

## The SOF Truths: A Different Perspective on Security Force Assistance

### Description

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

US special operations forces train, advise, and assist [in at least sixty countries](#) every day, preparing allies and partners for conflict. The [SOF Truths](#) guide these special operations units; every special operator knows them by heart. The SOF Truths reside within a unique culture set by the [SOF imperatives](#) and [SOF's core activities](#).

Special operations forces play a critical role as part of the joint force's [forward presence and expeditionary capability](#) within multidomain operations. Army special operations forces [advance partnerships, influence adversarial behavior, execute special operations, and respond to crisis](#), often before conflict begins. Leaning forward requires nuanced and critical thinking to prioritize limited special operations forces across the combatant commands.

But while the SOF Truths guide individual units and special operators, they should play a much broader role in the policymaking process. Planners should use them to provide a creative framework for special operations employment. By considering the SOF Truths during planning decisions, SOF's [tailorable, scalable, and purpose-built](#) units will lead more irregular warfare efforts across the Department of Defense's integrated deterrence efforts.

*SOF Truth #1: Humans are more important than hardware.*

Policymakers should align US SOF with partners who invest in their people. The United States maintains its strategic advantage with the right [personal, institutional, or programmatic relationships](#) among partners and allies. Partner-nation special operations forces trained by the United States are adept at weathering crises, be they [assaults from the Islamic State](#) or [invasions from great powers](#). US SOF partners succeed during crisis because they have internalized and sustain the rigors of special operations training and culture.

Ideally, willing and able countries align with the United States against mutual adversaries like China, Russia, Iran, North Korea, or violent extremists. As documented by retired Lieutenant General Mark Hertling, former commander of US Army Europe, US Army [Special Forces's investment in Ukraine](#) is

paying strategic dividends. US special operators cannot create SOF everywhere; the key lies within a willing and able partner.

*SOF Truth #2: Quality is better than quantity.*

The employment of US special operations is improved when partnered forces have the right equipment at the right time with the right training. While special operators provide expertise in the human domain, foreign military sales [provide the tools](#) for partner-nation forces to deter or defeat their adversaries. Providing quality equipment requires synchronization of the security cooperation triad: [SOF assistance](#), [defense attachés](#), and [Office of Defense Cooperation initiatives](#).

[Foreign military sales](#) cover a [wide range of equipment](#), [schooling](#), and [training opportunities](#). Under the control of both the State Department and the Department of Defense, the [best](#) foreign military sales provide consistent delivery of what partnered nations want *and* need, while reinforcing that the United States is the preferred partner of choice.

Policymakers and engagement managers should compare the prioritized regions in the 2022 National Defense Strategy with current crises and adversary actions to determine multiyear investments in robust and capable partners.

*SOF Truth #3: SOF cannot be mass produced.*

SOF personnel are carefully selected and then rigorously trained. The United States should apply the same scrutiny when selecting partners abroad.

Ukraine provides a perfect case of successful SOF investment. There, [previous instruction from Green Berets](#) in marksmanship and antitank gunnery is [paying obvious dividends](#). The time for creating competent Ukrainian SOF passed when Russia invaded on February 24, 2022. Thankfully, soldiers from 1st Special Forces Command had been in Ukraine for [nearly a decade](#), establishing training centers, initiating training cadres, and building a capability that is disrupting the much larger Russian army.

Just as SOF cannot be mass produced in the United States, policymakers should not expect SOF to be mass produced in partner nations, like the Philippines or Ukraine. Investment of security force assistance professionals and equipment, [especially in a new partner](#), is a multiyear, possibly [multidecade](#), effort. Policymakers should [employ SOF with a long-term vision](#) nested with the National Defense Strategy and with resources that are robust enough to weather changes in national priorities.

*SOF Truth #4: Competent SOF cannot be created after emergencies occur.*

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Just as US special operations forces spend years honing their craft, partnered special operations forces cannot be created after an emergency.

Recent case studies show how employing SOF prior to conflict supports US national interests. For example, the Lebanese Armed Forces defeated ISIS in 2017, expelling the terrorist group from Lebanon. [US security cooperation efforts](#), combining training, equipment, and Joint Combined Exchange Training (JCET) since 2006, played a role in [Lebanon's victory](#). Likewise, decades-long US Army Special Forces engagement with [El Salvador](#), [Colombia](#), and [Thailand](#) show the value of creating competent partner-nation SOF before emergencies occur.

However, special operations forces are not a panacea. To be effective, SOF should be deployed into a struggling country or training with that country's armed forces well ahead of a crisis, not afterward. Wars in Iraq, Afghanistan, and Yemen highlight the risks of attempting to create competent SOF in theater after emergencies occur. While brave, courageous, and competent, [Afghan National Army commandos](#) could not overcome Afghan national policy, the inability to resupply their formations, or a determined enemy with mass and interior lines. Likewise, [the Iraqi Counterterrorism Service](#) suffered [40 percent casualties](#) fighting the Islamic State. Effective and sustainable strategies will see special operations forces deployed ahead of crises with long-term plans supporting security cooperation and integrated country strategies.

Policymakers employing SOF should invest appropriately across potential conflict zones to [set the theater](#) for potential contingencies before emergencies occur.

*SOF Truth #5: Most special operations require non-SOF support.*

Just as US special operations forces require administrative, logistics, and communications support, the same is true of our allies and partners. If US special operators aim to increase partner-nation SOF quality, the conventional forces in those militaries must be improved through comprehensive training and changes to US special operations policy.

Fortunately, conventional advisors and joint exercises can help the United States' conventional military partners improve. [Security force assistance brigades](#) advise foreign militaries at the battalion level and above and bring dedicated sustainment advisors. Likewise, the [Joint Chiefs of Staff's Joint Exercise Program](#) provides consistent episodic engagement for battle staff training at the brigade level and above.

Creating non-SOF support for partner-nation SOF also requires US policymakers to [create flexibility in US Special Operations Command's JCET program](#) to deploy non-special operations specialties

in support of US objectives. For example, North Korea maintains a [credible chemical weapons capability](#) but under the current construct US Army chemical specialists, even from within the Special Forces groups, are prohibited from deploying on a JCET to train alongside South Korean forces. If such niche specialties are deployed with SOF, then USSOCOM will meet one of its [strategic efforts](#) by deploying enablers to “integrate and synchronize into [SOF] operations non-lethal and other enabling capabilities.”

### **Call to Action: Use the SOF Truths as an Employment Framework**

Special operations forces make [necessary and unique](#) contributions to national defense. Using the SOF Truths as a framework for special operations employment ensures special operators are “[specially employed](#),” and maintains boundaries on what they should and should not do.

With the releases of the 2022 National Defense Strategy and National Security Strategy, a new framework for special operations employment can ensure flexibility and resilience [in complex environments across the conflict continuum](#). Policymakers and engagement planners must choose capable nations to receive special operations security force assistance prior to conflict. Capable partner forces, in need of SOF assistance, enable [integrated deterrence](#) alongside the US joint force. Rigor is required to ensure SOF support has a long-term vision capable of crossing administrations, as irregular warfare is a multiyear effort.

A return to the indirect approach requires patience on the part of both policymakers and practitioners. Thoughtful use of the SOF Truths as criteria for special operations employment would ensure the quality, competency, and robustness required of [USSOCOM’s vision](#).

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*The views expressed are those of the author and do not reflect the official position of the United States Military Academy, Department of the Army, or Department of Defense.*

*Main Image: Ukrainian Special Operations Forces and U.S. Army Special Forces Soldiers move across an objective during exercise Combined Resolve XI at the Joint Multinational Readiness Center in Hohenfels, Germany, December 10, 2018. (1st Lt. Benjamin Haulenbeek, US Army)*

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