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THE ROLE OF SPECIAL OPERATIONS FORCES IN GREAT POWER COMPETITION

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THE ROLE OF SPECIAL OPERATIONS FORCES IN GREAT POWER COMPETITION

HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES,
COMMITTEE ON ARMED SERVICES,
SUBCOMMITTEE ON INTELLIGENCE AND SPECIAL OPERATIONS,
Washington, DC, Wednesday, February 8, 2023.

The subcommittee met, pursuant to call, at 3:03 p.m., in room 2118, Rayburn House Office Building, Hon. Jack Bergman (chairman of the subcommittee) presiding.

OPENING STATEMENT OF HON. JACK BERGMAN, A REPRESENTATIVE FROM MICHIGAN, CHAIRMAN, SUBCOMMITTEE ON INTELLIGENCE AND SPECIAL OPERATIONS

Mr. BERGMAN. Good afternoon. I call to order this hearing of the Intelligence and Special Operations Subcommittee on "The Role of Special Operations Forces in Great Power Competition."

The United States is facing a dramatically different geopolitical environment than any other time in recent decades. While this century has been dominated by our efforts in the global war on terrorism, the new era of great power competition presents strategic challenges from revisionist states in China and Russia and their rogue state allies in Iran and North Korea. All the while, the threat from violent extremist organizations persist, as nodes from ISIS [Islamic State of Iraq and Syria], al-Qaida, and their affiliates continue to seek out unstable regions from which they can plot and plan against Western targets.

As the United States faces an inflection point in geostrategic competition, so too does our special operations community. Thankfully, the SOF [special operations forces] enterprise is well-suited to address the challenges posed by great power competition, where core SOCOM [U.S. Special Operations Command] activities such as irregular warfare and the train, advise, and assist mission offer the ability to present strategic and operational challenges to our adversaries and enable our allies and partners to resist outside aggression.

Great power competition, in which conventional force capabilities may play a larger role in deterring hostile actions from our state adversaries, similarly means that special operations forces will play more of a supporting and enabling role for the wider joint force. The core functions of the SOF enterprise, when taken together, provide options and capabilities across the entire operational spectrum—from gray zone competition to direct military engagement if the need arises.

During this transition, it will be critical for our special operators to continue to hone new skills and expertise in a variety of areas,

from critical cultural knowledge and language capabilities, to being tactically proficient in the cyber and information space.

Today's hearing is focused on the role of special operations forces as the United States enters an era of great power competition. This subcommittee will seek to examine the unique capabilities of SOCOM and how special operations forces' core activities may complement and enable the joint force to operate against strategic adversaries. We hope to further understand which skill sets of the SOF community must be relearned after 20-plus years of counterterrorism, and what new skills our special operators must learn to operate in the 21st century gray zone, below the threshold of direct military intervention.

Our witnesses today have a breadth of experience with the special operations community and the study of gray zone conflict and irregular warfare.

Dr. Seth Jones is a senior vice president at the Center for Strategic and International Studies. Dr. Jones has also served as a director at the RAND Corporation and has served as a plans officer and adviser to the commanding general of U.S. Special Operations Forces in Afghanistan.

Dr. David Ucko is a professor and department chair at the College of International Security Affairs at the National Defense University, where he oversees the college's irregular warfare area of concentration.

In the interest of time, I ask the witnesses to keep their opening remarks to 5 minutes or less so that we will have sufficient time for questions and answers.

With that, please let me thank our witnesses for appearing before us today.

And I now recognize Ranking Member Gallego for any opening remarks.

And, oh, by the way, just know the subcommittee chairman and the ranking member both probably look at life from a slightly Marine Corps perspective. So, having said that, just keep your words, you know, to simple syllables. We want to be able to understand.

Congressman Gallego, over to you.

STATEMENT OF HON. RUBEN GALLEGO, A REPRESENTATIVE FROM ARIZONA, RANKING MEMBER, SUBCOMMITTEE ON INTELLIGENCE AND SPECIAL OPERATIONS

Mr. GALLEGO. Thank you, Mr. Chairman. I look forward to working with you in a bipartisan manner to continue the great work that we started last year.

And it is hard to think of a more appropriate topic as we continue our oversight responsibilities at the beginning of this Congress. As I said during last year's SOCOM posture hearing, special operations forces are at an inflection point. The 2022 National Defense Strategy focuses on strategic competition to counter China's growing multi-domain challenges and Russia's persistent aggression, including its ongoing war in Ukraine.

SOF has a significant role to play and, in this volatile security environment, should be prioritized.

But I want to return to the inflection point I mentioned earlier at the hearing. How are SOF postured to support a whole-of-government approach to great power competition?

What is the role in concert with other departments and agencies so you are using the right instrument of national power for its best purposes?

The summary of the Irregular Warfare Annex to the National Defense Strategy published in 2020 tells us that irregular warfare is the struggle among state and non-state actors to influence populations and affect legitimacy. This needs to be prioritized as a competency within the joint force and the special operations community.

Some of the core activities that are important to irregular warfare are ones like foreign international defense and military information support operations, which are essential if we are to be successful in confronting our competitors in the gray zone or below the threshold of armed conflict.

My question stands: Where does the special forces community stand in the core activities needed for irregular warfare?

Has the focus on counterterrorism and counter violent extremist organizations, which has been needed for the last 20 years, caused other aspects of SOCOM's core activities to atrophy?

I would argue that the lessons over the last 20 years, as is, don't directly translate to the needs of today or tomorrow. We need to ensure that SOCOM has the right training, institutional education, and authorities to continue to be the best at what this nation asks them to do.

Thank you, Mr. Chairman, for this hearing. And I also want to thank our witnesses for their time today. And I look forward to hearing your views.

Mr. BERGMAN. Thank you, Representative Gallego.

We will now hear from our witnesses, then move into question and answer session.

So, Dr. Jones, we will begin with you.

STATEMENT OF SETH G. JONES, SENIOR VICE PRESIDENT, CENTER FOR STRATEGIC AND INTERNATIONAL STUDIES

Dr. JONES. Thank you very much, Chairman Bergman, Ranking Member Gallego, and distinguished members of the committee. This is an important hearing, and look forward to the discussion afterwards.

As I will outline in my testimony, U.S. Special Operations Forces need to play an important role in competition, particularly with such countries as China, Russia, and Iran, including in the area of irregular warfare.

My brief remarks are going to cover three areas.

The first is irregular warfare.

The second is the role of SOF in irregular warfare.

And the third are some implications on the congressional side.

So, let me just say that I think, as has been well documented in the recent National Defense Strategy and the National Security Strategy, we are in an era of competition with a range of countries, particularly with the Chinese at the top. I would argue, as we have seen historically, we have not had nuclear powers ever go to war

directly with each other, in part because states get quite cautious in conventional warfare against other nuclear powers.

So, the Soviets, even the Chinese and the Indians, or the Indians and Pakistanis, have generally acted with restraint. We have not seen any of those states go to direct conventional war with each other.

However, we have still seen intense competition below the threshold of conventional war. So, I would argue here today that I consider this area below the threshold of conventional war as probably being the primary area of competition on an hourly and a daily category.

As we look at a range of U.S. competitors, the Chinese are very active below this threshold with elements of the People's Liberation Army, the Ministry of State Security, the Ministry of Public Security. The Russians with elements of the GRU, the Main Directorate; the SVR, Foreign Intelligence Service; the FSB [Federal Security Service]; several of Russia's special operations forces, including its Spetsnaz; as well as non-state entities including, as we have seen in the Ukraine in the Bakhmut area, the Wagner Group, and some of the private military companies.

And I don't need to say a lot about the Iranians because they are among the quintessential irregular actors with the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Quds Force, and its relationship with the Lebanese Hezbollah, Popular Mobilization Forces, and others around the Middle East.

So, I think when we look at, at the role of SOF in this arena, I think there is a particular role for activities outside of direct action. That has been the mantra over the 20 years after 9/11 of SOF and many of its units. But I think what we are talking about primarily, because of the risk of escalation, is a heavy focus on things like foreign internal defense, providing assistance to a range of countries. So, think for a moment about aiding the Baltic States or Finland in providing assistance in case of an invasion, Russian invasion, not imminent at this point, but certainly potentially down the road.

Taiwan in case of an invasion there is an important component of the Taiwanese would need to resist both conventionally but also an irregular element of that as well.

Unconventional warfare, which is the support to non-state entities, non-state partners, a role historically of organizations like the Green Berets.

And then a range of other activities, including information operations.

My general view is, again, is that I think there has been a slight misunderstanding of the non-kinetic side of special operations forces. And they, they have a range of capabilities.

When it comes to the role of Congress, I think Congress has a very important role moving forward for SOF, particularly in this area of irregular warfare. My own view is that funding should be considered expanding in the section 1202 area, potentially also in triple-three, section 333. And happy to discuss that.

I do think there needs to be a broad review, posture review of the Department of Defense's and the interagency role in irregular warfare.

And happy to take more specific questions. But as I have argued so far, I think this will be a major form of competition. The Chinese, the Russians, and the Iranians are heavily involved in this, and we need to responsibly as well.

[The prepared statement of Dr. Jones can be found in the Appendix on page 25.]

Mr. BERGMAN. Thank you, Dr. Jones.

Dr. Ucko.

STATEMENT OF DAVID H. UCKO, PROFESSOR AND DEPARTMENT CHAIR, COLLEGE OF INTERNATIONAL SECURITY AFFAIRS, NATIONAL DEFENSE UNIVERSITY

Dr. UCKO. Chairman Bergman, Ranking Member Gallego, and members of the subcommittee, thank you for inviting me here today.

As we have heard, the United States finds itself in an era of strategic competition. How to respond is now the focus of the U.S. Government, but it is a question compounded by the variegated and global method of attack.

Indeed, America's rivals are deliberately avoiding U.S. strengths, particularly in the military domain. And, instead, they privilege ambiguity and subterfuge, blending statecraft with subversion and war with peace.

SOF have and can contribute to this competition through its specialization in irregular warfare. In recent years, SOF has broadened its application of foreign internal defense and unconventional warfare to IW [irregular warfare] missions and SOF core activities to fit this new strategic environment. FID [foreign internal defense] traditionally meant aiding a friendly government against an insurgency. But SOF now looks upon it to boost a country's resilience against foreign-sponsored proxies.

UW [unconventional warfare] traditionally implied sponsoring an insurgency against an illicit or occupying government. But SOF now looks upon its work as supporting resistance capabilities for states either facing foreign invasion or seeking to deter such a threat.

Building resilience and resistance will be key lines of effort in America's overall approach. Yet, they are also highly demanding tasks requiring institutional readiness and protracted partnerships abroad. There is today a need to rebalance SOF in favor of FID and UW, and to harness the skills they call for within this new strategic era.

This will mean an emphasis on language skills, cultural know-how, political awareness, and strategic acumen, all at scale, with major implications for SOF recruitment and career tracks.

Yet, FID and UW are more than military tasks. In FID the assets trained by SOF must be supported by a capable security sector, undergirded by sustainable institutions, and operating alongside instruments of state that can take the lead in political, societal, and economic matters.

In UW, fostering potential for armed resistance must be complemented by a whole-of-society effort to provide a legal framework, engage with allies and partners, build a narrative for mobilization,

and win the struggle for legitimacy that is so essential to irregular warfare.

This calls for greater interagency coordination, and integration even, in conducting what many see exclusively as a SOF task.

This brings us to the primary non-military nature of strategic competition. Indeed, as our competitors seek to avoid our military strengths, there are clear limits to how much we can and should expect from SOF, still a military force. Responding to weaponized corruption, election interference, media penetration, political infiltration, dodgy trade deals, and infrastructural development will require a far broader portfolio. Even where SOF has relevant capability, for example its PSYOPS [psychological operations] assets, so do other instruments of power. And they must be made to count.

This is not only a matter of managing SOF's operational tempo, which has been too high for too long, forcing standards to slip, it is also about allowing SOF to master the tasks we expect of them, FID and UW in particular. Thus, where SOF engages in non-military tasks, it should be to increase the reach and effectiveness of civilian agencies.

My written testimony sets out useful precedents for such integration at the operational level, which could be scaled up for truly strategic effect. This also means integrating better with general purpose forces for a more calibrated division of labor, particularly as concerns security force assistance and persistent partnerships.

Now, such partnerships do rely on an interagency and conventional military being able to play their parts within irregular warfare. Thus, I recommend interagency strategic education, training, and sensitization as to the nature of this competition and the roles of different components of state in generating a tailored response.

My college, the College of International Security Affairs at the National Defense University, provides a model for such education that could be scaled up for greater effect. At our campus at Fort McNair here in DC, under the Regional Defense Fellowship Program we combine senior officials from across the armed services, the intelligence community, the interagency, and partner nations for an education in irregular warfare and associated strategies. The program is partner oriented, with more than 50 percent of students coming from abroad.

At our MA [master of arts] program at Fort Bragg, civilian academics teach an irregular warfare curriculum to SOF officers and NCOs [noncommissioned officers], alongside international SOF students and State Department personnel.

On integration, there's also a key role here for cross-functional teams, liaison officers, and other structural ways of cutting across agencies, thereby enabling awareness and synchronization of respective strengths. The newly formed Irregular Warfare Center could play a leading role in this initiative, as it provides a focal point for irregular warfare and taps into existing networks devoted to this topic.

As of the FY 2023 defense budget, it has been granted authorities to engage and coordination across the interagency to enhance America's capability for irregular and political warfare.

The final need is for greater strategic clarity and long-term planning for strategic competition, to understand what we are both

competing for and against. I think this means developing a strategy that proceeds according to a clearly elaborated theory of success rather than just the means and capabilities at our disposal.

I look forward to discussing these issues with you, and to your questions.

Thank you.

[The prepared statement of Dr. Ucko can be found in the Appendix on page 39.]

Mr. BERGMAN. Thank you, Doctor.

And I will defer my questions until—till last.

I would like to recognize Ranking Member Gallego for his 5 minutes.

Mr. GALLEGO. Thank you, Chairman. I just have two questions. And this is to both of our witnesses.

While we are discussing the role of SOF in great power competition, are there some areas that should be left to other departments and agencies?

And are there any tasks that SOF should not necessarily do when it comes to great power competition?

And that is not necessarily that they can't do it well, but that someone else could probably be doing it better and we have the opportunity cost issue here.

Want to start, Dr. Jones?

Dr. JONES. Sure.

Yes, so I think a range of the skill sets that SOF do get involved in, including information operations, there is a role in MISO [military information support operations] that SOF can play. But I think in general, as we look across the U.S. Government more broadly, there is a critical role and a leading role for the State Department to play there, including with the Global Engagement Center.

When it comes to covert activity there is certainly a role for the U.S. intelligence community to play.

So, I would say on some of these areas SOF and the Department of Defense are not even the leading agency for this but need to be nested. This does raise questions about to what degree on the information side we are nested more broadly into a broader strategy. And I don't—I think we are still a long way away from where we were in the last, say, decade of the Cold War.

So, that is one.

When it comes to providing foreign internal defense, there are key elements, I think, of training foreign forces that are probably better left to Army or Marine Corps forces as well. I think when you're talking about specialized units, your special operations forces, commando units, some civil defense side that would be engaged in responding to a foreign invasion, that is probably where SOF has some comparative advantage.

But general, there are SFABs [security force assistance brigades] within the Army, for example, that can do broader training.

So, I think it depends on what kind of foreign military, for example, is training and whether that is better left to SOF or conventional forces.

Mr. GALLEGO. And we have seen some of, for example, State National Guards going and training other countries, and with a lot of

that, a lot of that relationship that normally would have been taken up by special forces and they're doing it, and doing it well, and freeing up our SOF elements for something else.

Dr. Ucko.

Dr. UCKO. Thank you, Representative Gallego.

I concur with my colleague here. I would say that on the military or security side it is absolutely worth mentioning the State Partnership Program that the National Guard leads up. And the way that that has produced an enduring security cooperation bond with strategically relevant countries.

The SFAB initiative I think is also a very positive step for the Army, finally recognizing that it, too, has a role in security force systems and need to actually devote specialized assets to that end.

But it is also worth recalling, again, that great power competition is primarily non-military, and that China, and Russia, and other actors we're competing with have found a way of carrying out the so-called war of interlocking, that is to say synchronizing different efforts across different agencies. And we need to be as versatile and as nimble.

And on that front, I think that it would be foolish to look to the special operations community as the go-to option in responding to this type of aggression. I'm thinking in particular in terms of countering threat finance. Admittedly, SOF has a burgeoning expertise in this area, but I think it would be unwise to neglect the fact that Department of Commerce and the OFAC [Office of Foreign Assets Control] also should have a role to play. And that we need to make sure that our portfolio is as diverse and as specialized, particularly at the strategic level, as that of our adversaries.

Thank you.

Mr. GALLEGO. And, Dr. Ucko, you recently proposed a modified definition of irregular warfare. Can you share that with the group and why you believe that is important?

Dr. UCKO. Absolutely.

Irregular warfare, ironically, has become more of a talking point since we said goodby to the so-called war on terror. And yet, of course, that was 20 years of very protracted and very intense involvement in this term.

My concern is that in trying to close that chapter we will now try to redefine irregular warfare as something very different from the experience we had there.

To my mind, the definition that was come up in 2007, the joint operating concept, is still absolutely relevant. Irregular warfare, then, is a violent struggle for legitimacy. It is violent because it is, ultimately, something that the military is involved in. If you take that away, then irregular warfare becomes pretty much anything China does.

And it is a struggle for legitimacy because in the struggle a need for partnerships and for mobilizing potential and united fronts is key. This is an area where China and Russia are competing extremely heavily.

So, I wrote this piece on redefining irregular warfare to make sure that we don't lose the lessons, both positive and negative, from the last two decades, and turn irregular warfare into something that is in fact very alien to its nature. This is still something that

we have to deal with now versed against—waged against states, rather, non-state actors. But it is an area of more continuity than change.

Mr. GALLEGO. I yield back, Mr. Chair.

Mr. BERGMAN. Representative Scott, you are recognized for 5 minutes.

Mr. SCOTT. Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

Dr. Ucko, I want to stay on that train of thought. And could you identify briefly, in about 2 minutes so that I can move to Dr. Jones, the key differences in the way Russia and China carry out irregular warfare and their competition?

Dr. UCKO. Yes, absolutely.

I would say that—do you mean the difference between the two respective nations or between us and them?

Mr. SCOTT. Between the two respective nations.

Dr. UCKO. Right. Thank you, Representative.

Yes. I think Russia has emphasized to a greater degree the use of violence, seen most egregiously, of course, in Ukraine, but also previously in Georgia, also in its engagement on the African continent. Its main contribution to those states have been in the security realm with the deployment of the so-called Wagner Group to provide, effectively, the role of mercenaries.

China, in contrast, has adopted a slightly different role. And I think it is more invested in infrastructural development, economic, financial, and informational lines of effort. That, in a sense, and perhaps paradoxically, I think, is a bigger threat. Because whereas Russia has played the role of spoiler, China actually threatens to contribute something and to create a new order.

That order I think is deleterious both to the countries that it is targeting and to the international system that the United States upholds. But it is, nonetheless, attractive, particularly to elites looking for quick solutions to urgent problems of debt and poverty.

So, therein lies one difference.

And I think going back to the issue of irregular warfare, then, what we have to make sure is that we also bring into the fore the notion of political warfare which, of course, George Kennan described as the application of Clausewitzian logic in times of peace. But Russia and China, then, bridge the spectrum from conflict to peace. And we need to ensure that while the DOD [Department of Defense] and the special operations forces have a role in particular to play along that spectrum, we don't use sight of the other instruments of state that must also be integrated and synchronized to meet a threat where it is active.

Mr. SCOTT. So, just in summary, China is using debt and infrastructure projects, whereas Russia is using mercenaries and the Wagner Group?

Dr. UCKO. Yes, absolutely. I think that is a fair characterization.

Mr. SCOTT. The end result is the same in that the people lose the country.

Dr. UCKO. Yes.

I would add one point which is, of course, that the target is never static. And what Russia did in February of last year will very much inform the way it acts in the future. It would be foolish, and I

think unrealistic, to assume that it won't learn from this strategic error.

Mr. SCOTT. Dr. Jones, I want to stay on the issue of African Wagner Group. My friend Jimmy Panetta and I traveled there; I've traveled there several times. But the most recent time we had seen a marked change towards the French on the continent of Africa in the Lake Chad Basin area and Mali.

And it seems that Wagner Group has been extremely successful in the use of social media to drive the general public against the French. There is one, and it is publicly reported, instant where French ISR [intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance] picked up a mass grave and mass killing that had been carried out presumably by the Wagner Group. And when the French reported that, before it was ever disseminated to the general public, Wagner had picked up on it and put it out that the French had done that.

The end result of that is the public believed what they heard first. And the French were asked, have been asked in some cases to leave the countries.

How fast do we have to operate when it comes to the social media aspect of information and our special forces groups?

Where should the authorities lie? Should it be at the lieutenant colonel level where the commander on the ground in-country has the authority to just unleash his keyboard warrior?

Dr. JONES. Well, two things. On the role of organizations like the Wagner Group, I mean, it is certainly important to put this in the context of the Wagner Group. If you look at its location where it operates out of in Russia, it is collocated with Russian Spetsnaz. So, there is a close connection deployed overseas between the Wagner Group and Russian government agencies, whether it is Spetsnaz, GRU, SVR, or even the Kremlin itself with Yevgeny Prigozhin.

And they are heavily involved, as you know, in information operations against the French, against us, against local governments in some cases. So, I think there is an important need to combat those kinds of information campaigns.

Now, how much of that gets pushed down, I think it depends. I do think there is a need to have initiatives at the lower level. It may depend on the concept of operations. There may be some CONOPS that need to be approved, because of their sensitivity, at higher levels.

Mr. SCOTT. I am out of time.

It just seems to me that with regard to the information war, if you don't move first, it doesn't matter if it is an hour or a week behind, you are out.

I yield.

Mr. BERGMAN. Thank you.

Now, since we have two members of the subcommittee with the last name of Jackson, this will be Representative Jeff Jackson. You are recognized for 5 minutes.

Mr. JACKSON OF NORTH CAROLINA. I would defer to the doctor. Only one of these Jacksons is a doctor.

Mr. BERGMAN. I don't know. Would you like to be a doctor?

Mr. JACKSON OF NORTH CAROLINA. I will go and I will defer afterwards.

I just want to ground this conversation real quick. I understand we are having a very high-level conversation which I gather is basically about reorienting SOF in the great power conflict era into which we appear to be entering.

When I think about reorienting a military group, I think in terms of mission, training, and equipment, and that we have to make changes along those three axes.

And I would like you both, if you would, give me a quick glance at mission, training, equipment. Are there major changes that need to be made in each one of those categories?

Is it major in one and minor in two others?

Do you think we are okay in one area?

How big of a pivot are we really talking about on the ground?

Dr. UCKO. I will attempt to answer your question, Representative. It is a very good one.

I think in terms of mission there is a contrast to be drawn between aiding El Salvador against the FMLN [Farabundo Martí National Liberation Front] in a FID environment of the 1980s, and helping a country that is threatened by China. Not only is the adversary a state actor, and a very potent one at that, but the threat of military action is also both more remote and more existential.

And so, in the mission we have to probably spend some time redefining what it is that we are fighting for, and what victory will look like.

How do you know that you are resilient? It is one thing when you are facing an ongoing insurgency. It is another thing when you are facing proxies, auxiliaries, and subversion within your state borders.

So, again, this is perhaps a less military problem set than a political and societal one. We have to, in a sense, effectively figure out where would we draw the line.

And I am sorry, that is not a very definitive answer, but I think it speaks to the messiness of the strategy that is being waged against us.

In terms of training, then, certainly after two decades of heavy use of SOF in direct action, it is heartening to see that after the withdrawal from Afghanistan we have seen initial steps of rebalancing and returning to the regional alignment of the Special Forces in particular, but SOF in general. And that is, I think, a step that we need to continue and sustain so that you have the, again, cultural knowhow, the linguistic skill set, and political awareness necessary to engage in partner countries and to understand the environment in which you are operating, both human and otherwise.

And then equipment, this is when things get more techy. I think there's been some interesting news in the last few months, which I applaud, talking about the deployment of drones as a particular MOS [military occupational specialty], the possibility of adding cyber MOSes within special operations forces, and taking the lessons from Ukraine and trying to institutionalize that within emerging force structure.

So, that would be my initial attack at that question.

Thank you.

Dr. JONES. Great, great question.

Let me just start off by saying that, that this problem set is obviously not new to the SOF community. They—organizations like the U.S. Army Green Berets have a long history of doing irregular activity. So I think this is—the shifts are not major in most cases. But I will give you some examples of I think where.

So, if we go to mission, probably more of a rebalancing than a big mission shift. The rebalancing is when you are dealing with countering major powers instead of terrorist groups, probably shift away from how much you are putting into direct action and how much you are putting into foreign internal defense and unconventional warfare, I would argue.

The number of direct action missions you are going to want to do when it involves the Chinese government or the Russians is going to be limited because of the risks of escalation.

So, I think it is a rebalancing on the missions.

On the training, I think that is a bit of a challenge because I think you are talking about shifting from special operations forces that have had to work through Dari, and Pashto, and Arabic in some areas, and now you are dealing with Mandarin and Russian. Or, if you are dealing with, you know, the Finns or the Baltic States, you are dealing with Eastern European languages in order to.

So, I think there are some cultural-linguistic challenges that SOF have to get through in understanding the partners that they are working with, certainly the case in the Indo-Pacific.

And then on the equipment, I would wholly agree. I think the issue is the French have withdrawn from key parts of Africa; so have we. So have we from the Middle East. So, I think there you are talking about ISR assets, where we are probably going to need more of to cover a bigger terrain. And the same thing on drones, and also underwater activity.

Mr. JACKSON OF NORTH CAROLINA. Thank you.

I yield to the doctor.

Mr. BERGMAN. Thank you. And Dr. Jackson of Texas, you are recognized for 5 minutes.

Dr. JACKSON OF TEXAS. Thank you, Mr. Chairman. I appreciate the time. Unfortunately, I came in with three great questions and they have almost been completely addressed at this particular point.

So, I will yield my time back. I thank you.

Mr. BERGMAN. Okay. Congressman Panetta of California, you are recognized for 5 minutes.

Mr. PANETTA. Thank you, Mr. Chairman. Appreciate this opportunity.

Gentlemen, good afternoon. Thanks for being here.

I think it was Dr. Jones, you talked about 1202 and title 333 authority. So, let's focus on there.

Obviously, 1202 authority enables DOD to support foreign forces engaged in IW, irregular warfare. However, once a conflict is determined to turn conventional, that authority is removed, as happened in Ukraine where 1202 authority is no longer applied.

Are there other funding authorities that could be used to supplant 1202 in that situation?

Dr. JONES. Possibly. I mean, I think there are elements of triple-three, of section 333, that could be used for building partner capacity. If there's a counterterrorism component of it, 127 Echo. So, there may be other authorities that could be used, depending on the circumstances.

Mr. PANETTA. But isn't title 33, that can't be used for irregular, it can only be used for asymmetric warfare; correct?

Dr. JONES. Well, it's a—I am operating in the gray zone here. It kind of depends on how one interprets it. So, if a country is—if you want to build the capacity for future irregular activities, I mean there may be some, some ways you can, you can define that.

Mr. PANETTA. Okay. So, I mean, going forward, once you either—once you have conventional or asymmetrical warfare, those two authorities are no longer applied?

Dr. JONES. That is my understanding.

Mr. PANETTA. Okay. And is there any other type of authority that could allow us any other type of funding stream?

Dr. JONES. There may be. I'm not aware off the top of my head.

Mr. PANETTA. Okay. Would you happen to know, sir?

Dr. UCKO. No. I would [inaudible] the same answer.

But I would add, if I may——

Mr. PANETTA. Please.

Mr. UCKO [continuing]. That part of the confusion here is this delineation between irregular and major combat operations. It just doesn't really make sense in reality. And I think that is when we come up to these legislative hurdles with authorities.

I would probably prefer just to speak of war as war in all its complexity, but we are where we are. But that might be one of the issues confronting us at this point.

Mr. PANETTA. Understood. And one I am sure we will talk more about in this committee, I would imagine.

Moving on to Africa. Obviously, as you heard from my travel partner over there, Representative Scott of Georgia, we have taken a couple trips to Africa actually, three total, two to the Sahel. Obviously seeing some unfortunate developments that have gone on there, not just with the spread of VEOs [violent extremist organizations] and, obviously, the influx of Wagner, be it in Central African Republic, Mali, and possibly Burkina Faso based on some of the flags we saw at the coup, creating a lot of instability, pushing out France and, obviously, having military governments filling that vacuum that are openly sympathetic to Moscow, unfortunately.

I know I think, Mr. Scott, Mr. Jones, you talked about there has been a withdrawal from Africa. Well, I wouldn't necessarily says a withdrawal from Africa, because if you look at Chad, and you look at Niger, I believe Niger is kind of the Alamo. That is what I call it, in the sense that, you know, you saw the French forces go there after leaving Mali. We have our forces there, either in Diffa or Ouallam or right there in the capital city.

I mean, do you believe that we can hold the Alamo based on the situation that we are facing right now?

Dr. JONES. It is a very good question. By withdrawal my, my only comment there is when it comes to U.S. Special Operations Forces in Africa, the number has decreased over the last couple of years. So, we have——

Mr. PANETTA. Fair.

Mr. JONES [continuing]. Withdrawn some numbers.

And the challenge when you look at the Sahel, with groups like JNIM [Jama'at Nasr al-Slam wal Muslimin], some of the areas of North Africa, including in Libya, or even in the Horn with Somalia, is we are seeing pretty significant activity of violent extremist organizations.

I think the situation in the Sahel is extremely dangerous right now with the spread of both al-Qaida and Islamic State-linked groups operating. On the one hand it is a spreading right now. And we have got now Russian Wagner Group and Russian intelligence agencies linked up.

On the other hand, I am not aware of much external plotting going on against the United States from these areas. So, you know, it is different—it is a different situation from Syria where we have seen external plotting in the west from areas.

So, I think it is an area of monitoring closely. We need to be involved to some degree. How much? That is an area of debate and discussion.

Mr. PANETTA. Understood. Look forward to having that debate.

Mr. Chairman, I yield back.

Mr. BERGMAN. Thank you.

Mr. Mills of Florida, you are recognized for 5 minutes.

Mr. MILLS. Thank you, Mr. Chairman. Thank you both for coming.

And understanding this is about the great power resurgence, if you will, and knowing the geopolitical alignments now of Russia, China, Iran, and North Korea, I feel that the United States for many decades now has been very good in the kinetic elements of things. But we have failed to address a lot of the economic resource and cyber warfare capabilities that we are against.

In many cases while we are seeing where there is an increase in the capability of messaging strategies of propaganda and information warfare against the West whereby we don't have an effective countermessaging strategy to be able to prevent this. From your perspective, would you see fit more allocations of funding that would address the geopolitical alignments as opposed to just the kinetic elements of things?

Dr. JONES. Absolutely. And I think this goes back to our discussion both on amounts of funding, but also the speed with which we respond.

I mean, I think the Chinese also—we talked about Africa and the Russians—the Chinese are a very good example. Their entire three warfares campaign involve—all of them are non-kinetic. All of them involved information. And all of them are aggressive. That is in part, along with bribery and corruption, how they got into the Solomon Islands.

Which is for anybody that has read our World War II history, including our Marine Corps history, we fought tooth and nail against the Japanese there. So, now the Chinese have moved in. We lost that information fight in the Solomon Islands.

So, I think the funding side, as well as the speed with which we respond, are important.

Mr. MILLS. And just kind of following up on that same tone, and obviously this is information I am aware of, but I just want it for the chamber.

Knowing that it is an economic resource warfare that's been launched against, and it is one of Chairman Xi's primary focuses to try and expand out the Eurasian border, which is what I believe Ukraine was truly about, take Africa, Oceania, with an attempt to try to create a maritime silk route to choke off Western Hemisphere supply chain while dominating resources and attacking things like the petrodollar for the ultimate goal of U.S. dollar elimination, do you feel that the State Department, the DOD, and other elements work well together in addressing all of these complex issues when they are so diverse and just outside of the SOF kinetic capabilities?

Dr. UCKO. Thank you for that question, Representative.

I would offer that we don't have a strategic framework or guidance at this point with which to synchronize and integrate those respective agencies and departments.

Mr. MILLS. And do you feel that is something that is needed?

Dr. UCKO. I would very much say so. I think a looming question in this era is who actually sets a strategy?

Where are the structures where you have that level of interagency integration?

Certainly at the country team, great things are done, but that's within specific countries rather than as a nation. So this, I think, is an area of urgent concern, and one that I think we should certainly keep moving.

Mr. MILLS. And, Dr. Jones, in your testimony you mention that the Department of Defense does not use all the funds appropriated to it by Congress for IW activities.

In what ways would you recommend Congress play a more active role in ensuring that DOD maximizes its capabilities in this area to counter the very real and very heavily invested war being waged against our country by our adversaries?

Dr. JONES. So, my comment was, was not that it is necessarily being used inappropriately. It is more that there is a focus predominantly, and there needs to be a focus to some degree, on the conventional side of warfare.

So, we need to build our, we need to build our F–35s. We need to build our *Virginia*-class and *Columbia*-class submarines. We need to build our B–21.

But the problem is, I think, at least in my view, are some of our funding for irregular warfare activities—we are not asking for a lot of money. I mean, they are not, they are not very costly. But they are pretty low right now. And there is, as you are noting, the challenge with the Chinese, I think the problem is bigger than what our National Defense Strategy highlights, which is a focus on China and the Indo-Pacific.

And the reality is when you look at the Belt and Road Initiative, and you look at China's Digital Silk Road, it is global in nature. And it touches key parts of Africa where they are building infrastructure and there are information campaigns that go along with that; same thing on the Digital Silk Road. Which means that, I

think, we have got to also be heavily invested in countering that activity and funding it.

So, when I talk about funding, I am talking about some of these sections, 1202, triple-three, that I think are pretty low right now.

Mr. MILLS. And just really quickly, knowing that it is also a geopolitical alliance that has the Chavez in Venezuela, Petro in Colombia, and they are developing that kind of Iron Curtain, if you will, do you feel counternarco operations would be a very effective thing with combating the fentanyl overdoses coming across the borders?

Dr. JONES. Yes. Although I am not an expert on counternarcotics. But it certainly is a problem.

Mr. MILLS. Thank you so much for that. I appreciate it.

With that, I yield back.

Mr. BERGMAN. Mr. Luttrell of Texas, you are recognized for 5 minutes.

Mr. LUTTRELL. Am I the clean-up shot?

Thank you, gentlemen.

I always get very uneasy when the words "rebalance," and "restructure," and "reorganize" SOF communities come about. It seems that that happens as the war starts to progress. We saw it in early 2000s as we came in, hard direct action missions. And we were at learning curves completely vertical. And as we reached out up to the ten and the early, and the early teens, we went from—we went into more of a FID where organizations were fighting for work, but still forward deployed.

And then ISIS hit and then we went right back to direct action missions where it seems like we, we essentially focused on FID and certain things when we lost the capability that we should have been hyper aggressive on but patiently focused.

And I hope that is just not the case right now because SOF fills out a portfolio of all the experiences that we have had over the past two decades. And that is something that we need to hold near and dear in case China or Russia clacks off and we are actively involved in that.

But my question to you both is regarding the Tier 1 organizations in Russia and China, how does the American Tier 1 organizations compare and compete?

Dr. JONES. So, I can start there.

Look, I think our special operations forces in my view are the best in the world, whether it's Joint Special Operations Command or any of the other special operations forces that are within the Department of Defense and, frankly, their partners in the U.S. intelligence community.

I think where we do not have—we are not as well organized and not as well structured is what I will call the broader interagency. So, that is we see a fair amount of Chinese activity across the Chinese intelligence, MSS [Ministry of State Security], Chinese PLA [People's Liberation Army], the United Front Workers Department. Same thing on the Russian side as well.

That, I think we are being outcompeted in the interagency national scope, not on the capabilities of our SOF.

Mr. LUTTRELL. And to your point earlier, it seems to me that we are trying to spread SOF too thin when it comes to these extracurricular activities that the other countries seem to be performing

in, where we can bring in civil affairs or the Army units or the Marine units to help us.

Does that, does that hold water?

Dr. UCKO. Yeah. That is exactly the point that I tried to make in my testimony.

There is simply no appetite for irregular warfare really outside of SOF. Even the general purpose forces, although I did comment on the SFABs as a very positive step. Of course, they are oriented predominantly towards conventional warfare. And irregular warfare doesn't really translate outside of the Pentagon. And so we don't have a strategic construct, which I think the Communist—Chinese Communist Party does have and I think the Kremlin has for this type of competition.

Irregular warfare spend does not have to be very high, as Dr. Jones put it. But there is also no proponent for it. And I think that is allowing us to complete at a more suboptimal level than we should be.

Mr. LUTTRELL. Okay. I am fairly familiar with the Russian Spetsnaz capabilities. Not so much on China. How does that, how does that look?

Dr. JONES. Chinese capabilities of their special operations forces I would call mediocre. Where they are high, high profile is in areas outside of PLA special operations forces so, for example, offensive cyber operations and espionage, along those lines, reasonably competent. You know, those are probably the areas where, in my view, the Chinese are reasonably competent, but not in the special operations.

Mr. LUTTRELL. They don't define their SOF like we define our SOF with direct action, aggressive warfare?

Dr. JONES. And they don't use them in the same way. Our special operations forces have had several decades of experience conducting direct action, unconventional warfare, foreign internal defense. So, we have got—we know how to do a lot of activity. Chinese are not.

Again, what the—on the irregular warfare side, the Chinese are able to use a range of different agencies in conducting action.

Mr. LUTTRELL. I yield back. Thank you.

Mr. BERGMAN. Ranking Member Gallego, you are recognized.

Mr. GALLEGO. Thank you, Mr. Chair, for giving me one more bite at the apple. And it is kind of following up on Congressman Luttrell's question a little.

How much and what did we learn from the last 20 years of special forces operations, which were largely dominated by CT [counterterrorism]-like missions? And did it prepare us for irregular warfare?

I mean, there is the downside but there also should be some of the lessons that we can carry over.

And it is for both witnesses.

Dr. UCKO. I think what we have learned in the last 20 years, and it really comes on the back of the information technology revolution that started in the 1990s, perhaps even 1980s, is that SOF equipped with that technology, and having the training and education that they do have, can achieve amazing things through direct action, but also very sensitive clandestine operations.

The broader strategic lesson, however, I think comes from places like Colombia, places like the Philippines, where we see FID missions being conducted on a protracted basis through partnerships with the host nation government. And, in comparison with Afghanistan and Iraq, albeit in a very different strategic context, Philippines and Colombia I think points to a way forward for FID and for the special operations community.

What does that mean? It requires then a political engagement. It requires an enduring partnership, trust. And those things, of course, cannot be instantly manufactured. But it also requires different instruments of state power to make sure that the operational gains can have a strategic meaning.

So, I think 20 years of war on terror, those are some of the key lessons that I would take away from SOF activity.

Dr. JONES. And I would say what we can do well is if we need to hit a target in a specific location, we can do that quickly, and we can do it probably better than—not probably—better than anybody else in the world. So, we can do direct action extremely well.

I think we can generally train foreign forces relatively well. We did it in Colombia. We have done it with the Iraqi counterterrorism services. But there are limitations to what that means. You can't rebuild a government that way. You can't nation build.

So, by training key partner forces it doesn't mean you win in that case. We struggled in Afghanistan, despite the fact that the commandos were a phenomenal organization as part of a broader government that was collapsing.

So, there are limits to what I think you can do with these activities if you don't have it.

The other thing that I would just add is I think we, hopefully, have learned that the answer to dealing with challenges is not to flood a foreign country with large numbers of American forces. That as I think we finally got to a point by 2017, 2018, 2019, 2020 where a small number of both special operations and conventional forces, working with an indigenous force, the Syrian opposition, could retake territory on the Syrian side and on the Iraqi side.

And I think that was a much better way to end those 20 years than the way we started by 100,000-plus in both countries. We ended up, I think, largely getting it right at the end.

Mr. GALLEGO. I yield back.

Mr. BERGMAN. Thank you. And I know we are going to call votes here in a couple minutes.

But, you know, Dr. Jones, just how would you ideally delineate SOCOM's core activities between the component commands, TSOCs [Theater Special Operations Commands], JSOCs [Joint Special Operations Commands], to compete in irregular warfare and continue the CT mission?

Dr. JONES. Well, I think U.S. Special Operations Command generally does not own its forces when they go to the combatant commanders. So, it has got a coordinating function with the combatant commanders.

But I think it does have a responsibility. It has got to help equip those forces. It has got the responsibility to help and work and train with U.S. Army Special Operations Command, with the Navy SEALs, with WARCOM [Warfare Command] to help train.

And then with the TSOCs, to help manage the role of special operations globally in the combatant commands.

So, it has got a very important role in preparing for and then supporting combatant commanders in the use of special operations forces. But, really, without SOCOM and without a major role, the special operations community breaks down into Army SF [Special Forces], into Navy SEALs. So, it provides really the overarching umbrella for the training.

And then it also has an important role, I think, on the personnel side in pushing for the, you know, the—how well the forces are dealing with PTSD [post-traumatic stress disorder], with suicide, with a range of those issues. SOCOM's got a very important component of that as well.

Mr. BERGMAN. Thank you.

Dr. Ucko, in your written statement you equate FID and UW to resilience and resistance respectively. How have resilience and resistance evolved in the 21st century, especially with the expansion of cyber and information space?

Dr. UCKO. Thank you.

So, the main change, I think, from what we saw during the Cold War is that the threat is no longer primarily military. And, of course, it was the military nature of the threat that brought SOF into the scene. Defending, again, El Salvador, or supporting mujahedeen in Afghanistan is a very different enterprise when you are looking at the strategy that China and Russia are now using.

So, that brings in new capabilities that have to be sharpened, whether it is countering threat finance, countering disinformation. And the question for me is to what degree SOF really ought to be taking the lead in those particular areas. So, while we speak of FID and UW, really have to bring in other agencies and expertise to that portfolio.

Doctrinally, that is anyway recognized. I think it is also recognized within SOF's emphasis on partnerships and working with and through their interagency. But it does, perhaps, run up against a tendency to press what one former Secretary—one former Assistant Secretary of Defense called the SOF easy button, that is to say, to delegate things to the special operations community because of problems being unorthodox and no one else is around to solve them.

I think that is fighting this competition with one arm tied behind our back. And so, we have to probably instead broaden what we mean by resilience and resistance to bring in the relevant civilian capabilities that can give us strategic purpose.

Mr. BERGMAN. Okay. Thank you.

You know, I wanted to thank—I want to thank everybody, our members and our witnesses for, I believe, getting our 118th Congress subcommittee off to a great start with a presentation of ideas, thoughts based on experience, both your experience, with all of the members' here experience, to bring us into the reality of where we are here in 2023 and going forward.

And I think since where the first two wolves, Romulus and Remus, life has been a competition for resources. You find that carcass on the road, you are going to tear it apart and you are going to fight for what you want.

And when we look at what we do as Members of Congress in allocating funds, understanding which authorities exist and don't exist, and how it relates to the future resources that we are going to need, and then understand how we as a congressional committee do the right thing then to enable the Department of Defense to do what it needs to do, it is—we have to be very careful in life that we don't fight yesterday's war or use yesterday's—in the case, my case, I would love to be able to use just yesterday's phone and make it work, but we know it is going to change.

The point is, as a committee we are going to work through this, and we are going to—we are going to test areas where we are not comfortable. And we would hope that all of the services, all of our subject matter experts who come from the different communities will run with us. And we will run together and figure out ways in the next 2 years to do the right thing for the defense of our Nation through our special operations, through our irregular warfare, through the recruiting, training, and sustaining of the MOSes that we are going to need to win the next fight.

So, I just with that, unless there is anything else, this hearing is adjourned.

Thank you, everybody.

[Whereupon, at 4:01 p.m., the subcommittee was adjourned.]

A P P E N D I X

FEBRUARY 8, 2023

PREPARED STATEMENTS SUBMITTED FOR THE RECORD

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Statement before the
House Committee on Armed Services,
Subcommittee on Intelligence and Special Operations

"The Role of Special Operations in Great Power Competition"

A Testimony by:

Dr. Seth G. Jones
Senior Vice President; Harold Brown Chair; and
Director, International Security Program, CSIS

Wednesday, February 8, 2023

Thank you Chairman Bergman, Ranking Member Gallego, and distinguished Members of the Subcommittee on Intelligence and Special Operations for the opportunity to testify on "The Role of Special Operations in Great Power Competition."

As I will outline in this testimony, U.S. Special Operations Forces (SOF) need to play an increasingly important role in competition with such countries as China, Russia, and Iran—particularly in the area of *irregular warfare*. Irregular warfare includes activities below the threshold of conventional (or regular) warfare—such as information operations, espionage, cyber operations, support to state and non-state partners, and economic coercion—designed to weaken adversaries as part of balance-of-power competition. The leading role of SOF in irregular warfare makes it important to ensure that SOF have a sufficient quality of personnel, mission readiness and resilience, a modernized force, and close relationships with interagency entities and foreign allies and partners.

My remarks are divided into four sections. The first section discusses global competition. The second focuses on irregular warfare. The third section highlights the role of SOF in irregular warfare. The fourth outlines implications for Congress.

I. Growing Competition

Competition between the United States and such countries as China, Russia, and Iran is likely overdetermined for several reasons, with significant repercussions for SOF.

First, these authoritarian regimes have political systems that are dramatically different from the United States and its democratic allies and partners. Take China, which is undemocratic and eschews a free press. In October 2022, Xi Jinping secured a historic third term as China's leader, cementing his position as the most powerful leader since Mao Zedong.[1] There were no democratic elections. The Chinese government has also violently cracked down on democratic movements in the country, including in Hong Kong, and suppressed information through a "Great Firewall." China's digital firewall has banned over 18,000 websites that the government assessed had content unfavorable to China.[2]

Vladimir Putin has used the war in Ukraine to further crack down on political dissent. Iran also continues to repress its population, which has triggered numerous protests over the past several years. More broadly, there has been a decline in democracy across the globe with 16 straight years of a decrease in freedom, according to the non-partisan Freedom House.[3]

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[1] Xi Jinping, *Hold High the Great Banner of Socialism with Chinese Characteristics and Strive in Unity to Build a Modern Socialist Country in All Respects: Report to the 20th National Congress of the Communist Party of China*, October 16, 2022, https://news.cgtn.com/news/files/Full-text-of-the-report-to-the-20th-National-Congress-of-the-Communist-Party-of-China.pdf.

[2] On the Chinese practice of blocking internet sites and digital platforms see Peter C. Oleson, "Chinese Offensive Intelligence Operations," *The Intelligencer: Journal of U.S. Intelligence Studies*, Vol. 26, No. 1, Fall 2020, pp. 9-17.

[3] Freedom House, *Freedom in the World 2022: The Global Expansion of Authoritarian Rule* (Washington, DC: Freedom House), https://freedomhouse.org/sites/default/files/2022-02/FIW_2022_PDF_Booklet_Digital_Final_Web.pdf.

Second, the United States—along with its democratic allies and partners—have increasingly divergent economic systems from these regimes. Western countries remain committed to free market capitalism. But their competitors have increasingly rolled back free market policies. In a series of crackdowns against capitalism, for example, the Chinese Communist Party has placed strict controls on booming sectors, such as technology, real estate, and food delivery; large private companies; and wealthy individuals. In 2021 and 2022, for example, Chinese regulators scuttled Ant Group's listing, fined Alibaba Group, blocked a Tencent-backed merger, and opened a stifling cybersecurity review into Didi Global just days after the ride-hailing firm went public in New York.[4] In addition, there is a close relationship between the PRC and Chinese companies, in which espionage is utilized to advance Chinese commercial and defense competitiveness.[5]

Third, these countries are challenging a Western-led international system that has been committed since World War II to free market international economic institutions, bilateral and regional security organizations, and democratic political norms.

II. Irregular Warfare

Despite this reality of competition, irregular warfare will likely be a major—if not *the* major—type of struggle between the United States and its competitors. Irregular warfare involves activities short of conventional and nuclear warfare that are designed to expand a country's influence and legitimacy, as well as weaken its adversaries.[6] Irregular warfare includes numerous tools of statecraft that governments can use to shift the balance of power in their favor: information operations, cyber operations, support to state and non-state partners, covert action, espionage, and economic coercion.[7] Other government officials and scholars have used different terms—such as political warfare, hybrid warfare, gray zone activity, asymmetric conflict, and the indirect approach—to capture some or all of these activities.[8]

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[4] Jing Yang, Keith Zhai, and Quentin Webb, "China's Corporate Crackdown is Just Getting Started," *Wall Street Journal*, August 5, 2021, https://www.wsj.com/articles/china-corporate-crackdown-tech-markets-investors-11628182971?mod=article_inline.

[5] Ken McCallum and Christopher Wray, "Joint Address by MI5 and FBI Heads," London, July 6, 2022, https://www.mi5.gov.uk/news/speech-by-mi5-and-fbi.

[6] The U.S. government's formal definition of irregular warfare can be found in *Summary of the Irregular Warfare Annex to the National Defense Strategy* (Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Defense, 2020). Also see, for example, Charles T. Cleveland, *The American Way of Irregular Warfare: An Analytical Memoir* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND, 2020); David H. Ucko and Thomas A. Marks, *Crafting Strategy for Irregular Warfare: A Framework for Analysis and Action* (Washington, DC: National Defense University Press, July 2020).

[7] See, for example, the "toolkit" highlighted in Kathleen H. Hicks, et. al., *By Other Means, Part I: Campaigning in the Gray Zone* (Washington, DC: Center for Strategic and International Studies, 2019). Also see Robinson, *Modern Political Warfare*.

[8] See, for example, Hal Brands, *The Twilight Struggle: What the Cold War Teaches Us about Great-Power Rivalry Today* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2022); Tim Weiner, *The Folly and the Glory: America, Russia, and Political Warfare 1945-2020* (New York: Henry Holt, 2020); Thomas Rid, *Active Measures: The Secret History of Disinformation and Political Warfare* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2020; Linda Robinson, et al., *Modern Political Warfare: Current Practices and Possible Responses* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND 2018); Frank G. Hoffman, "Examining Complex Forms of Conflict: Gray Zone and Hybrid Challenges," *Prism*, Vol. 7, No. 4, 2018, pp. 31-47; George F. Kennan, "Organizing Political Warfare," April 30, 1948, History and Public Policy Program Digital

Some might object to the term "warfare" to describe non-violent activities, such as economic coercion and information operations. But that is not how the U.S.'s competitors see it. China has used terms like "three warfares" (or *san zhong zhanfa*), which involves public opinion, legal warfare, and psychological operations—none of which include the direct use of violence. Iran has utilized such terms as "soft war" (or *jang-e narm*) to describe such activities as propaganda and information operations.

Why will irregular warfare likely be the preeminent mode of conflict and competition? The answer lies in the existence of nuclear weapons, which will likely have a dampening effect on the probability of conventional—and nuclear—war between nuclear-armed powers.[9] Because of the destructive power of nuclear weapons, no nuclear states have engaged in conventional war with each other. There have been several close calls, such as the 1962 Cuban missile crisis and the 1999 crisis in Kargil between India and Pakistan. But conventional war between nuclear powers is risky.

The same logic holds between the United States, China, and Russia. The results of numerous wargames and analyses involving the United States and China, for example, highlight the costs and risks of conventional war.[10] According to one analysis, a U.S. war with China could reduce China's gross domestic product (GDP) by between 25 and 35 percent and the U.S.'s GDP by between 5 and 10 percent.[11] Both the United States and China would also likely suffer huge numbers of military and civilian deaths and risk large-scale destruction of their military forces. If war expanded to include their allies—as it did during World War I, World War II, and the Korean War—economic and casualty figures could skyrocket even further. Escalation to nuclear war would significantly raise the military, economic, and environmental costs. While a war between the United States and China over Taiwan is not impossible, its destructiveness has made—and will likely continue to make—Beijing and Washington cautious.

Instead, the United States and its main competitors—especially China, Russia, and Iran—are likely to engage in irregular warfare as the daily method of competition. These authoritarian regimes have utilized numerous state and non-state organizations as surrogates against the United States and its allies and partners. Examples of key agencies include:

- **China:** Parts of the People's Liberation Army (PLA), Ministry of State Security (MSS), Ministry of Public Security (MPS), Ministry of Industry and Information Technology (MIIT), United Front Work Department (UFWD), Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA), and other state and non-state organizations such as hackers.

Archive; Hal Brands and Toshi Yoshihara, "How to Wage Political Warfare," *National Interest*, December 16, 2018.

[9] Kenneth N. Waltz, "More May Be Better," in Scott D. Sagan and Kenneth N. Waltz, The Spread of Nuclear Weapons: A Debate (New York: W.W. Norton, 1995), pp. 1-45.

[10] See, for example, David C. Gompert, Astrid Stuth Cevallos, and Cristina L. Garafola, *War with China: Thinking Through the Unthinkable* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND, 2016); David Ochmanek, et al., *U.S. Military Capabilities and Forces for a Dangerous World: Rethinking the U.S. Approach to Force Planning* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND, 2017), pp. 14-19; John Gordon IV, et al., *Army Fires Capabilities for 2025 and Beyond* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND, 2019), pp. 58-67.

[11] Gompert, Cevallos, and. Garafola, *War with China*, p. xiv.

- **Russia:** Parts of the Main Directorate of the General Staff of the Armed Forces of the Russian Federation (GRU), Foreign Intelligence Service (SVR), Federal Security Service (FSB), Russian SOF (such as Spetsnaz), and other state and non-state entities such as the Wagner Group.
- **Iran:** The Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps-Quds Force (IRGC-QF), parts of the Ministry of Intelligence (MOIS), and a range of entities linked to the IRGC-QF in Lebanon (such as Lebanese Hezbollah), Iraq (such as the Popular Mobilization Forces), Syria (such as Shia militias), Yemen (such as Ansar Allah, or the Houthi movement), and other countries.

The People's Republic of China (PRC) has engaged in an aggressive irregular campaign designed to expand Chinese power and influence in the Indo-Pacific and the world more broadly. As Xi Jinping outlined, China must "adopt an asymmetrical strategy of catching up and overtaking" the United States and the West.[12] Chinese actions have included offensive cyber operations, information and disinformation campaigns, economic coercion (including through the Belt and Road Initiative and Digital Silk Road), and espionage against U.S. and other Western government agencies and corporations.

Russia has meddled in U.S. elections, waged a disinformation campaign against the United States on digital platforms, conducted an offensive cyber campaign against U.S. and Western government agencies and companies, and conducted a range of other activities such as assassinations and sabotage. Finally, Iran has waged an aggressive irregular campaign against the United States and its allies and partners across the Middle East using a range of partner forces. As the U.S. intelligence community concluded, "Iran's hybrid approach to warfare—using both conventional and unconventional capabilities—will pose a threat to U.S. interests in the region for the foreseeable future. The IRGC-QF and its proxies will remain central to Iran's military power."[13]

III. SOF and Irregular Warfare

SOF need to play a major role in countering these countries, including through such core activities as:

- *Foreign internal defense*, which involves efforts to build the capacity of foreign governments. This can include training and equipping partners in Europe that border Russia (such as Finland, Latvia, Lithuania, Estonia, and Poland) and the Indo-Pacific that face a possible Chinese invasion (such as Taiwan). SOF are an essential part of foreign internal defense. These activities can also include broader efforts to conduct security force assistance.

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[12] 习近平 [Xi Jinping], 习近平关于总体国家安全观论述摘编 [Excerpts from Xi Jinping's Discussion on Overall National Security] (Beijing: Central Party Literature Publishing House, 2018).
[13] Office of the Director of National Intelligence, *Annual Threat Assessment of the U.S. Intelligence Community* (McLean, VA: Office of the Director of National Intelligence, 2022), https://www.dni.gov/files/ODNI/documents/assessments/ATA-2022-Unclassified-Report.pdf.

- *Unconventional warfare*, which includes operations to advise, assist, and accompany non-state partners resisting a hostile actor by operating with or through an underground, auxiliary, and guerrilla force.

- *Information operations*—or Military Information Support Operations (MISO)—which involves activities to influence foreign audiences.

There are other critical SOF activities, such as special reconnaissance, civil affairs operations, direct action, counterterrorism, counter-proliferation of weapons of mass destruction, counterinsurgency, and hostage rescue and recovery. Yet such activities as foreign internal defense, unconventional warfare, and information operations are core activities for irregular warfare.

Despite the irregular threat from China, Russia, and Iran, SOF face several major hurdles today. First, the United States—including the Department of Defense—is still too heavily weighted toward preparing for conventional war. Most of the wargames conducted by the Department of Defense and outside entities cover conventional war, including with China over Taiwan. U.S. planning scenarios, or operations plans (OPLANs), are also heavily geared toward conventional war. Long-term U.S. Department of Defense research and development, budget planning, training, and force structure are likewise concentrated on conventional war. Professional military education at such locations as the U.S. Army War College, United States Army Command and General Staff College, and National Defense University is heavily biased toward conventional war. To be clear, it is important for the United States to build conventional and nuclear capabilities to deter and—if deterrence fails—fight. Nevertheless, they can't come at the expense of being adequately prepared to conduct irregular warfare.

Second, far too many individuals—including within the Department of Defense—focus on the direct action capabilities of SOF, but not such activities as foreign internal defense and unconventional warfare that are at the heart of irregular warfare. The activities of the U.S. Army's 10th Special Forces Group, for example, were critical in building the capacity of Ukrainian military forces before and after the Russian invasion.

IV. Implications for Congress

SOF are critical to U.S. national security. They have played—and will continue to play—an important role in countering terrorist groups and responding to weapons of mass destruction incidents. But they will be increasingly important in competition with such countries as China, Russia, and Iran—especially in irregular warfare. The future impact of SOF will depend on the quality of SOF personnel (including their commitment to high ethical standards, leadership, and accountability), mission readiness and resilience (including the preservation of the force and family), modernization of the force, and relationship with other Department of Defense entities, the U.S. interagency, and foreign allies and partners.

Congress has an important budgetary and oversight role with SOF. The rest of this section focuses on four areas: Section 1202, a review of irregular warfare, Section 333, and information operations.

Section 1202: Section 1202 of the National Defense Authorization Act for Fiscal Year 2018 allows the Secretary of Defense to spend money annually to "provide support to foreign forces, irregular forces, groups, or individuals" that conduct irregular warfare activities.[14] This funding is critical to help SOF conduct irregular warfare. As Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff Mark Milley noted, Section 1202 "is a highly useful tool for enabling irregular warfare operations in support of the NDS's emphasis on expanding the competitive space to deter and defeat coercion and aggression by revisionist powers and rogue regimes."[15] Congress should consider extending and expanding funding for Section 1202 activities, building on the program's success in Europe, the Indo-Pacific, Middle East, and other regions. Indeed, Section 1202 should be increased to facilitate efforts by SOF to conduct irregular warfare against China, Russia, and Iran—as well as their state and non-state surrogates.[16]

Review of Irregular Warfare: Congress should consider directing the Department of Defense to conduct an irregular warfare posture review, including an analysis and assessment of DoD's organizational design for irregular warfare and the identification of any capability, resourcing, or authority gaps that could inhibit the Department of Defense's ability to effectively conduct and synchronize irregular warfare activities around the globe. The study could focus on:

- Roles and responsibilities for the planning and conduct of irregular warfare across the Department of Defense, including whether current structures are effectively supporting an integrated and appropriately resourced approach to irregular warfare.
- Existing policy guidance and authorities, including whether they provide sufficient clarity and agility for the Department of Defense to conduct irregular warfare.
- U.S. support to partner nations' irregular warfare activities, including whether it is properly resourced and coordinated.

Section 333: Congress should direct the Department of Defense to report on how it prioritizes Section 333 "Authority to Build Capacity" funding, with specific focus on shortfalls and support to irregular warfare, as well as needs for authority modifications.[17] Section 333 of Title 10 of the U.S. Code (10 U.S.C. §333) gives the U.S. Secretary of Defense the authority to conduct or support programs to provide training and equipment to the national security forces of foreign countries.[18] The U.S. Department of Defense received roughly $1.4 billion annually through Section 333, allocated across the geographic commands. But very little of this funding supports irregular warfare. Based on the U.S.'s main effort to compete with China—as well as such countries as Russia and Iran—this low prioritization on irregular warfare needs to change. Congress can help.

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[14] On Section 1202 see, for example, National Defense Authorization Act for Fiscal Year 2018, Pub. L. No. 115-91, § 1202 (2017).
[15] Testimony by Mark A. Milley, Before the Senate Armed Services Committee, July 2019, p. 68, https://climateandsecurity.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/07/milley_apqs_07-11-19.pdf.
[16] See, for example, Christopher B. Rich, Jr., Charles B. Johnson, and Paul T. Shirk, "By, With, and Through: Section 1202 and the Future of Unconventional Warfare," *Journal of National Security Law and Policy*, 2022, Vol. 12, No. 3, pp. 537-582.
[17] Title 10 U.S.C., Ch. 16, §333 [from Sec. 1241, NDAA, FY2017, P.L.114-328].
[18] See, for example, Kimberly Jackson, *Authorities and Permissions to Conduct Army Special Operations Activities Abroad* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND, 2022).

Information Operations: The Department of Defense should increase its use of Military Information Support Operations (MISO) for Joint Force Commanders to achieve favorable outcomes in select foreign audiences, in coordination with interagency partners. As highlighted recently in Ukraine, state and non-state actors use information operations to compete for influence over target audiences in the political, military, economic, social, information, and infrastructure realms. China, Russia, and Iran are all involved in extensive information, disinformation, and misinformation campaigns against the United States and its allies and partners.

Thank you again for the opportunity to testify. As I have argued in this testimony, irregular warfare will likely be a major form of both competition and warfare between the United States and its main adversaries—such as China, Russia, and Iran. SOF are a critical component of irregular warfare. But the United States still has a long way to go in building a sufficiently-funded, organized, and coordinated irregular warfare campaign that includes SOF and other interagency organizations—such as the U.S. State Department, Treasury Department, and intelligence community—and foreign allies and partners.

Dr. Seth G. Jones
Senior Vice President; Harold Brown Chair; and Director, International Security Program
Center for Strategic & International Studies

Seth G. Jones is senior vice president, Harold Brown Chair, director of the International Security Program, and director of the Transnational Threats Project at the Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS). He focuses on defense strategy, military operations, force posture, and irregular warfare. He leads a bipartisan team of over 50 resident staff and an extensive network of non-resident affiliates dedicated to providing independent strategic insights and policy solutions that shape national security. He also teaches at Johns Hopkins University's School of Advanced International Studies (SAIS) and the Center for Homeland Defense and Security (CHDS) at the U.S. Naval Postgraduate School.

Prior to joining CSIS, Dr. Jones was the director of the International Security and Defense Policy Center at the RAND Corporation. He also served as representative for the commander, U.S. Special Operations Command, to the assistant secretary of defense for special operations. Before that, he was a plans officer and adviser to the commanding general, U.S. Special Operations Forces, in Afghanistan (Combined Forces Special Operations Component Command–Afghanistan). In 2014, Dr. Jones served on a congressionally mandated panel that reviewed the FBI's implementation of counterterrorism recommendations contained in the 9/11 Commission Report. He is the author of *Three Dangerous Men: Russia, China, Iran, and the Rise of Irregular Warfare* (W.W. Norton, 2021), *A Covert Action: Reagan, the CIA, and the Cold War Struggle in Poland* (W.W. Norton, 2018), *Waging Insurgent Warfare: Lessons from the Vietcong to the Islamic State* (Oxford University Press, 2016), *Hunting in the Shadows: The Pursuit of al Qa'ida since 9/11* (W.W. Norton, 2012), and *In the Graveyard of Empires: America's War in Afghanistan* (W.W. Norton, 2009). Dr. Jones has published articles in a range of journals, such as *Foreign Affairs, Foreign Policy*, and *International Security,* as well as newspapers and magazines like the *New York Times, Washington Post,* and *Wall Street Journal*. Dr. Jones is a graduate of Bowdoin College and received his MA and PhD from the University of Chicago.

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U.S. HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

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Hearing Date: 02/08/2022

Hearing Subject:

The Role of Special Operations Forces in Great Power Competition

Witness name: Seth G. Jones

Position/Title: Senior Vice President; Harold Brown Chair; and Director, International Security Program, CSIS

Capacity in which appearing: (check one)

● Individual ○ Representative

If appearing in a representative capacity, name of the organization or entity represented:

Federal Contract or Grant Information: If you or the entity you represent before the Committee on Armed Services has contracts (including subcontracts) or grants (including subgrants) with the federal government, received during the past 36 months and related to the subject matter of the hearing, please provide the following information:

2023

Federal grant/ contract	Federal agency	Dollar value	Subject of contract or grant

2022

Federal grant/ contract	Federal agency	Dollar value	Subject of contract or grant

2021

Federal grant/ contract	Federal agency	Dollar value	Subject of contract or grant
Grant	Office of the Director of Net Assessment	$198,321.44	Understanding Modern Warfare

2020

Federal grant/ contract	Federal agency	Dollar value	Subject of contract or grant
Grant	Defense Threat Reduction Agency	$141,944.00	Scenarios on the Future Threat Environment

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2023

Foreign contract/ payment	Foreign government	Dollar value	Subject of contract, grant, or payment

2022

Foreign contract/ payment	Foreign government	Dollar value	Subject of contract, grant, or payment

2021

Foreign contract/ payment	Foreign government	Dollar value	Subject of contract, grant, or payment

2020

Foreign contract/ payment	Foreign government	Dollar value	Subject of contract, grant, or payment

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2023

Contract/grant/ payment	Entity	Dollar value	Subject of contract, grant, or payment

2022

Contract/grant/ payment	Entity	Dollar value	Subject of contract, grant, or payment

2021

Contract/grant/ payment	Entity	Dollar value	Subject of contract, grant, or payment

2020

Contract/grant/ payment	Entity	Dollar value	Subject of contract, grant, or payment

Statement before the
Subcommittee on Intelligence and Special Operations
House Armed Services Committee

The Right Force for the Right Mission:
Assessing the Role of Special Operations in Strategic Competition

A testimony by:

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Wednesday, February 8, 2023

Since 2017, the United States has been undergoing a shift away from counterterrorism and toward great power competition, now often referred to as "strategic competition." The shift came in response to the greater assertiveness and incremental success of the People's Republic of China and the Russian Federation in challenging the international norms and order promoted by the United States. How to respond is now the focus of the U.S. national security enterprise, but it is a question compounded by the variegated and global method of attack. Indeed, America's rivals in this competition are deliberately avoiding U.S. strengths, particularly in the military domain. Instead, they privilege ambiguity and subterfuge, blending statecraft with subversion and war with peace.

Following key roles in fighting al Qaeda and Islamic State, the Special Operations community has a case for relevance also in this new strategic era. Based on its competence with foreign internal defense (FID), Special Operations Forces can assist partners and allies threatened by state-sponsored subversion. Based on its experience with unconventional warfare (UW), it can boost partners' capability to resist or deter foreign occupation. Its competence with civil affairs and information operations are also valuable for a competition driven by societal penetration and contending narratives. Going further, SOF global engagement and presence help develop the trust and partnerships necessary to mount a common front against revisionist states.

SOF's role in strategic competition is multifaceted, but it is not unlimited. Strategic competition is primarily a non-military effort, as China and Russia strive to avoid U.S. military strengths and strike instead via societal, political, and economic lines of effort. Response therefore requires a similarly broad and integrated approach, wherein SOF should be allowed to focus on its comparative advantages. This is not only a matter of establishing a more sustainable operational tempo than that seen over the past two decades, but also one of achieving strategic effectiveness against a primarily non-military threat.

The great danger for SOF is that in seeking to prove its relevance within a new strategic era, it is pushed into tasks and activities where other structures should lead. The danger is compounded by the tendency

* *The views presented are those of the author and do not necessarily represent the views of the Department of Defense or its components.*

of political leaders to look to SOF for seemingly low-risk and small-footprint solutions to unorthodox problems. The danger is magnified further by the ongoing effort to redefine "irregular warfare" (SOF's principal domain) as something far broader than the military activities traditionally associated with the term.[1] Unless the present opportunity to reset and recalibrate is seized, the outcome will likely be a SOF that is handed ever more missions – missions for which it is not ready and for which it cannot prepare without accepting risk elsewhere – all while the broader portfolio of interagency capabilities remains underfunded and underutilized.

Instead, the desired goal would be to design an integrated force wherein each component plays to its strengths. For SOF, this would mean homing in on its core irregular warfare (IW) activities, which – if conducted in concert with other instruments of power – can be highly relevant to this new strategic era. SOF can also play a supporting role in non-military aspects of strategic competition, but it should do so in ways that enhance other players and allow it to focus on what truly makes it special. Through such synergy, nested within a strategic plan, the United States can compete, even prevail.

This vision will require preparation and so three broad recommendations are made:

1) Awareness: efforts should be made to maximize irregular warfare education for SOF and for those interagency partners alongside which it will operate.
2) Capability: the civilian agencies best placed to counter the non-military lines of effort of our state competitors require broader funding, capacity, and mandates.
3) Strategy: an aware and capable joint and interagency force still requires strategic direction to meet specific ends in line with policy. Is it not clear who currently sets this strategy, what we are competing for, and how we define success.

Irregular Warfare and Great Power Competition

In competing with the United States, both Russia and China have designed their strategies to avoid American strengths, particularly within its armed forces, and to target instead societal, information, and economic areas where the U.S. capacity to deter and respond is less advanced. Though anchored in a shared awareness of underlying military realities, the theory of success relies overwhelmingly on achieving incremental gains under the threshold of armed conflict, until new facts have been created and become difficult to reverse.

As part of this indirect attack, China and Russia have sought to soften up, subvert, and ultimately flip the international system in their favor. Individual countries are targeted, with carrots as well as sticks, to build informal blocks of pro-Chinese or pro-Russian support. In tandem, U.S. influence wanes, along with its legitimacy and power. Methods range from the relatively peaceful, such as infrastructural development and charm offensives, to more coercive ones, such as "debt-trap" diplomacy, cyberattacks, or the use of disinformation and political infiltration. Only in a few instances has the strategy relied on military aggression, such as that seen in Georgia and Ukraine.

As the United States observes China and Russia subverting its international leadership, what is SOF's role in turning the tide? The good news is that many of the skills and capabilities that SOF has developed are relevant also in this new strategic environment. Beyond its well-publicized strikes and sensitive operations, which can impose costs on adversaries, the bulk of SOF's contribution resides in its

[1] For discussion, see David H. Ucko Ucko and Thomas A. Marks, "Redefining Irregular Warfare: Legitimacy, Coercion, and Power," *Modern War Institute*, October 18, 2022, https://mwi.usma.edu/redefining-irregular-warfare-legitimacy-coercion-and-power/.

specialization in irregular warfare (IW). Though traditionally concerned with non-state threats, and focused therefore on insurgency and counterinsurgency (with counterterrorism an integral component), IW also describes well the playbook used by Russia, China, and others competing with the United States. Doctrine explains how IW "favors indirect warfare and asymmetric warfare approaches" to direct military confrontation and seeks "to erode the adversary's power, influence, and will." Furthermore, irregular warfare is fundamentally a "struggle for legitimacy," which captures the strategic competition at hand: a struggle for the right to lead and to shape new and long-lasting political realities.[2]

Given this overlap, SOF's IW expertise can be relevant also in an era of strategic competition – though some aspects need to be tweaked.[3] In recent years, for example, SOF has broadened its application of foreign internal defense (FID) and unconventional warfare (UW) – two IW missions and SOF core activities. Whereas FID traditionally meant aiding a friendly government against an insurgency, SOF now looks upon it to boost a country's "resilience" against foreign-sponsored proxies, modes of disinformation, or political infiltration. In a similar vein, whereas UW traditionally implied sponsoring an insurgency against an illicit or occupying government, SOF now looks upon this work as supporting "resistance" capabilities within states either facing foreign invasion or seeking to deter such a threat.

The work on resilience and resistance gives SOF a major role in strategic competition, given Russia's targeting of its eastern flank and the possibility of Chinese expansion in the East and South China seas. However, FID and UW, or building resilience and resistance, are highly demanding and difficult tasks, requiring institutional readiness and protracted partnerships. After twenty years of counterterrorism, where SOF engaged heavily with direct action, there is today a need to rebalance in favor of FID and UW and to develop the skills they call for within this new strategic environment.[4] This will mean an emphasis on language skills, cultural know-how, political awareness, and strategic acumen – and all at scale – with major implications for SOF recruitment and career tracks. The decline of high-tempo counterterrorism operations provides an opportunity for such a shift, but the challenge of reform is significant and the complexity of the task high.[5]

Beyond FID and UW, SOF's work with IW brings other capabilities that can be relevant to strategic competition. Because IW "favors indirect approaches" (that is, working through partners and proxies), SOF has a strong tradition of engaging with international entities both at the state level and below. Its work in security force assistance also creates bonds of familiarity and trust with those receiving such support. Developing and extending these networks will be invaluable to the United States as it mobilizes fronts against common threats. IW is ultimately a struggle for legitimacy, and so partnerships are key.[6]

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[2] US Department of Defense, "Irregular Warfare: Countering Irregular Threats," Joint Operating Concept (Arlington, VA, May 17, 2010), 9, https://www.jcs.mil/Portals/36/Documents/Doctrine/concepts/joc_iw_v2.pdf?ver=2017-12-28-162021-510.

[3] Kevin Bilms, "What's in a Name? Reimagining Irregular Warfare Activities for Competition," *War on the Rocks*, January 15, 2021, https://warontherocks.com/2021/01/whats-in-a-name-reimagining-irregular-warfare-activities-for-competition/.

[4] United States Special Operations Command, "Comprehensive Review," January 23, 2020, 39, https://sof.news/pubs/USSOCOM-Comprehensive-Ethics-Review-Report-January-2020.pdf.

[5] As former USSOCOM commander ADM Eric Olsen points out, it remains "extremely difficult…to create a SOF operator who knows the people, languages, terrain, climate, politics, and religions of a micro-region without hurting his/her chances for promotion to the top ranks." ADM Olsen therefore recommends that the USSOCOM commander be granted "the authority to manage selected personnel to very high levels of focused expertise without damaging their careers," perhaps via "the development of alternative career." See Eric T. Olsen, "USSOCOM and SOF: War Around the Edges," *Journal of National Security Law & Policy* 12, no. 71 (October 2021): 78.

[6] As General Richard D. Clarke, Commander of SOCOM, explains, "USSOCOM maintains a global network of liaison officers and exchange officers with Allied and international SOF. At our headquarters alone, we host exchange officers and foreign liaison officers from 28 Allied and partnered nations, offering an unrivaled ability to provide options to understand and act worldwide." See "Statement of General Richard D. Clarke, USA, Commander, United States Special Operations Command" (Washington DC, April 5, 2022), 5.

Likewise, IW is about contending narratives, and so SOF's military information support operations (MISO) are relevant, not just in shaping the perception of likely adversaries but also to "expose, counter, and compete with hostile propaganda and disinformation online."[7] Finally, IW relates intimately to governance, and so there are several ways in which SOF's civil affairs capabilities can help engage with local populations, identify political and societal trends, and represent and promote American interests.

The Limits of SOF in Strategic Competition

SOF clearly has the potential to contribute to the strategic competition currently underway. Seizing this potential requires understanding SOF's role but also its limits. Specifically, as a military force, SOF will always be most relevant where there is an active threat or use of force, hence its natural fit within IW – a "*violent* struggle for legitimacy." Yet strategic competition is only in part about IW. In most settings, our competitors resort instead to "political warfare," an adjacent but separate term that describes the weaponization of *non-military* means to prevail *without fighting*. As George Kennan put it in his famous cable of 1946, at the dawn of the Cold War, political warfare is "the logical application of Clausewitz's doctrine in *time of peace*."[8] In practice, political warfare today includes economic pressure, election interference, disinformation, lawfare, intellectual theft, "wolf warrior diplomacy," and political infiltration.

This weaponization of statecraft mounts an analytical and institutional predicament for the American interagency. Despite some progress, it struggles to fully grasp and to adapt in strategically effective ways. Yet while SOF is often viewed as the "problem solver" for tasks that cannot be accomplished by others (indeed, a former SOCOM commander defines a "special operation" as one "for which no other force is organized, trained and equipped to conduct."), it is not clear that it can or should be relied upon to counter this particular challenge.[9]

The first consideration relates to SOF's operational tempo, which was too high during the last two decades and caused morale, ethics, and recruitment standards to slip.[10] Though the withdrawal from Afghanistan has mitigated this problem, a new normal must now be set. Second, the tasks that we expect SOF to master – in particular, FID and UW – are so ambitious that they require sustained institutional focus; a focus that should not be diluted by tasking SOF unnecessarily.[11] In other words, "just because special forces can conduct a mission does not mean that they should."[12] Third, though SOF often

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[7] "Posture Statement of General Richard D. Clarke, USA, Commander, United States Special Operations Command" (Washington DC, March 25, 2021), 5.

[8] George F. Kennan, "The Inauguration of Organized Political Warfare [Redacted Version]," April 30, 1948, 1, Wilson Center Digital Archive, https://digitalarchive.wilsoncenter.org/document/114320.

[9] Eric T. Olsen, in Kyle Atwell and Abigail Gage, "Back to the Future: Resetting Special Operations Forces for Great Power Competition," Irregular Warfare Podcast, accessed July 2, 2021, https://mwi.usma.edu/back-to-the-future-resetting-special-operations-forces-for-great-power-competition/.

[10] Andrew Milburn, "How to Fix a Broken Special Operations Culture," *War on the Rocks*, September 13, 2019, https://warontherocks.com/2019/09/how-to-fix-a-broken-special-operations-culture/; David Martin, "Navy SEAL Drug Use 'Staggering,' Investigation Finds," *CBS News*, April 11, 2017, https://www.cbsnews.com/news/navy-seal-drug-use-staggering-investigation-finds/; David Choi, "After Multiple Deployments, US Special Forces May Have 'Mortgaged the Future,'" *Business Insider*, May 3, 2017, https://www.businessinsider.com/special-forces-groups-problems-2017-5.

[11] As Schroder argues, "The desire of US policy-makers to steadily decrease the risk profile of US activities overseas has led to a consistent trend of them asking for SOF to solve their most difficult policy problems, but also increasingly to solve their easy ones, too." .... "The political convenience of special operations forces threatens their readiness for tasks where their skills and capabilities are essential enablers for the joint force."

[12] Jack Watling therefore concludes that "Perhaps the most important prerequisite for special operations forces optimizing for great power competition... is the recognition by policymakers that throwing them into the breach to confront every challenge comes at a cost." See Jack Watling, "Old Habits Die Hard: Special Operations Forces, Twenty Years of

promote their smaller footprint, more efficient use of resources, and quiet and creative ways of solving unorthodox problems, there is nothing inherently "low risk" about deploying military forces of any type; instead, it carries a clear potential for escalation.[13] Finally, there are other components of the government that have more appropriate authorities and could take on the non-violent lines of effort pursued by our state adversaries.

It may be helpful to consider a few examples for which there is no "SOF easy button."[14] Corruption and lack of transparency greatly facilitate Chinese efforts at economic and political infiltration, resulting in the subservience of ostensibly sovereign nation-states to Chinese interests. The response to this method relies on strengthening the rule of law and in bolstering the "capacity of independent media, civil society, political parties and private enterprise to force greater transparency."[15] This effort, so essential to strategic competition, is not a SOF skill. Similarly, Russia seeks to subvert democratic elections, either to discredit the system or to sway outcomes, and there is no clear role for SOF in thwarting this attack. SOF also lacks the authorities to halt shady investment in the United States, or elsewhere, that are likely to affect national security. And what is the likely SOF response to countries and individuals shirking the sanctions meant to curb hostile behavior by adversarial states?

These examples are not meant to belittle SOF's utility in strategic competition, but to delimit its application. As the United States seeks to engage against the hostile strategies deployed by adversarial states, it must look not just or primarily to SOF, but to the range of agencies and capabilities residing within other instruments of power. For boosting transparency and combating corruption, this may involve working with civil society organizations, USAID, the State Department and Department of Justice. On the protection of U.S. democratic elections, the Foreign Malign Influence Center was activated in September 2022 within the Office of the Director of National Intelligence for precisely this role. Where shady investments are concerned, the interagency Committee on Foreign Investment in the United States (CFIUS) has recently been granted added powers to protect national security.[16] As for sanctions enforcement, the Department of Treasury has its Office of Foreign Assets Control (OFAC). The list goes on – and could be developed further.

These considerations should also inform how SOF engages in IW – or how it seeks to build resilience and resistance capability abroad. Whereas FID and UW are core SOF activities, here too the problem is far more than military and requires broader engagement. FID, to take one example, is described in doctrine as "the participation by *civilian agencies and military forces*" to assist another government in countering its domestic threats, and it is meant to nest within that government's "internal defense and development plan," implying interagency-to-interagency engagement throughout. For SOF, the forces it trains must be supported by a capable security sector, girded by sustainable institutions, and operating alongside instruments of state that can take the lead on political, societal, and economic matters.

Counterterrorism, and the New Era of Great Power Competition," *Modern War Institute*, June 21, 2021, https://mwi.usma.edu/old-habits-die-hard-special-operations-forces-twenty-years-of-counterterrorism-and-the-new-era-of-great-power-competition/. See also See also Jack Watling, "Sharpening the Dagger: Optimising Special Forces for Future Conflict," Whitehall Report (London: RUSI, May 2021), 19.

[13] This argument runs counter to the popular "value proposition" of SOF as "low risk." For discussion of SOF and risk, see Russell A. Burgos, "Pushing the Easy Button: Special Operations Forces, International Security, and the Use of Force," *Special Operations Journal* 4, no. 2 (July 3, 2018): 109–28, https://doi.org/10.1080/23296151.2018.1522754.

[14] Brian Dodwell, "A View from the CT Foxhole: Mark Mitchell, Principal Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defense for Special Operations/Low-Intensity Conflict," *CTC Sentinel*, December 2018, 11.

[15] "Chinese Malign Influence and the Corrosion of Democracy: An Assessment of Chinese Interference in Thirteen Key Countries" (Washington DC: International Republican Institute, 2019), 7–8.

[16] Kevin Granville, "Cfius, Powerful and Unseen, Is a Gatekeeper on Major Deals," *The New York Times*, March 5, 2018, sec. Business, https://www.nytimes.com/2018/03/05/business/what-is-cfius.html.

Producing such synergy is anything but easy. Indeed, the failure to engage comprehensively in this manner has been a major drag on strategic effectiveness in the past.

Similarly, in UW, or in fostering resistance potential to counter or deter foreign aggression, the tasks undertaken by security forces and armed units must be complemented ideally by a whole-of-society effort. As Fiala argues, it may require a Ministry of Justice effort to support national legislature necessary for resistance organizations, a Ministry of Foreign Affairs effort to engage with allies and partners for support and recognition, a Ministry of Communication effort to build a national narrative for mobilization domestically and abroad, a Ministry of Education or of Culture to develop national pride and confidence, and various civil society organizations to support these goals and carry them onward to the populace.[17] The ongoing effort to support Ukraine demonstrates these requirements, as well as the foundational importance of counter-corruption and, more broadly, legitimacy.[18]

The reliance on non-military institutions and authorities becomes particularly pressing in settings where the enemy strategy, while nefarious, is non-military in nature. Where domination is achieved indirectly, via political warfare as opposed to irregular warfare, SOF's work on resilience and resistance risks veering into civilian realms where other agencies should have the lead. Some have for example suggested, as SOF priorities, "cognitive access denial" or "financial access denial," to wit resisting propaganda and disrupting "proxy, patronage, or corruption networks."[19] It is unclear whether SOF are adequately educated or trained for these tasks. Even where SOF has some relevant capability – for example its MISO assets – so do other instruments of power, be it within the Department of State, the Agency for Global Media, and within the country teams.[20] Meanwhile, SOF are meant to bring something special.

Ways Forward: Integration and Support

The primarily non-military nature of strategic competition does not make SOF irrelevant. It does mean, however, that in defining its role, SOF will need to think of itself, present itself, and be used to empower an interagency solution. SOF's indispensable contribution should be to add that special ingredient that allows a broader response to unfold. This type of role should in theory come naturally to the SOF community, given its emphasis on partnerships, but it rubs up against its desire to carve out unique relevance in a new strategic era and its occasional (and by no means universal) tendency to operate in parallel rather than in support of civilian government agencies.[21] Ultimately, however, it is an approach

[17] Otto C. Fiala, "Resistance Resurgent: Resurrecting a Method of Irregular Warfare in Great Power Competition," *Special Operations Journal* 7, no. 2 (July 3, 2021): 124, https://doi.org/10.1080/23296151.2021.1994746.

[18] On this point, some experts on proxy war decry the "chronic failures" of the United States "to consider ethnography, legitimacy, and long-term effects of proxy sponsorship on regional security and stability." See Claire Graja, "SOF and the Future of Global Competition," CNA Conference Proceedings (Arlington, VA: CNA, May 2019), 5.

[19] Katie Crombe, Steve Ferenzi, and Robert Jones, "Integrating Deterrence across the Gray — Making It More than Words," *Military Times*, December 9, 2021, https://www.militarytimes.com/opinion/commentary/2021/12/08/integrating-deterrence-across-the-gray-making-it-more-than-words/. See also Bryan Groves and Steve Ferenzi, "Unconventional Deterrence in Europe: The Role of Army Special Operations in Competition Today," *RealClearDefense*, April 16, 2020, https://www.realcleardefense.com/articles/2020/04/16/unconventional_deterrence_in_europe_the_role_of_army_special_operations_in_competition_today_115207-full.html.

[20] For a full accounting of U.S. government assets for countering disinformation, see Jesse S. Curtis, "Springing the 'Tacitus Trap': Countering Chinese State-Sponsored Disinformation," *Small Wars & Insurgencies* 32, no. 2 (February 17, 2021): fig. 3, https://doi.org/10.1080/09592318.2021.1870429.

[21] For discussion of this tendency, in relation to 127e authorities see Nick Turse and Alice Speri, "How the Pentagon Uses a Secretive Program to Wage Proxy Wars," *The Intercept*, July 1, 2022, https://theintercept.com/2022/07/01/pentagon-127e-proxy-wars/. For the broader issue of SOF mis- and overuse, see Alice Friend and Shannon Culbertson, "Special Obfuscations: The Strategic Uses of Special Operations Forces," CSIS Briefs (Washington DC: Center for Strategic & International Studies, March 2020).

that would not only boost American competitiveness but also allow SOF to contribute less often but in more impactful ways, thereby sustaining a manageable operational tempo.

There is ample precedent for these types of supportive arrangements. As commander of Special Operations Command Pacific (SOCPAC), Gen. Jonathan B. Braga oversaw an impressive operational effort to counter Chinese malign influence in South-East Asia and Pacific Islands. Through partnerships with Treasury, the FBI, and the Department of Justice at INDOPACOM, a small SOCPAC team was able to recover and analyze evidence relating to Chinese Communist Party (CCP)-linked criminal networks, resulting in the Office of Foreign Assets Control (OFAC) sanctioning Wan Kuok-koi ("Broken Tooth") and his network under the Global Magnitsky Act.[22] The CCP has a track record of using criminal proxies to undermine states in the region. By acting via the intelligence community and its own analysts, SOF empowered the agencies necessary to respond to this non-military approach. In a similar manner, SOCPAC has worked with the Commerce Department's National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA) to investigate, report on, and check the Chinese fishing companies operating illegally in the South Pacific. Through MISO, SOCPAC was able to broadcast the horrific images that accompany this activity to senior INDOPACOM, Coast Guard, State, and other Washington advisors and decision makers.[23]

Unsurprisingly, this need for integration concerns also SOF's work alongside the general purpose forces. It should be recalled that SOF comprise just 2% of the joint force. While the return on investment is rightly celebrated by many, SOF's work does not come without cost and, also, has its limits.[24] This issue of reach is accentuated by declining resources and the concomitant shift away from counterterrorism and toward great power competition, as both may result in reduced presence in areas far removed from China and Russia (but where both are nonetheless seeking influence and power).[25] Thus, U.S. Army's belated creation of Security Force Assistance Brigades in 2017 is a step in the right direction, allowing – ideally – for a division of labor with SOF that reserves its specialization for when it is truly needed.[26] Even in those contexts, of course, focusing just on elite forces is insufficient, and so SOF efforts will need to be nested within a broader engagement.[27]

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[22] U.S. Department of the Treasury, "Treasury Sanctions Corrupt Actors in Africa and Asia," December 9, 2020, https://home.treasury.gov/news/press-releases/sm1206. For discussion of how sanctions could more effectively be integrated as a component of deterrence and signaling, see Elizabeth Rosenberg and Jordan Tama, "Strengthening the Economic Arsenal: Bolstering the Deterrent and Signaling Effects of Sanctions" (Washington DC: Center for a New American Security, December 2019).

[23] For context, see Matthew West, "Coast Guard Releases New Plan to Combat Illegal, Unreported, and Unregulated Fishing World," *U.S. Indo-Pacific Command*, September 18, 2020, https://www.pacom.mil/Media/News/News-Article-View/Article/2353718/coast-guard-releases-new-plan-to-combat-illegal-unreported-and-unregulated-fish/https%3A%2F%2Fwww.pacom.mil%2FMedia%2FNews%2FNews-Article-View%2FArticle%2F2353718%2Fcoast-guard-releases-new-plan-to-combat-illegal-unreported-and-unregulated-fish%2F.

[24] United States Government Accountability Office, "Special Operations Forces: Better Data Necessary to Improve Oversight and Address Command and Control Challenges," Report to Congressional Committees (Washington DC, October 2022).

[25] In 2021, Gen. Richard Clarke, USSOCOM Commander, testified that "Our deployed forces are down 15% from last year – the lowest since 2001, and in FY21, nearly 40% of our deployed forces will focus on GPC requirements." "Posture Statement of General Richard D. Clarke, USA, Commander, United States Special Operations Command," 4.

[26] For a revealing glimpse into the tensions within SOF created by the SFAB, see Tim Ball, "Replaced? Security Force Assistance Brigades vs. Special Forces," *War on the Rocks*, February 23, 2017, https://warontherocks.com/2017/02/replaced-security-force-assistance-brigades-vs-special-forces/.

[27] Tommy Ross and Philip McDaniel, "Training Law Enforcement in Fragile States: The Case for a New U.S. Approach," *War on the Rocks*, March 25, 2019, https://warontherocks.com/2019/03/training-law-enforcement-in-fragile-states-the-case-for-a-new-u-s-approach/. As Michael Vickers has also argued, "Security forces are part of society… One of my complaints about SOF is that SOF would only want to partner with the commando or counter-terror [CT] units. So, they end up training one incredible CT unit, but you don't win wars with that." John Taft, Liz Gorminsky, and Joe Mariani, "Special Operations Forces and Great Power Competition: Talent, Technology, and Organizational Change in the New Threat Environment," Deloitte Insights (Deloitte Center for Government Insights, 2019), 11.

Detractors to this type of burden-sharing will point out that neither the general purpose forces nor the interagency have the capacity and/or capability to engage effectively with the type of irregular and asymmetric activities undertaken by SOF. This is a fair point but should motivate greater investment in these areas across the U.S. national security enterprise (an enterprise that must now extend far beyond the traditional "security sector"). Not only is burden-sharing and integration a more efficient use of resources, and a necessary source of support for a relatively small special operations force, but it also reflects the fact that IW – and the complexity of strategic competition – cannot be quarantined within the SOF community in the hope of not upsetting programs and priorities elsewhere.[28] We all operate in the "human domain" – the one that SOF calls its home – and we best prepare accordingly.

Conclusion and Recommendations

In defining SOF's contribution to strategic competition, the emphasis must be on delimiting where it can most effectively contribute, identifying what else is needed, and how these various efforts can be strategically integrated in line with policy.

SOF can contribute in unique ways to strategic competition, and yet its role needs to be carefully understood so that it is neither downplayed nor allowed to bleed into areas where other agencies are a more natural fit. Strategic competition is primarily non-military and so SOF cannot and should not be expected to carry the load by itself. Accustomed to having to fight for equities and profile, SOF risks overselling its services and being mis- or overused by policymakers. This will weaken its ability to contribute in the ways only it can.

Indeed, in its core competences, SOF already is expected to master a range of extremely important and equally complex missions – FID and UW in particular. Mastering these missions will require significant reorientation and investment, not least given the erosion of capability during the last two decades of counterterrorism and the reorientation of FID and UW for a new strategic environment. A key priority for SOF going forward will be to ensure that it can institutionalize the capabilities needed to build resilience and resistance against state-sponsored subversion, insurgency, and proxy warfare.

Even in these areas, SOF's efforts must nest within a broader interagency response to gain strategic meaning. This requires greater interagency coordination and capacity. On the civilian side, it becomes important to raise awareness of the multiple non-military lines of attack that China, Russia, and others are deploying against the United States and the international system it seeks to support. Within the armed forces, the step away from messy counterinsurgencies in Iraq and Afghanistan should not imply abandoning irregular warfare and the associated mindset and activities. To the contrary, relevant strategic education, training, and sensitization is required – plausibly within the context of combined senior-service education – to build interagency capacity and capability for this challenge. The College of International Security Affairs at the National Defense University provides models that could be scaled up for greater effect.[29]

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[28] For one proposal, see Phillip Lohaus, "Special Operations Forces in the Gray Zone: An Operational Framework for Using Special Operations Forces in the Space Between War and Peace," *Special Operations Journal* 2, no. 2 (July 2, 2016): 75–91, https://doi.org/10.1080/23296151.2016.1239989.

[29] In its MA classes at Fort McNair, under the Regional Defense Fellowship Program, CISA combines senior officials from across the armed services, the intelligence community, the interagency, and partner nations for education in IW and associated strategies. The program is partner-oriented, with 50%+ of students coming from abroad. At the CISA MA program at Fort Bragg, civilian academics teach a curriculum focused on IW to U.S. (mostly ARSOF) officers and NCOs alongside international SOF students and State Department FSOs and Diplomatic Security personnel. Both programs could

Across government, there is also a crucial need for greater integration to allow a comprehensive response to a variegated attack. Cross-functional teams, liaison officers, and other structural ways of cutting across agencies may help bring common awareness of respective strengths and authorities, and thereby enable integration in practice. The newly formed Irregular Warfare Center could play a role in leading this initiative, as it provides a focal point for IW and taps into existing networks devoted to this topic. As of the FY23 defense budget, it was granted authorities to engage and coordinate across the interagency to enhance America's IW capability.[30] This type of work could equally benefit America's response to political warfare, which also requires various government agencies to integrate and balance the load depending on the challenge at hand.

Finally, across the board, the United States requires greater strategic clarity and long-term planning for strategic competition, to understand what we are competing for, against, and what success might look like. The ultimate requirement here is for a strategy that proceeds according to a clearly elaborated theory of success rather than simply the means and capabilities at our disposal. It also requires greater familiarity with strategic thinking and planning, specifically to counter the ambiguous and variegated attack presently underway.[31]

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be expanded, if resourced appropriately, to encourage more cultural and organizational integration to tackle the challenges posed by strategic competition.

[30] "H.R.7776: James M. Inhofe National Defense Authorization Act for Fiscal Year 2023," § House of Representatives (2022), http://www.congress.gov/.

[31] For one methodology, see David H. Ucko and Thomas Marks A., *Crafting Strategy for Irregular Warfare: A Framework for Analysis and Action*, 2nd edition (Washington DC: National Defense University Press, 2022).

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Hearing Date: 8 February 2023

Hearing Subject:

The Role of Special Operations Forces in Great Power Competition

Witness name: David H. Ucko

Position/Title: Professor and Department Chair, National Defense University

Capacity in which appearing: (check one)

● Individual ○ Representative

If appearing in a representative capacity, name of the organization or entity represented:

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2022

Federal grant/ contract	Federal agency	Dollar value	Subject of contract or grant

2021

Federal grant/ contract	Federal agency	Dollar value	Subject of contract or grant

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2022

Foreign contract/ payment	Foreign government	Dollar value	Subject of contract, grant, or payment

2021

Foreign contract/ payment	Foreign government	Dollar value	Subject of contract, grant, or payment

2020

Foreign contract/ payment	Foreign government	Dollar value	Subject of contract, grant, or payment

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2022

Contract/grant/ payment	Entity	Dollar value	Subject of contract, grant, or payment

2021

Contract/grant/ payment	Entity	Dollar value	Subject of contract, grant, or payment

2020

Contract/grant/ payment	Entity	Dollar value	Subject of contract, grant, or payment

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