

How to Fix the Joint Combined Exchange Training Program

Description

This Irregular Warfare Initiative article was originally posted through our partner organization, the Modern War Institute at West Point.

At precisely 2:30 a.m., a combined team of hackers from the United States and one of its partner nations launched a denial-of-service attack against the adversary's cellular provider. For more than fifteen minutes, cell signal was disabled in the center of the ruined city.

The radio in the basement crackled to life. "Two tanks come! Four trucks!" came an excited voice in broken English from the western security position. An American Special Forces soldier, crouched underneath the sill of a blown-out window checked his watch 2:32 a.m. "Perfect timing!" he thought, and he whispered as much to the guerrilla leader, who keyed his own radio three times in deliberate succession. Tongues of fire leapt from basement windows hundreds of meters down the street, as antitank missiles screamed toward their target, impacting the lead tank with dull thuds. Machine guns in darkened windows all along the block began to shoot at the trucks in short bursts.

The adversary, with its cell phones ineffective and unable to use line-of-site radio because of the interference of locally positioned guerrilla jammers, launched a flare into the air that served as a distress signal. The adversary's small unmanned aerial vehicles spotted the flare and signaled to two attack helicopters to cautiously approach. As the helicopters drew near, unable to see the trapped convoy without flying directly over it, teams operating shoulder-fired antiaircraft missiles from rooftops several blocks away opened fire, destroying both helicopters—the real objective of the ambush. Immediately after firing, the antiaircraft and antitank teams disassembled their weapons and melted into the city.

This scene, entirely fictional, portrays American special operations forces (SOF) operating alongside indigenous forces in a complex, multidomain, urban ambush. With the right weapons systems and terrain on which to practice, any ground force could train to conduct a baited ambush of enemy aircraft. What differentiates SOF from a conventional force is the requirement that SOF be able to advise a partner force of foreign, irregular fighters to conduct the ambush itself.

This is no easy task, and it requires extensive training. Today, one of the most important forms such training takes are Joint Combined Exchange Training (JCET) exercises, in which US special operators

train alongside host nation forces. [US Special Operations Command \(SOCOM\) plans to conduct 149 JCETs in 2022, at a cost of approximately \\$55 million.](#) These missions provide critical overseas training opportunities for SOF to work with foreign partners, something that cannot be replicated at home.

But SOCOM's approach to implementing the thirty-year-old program needs reform. At the moment, it affords participating SOF little flexibility to organize for training in a way that enhances their readiness to fight peer adversaries. SOCOM should avoid a narrow, overly conservative approach to the [statute pertaining to JCETs](#), and instead should seek the maximum amount of flexibility within the law. Congressional stakeholders should direct a study of the JCET program to ensure that the law, as written, is suitable to contemporary US military and foreign policy requirements. And they should make sure the worldwide training program complements other efforts to engage with foreign partner forces. JCETs can play an important role in helping SOF prepare for a fight against a great power rival—but only if the program is reformed.

What is the JCET?

The modern JCET program [dates back to 1991](#). That year, Congress clarified the Department of Defense's (DOD) authority to spend training funds in connection with SOF training overseas with friendly foreign forces, as long as the primary purpose was to train U.S. forces. Thirty years later, the program remains generally unchanged. A small element of Army, Navy, Air Force, or Marine special operators deploy to a partner nation where they train alongside a special operations unit from the host nation. The training is tactical in nature, usually around one month long, and typically focuses on an exchange—the US element provides training to the partner force in one area, while the host nation SOF reciprocates in another.

According to [the governing statute](#), the primary purpose of a JCET is to train the participating US special operations force. For select US SOF, whose work entails advising foreign partner forces, this overseas exposure meets a critical training requirement. It is one thing to train unilaterally to perform a task; it is another thing to train and execute an operation in a foreign country, with and through a foreign force. Even an immersive exercise in the United States, using American military or civilian role players to simulate the foreign forces, fails to recreate the real linguistic, cultural, and logistical obstacles that SOF must negotiate.

Although the primary purpose of the JCET is to train US SOF, the engagements have ancillary benefits for the host nation SOF partner in terms of building proficiency. Improving their expertise and deepening US relationships with these elements generally support US objectives in a given country.

What is Wrong with JCETs Today?

JCETs are intended to provide realistic training to US special operations forces. But SOCOM's strict interpretation of the law's language prevents SOF from exercising the flexibility, in terms of organization, to train as they would fight. Units are unable to "task organize" or "tailoring teams to meet the specific mission requirements and the overall training objective. Instead, they can only deploy with their organic teams—the members of the unit who are permanently assigned.

According to one of SOCOM's [SOF Truths](#), "Most special operations require non-SOF support." This truth, [first articulated in 1987](#), is as true today as it has ever been. SOCOM's components envision embedding information, intelligence, and cyber-related capabilities, to name a few, within SOF units of action—creating, [in the words of US Army Special Operations Command, a "special operations combined arms team"](#). To train to fight peer adversaries, SOF must maximize every opportunity to employ these "cross-functional, cohesive, task organized" sorts of teams. Returning to the earlier fictional example, a future battlefield could require a SOF team to integrate an air defense team, a cybersecurity expert, a civil engineer, and an electronic warfare team, for instance. Under SOCOM's current practices, none of these people can participate in a JCET.

Within those teams, the SOF label extends only to those servicemembers who are specially selected and trained as special operators. (Under the [relevant statute](#), the secretary of defense makes this designation.) This division is necessary because [SOCOM exercises service-like responsibility for manning and professional development of these men and women](#), but not over the servicemembers with conventional military occupational specialties who are assigned to special operations units. Though they receive on the job training, the supporting cast within any given special operations unit—supply sergeants, personnel clerks, and intelligence analysts, for instance—are not special operators.

This delineation of who qualifies as a special operator, combined with a narrow reading of the law regarding JCETs, creates an inflexible approach toward tailoring organizations to encompass both organic and non-assigned servicemembers. While it is unlikely that the incorporation of supply or administrative personnel into a SOF detachment's organization would be a critical requirement for a realistic exercise against a peer adversary, the inclusion of nonorganic teammates—including intelligence specialists, chemical experts, fire support planners, and electronic warfare specialists—might all be critical.

In addition to diminishing training realism, the inflexibility of JCET authorities deprives junior SOF leaders of key developmental opportunities. One of the many issues cited in [a 2020 comprehensive review](#) conducted by SOCOM was an absence of opportunities for officer and enlisted leaders at the

unit-of-action level (principally leaders in the grades of O-3 and E-8) to integrate with the US joint force and develop the baseline knowledge to execute staff functions. Constraining JCET participation to organic units of action deprives these junior leaders of the opportunity to develop this sort of proficiency during a major training event.

Other Vehicles for Training and Engagement

To be sure, there are other mechanisms for engagement between US SOF and their foreign counterparts, some of them theater specific. Exercises under the [US chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff's Joint Exercise Program](#), commonly referred to as JCS exercises, allow the US military to train and engage with partner nation forces under different statutory authorities. JCS exercises range considerably in size and scope, and while there are no limitations on who can participate, JCS exercises can be less flexible than JCETs for the participating SOF unit: SOF units may be constrained by larger conventional force headquarters's umbrella organizations and their intent for specific exercises.

[European Deterrence Initiative](#) funding, meanwhile, helps support US SOF training and engagement with regional partners. This includes participation in larger conventional force exercises, as well as efforts to build partner capacity. While the European Deterrence Initiative's budgetary language is broad and gives US SOF multiple opportunities to train and engage with partner forces, its Asia-Pacific counterpart allows far less wiggle room. The [Pacific Deterrence Initiative](#) is extremely [platform-focused](#), with more than 95 percent of the \$5 billion budget funding research, development, and procurement of surface ships, aircrafts, and missiles for the Navy. There is no mention of SOF in the Pacific Deterrence Initiative. The only explicit reference to engagement with partner forces comes in the form of a \$500,000 allotment to the US Marine component using two JCS exercises and a service exercise to demonstrate rapid deployment.

The distinction between the opportunities that the European and Pacific Deterrence Initiatives afford to SOF may be indicative of an abundance of JCETs in Asia. SOCOM does not generally publish the annual number of JCETs conducted per region, but in [2018 US SOF conducted seventy-seven JCETs in the Indo-Pacific](#); it is highly likely that US SOF conduct more JCETs in the Indo-Pacific than in any other single region. As a result, US SOF working in the Indo-Pacific—the Department of Defense's [priority theater](#), given its focus on China as the [pacing threat](#)—have the greatest overall interest in SOCOM taking a more flexible approach to the JCET program.

Both JCS exercises and the European Deterrence Initiative provide SOF with opportunities to conduct overseas engagements with partner forces, but the existence of either program does not excuse SOCOM from the requirement to more flexibly implement the JCET program. JCETs are unique in the

prioritization of training value for US SOF; if SOCOM is serious about preparing the force for [contests against peer adversaries](#), the command should maximize every opportunity to train alongside partner forces.

Flexibility is Key

Given the diminished requirements for SOF in Iraq and Syria and the wholesale US withdrawal from Afghanistan, JCETs may begin to amount to a greater proportion of worldwide SOF deployments than at any other point in the last two decades. Leaders of the Senate Armed Services Committee's Subcommittee on Emerging Threats and Capabilities and the House's Armed Services Committee's Subcommittee on Intelligence and Special Operations should exercise oversight over the JCET program by initiating another study, in the tradition of [the 1999 report that remains the most comprehensive study of JCETs](#).

Such a report should ask three principal questions: First, does the JCET program continue to meet SOF training requirements? Second, is US SOF training the appropriate prioritization for these missions or should geographic combatant commands (the force employers) have more agency in determining the focus of participating SOF units? Third, how does the JCET program complement other forms of SOF engagement with foreign partners? This analysis, directed and sponsored by stakeholders in Congress, can guide the evolution of the JCET program—perhaps specifically articulating the potential for non-SOF participation in training.

In the interim, SOCOM should interpret the law to afford maximum flexibility to the elements and the theater special operations commands who coordinate and execute the JCETs themselves. According to the letter of the law, training must focus on participating US SOF's mission-essential tasks. And [the law](#) stipulates that SOCOM can authorize payment for "expenses of training special operations forces assigned to that command in conjunction with training, and training with, armed forces and other security forces of a friendly foreign country," as well as for the "expenses of deploying such special operations forces for that training." Since integration of select non-SOF servicemembers can be critical to training mission-essential tasks, the expense of deploying these servicemembers would be in accordance with the statute. This may require SOCOM to expand its internal apportionment of operations and maintenance funds toward the JCET program, at least in select cases.

Lest this flexibility lead to a run on SOCOM's bank, the inclusion of non-SOF servicemembers in JCETs should remain an exception—a requirement validated by Title 10 chain of command (the force provider), and with the concurrence of the theater special operations command (the force employer). The men and women in the staffing channels for these exceptions must be mindful that the training requirements for SOF to prepare for twenty-first-century war may warrant augmentation of non-SOF

elements.

JCETs are not the only model of SOF training and engagement overseas. But the program affords SOF small-unit commanders the unique ability to tailor their training to meet real-world requirements, while building relationships with foreign partners. Until and unless congressional stakeholders, with SOCOM advice, craft a different model, JCETs present indispensable training opportunities. Working within the law, SOCOM should ensure that JCET guidance is as flexible as today's units of action require.

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Main Image: US Army Special Forces trainer in Panama explains range procedures to Panamanian counterterrorism security forces (Staff Sgt. Osvaldo Equite, US Army)

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