

Leverage Afghan Special Forces to Strengthen US Defense

Description

When a new American president takes office on January 20th, they will confront a dangerous national security environment shaped by Irregular Warfare (IW) challenges. From cyber warfare and gray zone conflicts to terrorism and insurgency, these challenges demand immediate, actionable solutions. In September, the Irregular Warfare Initiative invited readers to contribute fresh, pragmatic, and non-partisan policy recommendations to help shape the next administration's approach to these threats. In our first article, Connor T. Christensen calls for the U.S. military to incorporate ANASOC veterans into its special operations ranks.

The United States faces growing challenges in military recruitment and talent retention across both [traditional](#) and [Special Operations Forces \(SOF\)](#). [In 2022](#), the Army missed its recruitment quota by 15,000 soldiers, and in [2023](#) the shortfall was 10,000 soldiers.

2024 was the year the Army bandaged the problem by [slashing the quota](#) by 10,000, but a proactive partial remedy is all but begging policymakers to take action in the coming years of the new presidential administration.

The 2021 withdrawal from Afghanistan, now long-faded from media headlines, offers more than a series of past and present obstacles—it presents an opportunity to expand the military ranks and increase US defense capabilities. While much attention has been given to the [equipment abandoned](#) in the chaos of the Taliban's takeover, a critical resource was successfully brought to American soil: human capital.

Among the [122,000 Afghans](#) airlifted during the Kabul evacuation were [at least 250 highly skilled Afghan special forces soldiers](#), trained to the highest standards by the United States. Belonging to the Afghan National Army Special Operations Command (ANASOC), these elite soldiers [trained extensively at Camp Commando](#) in counterinsurgency, reconnaissance, advanced medical care, land navigation, and close air attack coordination.

They [frequently operated](#) alongside US Army Green Berets and Navy SEALs in some of Afghanistan's most dangerous provinces. Their direct combat experience and specialized skills—developed under the guidance of US SOF—made them invaluable assets during the war.

The US faces mounting irregular warfare challenges from China, Russia, and Iran as a critical military resource remains untapped: hundreds of elite Afghan special operations veterans whose battle-tested regional and martial expertise could fill critical gaps in military readiness and strengthen America's strategic posture.

All that stands in these operators' way of entering the ranks of the nation that trained them is a small investment in an expedited processing of residency status and the creation of a structured integration program. Extending veterans' benefits to them would also send a powerful message to future foreign allies, reaffirming America's commitment to its partners even after the conflict ends.

The Untapped Resource of Afghan Veterans

Many of these veterans resettled in the US, but others were not so fortunate. By 2022, Russia had already recognized the potential of these troops and [began recruiting](#) them for operations in Ukraine. While some allies, such as the UK, [hinted at integrating](#) Afghan special forces into their own ranks, they have yet to follow through. In stark contrast to Russia, the US has allowed the American-trained Afghans to [languish in kitchens, taxi cabs, and warehouses](#) inside its own borders.

There is a moral argument to be made about what the American people owe these Afghan veterans. Beyond this, however, lies a critical untapped resource at the Department of Defense's (DoD's) fingertips—one that could enhance mission capability in pursuit of US strategic interests. So many of these men and women are [eager](#) to trade their box cutters for rifles once again. They possess skills and knowledge that remain critically underutilized in the face of growing global challenges. Their integration into US forces could dramatically reduce the training time and costs typically required for irregular warfare units, and their linguistic compatibility and cultural familiarity are precisely the assets needed to address [critical capability gaps](#).

Military Readiness and Regional Threats

Even if ANASOC veterans do not initially qualify for SOF roles, their extensive combat experience could benefit conventional Army and Marine Corps combat and combat-support units. Their specialized expertise in asymmetric warfare tactics can bridge gaps in cultural understanding and improve operational readiness. By bolstering irregular warfare missions and providing a solution to the military's [recruitment challenges](#), their inclusion addresses urgent needs within the ranks of America's armed forces. The US must act decisively to integrate ANASOC veterans and leverage their skills to strengthen national security and prevent adversaries from exploiting their potential. Their extensive combat experience and cultural fluency in Dari, Pashto, and Central and South Asian

dynamics make them indispensable assets in the context of great power competition. ANASOC veterans, trained and tested alongside US SOF, bring advanced skills that can directly address threats posed by Iran, China, Russia, and the Taliban.

Iran, China, Russia, and Pakistan

Iran's use of proxy militias and influence operations across Afghanistan and the broader Middle East undermines regional stability from a different angle. The Quds Force, in particular, has long [leveraged Afghanistan's borders](#) to smuggle arms and support insurgent networks. ANASOC veterans have firsthand experience in countering [Iran-backed elements](#), making them valuable assets for US intelligence and operational efforts. They could play a critical role in mapping and disrupting [smuggling networks](#) that span Afghanistan's porous borders. Their operational history in [intercepting arms shipments](#) and [dismantling militia supply chains](#) would enhance US interdiction efforts beyond current capabilities.

Moreover, their insights into Iran's tactics—such as the use of cultural and religious ties to build proxy networks—could inform US strategies to counter Tehran's influence. By embedding these veterans within advisory teams or intelligence units, the US could strengthen local resistance to Iranian meddling, empowering communities to reject Tehran's overtures. Additionally, their [psychological operations](#) experience could be leveraged to undermine Iranian propaganda, promoting narratives that highlight the risks of aligning with Tehran while emphasizing the benefits of US partnerships.

China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) has solidified Beijing's economic and strategic foothold across Asia and the Middle East, using infrastructure projects to expand its influence in Afghanistan and Central Asia. Xi's strategy hinges on [establishing economic dependencies](#) and leveraging infrastructure investments for geopolitical influence. For instance, infrastructure projects such as roads, railways, and energy pipelines now link Central Asia to Chinese markets, increasing Beijing's economic leverage over these regions. ANASOC veterans, with their operational experience in these areas, [can provide critical insights](#) into how these projects affect local power dynamics, including tribal rivalries and governance structures. Their ability to engage with regional actors familiar with Chinese economic entanglements could help identify vulnerabilities in Beijing's strategy, enabling targeted US efforts to offer counter-incentives and foster alliances that resist Chinese influence.

Given Russia's reliance on [hybrid warfare](#) and [proxy strategies](#) in the Middle East and Central Asia, addressing these challenges requires a comprehensive approach—one where ANASOC veterans are uniquely positioned to identify and counter these proxy networks. In regions like Tajikistan and Turkmenistan, where [Moscow seeks to extend its influence](#), these veterans can amplify the

effectiveness of US efforts by cultivating local alliances and countering Russian attempts to co-opt tribal leaders or insurgent factions. Acting as a force multiplier, they enhance the operational effectiveness of US forces by leveraging their deep regional expertise, enabling smaller teams to achieve disproportionate outcomes in complex and contested environments.

Their technical expertise, especially in [air-ground coordination](#), is invaluable in contested areas where Russian advanced air-defense systems and electronic warfare capabilities are deployed. By integrating into US advisory teams, ANASOC veterans can provide actionable intelligence on these systems's operational patterns, enabling more effective countermeasures. Additionally, their ability to gather human intelligence through established rapport with local populations enhances US situational awareness in regions where traditional intelligence collection methods face limitations.

When it comes to the future of the US's relationship with the Taliban, Pakistan's relationship with the now-ruling party of Afghanistan and Pakistan's historical support for extremist groups present a persistent threat to regional stability and US security interests. For years, Pakistan's Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI) agency has been accused of providing covert support to the Taliban, facilitating safe havens, and enabling cross-border operations that have undermined Afghan sovereignty and contributed to ongoing violence in the region. [Reports indicate](#) that Pakistan allowed groups targeting Afghanistan, including the Afghan Taliban and the Haqqani Network, to operate from its territory. The ISI has also [supplied the Taliban](#) with funding, training, and weapons since their emergence in the 1990s, as part of a broader strategy to maintain influence over Afghanistan while countering Indian interests in the region.

These safe havens have [consistently allowed](#) the Taliban and Haqqani Network to regroup, plan, and launch attacks on Afghan and coalition forces, further destabilizing the region. This nexus of state and non-state actors continues to serve as a platform for terrorist activity, including threats to US allies and interests. The symbiotic relationship between the Taliban and ISI has also fueled violence within Pakistan itself, as militant groups frequently cross borders to carry out attacks. For instance, the Pakistani Taliban, a close ally of the Afghan Taliban, [remains active](#) in the region and has intensified operations within Pakistan, leading to significant casualties among security personnel.

ANASOC veterans are uniquely positioned to monitor and counter such activities. Their deep understanding of Taliban operational methods, combined with their linguistic fluency and cultural familiarity, enables them to identify patterns of movement and resource flows across the Afghanistan-Pakistan border. By integrating ANASOC veterans into US intelligence and advisory teams, the US could enhance its ability to detect and disrupt these networks. They can contribute to mapping out financial and logistical support mechanisms that sustain terrorist operations and provide actionable intelligence to mitigate these threats.

Moreover, ANASOC veterans' experience in counterinsurgency operations equips them to advise on strategies for neutralizing Taliban influence in rural and urban areas. Their ability to build relationships with local communities could be leveraged to counter extremist recruitment efforts and disrupt the propaganda that often accompanies Taliban operations. Embedded within US and allied operations, these veterans can help foster greater regional cooperation to address Pakistan's role in sustaining terrorism and push for accountability in its dealings with extremist groups.

Blueprint for Integrating ANASOC Veterans

To fully capitalize on the expertise of ANASOC veterans, the new administration must implement targeted policies that not only integrate these individuals into US military frameworks but also reaffirm America's commitment to its allies. Policies such as expedited green card pathways and structured enlistment programs would allow these veterans to contribute effectively while ensuring rigorous vetting standards are upheld.

Maximizing the contributions of ANASOC veterans requires coordinated efforts from stakeholders across the US SOF community and beyond. Partnering with advocacy organizations such as [Iraq and Afghanistan Veterans of America \(IAVA\)](#), [No One Left Behind \(NOLB\)](#), and [Honor the Promise](#) could help build bipartisan support for the ANASOC initiatives. These groups, with their established success in championing veterans' issues, are uniquely positioned to communicate the strategic and moral imperative of integrating ANASOC veterans. While the specific details of legislation should reflect input from the broader veteran and defense communities, a strong foundation for policy reforms could include the following:

Expedite Immigration Pathways: The first step in this effort requires action from both the executive and legislative branches. The President could issue an executive order directing the Department of Homeland Security (DHS) and US Citizenship and Immigration Services (USCIS) to prioritize Afghan SOF veterans within existing immigration frameworks, ensuring an expedited process for those with verified combat service.

At the same time, Congress should pass legislation formalizing this pathway, drawing inspiration from the [Military Accessions Vital to National Interest \(MAVNI\) program](#) (a program authorized by the US Department of Defense that allowed certain non-citizens with critical skills—such as medical expertise or foreign language proficiency—to enlist in the U.S. military in exchange for an expedited pathway to US citizenship) to establish clear eligibility criteria and funding for processing. Rigorous vetting measures, led by USCIS and supported by the DoD, would ensure security while prioritizing veterans with critical skills, reinforcing the immediate value they bring to national defense. Coordinated

action from these entities is essential to ensure timely and effective implementation.

Create a Structured Integration Program: The DoD, in collaboration with the US Army and Marine Corps, should lead the development and implementation of a specialized ANASOC Veterans Pathway Program to integrate Afghan veterans into US military frameworks. This initiative would mirror the intensive training models used by [US Army Security Force Assistance Brigades \(SFABs\)](#) (specialized US Army units trained to conduct security cooperation activities, such as advising and assisting partner nations in building and maintaining effective defense capabilities) and focus on providing targeted education in US military protocols, tactical communication systems, and irregular-warfare-specific skills.

To initiate this program, the DoD would need to allocate resources and establish training facilities within existing military education centers, such as the US Army John F. Kennedy Special Warfare Center and School. Additionally, service branches must coordinate recruitment and selection processes, ensuring that ANASOC veterans with verified combat experience are prioritized. Congress could play a supporting role by authorizing funding for this program and mandating its inclusion within broader military readiness initiatives. By spearheading this effort, the DoD would ensure these veterans are mission-ready and positioned to contribute effectively to current and future operations.

Enhance Intelligence Collaboration: Deploying ANASOC veterans in intelligence and advisory roles would allow the US to capitalize on their regional expertise. By coordinating efforts with agencies such as the Defense Intelligence Agency (DIA) and regional commands, these veterans could provide actionable insights into adversary operations, regional power dynamics, and cultural nuances that are otherwise difficult to access.

Expand Veterans Benefits: Revising eligibility criteria for Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) benefits to include ANASOC veterans would require action from Congress to amend existing legislation. This revision would establish a precedent similar to benefits extended to certain Vietnamese allies after the Vietnam War, such as the [Amerasian Homecoming Act](#). Congress would need to pass legislation explicitly authorizing Afghan SOF veterans to access VA benefits, including housing assistance, mental health services, and employment support. The VA, in coordination with the DoD, would implement these changes by verifying service records and combat roles of ANASOC veterans to ensure eligibility. The President could also direct the VA and DoD to develop an interim support framework, while Congress finalizes legislative actions. These resources are essential for ensuring the long-term readiness and stability of ANASOC veterans, enabling them to reintegrate effectively and contribute to US defense objectives through advisory roles, intelligence collaboration, or other critical capacities.

Conclusion

Integrating ANASOC veterans into US military and strategic roles is a strategic opportunity to strengthen the DoD's irregular warfare capabilities in critical regions such as Central and South Asia, and the Middle East. Their unmatched combat experience, cultural fluency, and specialized training make ANASOC veterans vital assets for addressing challenges posed by Iran, China, Russia, and Pakistan. By adopting thoughtful policies to support their integration—expedited immigration pathways, a structured integration program, and expanded veteran benefits—the new administration can fortify American irregular warfare capacity, honor alliances forged in conflict, and strengthen America's global leadership. This initiative is not just a strategic imperative but a reaffirmation of America's commitment to those who stood beside it in its most challenging missions.

At a time when military recruitment and retention face growing challenges, ANASOC veterans offer a rare solution: human capital already tested in the crucible of war. Their expertise is not just a resource for addressing global threats, but also a means of addressing the broader talent crisis within US forces. By embracing their potential, the US can rebuild critical capacities, reinvigorate its ranks, and show the world that it values the dedication of those who stand with her in battle. Integrating these veterans into American defense is an operational necessity and a testament to the enduring promise of partnership and shared sacrifice.

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The views expressed are those of the author(s) and do not reflect the official position of the Irregular Warfare Initiative, Princeton University's Empirical Studies of Conflict Project, the Modern War Institute at West Point, or the United States Government.

Main Image: 10th Special Operation Kandak Commandos conduct small arms barrier firing drills during a series of weapons proficiency ranges at Camp Pamir, Kunduz province, Afghanistan, Jan. 13, 2018. (US Air Force [photo](#) by Senior Airman Sean Carnes via DVIDS)

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