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Developing and Assessing Options for the Global SOF Network

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Key findings

- The Global SOF Network vision consists of a globally networked force of Special Operations Forces (SOF), interagency allies and partners able to rapidly respond to, and persistently address, regional contingencies and threats to stability. RAND focused on three supporting elements of the vision: small footprints and low-level presence, responsiveness, and capacity-building. *Small footprints and low-level presence* consist of small deployed teams that deter aggression and enable SOF to attain situational awareness and understand local conditions, shape the operating environment, train new partners, and gain actionable intelligence. *Responsiveness*, which is the total of a global network of access arrangements and posturing, enables SOF to respond rapidly to terrorist attacks, hostage situations, assaults on U.S. embassies, and other contingencies that may erupt with little or no warning. *Capacity-building for regional SOF*, which would be achieved by embedding SOF in a network of institutionalized cooperative arrangements, will enable SOF contacts to address regional security issues; assist local partners in developing SOF capability, deconflicting SOF operations, and increasing coordination and interoperability between U.S. SOF and its SOF partners.

- For each researched element of the Global SOF Network, RAND developed sets of options ordered by priority that identify a range of reasonable solutions to consider at varying resourcing levels. Each set of options is nested, with Option 1 representing the smallest global SOF posture option and each successive option building on the previous one by adding more choices of elements.

- To be effectively implemented, budget responsibility for regular, planned activities will need to be clarified, including items like more formal definitions of what constitutes "SOF Peculiar." Funding mechanisms are needed to support unplanned, urgent operations.

The current Defense Strategic Guidance calls for small-footprint, low-cost approaches to ensure U.S. security in a world of global, transnational threats.[1] In response, U.S. Special Operations Command (USSOCOM) has developed a Global SOF Network vision that calls for a distributed overseas posture for Special Operations Forces (SOF). The Global SOF Network is expected to serve two primary roles. The first is to improve the strategic reach of the United States and enable SOF to respond more rapidly and effectively to emerging threats while deterring future ones. The second is to strengthen relationships and capabilities of strategic partners in order to create more stable and secure environments while increasing the capacity for joint regional operations.[2]

Enhancing partner capacity will provide more SOF capacity across the globe, greater insight regarding conditions on the ground, allow SOF to more effectively shape the environment, and better enable U.S. partners to face their own security threats. Building and employing a global SOF network of strong partners form the core of the USSOCOM vision. USSOCOM asked RAND to develop and evaluate options for implementing the Global SOF Network by creating and then applying an analytically rigorous methodology, and to determine where to posture forces, the type of presence to establish in specific regions (what forces and method of presence such as rotational or stationing), and where to establish Regional SOF Coordination Centers (RSCCs).

A GLOBAL POSTURE FOR SOF

RAND conducted research and analysis on the following supporting elements of the Global SOF Network: small footprints and low-level presence, greater responsiveness, and regional capacity-building.

- *Small footprints and low-level presence* enable SOF to attain situational awareness and understand local conditions as well as shape the operating environment, train new partners, and gain actionable intelligence utilizing a relatively low profile and minimal logistical signature.
- *Responsiveness*, which is the sum total of a global network of access arrangements and posturing, enables SOF to respond rapidly to terrorist attacks, hostage situations, assaults on U.S. embassies, and other contingencies that may erupt with little or no warning.
- *Capacity-building*, which is achieved by embedding SOF in a network of institutionalized cooperative arrangements, enables SOF partners to address regional security issues and assist in the development of capabilities, coordination mechanisms, and interoperability to tackle challenges on their own while forming a local network of SOF partners.

RAND developed rigorous, data-driven, transparent approaches for USSOCOM to apply to each of these three elements as a way to develop an initial implementation plan for the Global SOF Network. While the databases that informed RAND's analysis will need to be updated periodically, the tools developed will retain their usefulness; thus, these approaches will also assist in continual planning and updating as global conditions and priorities change. They also provide transparency, allowing the broader stakeholder community to understand the rationale behind USSOCOM's network choices.

> Nesting allows options that are more limited to be pursued without foreclosing the choice of a more expansive option in the future.

RAND developed sets of options ordered by priority that identify a range of reasonable solutions to consider at varying resourcing levels. Each set of options is nested, with Option 1 representing the smallest global SOF posture option and each successive option building on the previous one by adding more choices of elements. We did not limit our analysis to identify only one option, as this would not capture the complexity of the policymaking process. Deciding which option level to pursue depends on resource availability levels and regional priorities. Nesting allows options that are more limited to be pursued without foreclosing the choice of a more expansive option in the future. The options also point to longer-term regional blueprints that can be implemented as necessary—and incrementally, if conditions dictate.
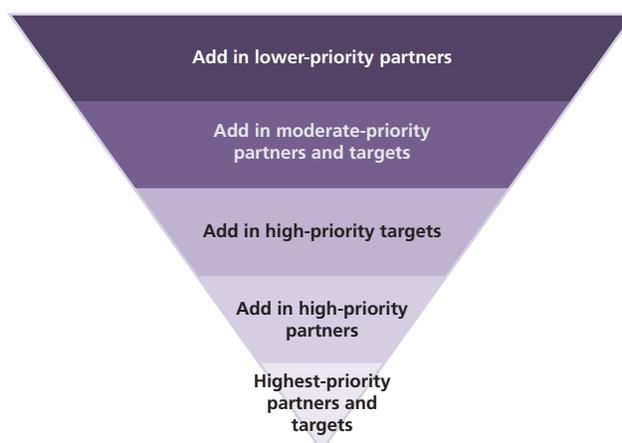
This document summarizes the main report, which is published separately, and lays out the specific details for the options.[3] Supplementary appendixes to the main report describe data sources and modeling approaches.

SMALL FOOTPRINTS AND LOW-LEVEL PRESENCE

Small footprints and low-level presence are an important aspect of the global SOF posture. SOF personnel's tactical expertise, cultural acuity, language skills, and regional knowledge enable them to train other armed forces and to gain an understanding of local dynamics in countries at risk of conflict. We developed three categories of SOF low-level presence based on current practices:

- *Liaison*, in which individuals embedded in embassy teams or partner nation organizations interact with partner-nation forces or serve as the primary in-country point of SOF contact. Liaison presence generally consists of one or two personnel.
- *Small-Scale Building Partner Capacity (BPC)*, in which small, multifunctional teams organized for a specific task can facilitate larger SOF BPC efforts, provide and coordinate enduring in-country training, support Theater Special Operations Command (TSOC) engagement plans,[4] and undertake physical infrastructure development. Small BPC presence generally consists of up to one dozen personnel.
- *Shaping and Surveillance* focused on adversaries or actors of concern entails an enduring presence that is intended to support human infrastructure development of U.S. partners and to prepare the environment to support U.S. goals and

Nested Options for Low-Level Presence

Add in lower-priority partners

Add in moderate-priority partners and targets

Add in high-priority targets

Add in high-priority partners

Highest-priority partners and targets

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operations. Shaping and surveillance presence generally consists of up to one dozen personnel.

To develop a set of nested options for USSOCOM to consider and propose in the interagency process, we constructed a framework to identify countries in which deploying a low-level SOF presence would provide a high value in deterring future threats, responding more effectively to emerging threats, and providing critical skills necessary to enhance partner SOF capacity, and support ongoing and future U.S. operations. Our framework is a two-phase process in which we identify what type of low-level presence, if any, would provide the most benefit for global SOF posture in each country. To determine this, we used DoD's highest-level guidance for force employment, the *2010–12 Guidance for Employment of the Force;* USSOCOM's *2014–18 Strategic Capabilities Guidance*; and the candidate country's ties to the United States, regime type, and internal stability.[5] We then prioritized candidate countries for each type of low-level SOF presence based on country priorities spelled out in DoD and USSOCOM policy guidance. We developed the following five nested options, which form the building blocks for future global, low-level SOF presence. The full report provides nested options for low-level presence for specific countries by region. In each option, the SOF partner priorities are determined by the two overarching policy documents, the *Guidance for Employment of the Force* and USSOCOM's *Strategic Capabilities Guidance.*

- Limit SOF liaison and small BPC activities to highest-priority partners, and likewise limit shaping and surveillance activities to only the highest-priority targets.
- Extend SOF liaison and small BPC activities to high-priority partners.
- Extend shaping and surveillance to high-priority targets.

- Extend liaison and small BPC to moderate-priority partners; similarly, extend shaping and surveillance to moderate-priority targets.
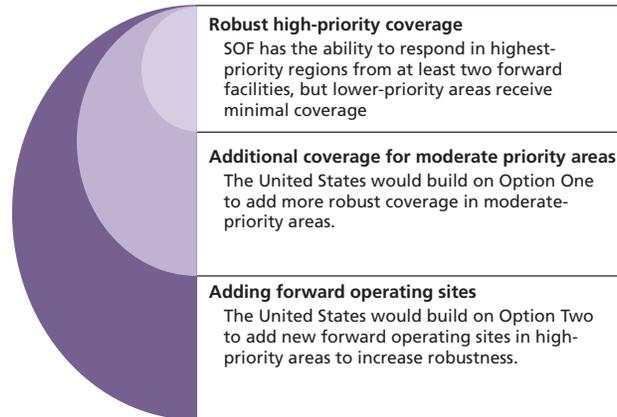- Extend liaison and small BPC to lower-priority partners.

RESPONSIVENESS

To take full advantage of unique SOF capabilities to respond quickly in austere environments, the United States needs a global posture that has access arrangements already in place and allows SOF to deploy quickly to areas of operation. Access arrangements include consultative mechanisms, overflight permissions, and Status of Forces Agreements that would have to be negotiated between the United States and individual countries. To support USSOCOM planning and requests for the negotiation of access arrangements for a rapid SOF response to urgent contingencies, we developed a set of nested options that identify locations for establishing forward facilities that would improve SOF abilities to move quickly and respond globally.

We assessed candidate locations based on their ability to provide robust geographic coverage, support U.S. geostrategic priorities, increase partnerships with politically reliable countries, and use existing U.S. and allied overseas facilities. We constructed the global SOF responsiveness model to calculate the range and depth of geographic coverage of the current U.S. network of forward facilities, along with any proposed networks, and used this model to identify potential gaps in geographic coverage provided by U.S. and allied forward facilities.

We then compared these potential gaps to areas of greatest priority based on policy guidance and areas in which the United States had the least reliable partners. We identified

Nested Options for Forward Facilities

Robust high-priority coverage
SOF has the ability to respond in highest-priority regions from at least two forward facilities, but lower-priority areas receive minimal coverage

Additional coverage for moderate priority areas
The United States would build on Option One to add more robust coverage in moderate-priority areas.

Adding forward operating sites
The United States would build on Option Two to add new forward operating sites in high-priority areas to increase robustness.

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high-priority areas with low-reliability partners as being the areas with the greatest need for robust coverage, because they have the greatest need for responsiveness coupled with the greatest concern for failure of access. We define "robustness of the network" as the need for some redundancy, as well as avoiding dependency on a single point of access to and within areas of priority. Taken together, these locations amount to a network of forward operating sites for rotational forces and small-to-no-footprint cooperative security locations that can serve as logistical hubs and entry points for urgent SOF deployments. We focused on the ability of U.S. SOF to move quickly to contingency locations from these forward locations (often described as "lily pads"). Urgent SOF missions in politically unreliable areas that are reachable only through a single forward facility could be riskier, harder, and slower.

We developed three nested options for an enhanced U.S. network of forward facilities. The options focus on the level of comprehensiveness in coverage and give greater attention to regions where SOF are most likely to have to deploy. The full report provides nested options for establishing forward facilities and access in specific countries by region.

- *Option One*—robust high-priority coverage: SOF has the ability to respond in highest-priority regions from at least two forward facilities, but less-important areas receive minimal coverage.
- *Option Two*—additional coverage for moderate priority areas: The United States would build on Option One to add more robust coverage in moderate-priority areas.
- *Option Three*—adding forward operating sites: The United States would build on Option Two to add new forward operating sites in targeted priority areas to increase robustness.

Our identification of candidate countries in which to establish forward facilities is only the first step in establishing such a hub. The United States would then need to negotiate access and transit agreements with the host country government (and possibly with the countries en route) to establish the facilities and to enable the qualities we assume in our selection criteria. Those negotiations will be conducted by other components of the U.S. government (primarily the Department of State).

CAPACITY-BUILDING

Local partners will always understand local dynamics better than any foreign force, no matter how well equipped, well trained, or well intentioned. By setting up institutionalized cooperative venues that will foster and enable regional SOF contacts to address regional security issues, USSOCOM believes RSCCs will allow U.S. SOF to greatly enhance their global effect by making a sustained commitment to strengthen, educate, and develop local partners, as well as increase interoperability and coordinate operations in the region. The RSCC concept draws on the example of the enduring NATO SOF Headquarters, but future RSCCs must accommodate regional realities and needs, as well as reflect U.S. relationships with partners whose ties are not as close as those with NATO allies. RSCCs will likely range in ambition and scope to ensure effectiveness without overreach. RSCCs would increase the capabilities of partner SOF, improve their training and education, increase their interoperability, enhance their information-sharing, and enable more effective cooperation and coordination with their U.S. counterparts.

We developed options for potential locations to propose to partners for a global network of RSCCs in three areas: the West-

ern Hemisphere, the Asia-Pacific region, and Africa.[6] We considered geographic scope, U.S. strategic priorities, a given country's ties with the United States, domestic political environment, state stability, and a country's importance within its region, among other factors. The full report provides nested options for regionally centered institutionalized cooperative venues and the siting locations for these venues within each of the three regions.

- To ascertain regional groupings that would coalesce naturally, our analysis of the geographic scope of RSCCs took into account the strength and extent of ties of all countries within the region.
- To establish the critical partners for the United States, our assessment of membership attractiveness focused on U.S. interests in a given region.
- Having assessed each country in a region from the perspective of membership attractiveness, we then took a closer look at the top choices in each region and assessed them from the perspective of attractiveness as a location of the RSCC.

Western Hemisphere: The region can support up to three RSCCs. One center for the entire hemisphere might be an initial step. Establishing one RSCC for Central America and a second for South America would be a more robust option. Supplementing those two with a third center for the Caribbean would represent a high level of RSCC investment in the Western Hemisphere. Our analysis indicates that two RSCCs in the Western Hemisphere is currently the best option.

Asia-Pacific: The region can support one or perhaps two RSCCs, although political strains may preclude establishment of a second center at this point. Our analysis indicates that establishing one RSCC focused on the Association for Southeast Asian Nations and including substantial membership from states outside Southeast Asia is currently the best option. For now, tensions among India, Pakistan, and Afghanistan would probably snarl the cooperation required to establish a south Asian RSCC, but if those strains were to ease, then the subregion might emerge as a candidate to host a second RSCC.

Africa: The continent could support from one to five RSCCs, ranging from a single pan-African center to five that would roughly parallel the African Union's internal structure of regionally aligned brigades. Our analysis indicates that, eventually, establishing three RSCCs would be the preferred option: one in northern Africa for the Sahel and the Horn, another in western Africa, and a third in south and eastern Africa. A north-

ern African RSCC is most problematic; political challenges constrain cooperation and siting choices.

AUTHORITIES TO ENABLE THE GLOBAL SOF NETWORK VISION

As the Global SOF Network vision is implemented, it may call for new activities that will need to be programmed. To be effectively implemented, budget responsibility for those activities will need to be clarified.

Additionally, USSOCOM needs mechanisms or processes that enable it to mount urgent but unplanned operations that produce unanticipated expenses, which must be paid by USSOCOM, the combatant command support agencies, the geographic combatant commands, or service component commands. Reaching agreement on who is responsible for funding particular requirements currently presents a challenge because multiple funding sources for different purposes exist, and because budget responsibilities for the different types of goods and services that SOF needs are split among organizations.

Left unresolved, several organizational and procedural challenges will likely impede the level of responsiveness envisioned by the Global SOF Network. The biggest challenge revolves around disagreements among the services and USSOCOM regarding responsibility for funding specific mission requirements. In many cases, the dollar values involved are relatively small compared with the difficulties they cause.

CONCLUSION: BUILDING TRUST, BUILDING CAPACITY, BUILDING PARTNERS

The Global SOF Network vision aims to broaden and deepen the role of SOF in defending U.S. security in a world of transnational threats. It aligns with low-cost and small-footprint policy guidance, as elaborated in the Defense Strategic Guidance. Based on our research, we offer a set of inherently flexible, nested options to implement the vision, and we provide USSOCOM with the tools to keep it optimized. These will enable USSOCOM to tailor its implementation plan to current and future priorities—and to the funding available. In line with the Global SOF Network vision, they also should help USSOCOM take advantage of its strengths and develop strong local partners.

Notes

[1] Department of Defense, *Sustaining U.S. Global Leadership: Priorities for the 21st Century*, Washington, D.C.: Department of Defense, January 2012.

[2] U.S. Special Operations Command, *The Global SOF Network,* March 22, 2012.

[3] Thomas S. Szayna, William Welser IV, et al., *Developing the Global SOF Network: Planning Future SOF Posture,* Santa Monica, Calif.: RAND Corporation, RR-339-SOCOM, 2013, not available to the general public.

[4] A TSOC is a subordinate unified command of a unified command or a functional component command of another permanent joint command. It is the joint Special Operations command through which the geographic combatant commander normally exercises operational control of SOF within the area of responsibility.

[5] Office of the Secretary of Defense, *Guidance for Employment of the Force (GEF) for 2010–2012*, April 9, 2011; U.S. Special Operations Command, *2014–18 Strategic Capabilities Guidance,* August 10, 2011, not available to the general public.

[6] Regarding other regions, a robust multinational SOF organization already exists in Europe, the NATO SOF Headquarters. The Middle East is not currently a USSOCOM focus area for establishing an RSCC.

About the Authors

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