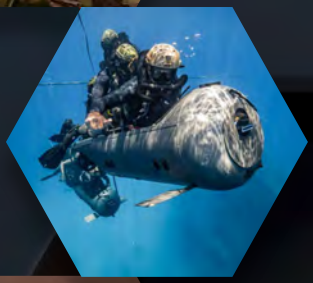
JOINT SPECIAL OPERATIONS UNIVERSITY

2026

Special Operations Research Topics



EDITED BY Doug Jordan

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Special Operations Research Topics 2026

Edited by
DOUG JORDAN

JOINT SPECIAL OPERATIONS UNIVERSITY
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Photo by Cpl. Salvador Flores Perez/DVIDS

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Photo by Petty Officer 1st Class Alex Perlman/DVIDS

FOREWORD

The special operations enterprise is facing a period of both significant change and significant opportunity. Special Operations Forces (SOF)-peculiar education, research, scholarship, and innovation will remain in increasingly high demand. JSOU is committed to being part of the solution—not just a center of learning, but a driver of innovation. To achieve this, we must ensure education and research work in tandem to equip SOF professionals with the intellectual tools needed for success.

This year's Special Operations Research Topics (SORT) booklet represents yet another step in that direction. Developed with input from across the SOF enterprise, these topics are designed to stimulate academic inquiry into areas of immediate and enduring value. They are not intended to constrain research, but rather to serve as a catalyst for exploration—a starting point for developing innovative research questions that merge, synthesize, or extend beyond those presented.

This year, we've broadened our solicitation to capture a wider range of perspectives and ensure topics reflect the needs of the entire joint SOF community.

The future success of joint special operations rests with our ability to bridge the gap between theory and practice. By fostering a vibrant research ecosystem that connects operators, scholars, and policymakers, we will continue to enhance the strategic value of SOF. CSM and I firmly believe that investing in well-crafted research will ensure our forces are not only prepared for tomorrow but also remain at the forefront of global security for years to come.

Dr. Paul Brister President, Joint Special Operations University
CSM Garric Banfield, Command Senior Enlisted Leader

INTRODUCTION

It is my distinct privilege to present the Special Operations Research Topics 2026 (SORT) booklet. This year's SORT team, under the leadership of Doug Jordan, Associate Professor of Practice in the Joint Special Operations University's (JSOU) Department of Applied Research, consists of representatives from the organizations and institutions that make up the United States Special Operations Enterprise (SOE). They have developed an exceptional set of topics and questions that promises to enable research, study, and innovative thinking on key topics of interest to United States Special Operations Command (USSOCOM), the joint force, and the SOF community.

While reviewing the previous editions of the SORT to come up with a brilliant introduction, I came to the realization, however obvious, that the SOE has always been asked to prepare to operate on a no-fail basis, against a variety of major threats, in an environment with growing threats and dwindling resources, and where the stakes are extreme. This nature of the SOF mission is the reason the SORT exists—it helps the SOE tap into a broad network of smart people who are able to think through many of the wicked problems that the U.S. encounters continuously.

As with previous editions, the objective of this SORT is to provide a list of salient topics, grouped by theme, to serve as a starting point for research that is timely, relevant, and of immediate and long-term value to the SOE. As part of this endeavor, several questions contained in this volume dig into specific subtopics determined to be of particular interest to the SOF enterprise. However, while you may address these specific questions, also feel free to modify the topics to fit your specific circumstances and subject matter expertise.

The SORT also serves to provide potential topics for both SOF and non-SOF students at professional military education (PME) institutions. Moreover, SOF operators and enablers, military and non-military scholars and writers, foreign partners and allies, and other patriotic and altruistic scholars are encouraged to use these topics to create scholarship that better informs the SOE on topics that matter. To facilitate this, we encourage you to consider submitting to the Joint Special Operations University Press or sharing your successful publications with us so that we can review and potentially provide them to decision-makers within the SOF enterprise.

Timothy W. Clark, PhD
Director, Department of Applied Research

DEVELOPING THE TOPICS

The 2026 SORT booklet is the 17th edition and is published by the Joint Special Operations University (JSOU) Press, a component of United Special Operations Command (USSOCOM).

To develop content for this edition, the research department at JSOU conducted a two-day virtual workshop in April 2025. A few weeks prior, participants received an online survey tool, which was used for both submitting topic ideas and adjudicating final topics. The topics included in this volume were submitted by 29 representatives from the USSOCOM community as well as partners and colleagues.

The ideas in the SORT should serve as prompts for academic research not only for graduate students and scholars but also for anyone interested in SOF-related research. Before the workshop, all submitted topics were provided to confirmed participants, including representatives from Headquarters, USSOCOM; SOF components; SOF school houses; the Space Force; and NATO SOF Headquarters (HQ)—for review.

During the virtual workshop, participants were given an opportunity to discuss each topic that had been submitted, along with topics they were interested in, through a combination of open plenary sessions and small group breakouts.

Afterward, participants completed an online survey that asked them to rank each topic on a scale from 1–10 based on the value of the topic to the SOF research community. Using basic statistical analysis, the mean, median, and mode of each topic was assessed. The topics were then ranked by average collective score.

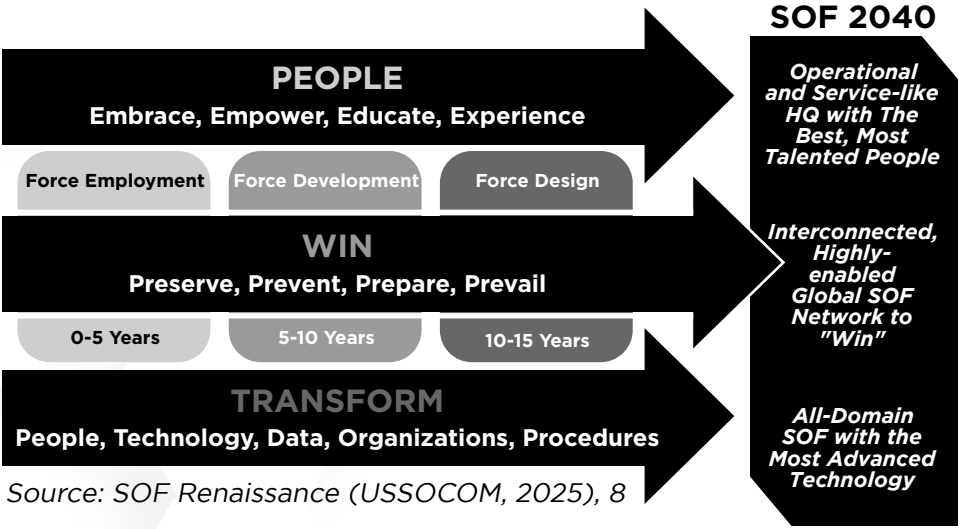
As a result, the topic listed first in each category was determined by participants to be the most important topic. The remaining topics are ranked accordingly. All proposed topics are included, as all have the potential to spark ideas and research. The methodology used is similar to previous methodologies used for topic development for the SORT, but this was the first time the process was conducted virtually.

As the lead facilitator this year, I would like to thank all participants, especially the JSOU Research Faculty for their support of this process: Dr. Tim Clark, Dr. Patrica Blocksome, Dr. Thomas Searle, Dr. Ehlmedi Yessef, Ms. Christiane Thompson, and Ms. Maggie Bess. Additionally, the support from JSOU's Department of Analysis, particularly Mr. Eddie Edwards and Mr. Steve Davis, was critical. Finally, thanks to Mr. Frank Reidy for providing support for the technical aspects of running the online collaboration and technology tools.

If you have any questions about the SORT or JSOU research, please reach out to us at jsou_research@socom.mil.

Douglas E. Jordan
Associate Professor of Practice
Department of Applied Research

PEOPLE
WIN
TRANSFORM



Source: SOF Renaissance (USSOCOM, 2025), 8

"People, Win, and Transform are the U.S. Special Operations Command (USSOCOM) enduring priorities. We see these priorities as critical to enduring operational imperatives and they formulate the foundation of USSOCOM's Strategic Enterprise Plan (SEP). USSOCOM's SEP establishes a road map to achieve end states for future SOF."[1]

[1] United States Special Operations Command, *SOF Renaissance: People, Win, Transform* (2025), 8.

Photo by Petty Officer 2nd Class Alex Kerska/DVIDS

PEOPLE

PEOPLE: STRENGTHENING THE RESILIENCE OF THE FORCE

"Consistent with the first SOF Truth, ***Humans are More Important than Hardware***, our people are the comparative and competitive advantage for USSOCOM. Ensuring the readiness, resilience, and well-being of our men and women and their families remains our #1 priority. The unique nature of the SOF mission demands an extraordinarily talented workforce, capable of operating in remote and austere environments, working alongside our national, interagency, and global partners."[2]

PEOPLE: HUMANS ARE MORE IMPORTANT THAN HARDWARE

We win with our PEOPLE. Consistent with the first SOF Truth that *Humans are More Important than Hardware*, our people are our comparative and competitive advantage. SOF sustain a culture where the best ideas win, and meritocracy reigns by *embracing* America's greatest resource, our Nation's most talented and dedicated men and women. The SOF enterprise trains and *educates* our warriors to solve the Nation's hardest problems. To ensure the resilience and well-being of our warriors, SOF *empower* those who serve at the tip of the spear with cutting-edge support from assessment to retirement. The Nation demands lethality and constant readiness out of our people. Consequently, people are our number one priority, and we invest accordingly. Service in SOF is an unparalleled experience for our Nation's best."[3]

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[2] *SOF Renaissance*, 8.

[3] Colby Jenkins and Bryan P. Fenton, *Statement for the Record before the Committee on Armed Services, Subcommittee on Emerging Threats and Capabilities*, United States Senate, April 8, 2025, 9.

TOPIC 1: PSYCHOLOGICAL AND COGNITIVE CONDITIONING FOR HIGH-STRESS, MULTI-DOMAIN SCENARIOS

DESCRIPTION: The mind and its ability to allow the body to effectively react even during high stress is the root of being a warrior. How can training programs for NATO SOF, United States SOF, or partner nation SOF be optimized to address psychological readiness and cognitive conditioning for operating in high-stress, multi-domain scenarios? Additionally, what are the key psychological and cognitive challenges faced by SOF personnel in multi-domain operations? What cognitive training techniques are most effective for improving decision-making and situational awareness in complex environments? How can ongoing support and mental health services be integrated into SOF training and operations to sustain long-term psychological readiness?

ORGANIZATION: NATO SOF HQ

SOF CATEGORY: Preservation of the Force; Resilience

KEY TOPIC: No (*Note: A key topic is one that was identified by a representative of a component or staff as being critical for analysis.*)

TOPIC 2: CUTTING-EDGE MANAGEMENT SYSTEMS FOR NEXT-GENERATION SOF TALENT

DESCRIPTION: SOF require specially selected, trained, equipped, and managed personnel. Subordinate commands within USSOCOM have successfully accomplished the first three activities but contract out the fourth activity—management—to the different service branches. How can SOF

personnel systems evolve to manage forces differently than the current systems as they are managed by service personnel systems, especially taking into consideration both SOF's unique personnel requirements and the latest knowledge on personnel management?

ORGANIZATION: United States Army Special Operations Command (USASOC)

SOF CATEGORY: Trained and Ready Personnel, Direct Action, Special Reconnaissance, Countering Weapons of Mass Destruction, Counterterrorism, Unconventional Warfare, Foreign Internal Defense, Security Force Assistance, Hostage Rescue and Recovery, Counterinsurgency, Foreign Humanitarian Assistance, Military Information Support Operations, Civil Affairs Operations

KEY TOPIC: Yes

TOPIC 3: CUTTING-EDGE PERSONNEL MANAGEMENT FOR NEXT-GENERATION SOF TALENT

DESCRIPTION: How can USASOC, or other SOF service components, optimize personnel management systems to better recruit, retain, and develop highly skilled SOF professionals? What cutting-edge talent management practices from the private sector can be adapted and implemented within USASOC? How can USASOC balance the unique cultural and operational requirements of SOF with the need for standardized personnel systems within the larger Army?

ORGANIZATION: USASOC

SOF CATEGORY: Personnel Training and Readiness

KEY TOPIC: No

TOPIC 4: CONTINUOUS LEARNING AND ADAPTING

DESCRIPTION: The current strategic and operational environment requires SOF professionals and organizations to use processes and institutions to discover, analyze, disseminate, apply, and assess relevant lessons continuously to evolve and change SOF tactics, operations, and organization to be most effective in competition, crisis, and conflict. By intentionally cultivating a culture of continual learning, SOF better capture key insights from disparate missions and changing adversary tasks. In this regard, better understanding of the following is needed: What are the current knowledge gaps? How does USSOCOM foster a culture that allows senior leaders to have both the opportunity and time to learn and evolve? Does the enterprise require new and/or specialized methods, facilities, educators, and/or better processes to better learn and adapt? What is the role of information and data management in continuous learning and adapting at every echelon? How does SOF optimize the enterprise—from individual through element through subordinate commands through HQ USSOCOM—to adapt more efficiently and effectively?

ORGANIZATION: USSOCOM J7

SOF CATEGORY: Transformation, Education, SOF Training and Readiness

KEY TOPIC: Yes

TOPIC 5: ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCE-POWERED ADAPTIVE LEARNING SYSTEMS

DESCRIPTION: Artificial intelligence (AI) promises improvements to many facets of life, including education. How can SOF best develop and apply AI algorithms to personalize learning experiences in real-time? Research could investigate the effectiveness in SOF education and training of AI tutors, personalized feedback systems, and adaptive learning platforms in improving student performance and reducing learning gaps.

ORGANIZATION: Air Force Special Operations Command (AFSOC)

SOF CATEGORY: Training Applicability

KEY TOPIC: No

TOPIC 6: THE FUTURE OF LEARNING IN THE AGE OF QUANTUM INFORMATION SCIENCE

DESCRIPTION: Quantum information science promises improvements to many facets of life, including education. This broad topic explores the long-term implications of quantum information science for education and learning within the SOF enterprise. Research could investigate the potential of quantum computing to revolutionize educational assessment, personalize learning pathways, and unlock new frontiers in human cognitive enhancement.

ORGANIZATION: AFSOC

SOF CATEGORY: Education, Training

KEY TOPIC: No

TOPIC 7: DIGITAL TWIN TECHNOLOGY FOR SKILL ACQUISITION AND TRAINING

DESCRIPTION: A digital twin is a digital model that mirrors a physical counterpart, allowing for real-time data integration and analysis. This concept originated from NASA's efforts to improve spacecraft simulations in the 1960s. Digital twins can be used to simulate real-world environments for training and skill development. This research should explore the effectiveness of digital twin training in fields applicable to training SOF functions (e.g., joint operations, tactics, techniques, and procedures [TTPs]) and support efforts (e.g., maintenance, field craft). Research should focus on instructional design strategies for digital twins, facilitated instructor and learner strategies for digital twins as an educational tool, and impact assessment of skill transfer and performance improvement.

ORGANIZATION: AFSOC

SOF CATEGORY: Training Applicability

KEY TOPIC: No

TOPIC 8: VIRTUAL REALITY-BASED EMBODIED COGNITION TRAINING

DESCRIPTION: Virtual reality (VR) has promised improvements to many facets of life. Using it for education has been long touted but is still nascent in SOF training and education. This topic explores the use of VR to enhance embodied cognition—the theory that our physical bodies play a crucial role in shaping our thoughts and understanding. Research could investigate the

effectiveness of VR-based simulations for developing spatial reasoning, problem-solving skills, and creativity/creative thinking (mission command).

ORGANIZATION: AFSOC

SOF CATEGORY: Training applicability

KEY TOPIC: No

TOPIC 9: CAPITALIZING ON NON-COMMISSIONED OFFICERS' ADVANCED DEGREES

DESCRIPTION: SOF components are increasingly investing in degrees for noncommissioned officers ([NCOs]; including graduate degrees) that provide rare skills, but there is not currently a process at Army Special Operations Forces or most other service components that aligns one's skills with position roles. How can the SOF enterprise and SOF service components best make use of these NCOs to leverage their new skills?

ORGANIZATION: USASOC

SOF CATEGORY: Talent Management, Education, Retention and Recruitment

KEY TOPIC: No

TOPIC 10: UTILIZATION OF MOBILE ADWARE IDENTIFICATION FOR TRACKING INDIVIDUALS AND IMPLICATIONS FOR FORCE PROTECTION

DESCRIPTION: The exponential growth in cell phone usage and technology comes with a corresponding exponential growth in applications/techniques that exploit mobile adware identification (MAI) utilization in cell phones. This research can provide a better understanding of MAI usage, including its applicability, potential dangers to SOF personnel and operations, legal and policy considerations, effective countermeasures, and a framework for an informational campaign.

ORGANIZATION: JSOU

SOF CATEGORY: Special Reconnaissance, Unconventional Warfare, Cyber

KEY TOPIC: No

TOPIC 11: SOF CIVILIAN WORKFORCE OPTIMIZATION

DESCRIPTION: On 7 April 2025, the Secretary of Defense directed the workforce acceleration and recapitalization initiative focused on optimizing the Department of Defense (DoD) workforce. In 2025, multiple rounds of civilian workforce cuts have forced the SOF enterprise to rebalance and reprioritize efforts to align with national security priorities. How can SOF best optimize its use of the civilian workforce to enable the SOF enterprise to be more efficient and lethal?

ORGANIZATION: Joint Task Force-Special Reconnaissance and Enabling Command (JTF-SREC)

SOF CATEGORY: Civilian Force Structure

KEY TOPIC: Yes

TOPIC 12: USSOCOM USE OF GAMING FOR INFORMATION ADVANTAGE

DESCRIPTION: Gaming is being increasingly integrated into military training and education to enhance performance and skillsets. How can serious gaming be designed and implemented to effectively train SOF personnel in the nuances of information advantage? What are the key metrics for evaluating the effectiveness of serious gaming in improving information advantage skills and knowledge within USSOCOM? How can existing SOF enterprise training and education programs be enhanced through the integration of serious gaming elements?

ORGANIZATION: JSOU

SOF CATEGORY: Training, Education, Military Information Support Operations, Civil Affairs Operations, Cyber, Space, Irregular Warfare

KEY TOPIC: No

Photo by Michael Bottoms/DVIDS

Photo by Sgt. 1st Class Whitney Hughes/DVIDS

Photo by Sgt. 1st Class Whitney Hughes/DVIDS

Photo by Petty Officer 1st Class Leon Wong/DVIDS

WIN: DECISIVE ADVANTAGE FOR THE NATION

"SOF provide a decisive advantage for the Nation as an integral part of the DoD's approach to National Defense Strategy (NDS) priorities. Accounting for less than two percent of the Defense budget, and less than three percent of DoD personnel, SOF provide an exceptional return on investment. SOF prepare the global operating environment to enable the joint force to prevail in the event of conflict via providing innovative options to senior leaders, as well as multiple dilemmas to adversaries. USSOCOM also preserves strategic focus for the Nation by countering violent extremist organizations and responding to crises with agile, modernized, and tailored capabilities."[4]

"WIN: AN IRREGULAR AND ASYMMETRIC ADVANTAGE FOR THE NATION

SOF will win anytime and anywhere for the Nation. The SOF enterprise draws upon over a half-century of irregular warfare and decades of combat experience and credibility to execute our critical roles in three specific mission sets: *deterrence, counterterrorism*, and *crisis response*. SOF will succeed in these core missions through the *prevent, prepare, prevail,* and *preserve* framework. First, SOF leverage persistent access and placement, shaping the operational environment to *prevent* conflict by altering adversaries' decision calculus as America's irregular warfare specialists. SOF *prepare* the operational environment through unique authorities for training and building partner nation capabilities. Should deterrence fail, decades-long relationships with partners and persistent daily SOF presence provide advantageous posture inside the weapons engagement zone and along the periphery to enable the joint force to *prevail* in conflict. Lastly, SOF preserve strategic focus on deterrence by faithfully executing *counterterrorism* and *crisis response* missions, allowing the Nation to focus on pacing threats."[5]

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[4] *SOF Renaissance, 8.*

[5] Jenkins and Fenton, *Statement for the Record,* 2.

TOPIC 13: OPERATIONALIZING IRREGULAR WARFARE: HOW TO CONDUCT LONG-TERM AND TRANSREGIONAL IRREGULAR WARFARE CAMPAIGNS

DESCRIPTION: Today's DoD is regionally organized and postured to flex into large-scale combat operations within a given theater. The conduct of irregular warfare (IW), however, given its global nature and long-term focus, requires more complex methods. How can USSOCOM help fill the requirement for IW campaigning in support of joint all domain operations (JADO) and the joint warfighting concept (JWC) that the current DoD structure doesn't support?

ORGANIZATION: USASOC

SOF CATEGORY: Counterterrorism, Unconventional Warfare, Foreign Internal Defense, Security Force Assistance, Counterinsurgency, Military Information Support Operations, Civil Affairs Operations, China, Russia

KEY TOPIC: Yes

TOPIC 14: STRATEGIC SABOTAGE

DESCRIPTION: Sabotage for strategic purposes is SOF's role in large-scale combat operations (LSCO) and can be used to deter conflict. The ability to create a cost-imposing dilemma to oppose adversary coercion or covert/clandestine activity is increasingly relevant. Ultimately, the goal is to set conditions proactively to dictate the terms of an adversary's next move and/or improve the global security posture of the U.S. around the subject of strategic sabotage. How can SOF effectively employ strategic sabotage to create cost-imposing dilemmas for adversaries below the threshold of armed conflict? What

legal and ethical frameworks should guide the use of strategic sabotage as a tool of persistent competition? How can SOF leverage interagency partnerships and foreign proxies to enhance the effectiveness of strategic sabotage operations? How does SOF proactively interdict peer adversary capabilities across diplomatic, information, military, and economic national power in a way that is time sensitive, non-attributable, and below the threshold of conflict? How does SOF, as part of the joint force and in coordination with the interagency and foreign persons and proxies, engage in persistent competition with peer rivals to proactively set conditions to impact adversary decision-making in a way that is time-sensitive, non-lethal, and non-attributive but below the level of armed conflict?
ORGANIZATION: USASOC, HQ USSOCOM
SOF CATEGORY: Direct Action, Unconventional Warfare
KEY TOPIC: Yes

TOPIC 15: MACHINE LEARNING AND ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCE IN TARGETING

DESCRIPTION: Machine learning (ML) and AI have the potential to improve and potentially revolutionize targeting. For example, AI can enhance automated detection to expedite the processing, exploitation, and dissemination of time-sensitive information of large amounts of data, such as from imagery or financial information in hard drives. How can SOF best utilize ML and AI in targeting?
ORGANIZATION: Joint Special Operations Command (JSOC)
SOF CATEGORY: Counterterrorism, Hostage Rescue and Recovery, Counterinsurgency, Cyber, Space, China, Russia
KEY TOPIC: Yes

TOPIC 16: HOW DOES SOF CONDUCT DELIBERATE AND DYNAMIC TARGETING AS A FUNCTION IN LARGE-SCALE COMBAT OPERATIONS?

DESCRIPTION: Historically, SOF have been required to plan both strategic and mobile targets that require a different approach or set of conditions beyond the capability of conventional forces. Historic examples include the Office of Strategic Services' use of partisan forces in WWII to target key lines of communication and the use of SOF during Operation DESERT STORM to target SCUD transporter-erector-launcher systems conducting strikes against Israel with the intent to fracture the alliance. What is SOF's role in LSCO for the conduct of fires to achieve effects on priority targets in JADO and the JWC?

ORGANIZATION: Marine Forces Special Operations Command (MARSOC)

SOF CATEGORY: Direct Action, Special Reconnaissance, Counterterrorism, Cyber, Space, China, Russia

KEY TOPIC: Yes

TOPIC 17: SPACE-CYBER-SOF-U.S. STRATEGIC COMMAND NEXUS

DESCRIPTION: The U.S. and its allies, partners, and adversaries are all grappling with integration of space, cyber, and other defensive and offensive capabilities. Within this focus area, how can the synergy between space, cyber, SOF, and U.S. Strategic Command (STRATCOM) be maximized to achieve greater joint effects in future conflicts in JADO and the JWC? What organizational structures and processes would best facilitate joint training and deployment of space, cyber,

SOF, and STRATCOM assets? What are the legal and policy implications of integrating space, cyber, SOF, and STRATCOM capabilities in a more formalized manner?

ORGANIZATION: HQ USSOCOM

SOF CATEGORY: Cyber, Space, Command and Control, Irregular Warfare

KEY TOPIC: No

TOPIC 18: OPERATIONALIZING IRREGULAR WARFARE: HOW TO CONDUCT LONG-TERM AND TRANSREGIONAL IRREGULAR WARFARE CAMPAIGNS

DESCRIPTION: IW is where SOF excels. To continue to dominate, SOF continually seek to improve its performance in the arena. How can the DoD overcome structural limitations to enable more effective long-term and transregional IW campaigns in support of JADO and the JWC? What are the key challenges and opportunities in coordinating joint forces for transregional IW campaigns? How can USSOCOM leverage its unique capabilities to support long-term IW campaigns that transcend traditional geographic boundaries?

ORGANIZATION: HQ USSOCOM

SOF CATEGORY: Counterterrorism, Unconventional Warfare, Foreign Internal Defense, Counterinsurgency, Irregular Warfare

KEY TOPIC: No

TOPIC 19: SOF'S ROLE IN PROTECTING THE HOMELAND AND COUNTERING DESIGNATED OTHER TERRORIST ORGANIZATIONS—INTERNATIONAL CARTELS

DESCRIPTION: On 20 February 2025, the U.S. Department of State designated eight foreign terrorist organizations and specially designated global terrorists. As President Donald Trump said in Executive Order 14157, cartels and other transnational organizations "threaten the safety of the American people, the security of the United States, and the stability of the international order in the Western Hemisphere." SOF play a critical role in counterterrorism and homeland defense. How can SOF use its exceptional capabilities most effectively to degrade and defeat these groups? How can SOF work better with partners and allies to counter this threat? How can SOF maintain the element of surprise while conducting this mission in a partnering environment?

ORGANIZATION: JTF-SREC

SOF CATEGORY: Direct Action, Counterterrorism, Foreign Internal Defense, Security Force Assistance, Military Information Support Operations, Civil Affairs Operations, Special Reconnaissance

KEY TOPIC: Yes

TOPIC 20: DIGITAL FORCE PROTECTION: THREATS AND RISKS TO SOF

DESCRIPTION: Advances in personal electronic devices, facial recognition systems, widespread foreign and domestic camera systems, and online presence continues to provide risk and threats to SOF personnel and units. What are the technical

and privacy threats to personal life, daily official work, and operational missions? What technology areas should the military research to further understanding of this problem? What metrics can be used to evaluate the various risk areas? What government, partner nation, commercial, private, or open-source communities can the military collaborate with on these topics? How can SOF balance operational security with personal privacy in the digital realm? What strategies can be employed to mitigate risks associated with adversaries exploiting open-source intelligence against deployed forces?

ORGANIZATION: JSOU

SOF CATEGORY: Unconventional Warfare, Foreign Internal Defense, Security Force Assistance, Cyber

KEY TOPIC: Yes

TOPIC 21: SPACE-CYBER-SOF-U.S. STRATEGIC COMMAND NEXUS: HOW TO BUILD CAPABILITY GREATER THAN THE SUM OF ITS PARTS TO ACHIEVE JOINT EFFECTS

DESCRIPTION: Space, cyber, SOF, and STRATCOM entities come together in theater today based on ad-hoc relationships and immediate needs, similar to how joint forces once came together to conduct counterterrorism before the advent of a joint HQ and assigned forces established an enduring partnership. How can these related forces come together today in a more solid relationship so that they can train together in a more formal manner and deploy together as part of a joint force? How can combatant commands (COCOMs) and theater special operations commands employ these forces in the future so they assist in gaining joint objectives and supporting regional and national security objectives?

ORGANIZATION: USASOC
SOF CATEGORY: Direct Action, Special Reconnaissance, Countering Weapons of Mass Destruction, Counterterrorism, Unconventional Warfare, Foreign Internal Defense, Military Information Support Operations, Civil Affairs Operations, Cyber, Space
KEY TOPIC: Yes

TOPIC 22: SOF INTERDEPENDENCE, INTEROPERABILITY, AND INTEGRATION WITH CONVENTIONAL FORCES

DESCRIPTION: Interdependence, interoperability, and integration (I3) within SOF and between SOF and conventional forces (CF) shapes and prepares the environment to achieve advantage in competition and transition to conflict. How might SOF and CF better create I3 to provide joint force advantage relative to the adversary in JADO and the JWC? What are the priority objectives in competition to increase joint force lethality and survivability in conflict?
ORGANIZATION: MARSOC
SOF CATEGORY: Direct Action, Special Reconnaissance, Counterterrorism, Unconventional Warfare, Foreign Internal Defense, Security Force Assistance, Foreign Humanitarian Assistance, Military Information Support Operations, Civil Affairs Operations, Cyber, Space, China, Russia
KEY TOPIC: Yes

TOPIC 23: SCALING OF SOF AUTHORITIES AND PERMISSIONS FROM COMPETITION TO CONFLICT

DESCRIPTION: Scaling from competition to conflict requires preapproved authorities for escalation. How can SOF authorities and permissions scale from competition to conflict at a tempo that provides joint force advantage, while providing clear activity escalation indicators in a degraded, denied, intermittent, and low-bandwidth communications environment? Do current processes provide the speed necessary to prevent or prevail against a near-peer adversary?

ORGANIZATION: MARSOC

SOF CATEGORY: China

KEY TOPIC: No

TOPIC 24: SOF TARGETING IN LARGE-SCALE COMBAT OPERATIONS

DESCRIPTION: LSCO, like any issue of increasing scale, adds a high degree of complexity to SOF targeting processes, which have been refined during the last 25 years via relatively small-scale conflicts against insurgents, terrorists, and other high-value-targets. In preparation for LSCO, SOF must understand how to conduct deliberate and dynamic targeting. How can SOF adapt its historical experience with targeting high-value, mobile targets to the demands of LSCO in a multi-domain environment? What are the unique contributions of SOF to the joint targeting process in LSCO? How can SOF leverage advanced technologies and intelligence capabilities to conduct effective dynamic targeting in the complexities of LSCO?

ORGANIZATION: MARSOC
SOF CATEGORY: Direct Action, Special Reconnaissance, Countering Weapons of Mass Destruction, Counterterrorism, Unconventional Warfare, Foreign Internal Defense, Security Force Assistance, Hostage Rescue and Recovery, Counterinsurgency, Foreign Humanitarian Assistance, Military Information Support Operations, Civil Affairs Operations
KEY TOPIC: No

TOPIC 25: ADVANCED RESILIENCE AND RESISTANCE IN DIGITAL BATTLESPACES: COUNTERING MULTI-PLATFORM INFLUENCE OPERATIONS THROUGH ADAPTIVE COMMUNICATION NETWORKS

DESCRIPTION: Building on research identifying Russia and China's sophisticated multi-platform influence operations, this topic proposes that USSOCOM seek solutions for how resilient strategic communication networks can resist and counter digital information warfare. Analyzing defensive and offensive communication strategies across platforms, languages, and modalities helps create understanding in how an integrated framework can be built for SOF to build resilience against adversarial influence campaigns. How can USSOCOM establish effective counter-narrative capabilities that leverage platform-specific affordances and audience engagement patterns?
ORGANIZATION: Georgia State University
SOF CATEGORY: Unconventional Warfare, Military Information Support Operations, Cyber, China, Russia
KEY TOPIC: Yes

TOPIC 26: SUSTAINING SOF MARITIME MOBILITY

DESCRIPTION: SOF is persistently forward postured in various archipelagoes. How do they sustain movement and maneuver by land, sea, and air with allies and partners? This approach should meet operational requirements and incorporate resilient and dependable platforms that are fiscally sustainable over a long period of time. How does SOF sustain maritime (surface and air) mobility with and through allies and partners with a persistent forward posture?

ORGANIZATION: MARSOC

SOF CATEGORY: Direct Action, Special Reconnaissance, Counterterrorism, Unconventional Warfare, Foreign Internal Defense, Security Force Assistance, Counterinsurgency, Foreign Humanitarian Assistance, Military Information Support Operations, Civil Affairs Operations, Cyber, Space

KEY TOPIC: Yes

TOPIC 27: SOF FUTURE REQUIREMENTS

DESCRIPTION: To prepare for the next conflict, SOF need to continue to assess what the future operating environment will be. In response to emerging global threats and changes in geopolitical dynamics, the following explore the future role of United States SOF, partner and allied SOF, and NATO SOF. What are the key geopolitical trends that influence SOF missions in the next decade? How can SOF enhance their capabilities to address new and evolving security threats? What new skills/competencies and training are required for SOF personnel to effectively operate in future conflict scenarios?

ORGANIZATION: NATO SOF HQ

SOF CATEGORY: Requirements for capabilities

KEY TOPIC: No

Photo by Staff Sgt. Alysia Blake/DVIDS

Photo by Staff Sgt. Janae Aguirre/DVIDS

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TRANSFORM: MODERNIZE FOR THE FUTURE

"USSOCOM aims to build enduring advantages by transforming our people, technologies, and organizations with a commitment to modernize, and optimize for the future operating environment. Our innovative, modernization efforts emphasize surface and subsurface maritime platforms; next-generation intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance; mission command systems; and collaborative and autonomous unmanned systems."[6]

"TRANSFORM: MODERNIZE FOR THE FUTURE

[Special Operations and Low-Intensity Conflict (SO/LIC)] and USSOCOM continue to trailblaze and build an enduring advantage for the joint force through modernization efforts focused on our people, technologies, organizations, and capabilities with a sustained commitment to evolve for the future operating environment. Leveraging our powerful Service-like acquisition authorities with rapid research, development, testing, and evaluation, USSOCOM invests in priorities and capitalizes on our Nation's strategic advantage: innovation. Additionally, SO/LIC's Irregular Warfare Technology Support Division rapidly identifies and develops capabilities for DoD and interagency customers to conduct irregular warfare activities. As a pathfinder for DoD in testing and adopting disruptive technology, the SOF enterprise accelerates momentum to create advantages for the joint force across the continuum of competition and conflict."[7]

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[6] *SOF Renaissance, 8.*

[7] Jenkins and Fenton, *Statement for the Record, 12.*

TOPIC 28: UTILIZATION OF CYBERSPACE PROXIES IN UNCONVENTIONAL WARFARE

DESCRIPTION: During unconventional warfare (UW), the use of cyber proxies to enable activities and operations during the phases of the UW campaign is an area that needs further exploration. Key considerations include the legal authorities (fiscal and operational) to conduct such activities and operations. A review of current legal framework and historical examples should be utilized when proposing recommendations that enable SOF use of cyber proxies.

ORGANIZATION: JSOU

SOF CATEGORY: Unconventional Warfare, Foreign Internal Defense, Counterinsurgency, Cyber

KEY TOPIC: No

TOPIC 29: COUNTERING HYBRID WARFARE IN A CHANGING GEOPOLITICAL LANDSCAPE

DESCRIPTION: As the geopolitical environment evolves and the rules-based international order faces challenges from rising powers and individuals capable of financing mercenaries and shaping warfare, how can NATO SOF, United States SOF, or partner nation SOF effectively counter hybrid warfare tactics employed by state and non-state actors and adapt to these evolving threats? Further, as hybrid warfare expands, how could the concept of war be broadened from a physical force to other instruments of power? In what ways are non-state actors advancing cutting-edge technology and developing game-changing capabilities? How can SOF adapt their training, tactics, and operational strategies to address these evolving

threats? What training and doctrinal changes are necessary for SOF to remain effective against these evolving threats?
ORGANIZATION: NATO SOF HQ
SOF CATEGORY: Irregular Warfare
KEY TOPIC: No

TOPIC 30: SOF USE OF NON-GOVERNMENTAL HACKERS IN SUPPORT OF STRATEGIC OBJECTIVES

DESCRIPTION: In recent decades, private individuals, hacker collectivities, proxies, non-governmental organizations, and hired hackers have been engaged in the cyber domain for patriotic, social activism, or monetary gain. Research focused on exploring the legal and operational issues in using or aligning such non-governmental hackers with SOF in support of national security objectives is needed. What would be the legal basis for the U.S. to utilize hacking groups or private companies that do not fall under the U.S. Government control? What might be the possible command and control relationship? What strategic capability or capacity gaps could a hired or volunteer hacking group fill? What ethical and legal frameworks should govern the use of proxy hacking groups by the United States? How could SOF establish effective command and control relationships with hired or volunteer hacking groups while maintaining accountability?
ORGANIZATION: JSOU
SOF CATEGORY: Special Reconnaissance, Countering Weapons of Mass Destruction, Counterterrorism, Unconventional Warfare, Cyber
KEY TOPIC: Yes

TOPIC 31: NEXT-GENERATION INTELLIGENCE, SURVEILLANCE, AND RECONNAISSANCE/ TACTICALLY RELEVANT FOR ADVANCED SITUATIONAL AWARENESS

DESCRIPTION: Sensors for high-resolution, imaging sensors, hyperspectral sensors, and synthetic aperture radar (SAR) systems continue to develop at a relative high rate of speed. This includes fusion of full-motion video with other sources of information (government-owned data, publicly/commercially available information) visually displayed in near-real time to significantly improve the opportunities for knowledge management and discovery during operations. How can SOF develop these next-generation intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance (ISR) systems? Additionally, how can SOF best use AI and ML to analyze and process large amounts of data, identify patterns, and provide predictive analysis?

ORGANIZATION: JSOC

SOF CATEGORY: Direct Action, Counterterrorism, Hostage Rescue and Recovery, Counterinsurgency

KEY TOPIC: Yes

TOPIC 32: OPTIMIZING DRONE USE AND COUNTER-UNMANNED AERIAL SYSTEMS STRATEGIES

DESCRIPTION: On the battlefield in Ukraine, drone and counter-unmanned aerial systems (UAS) are near-constantly changing and upgrading. How can SOF optimize the use of drones for operational effectiveness while developing and implementing robust counter-UAS strategies to mitigate threats? Additionally, what are the most effective operational

roles and applications of drones in special operations? How can drones be better integrated into existing SOF TTPs to enhance mission success? How can SOF ensure that their educational and training programs remain relevant given the rapid advancements in drone and counter-UAS technologies?

ORGANIZATION: NATO SOF HQ

SOF CATEGORY: Capabilities

KEY TOPIC: No

TOPIC 33: HARNESSING DATA FOR IRREGULAR WARFARE

DESCRIPTION: The U.S. military's advantage is increasingly reliant on data-driven technologies and the integration of diverse data sources, edge computing, and rapid software deployment. This, coupled with an increase in current and emerging AI/ML-enabling capabilities, requires the development of new warfighting concepts—to include within irregular warfare. How can SOF better capitalize on these data-analytics systems and processes for the purposes of irregular warfare?

ORGANIZATION: USASOC

SOF CATEGORY: Counterterrorism, Unconventional Warfare, Foreign Internal Defense

KEY TOPIC: Yes

TOPIC 34: ADVANCED DATA ACQUISITION AND MANAGEMENT FOR JOINT SOF

DESCRIPTION: For AI and ML systems, quality data is needed to separate "the signal from the noise." To process this data, SOF require technologies that provide automatic ingestion, metadata tagging, indexing, storage, synchronization, fusion, deduplication, mining, and dissemination of data collected by widely dispersed SOF resources. Data repositories require the ability to run AI/ML algorithms against the datasets to reduce analyst workload and rapidly deliver answers to warfighter problem sets. What are SOF's requirements for emerging developments of these systems? How can SOF best identify, acquire, and utilize these data acquisition and management systems?

ORGANIZATION: JSOC

SOF CATEGORY: Direct Action, Counterterrorism, Unconventional Warfare, Counterinsurgency

KEY TOPIC: Yes

TOPIC 35: INTEGRATION OF EMERGING TECHNOLOGIES IN SOF OPERATIONS

DESCRIPTION: How can emerging technologies such as AI, ML, and cyber capabilities be effectively integrated into SOF, including in multinational settings, to enhance mission success and operational efficiency? Additionally, what specific AI and machine learning tools can be applied to SOF operations? How can cyber capabilities be leveraged to support and secure SOF missions? What are the potential operational gains and risks associated with these technologies?

ORGANIZATION: NATO SOF HQ

KEY TOPIC: No

TOPIC 36: ETHICAL, LEGAL, AND OPERATIONAL CHALLENGES OF AI-DRIVEN WARFARE AND AUTONOMOUS SYSTEMS

DESCRIPTION: As AI gains the capacity to make decisions, coupled with the need for increased reaction time that may pressure SOF leaders and planners to remove human in the loop capabilities, what are the ethical, legal, and operational challenges of deploying AI-driven warfare and autonomous systems in United States, partner nation, or NATO SOF? How can these challenges be addressed to ensure compliance with international law and ethical standards? How do we balance the need for security with the preservation of freedom and human rights? What legal frameworks govern the use of AI and autonomous systems in warfare? How can accountability be maintained when using autonomous systems in operations? What strategies can be employed to ensure ethical compliance and operational effectiveness?

ORGANIZATION: NATO SOF HQ

SOF CATEGORY: Cyber, Capabilities

KEY TOPIC: No

TOPIC 37: ENHANCING MULTI-DOMAIN TRAINING WITH AI-DRIVEN VIRTUAL AND AUGMENTED REALITY

DESCRIPTION: In the last few years, there have been a multitude of innovations in virtual, augmented reality, and AI-driven simulation technologies. How can these innovations be utilized to enhance decision-making, adaptability, and strategic response in United States, partner nation, and NATO SOF, particularly in the context of complex, multi-domain operations? Specifically, how can synthetic environments be integrated with AI to create immersive and realistic training scenarios? How do these environments improve adaptability and strategic response in varied operational scenarios? What are the measurable impacts of these technologies on decision-making accuracy and operational effectiveness?

ORGANIZATION: NATO SOF HQ

SOF CATEGORY: Capabilities

KEY TOPIC: No

TOPIC 38: NEXUS/TRIAD STRATEGIC-LEVEL SYNTHESIS

DESCRIPTION: Most COCOMs and services are involved in discussions on NEXUS or TRIAD and the synthesis of space-SOF-cyber in IW to deter conflict and crisis, and, if necessary, used effectively in conflict. Within these discussions, the technical, tactical, and perhaps operational needs are relatively clear and already demonstrated. The discussion at the strategic level is lagging, however, especially in terms of the integration of key allies and partners (beyond temporary and tactically aligned task organizations) and has become mired in discussions on information sharing, clearances, etc. How

can USSOCOM rapidly synthesize and implement to enable the strategic-level space-SOF-cyber, including with allies and partners, to deter conflict, deal with crisis, and, if necessary, operate in conflict?

ORGANIZATION: United States Space Command (USSPACECOM) SIG

SOF CATEGORY: Unconventional Warfare, Cyber, Space, China, Russia

KEY TOPIC: Yes

TOPIC 39: STRATEGIC INFLUENCE THROUGH SOF

DESCRIPTION: Among SOF's value proposition is its network and reputation and its expertise in globally shaping friendly, neutral, and adversary perceptions and actions favorably. Since USSOCOM's inception, SOF have focused campaigning in the gray zone to enhance U.S. strategic influence. They use a full range of expertise and capabilities to assure partners; persuade the undecided; and illuminate, influence, and undermine malign activities. A systematic look at SOF's role in strategic influence is needed. What are the combinations of capabilities and authorities required to more effectively exert influence and to counter competitor influence? Which components should focus on which core activities in strategic influence? Given that physical operations can be the "loudest" narratives, how do we better synchronize strategic influence with tactical effects? How can joint SOF better exploit insights from academic and business such as social and cognitive psychology, marketing, social media, and the arts of influence and persuasion?

ORGANIZATION: USSOCOM J7

SOF CATEGORY: Military Information Support Operations, Civil Affairs Operations, Cyber, Space

KEY TOPIC: Yes

TOPIC 40: HARNESSING DATA FOR IRREGULAR WARFARE

DESCRIPTION: AI and ML promise improvements based on the speed they can process information. SOF have begun to explore and implement these data processing systems, but a better understanding of the capabilities, limitations, and applicability of these systems on SOF IW missions is needed. Specifically, how can data-driven technologies and AI/ML be ethically and effectively integrated into IW operations? What new warfighting concepts are required to leverage the full potential of data analytics and edge computing in IW? How can USSPACECOM, working with the SOF enterprise, contribute to the development and implementation of data-driven solutions for IW challenges?

ORGANIZATION: USSPACECOM SIG

SOF CATEGORY: Unconventional Warfare, Space, China, Russia

KEY TOPIC: No

TOPIC 41: THE FUTURE U.S. SOF ENTERPRISE: FLAT, FAST, AND FOCUSED

DESCRIPTION: The war in Ukraine has demonstrated that the speed of warfare has greatly increased, meaning the need for decision-making is often greatly reduced. How can the SOF enterprise adapt its structure and processes to become flatter, faster, and more focused in response to future challenges? Moreover, how can USSOCOM balance the need for specialized SOF capabilities with the imperative for interoperability and streamlined decision-making? What are the key workforce optimization strategies that USSOCOM should prioritize to maintain agility and responsiveness?

ORGANIZATION: JSOU
SOF CATEGORY: Trained and Ready Forces
KEY TOPIC: No

TOPIC 42: RAPID ALL-DOMAIN FUSION FOR SOF

DESCRIPTION: SOF rapidly bring together unique combinations of capabilities and authorities (e.g., SOF-space-cyber) to create strategic effects and generate the agile command and control (C2) configurations that joint SOF modular formations need. What concepts and capabilities must SOF develop to act as the synchronizer across different lines of effort carried out by various military and civilian organizations (with often-diverging objectives)? What are the C2 options for force presentation in future missions? Which technological solutions (e.g., joint all-domain command and control) are required to enable SOF-centered, all-domain fusion? What does a SOF-cyber-space nexus deliver for the joint force, and how do we develop and generate it?
ORGANIZATION: USSOCOM J7
SOF CATEGORY: C2
KEY TOPIC: Yes

TOPIC 43: GLOBAL PRESENCE

DESCRIPTION: U.S. SOF have a global mission in which it continuously campaigns for U.S. advantage, monitors and counters adversary activity, builds networks, and sets conditions for joint force and interagency success that conventional forces cannot. To better maintain and expand this global presence as necessary, USSOCOM seeks more information about the following: What locations on the globe afford geostrategic advantage? How can SOF posture the force in these locations? Should SOF physical repositioning leave less prioritized areas "uncovered,"? How may virtual presence mitigate competition risks? How can SOF present the force to support a forward-required presence, as well as the need for rapid fusion of capabilities across the spectrum of conflict? Where must SOF shift its footprint to ensure it is the partner of choice to advance U.S. interests?

ORGANIZATION: USSOCOM J7

SOF CATEGORY: Foreign Internal Defense, Security Force Assistance, posture and presence

KEY TOPIC: Yes

TOPIC 44: JOINT SOF MODULAR FORMATIONS

DESCRIPTION: To increase flexibility and support the force in the 21st century, the SOF enterprise is considering generating joint SOF modular formations (JSMF) that are flexible, interoperable, and composed of cross-functional professionals with appropriate platforms as determined by certification, verification, and validation processes. These formations include the blend of SOF, routine SOF enablers, and unique conventional capabilities required for any given mission. The modular components of the JSMFs may be human-centric or

platform-centric, depending on required capabilities. Which components in the SOF enterprise, with what capabilities, are best suited to deliver those capabilities to the rest of the enterprise and/or the joint force? Is a transformation of management for SOF military and civilian personnel needed to better foster the expertise necessary to emergent challenges? How can SOF acquire or leverage the more "high-demand, low-density" skills required across the joint force? What specific individual operational knowledge, skills, and attributes are required for SOF professionals? Are the SOF Truths enduring in lieu of this modularity?

ORGANIZATION: USSOCOM J7

SOF CATEGORY: Command and Control, Trained and Ready Forces

KEY TOPIC: Yes

TOPIC 45: PRECISION ACCESS

DESCRIPTION: Precision access is the SOF imperative. It's necessary to create the means to go anywhere—physically or virtually—at any time to take precise, attribution-managed actions that advance U.S. interests and/or degrade adversary capabilities. SOF is required to operate in politically sensitive and denied areas to develop relationships, enhance partner capabilities, prepare the environment, and hold adversary systems and interests at risk. Precision access gives national leaders options to create strategic effects and scale escalation risk. USSOCOM needs to better understand key aspects of precision access by examining the following: In the future, what are SOF's physical and virtual infiltration challengers, opportunities and necessities? How can SOF improve its capability to operate directly and indirectly with allies, partners,

proxies and/or surrogates—overtly, clandestinely and/or covertly—in competition, crisis, and conflict? In the physical domains, how can SOF platforms infiltrate and operate in contested or denied spaces? How can SOF operate effectively in arctic waters? What percentage of the SOF force needs to be proficient in special-access skills (e.g., military freefall capability, SCUBA, high-altitude land operations)? What are the optimal types of platforms and capacities for SOF land mobility? How must SOF modernize and integrate cross-domain ISR systems to include novel approaches?

ORGANIZATION: USSOCOM J7

SOF CATEGORY: Force Transformation

KEY TOPIC: Yes

TOPIC 46: SOF INTEROPERABILITY

DESCRIPTION: Given the global challenges faced by the U.S. and its allies, it remains imperative that SOF continue to develop interoperability and capability while continuing to grow capacity in a unified and cohesive manner. How do cultural and linguistic differences impact joint operations across SOF and its partners and allies (such as NATO SOF units), and what best practices can be implemented to improve interoperability and cohesion? How can SOF improve their collaboration with other military and intelligence agencies to meet future challenges? Additionally, how can NATO SOF, in its unique organizational construct, enhance cooperation and coordination with partner nation SOF to effectively address global security challenges?

ORGANIZATION: NATO SOF HQ

SOF CATEGORY: Capabilities

KEY TOPIC: No

TOPIC 47: SOF REQUIREMENTS

DESCRIPTION: In response to emerging global threats and changes in geopolitical dynamics, exploring the future role of NATO and national SOF is necessary. What are the key geopolitical trends influencing SOF missions in the next decade? How can SOF enhance its capabilities to address new and evolving security threats? What new skills, competencies, and training are required for SOF personnel to effectively operate in future conflict scenarios?

ORGANIZATION: NATO SOF HQ

SOF CATEGORY: Requirements for capabilities

KEY TOPIC: No

TOPIC 48: STRENGTHENING SOF CAPABILITIES IN DOD WORKFORCE OPTIMIZATION

DESCRIPTION: As the DoD restructures for optimization, SOF have an opportunity to review current structures and processes to become a more efficient and lethal force. Specifically, how can DoD workforce optimization efforts be implemented in a way that strengthens, rather than degrades, critical SOF capabilities? What are the unique challenges and considerations for optimizing the SOF workforce within the context of broader DoD workforce reforms? How can previous transformations within SOF, such as JTF-SREC, serve as a model for successful workforce optimization within the community to balance efficiency with operational effectiveness?

ORGANIZATION: JTF-SREC

SOF CATEGORY: Qualified Workforce, Irregular Warfare

KEY TOPIC: No

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CALL FOR SPECIAL OPERATIONS PAPERS

Several of the topics in this SORT are featured in JSOU's annual Call for Special Operations Papers program. Submissions (unclassified, no more than 5,000 words, and related to an identified SORT topic) are welcome from subject matter experts (SMEs) and scholars from throughout the SOF enterprise, including active duty and PME students, allies and partners, and academics.

Submissions are judged by a panel of SOF SMEs. Winners in each category are recognized by the USSOCOM commander and JSOU president and are published by the JSOU Press.

For more information and submission guidelines, please visit jsou.edu/Press/CallforPapers or email press@jsou.edu.

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ACRONYMS

AFSOC - Air Force Special Operations Command
AI - artificial intelligence
C2 - command and control
CF - conventional forces
COCOM - combatant command
DoD - U.S. Department of Defense
HQ - headquarters
I3 - interdependence, interoperability, and integration
ISR - intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance
IW - irregular warfare
JADO - joint all-domain operations
JSMF - joint SOF modular formations
JSOC - Joint Special Operations Command
JSOU - Joint Special Operations University
JTF-SREC - Joint Task Force-Special Reconnaissance and Enabling Command
JWC - joint warfighting concept
LSCO - large-scale combat operations
MAI - mobile adware identification
MARSOC - Marine Forces Special Operations Command
ML - machine learning
NATO - North Atlantic Treaty Organization
NCO - noncommissioned officer
NDS - National Defense Strategy
PME - professional military education
SEP - strategic enterprise plan
SME - subject matter expert
SOE - special operations enterprise
SOF - Special Operations Forces
STRATCOM - U.S. Strategic Command
UAS - unmanned aerial system
USASOC - United States Army Special Operations Command
USSOCOM - United States Special Operations Command
USSPACECOM - United States Space Command
UW - unconventional warfare

JSOU: Advancing the SOF Warrior Mind

Peace is achieved through strength. Strength is furthered through knowledge. And knowledge is advanced through research. For anyone involved or interested in SOF-related scholarship, the Special Operations Research Topics (SORT) 2026 includes an extensive range of nearly 50 topics submitted by 29 representatives, partners, and colleagues across the U.S. Special Operations Command (USSOCOM) enterprise.

Following the People I Win I Transform command initiative, topics this year include:

- **Management Systems for Next-Generation SOF Talent**
- **Continuous Learning and Adapting**
- **Strategic Sabotage**
- **Machine Learning and AI in Targeting**
- **Strategic Influence Through SOF**
- **Joint SOF Modular Formations**

This edition of the SORT offers peer-developed and peer-reviewed research themes that support USSOCOM enduring priorities and keep SOF thought leadership at the tip of the spear.

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