of the United States 2019, (Washington, DC: Office of the Director of National Intelligence, 2019).

2. James N. Mattis, *Summary of the National Defense Strategy: Sharpening the American Military's Competitive Edge*, (Washington, DC: 2018). The 2019 Irregular Warfare Annex is a classified annex to the 2018 NDS that expounds on the application of irregular warfare for the Defense Department and Joint Force; the Campaign Plan for Global Special Operations is a classified plan that synthesizes strategic level guidance and provides United States Special Operations Command the guidance to train, deploy, and employ its forces in support of the Unified Command Plan.

3. Combined arms in this sense goes beyond the tangible of indirect fire, close air support, mechanized maneuver, and even cyber effects. Combined arms for the purposes of this article and MARSOC's future employment means not only using tangible assets, but also connections with the joint force and interagency for diplomatic, economic, and information affects that may reach globally and then focused to one area for maximum results.

4. *National Intelligence Strategy of the United States 2019*.

5. MARSOC vs. MARSOF and Marine Raiders. For the purposes of this article, MARSOC refers to the institution "assigned the mission to recruit, organize, train, equip, and deploy task-organized, scalable, expeditionary Marine

Corps SOF worldwide to accomplish the full spectrum of special operations missions." MAR-SOF and Marine Raiders are best stated by the *MCWP 3-05, Marine Corps Special Operations*, "those active component Marine Corps forces designated by the Secretary of Defense that are specifically organized, trained, and equipped to conduct and support special operations." Headquarters Marine Corps, *MCWP 3-05, Marine Corps Special Operations*, (Quantico, VA: June 2017).

6. Gen David H. Berger, *Commandant's Planning Guidance*, (Washington, DC: HQMC, July 2019).

7. "A proxy war occurs when a major power instigates or plays a major role in supporting and directing a party to a conflict but does only a small portion of the actual fighting itself." As stated by Daniel L. Byman, *Why Engage in Proxy War? A State's Perspective*, (Washington, DC: Brookings Institution, May 2018). The Joint Staff is evolving its definition of irregular warfare, but the current definition is "a violent struggle among state and non-state actors for legitimacy and influence over the relevant population(s)," as listed in Department of Defense, *Department of Defense Directive 3000.07 (DODD 3000.07), Irregular Warfare*, (Washington, DC: 2017). The overlapping similarities in definitions and practical experience reveals that irregular and proxy wars are often closely related and indistinguishable

8. *Commandant's Planning Guidance*.

9. *MCWP 3-05*.

10. *Commandant's Planning Guidance*.

11. *Ibid*.

12. Maksymilian Czuperski, et al., *Hiding in Plain Sight: Putin's War in Ukraine*, (Washington, DC: The Atlantic Council, May 2015). MARSOC personnel have directly observed Chinese, Russian, and Iranian actions and activities across current theaters of operation leveraging local instability for their advantage via military and non-military means.

13. *Commandant's Planning Guidance*.

14. Owen West and Raymond A. Thomas III, "United States Special Operations Forces Vision", (Tampa, FL: United States Special Operations Command, November 2018).

15. *Ibid*.

