

## SOF in Competition Special Project Announcement

### Description

*Editor's Note: The Irregular Warfare Initiative proudly announces the SOF in Competition Project. The intent is to coalesce the community of SOF policymakers, researchers, and practitioners to understand the role of SOF in addressing contemporary and future national security challenges. The project explores the intersection among irregular warfare, SOF, and broader national security challenges. With a focus on current events and their underlying historical logics, scholarly theories and evidence-based findings on the role of SOF in national security, and applied doctrinal concepts we aim to contextualize the role of SOF in the evolving realities of irregular warfare and modern conflict. We invite your participation and engagement as we embark on this project. If you would like to contribute to the SOF Special Project, please submit proposals and ideas to [adam.darnley-stuart@irregularwarfare.org](mailto:adam.darnley-stuart@irregularwarfare.org) with the subject line "Project SOF Submission / Proposal".*

## SOF Professionals Need an Intellectual Home

Since President George W. Bush's declaration of the Global War on Terror (GWOT) in 2001, Special Operations Forces (SOF) have been focused on combating violent non-state actors. SOF excelled in the GWOT conflicts against networks like al-Qaeda and ISIS, resulting in a rise in prestige and national resources as they tackled threats with a high degree of flexibility and effectiveness.

However, the GWOT is over. Western governments are increasingly focused on the return of great power competition. The former focus on countering violent non-state actors coupled with the swift re-introduction of great power competition may have unintentionally dislocated SOF from contemporary deterrence strategies. This rapid shift has led to important questions for the SOF and broader national security communities.

Most pressing: what role does SOF have in great power competition? However, other questions require attention. How should SOF balance between non-state threats and directly confronting peer competitors? How should SOF capabilities and organization evolve to address changes to the threat landscape, and also to rapidly changing technologies? What is the role of SOF in large-scale combat operations? How should SOF integrate with conventional forces and what role might they play in evolved approaches to CIMIC? And many more.

These questions are not without consequence. Some argue SOF is irrelevant in strategic competition, with the U.S. Army going so far as to cut SOF manning and resources. Others argue that SOF will play a larger role in strategic competition, particularly as nuclear-armed great powers historically have sought to attack each other indirectly through proxy conflicts—where SOF play a key role. Force postures are being resourced and doctrine is being revised based on these competing perspectives.

The SOF in Competition Project will provide a space for the community of SOF professionals—researchers and practitioners—to explore and address the big questions. This space is needed so we can grow as a profession, build professional networks, and contribute to advancing Western national security interests.

The SOF in Competition Project aims to understand SOF’s value proposition in great power competition. It will serve as a rallying point for various SOF stakeholders to convene, network, and drive public dialogue. Working together, they can advance the collective understanding of SOF in areas ranging from phase zero operations, to SOF’s role in deterrence, and furthermore, SOF’s continuing mission of addressing persistent non-state actor threats—and beyond.

## **SOF in Competition Objectives**

This project serves as a flagpole for all SOF professionals and researchers from around the world to coalesce, discuss, and learn. There are three primary objectives to support the SOF community:

1. Mobilize the SOF professional community of scholars and practitioners.
2. Drive public dialogue on the role of SOF in competition.
3. Invest in SOF leaders—both practitioners and researchers.

These objectives will be accomplished through multiple activities, including but not limited to publishing written works by members of the community, hosting episodes on the Irregular Warfare Podcast dedicated to these topics, and running public events (virtual and in person) that bring the SOF professional community together.

If you are a SOF practitioner or researcher, this is your platform and community. All topics relevant to SOF are in play, and all perspectives are welcome. We grow through challenging extant assumptions, and through introducing evidence-based rigor to our understanding of SOF. There are no sacred cows if we are to grow as a profession!

To launch this endeavor, we will provide initial areas of focus. For the inaugural year, we will focus on three core SOF topics:

1. Resilience, Resistance, and Unconventional Warfare (UW)
2. Grey Zone, Influence, and Military Information Support Operations (MISO)
3. Counter-Proliferation of WMD (CP-WMD)

These three missions have been selected because they form the core value proposition that sets SOF apart from any other government agency or department. They are uniquely SOF activities because they generate strategic effects by design and transcend any single phase of the campaigning cycle. Furthermore, these three activities form a SOF mission eco-system that, if orchestrated effectively, generates strategic impacts greater than the sum of its parts.

## Resilience, Resistance, and Unconventional Warfare

*“Executing actions to enable a resistance movement or insurgency that is aiming to coerce, disrupt, or overthrow a government or occupying power”*

Resilience is the building block for resistance operations. Resistance can deter and is an effective way to apply increasing costs on an adversary who has not been deterred. The [Swiss](#) during World War II had a pre-planned, mature concept of national defense that included key variables of defense in depth, pre-prepared demolition of mountainous lines of communication (holding at risk the key assets Hitler wished to seize), and a mobilized population. This concept deterred Hitler from invasion in 1940 and again in 1943—the expected costs of an invasion were too great given Axis concurrencies.

This is important in the context of competition and conflict in both the Indo-Pacific and on the Russian periphery. SOF are postured to play a key role in building resistance capabilities with our Allies and partners at risk of great power invasion. What [unconventional warfare](#) activities, or special warfare activities in Australian SOF lexicon, should a coalition of SOF countries be supporting in the region to build resistance capabilities, and what should those resistance capabilities look like?

## Grey Zone, Influence, and Military Information Support Operations (MISO) — The Influencers

*Planned activities aimed at conveying specific, pre-selected information to foreign audiences. Such information is often aimed at influencing the emotions, motives, objective reasoning, or behavior of foreign audiences, groups, individuals, or sometimes governments in a manner favorable to US or host-nation objectives.*

Since 2012, the use and misuse of the information environment, integrated or aligned to military operations, has increased in breadth, speed, and scope. It is a focused effort for protagonists seeking to fracture the will to fight and degrade the legitimacy of opponents. Orchestrated disinformation and propaganda exploiting fractures and concerns in US and Australian society, regional relationships and alliances identified by an adversary will be the norm, not the exception, along the road to war. It will set the context and understanding for the fight to come. It will also be exploited during conflict making exaggerated claims supported by manufactured evidence.

The struggle for dominance in the information environment will play out globally, inviting greater participation and developing its own disordered ecosystem, in and through which SOF must harness and maneuver to sustain whole of government legitimacy. SOF are best placed to lead and integrate the information fight during competition due to their placement, access, and expertise in the human domain.

## Counter-Proliferation of WMD

*Activities to support US government efforts to curtail the development, possession, proliferation, and use of chemical, biological, radiological, and nuclear (CBRN) weapons by governments and non-state actors.*

In 2022, Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine, after eight years of conflict, renewed debate on the efficacy of nuclear deterrence. The debate between Cold War scholars and contemporary practitioners has enabled limitations previously ignored in deterrence literature to be re-litigated. Russia's invasion of Ukraine demonstrated that deterrence did not work.

Putin's nuclear saber-rattling against the backdrop of Ukraine's voluntary handback of nuclear weapons in 1994-96 highlights a significant problem within the current security environment. Will the invasion of Ukraine encourage the retention of nuclear capabilities? Will states pursue nuclear weapons as national security policies shift based on China-US tensions in the Indo-Pacific region? Regardless of how the proliferation of WMD progresses, SOF are best placed to directly support governments with the ability to counter competitor proliferation efforts within a strategic deterrence framework.

## Call to Action

The transition from the GWOT to strategic competition presents many questions about how SOF should adapt and what role it should play in the broader national security apparatuses of Western nations. There already exists a global community of SOF researchers and practitioners poised to explore these questions to advance the profession. The SOF in Competition Project provides a platform for this community to coalesce, explore the role of SOF, and invest in leaders and the broader community. If you are a SOF professional, this is your platform. We very much welcome article submissions, ideas for events and partnerships, podcast topics, and volunteers to join the community. Please email us to explore how to get involved.

The need for this dialogue is real and growing. The consequences are real. We look forward to building this community together!

Adam Darnley-Stuart is a national security professional with twenty yearsâ?? experience within Australian Special Operations and the National Intelligence Community. As a graduate of the Royal Military College Duntroon, Adam has extensive operational experience across the Middle East and Indo-Pacific focusing on counter-proliferation, unconventional warfare, and cognitive warfare.

Dr. Ian Langford, DSC and Two Bars is a retired senior officer of the Australian Army. He is a Distinguished Graduate of the United States Marine Corps Command and Staff College and the School of Advanced Warfighting. Ian was the Director General Future Land Capability for the Australian Army from 2018 until 2022; and previous to that was the acting head of Land Capability.

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

*Main Image: Marine Raider nighttime training (US Marine Corp, [Instagram](#))*

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### Date Created

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