



# Countering Russia

## The Role of Special Operations Forces in Strategic Competition

Stephen Watts, Sean M. Zeigler, Kimberly Jackson, Caitlin McCulloch, Joseph Cheravitch, and

Marta Kepe

[www.rand.org/t/RRA412-1](http://www.rand.org/t/RRA412-1)

The authors of this report assess the role of U.S. Army special operations forces (ARSOF) in great-power competition, focusing on the types of activities the United States will need to conduct in competition with Russia and ARSOF's effectiveness in conducting them, as well as ARSOF's advantages and disadvantages relative to conventional military forces and the efforts of nonmilitary agencies.



### RESEARCH QUESTIONS

- What sorts of activities is the United States likely to need to conduct in competition with Russia?
- Among these activities, what are ARSOF's areas of comparative advantage?
- What evidence exists on the effectiveness of the types of activities ARSOF conducts?



### KEY FINDINGS

- To successfully compete with Russia and other great powers, the United States requires the ability to mitigate adversarial messaging efforts, engage key populations, support decisionmakers against influence efforts by malign actors, improve the resilience of partner institutions, assure foreign partners of U.S. resolve, deter adversaries, and illuminate and disrupt adversary networks.
- ARSOF can make important contributions in all these areas.
- Under steady-state conditions, ARSOF can help to strengthen the resilience of allies and partners while improving the United States' situational awareness.
- When the risk of armed conflict is high, ARSOF can help to defend against proxy forces used by U.S. adversaries and can be used to disrupt adversary operations in denied environments or to impose costs on adversaries. However, unconventional warfare intended to overthrow adversary governments has historically had low rates of success.

*continued on back*

- ARSOF can be used to better target U.S. operations in the information environment and work with local surrogates to strengthen the impact of such efforts.



## RECOMMENDATIONS

---

- The U.S. Army should revise future iterations of its multi-domain operations (MDO) concept and other formal publications to provide more-concrete guidance for competition and the employment of ARSOF.
- In cooperation with U.S. Special Operations Command, the Office of the Assistant Secretary of Defense for Special Operations and Low-Intensity Conflict, and other key stakeholders in the U.S. government, U.S. Army Special Operations Command should periodically review allocations of ARSOF against the evidence of utility in strategic competition to ensure optimal employment.
- Given the high levels of risk and the other instruments available to it, the U.S. government should use ARSOF for cost-imposing strategies only in relatively rare circumstances.
- Because the gains achieved through special operations tend to be incremental and are realized through local partners with their own objectives, it is imperative that the U.S. government embed special operations in a broader, long-term political-military strategy.

