

## Maximizing The Indigenous Approach: Using Secondment to Enable Our Partners and Constrain Our Adversaries

### Description

**Editor's Note:** This article earned **first place** in the Irregular Warfare Initiative's 2025 Writing Contest, *Irregular Allies: Strengthening Regional Partnerships through Unconventional Means*. Authors were asked: *How can the United States and its partners use irregular warfare to strengthen security cooperation, build trust, and enhance resilience among Indo-Pacific nations—particularly those with limited conventional military capacity?*

The following piece rose to the top of our selection panel for its originality, depth, and clear policy relevance. It makes a compelling case that U.S. Special Operations Command should adopt a secondment model of advising, embedding small teams of SOF with Indo-Pacific partners for extended tours. *We have lightly edited the piece after its selection.*

*For the other winning articles in our contest, look back to our winners' announcement [here](#).*

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American Special Operations Forces (SOF) tasked with Irregular Warfare [activities](#) in the Indo-Pacific have an engagement problem. Deployed SOF are expected to illuminate irregular threats, deter China, and increase [burden sharing](#) among Allies and Partners—all in [six months](#) or less. At the same time, we often deploy too many of what is an extremely scarce resource: dozens of SOF when a handful will do. Together, this results in bilateral relationships with insufficient depth from revolving partnerships in the best case, and sporadic acquaintances in the worst. Both miss opportunities to deepen American influence and leave open the door for the Chinese to supplant the United States as the partner of choice.

It doesn't have to be this way. Instead of trading expertise for expediency, U.S. Special Operations Command (USSOCOM) should embrace a secondment model of advising that maximizes the utility of our greatest asset—our people—by embedding small contingents of SOF to live and work alongside our Indo-Pacific partner's premier SOF units for extended tours. By distilling the indigenous [approach](#) at the core of Army Special Operations culture into its purest form, the

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Department of War can deepen the reliability of our partners, frustrate Chinese military influence, and create a forward-first culture that creates outsized returns at lower cost.

### **Time under partnership**

The concept is simple. Arguably the most important factor in SOF advising is [time under partnership](#) with our NCO corps. Unfortunately, the current model of rotational deployments and sporadic training exchanges results in re-deploying our operators just as they reach their most productive stride. The secondment approach would fix this by lengthening and deepening our engagement. Current regulation allows for accompanied tours of up to [three years](#), and the SOF enterprise should strive for exactly that.

The model would place one to two senior NCOs or warrant officers, together with a major, in a critical role within a partner nation's organization. These volunteer teams, further refined through a command select process, would work directly with the partner force, from their location, on their schedule, for mutually agreed priorities. Secondment is distinct from an embassy tour. These embedded teams must rigorously avoid devolving into a coordinating entity and instead remain in the field, at the range, and in the schoolhouses where competent, lethal partners are forged—partners that are capable of operating independently or alongside US SOF.

Importantly, teams of three are too small to be socially insular, encouraging cultural integration alongside our hosts. This embeddedness drives the cultural understanding and operational insights that help define a theory of success for U.S. interests, relying on ground truth observations to identify the art of the possible.

### **Limiting Adversary Access**

The secondment model isn't just about building proficient partners; it's a deliberate strategy to frustrate Chinese influence. By firmly integrating our SOF partners into an ecosystem of elite units, we effectively remove a key tool from China's competition chessboard. Asymmetric strategies can be difficult for a superpower, but they don't have to be. If we recognize professionalism as a weapon of influence, we can fully leverage it at almost no cost.

While our placement beside our partners limits adversary access during the duty day, deploying our families allows for deeper, more resilient [social capital](#). The comingling of families during special occasions or holidays create bonds that are likely to be stronger and more enduring than those relying on professional exchange alone. In this scenario, going native is a feature, not a bug. By becoming the deeply embedded, indispensable partner of choice in the Indo-Pacific, we reinforce our best organizational traits, demonstrate commitment to critical partners, and at the same time [proactively](#)

[disrupt](#) our adversaries's preferred courses of action.

## Conclusion

A secondment model represents a practical approach to leverage SOF's greatest strength to create an archipelago of deeply embedded partnerships across Asia. Our partners will continue to rely on SOF as flexible, affordable military innovators. USSOCOM should support the disciplined initiative required to evolve our approach, integrating with these teams for maximum effect. By recognizing time under partnership as the most important variable in building elite units, we can refocus on the task and optimize our approach through secondments.

This is not a new problem. At SOF Week 2024, Admiral(ret) McRaven said that [inaction](#) was the primary impediment to building international SOF relationships. While strengthening our international partnerships is an evergreen challenge, we must recognize both the urgency of the threat and the critical opportunity to act in support of our nation's primary foreign theater. Fortunately, a secondment construct is small, supportable within existing authorities, and scalable if successful. Given the stakes inherent in countering China and the global demand for SOF, distilling the indigenous approach into its purest form through secondment is a worthy pursuit.

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*Main Image: Defender Pacific 21: Special Forces Soldiers conduct maneuvers with JGSDF in Guam. Photo courtesy of [DVIDS](#).*

*The views expressed are those of the author 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.*

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