

Solving for the Missing Element of Maritime Campaigning

Description

Editor's note: This article is part of [Project Maritime](#), which explores modern challenges and opportunities in the maritime dimension at the intersection of irregular warfare and strategic competition. We warmly invite your participation and engagement as we embark on this project. Please send submissions to submissions@irregularwarfare.org with the subject line "Project Maritime Submission" and follow us on X (formerly Twitter) [@proj_maritime](#).

After 20 years of land-centric counterterrorism, special operations service components are beginning to [return to the sea](#) for strategic competition. This pivot by Naval Special Warfare Command (NSW) and Marine Corps Forces Special Operations Command (MARSOC) is sensible, as both elements consider the [needs](#) of the larger fleet and the [realities](#) of warfighting in the largely maritime Indo-Pacific region.

But a disconcerting gap is forming within the Joint Force for campaigning in the maritime domain: one that misses its [human element](#), an area where special operations forces (SOF) have gained hard-earned expertise. A human element to maritime campaigning—including working through traditional and irregular maritime partners—[has not been a primary focus](#) of naval special operators who typically focus on unilateral direct action raids and more common "Visit, Board, Search, and Seizure" (VBSS) activities at sea and in the littorals.

This emerging gap resembles an easily avoidable mistake in baseball: when a [shallow pop-fly](#) falls between three players who assume the other will make the catch. Baseball's "Bermuda Triangle" parallels continue in maritime campaigning, where NSW maintains specialized maritime capabilities, but not a human-centric focus. Meanwhile, MARSOC and the U.S. Coast Guard are [somewhat proficient in both](#), but they suffer from limited resourcing and competing responsibilities. Finally, although Army Special Forces are experts in [human aspects](#) of military operations, Army SOF's [maritime capabilities](#) have faced neglect despite [a rich history](#) of maritime operations dating to World War II.

However, the [importance](#) of global waterways on regional populations and international trade underscores the urgency for forces and capabilities trained to engage in this space to fill this gap. As with the baseball metaphor, the Coast Guard and SOF components are close to the problem—but

neither is currently positioned to make the decisive play in [human contests](#) or struggles of legitimacy by applying cultural understanding, local relationships, historical knowledge, language skills, and other population-centric competencies among seafaring populations.

Demand for these sorts of forces has been high across multiple combatant commands, but the Navy disbanded one force element that might have addressed the challenge, the Navy's maritime civil affairs teams, [in 2014](#), right as maritime gray-zone coercion was [ramping up](#). Before discussing [the use of fiscal authorities](#) to support irregular warfare and maritime campaigning, there is a need to ensure the U.S. fields a force that is organized, trained, and equipped with the basics to foster the resilience of maritime partners facing gray-zone threats to their territorial waters and sovereign interests.

An Unconventional Look at Maritime Training

Look to the [Project Maritime Deep Dives](#) for a compelling reason to address the human element in maritime campaigning. From illegal fishing, piracy, smuggling, use and misuse of the commons, and even bullying behaviors that threaten human security at sea, the need is clear for a population-centric campaigning mindset. This approach differs from the platform-centric [material school](#) approach that traditionally dominates naval discourse and emphasizes a technological mindset and engineering-based thinking in the face of naval challenges. Today's increasing maritime complexity calls for scrutinizing maritime challenges through a human lens, one that emphasizes partner-focused problem solving and the local population. Before [enlisting the world's fishermen](#) to take personal risks and report or track illicit activity, there must be consideration on how to build rapport, understand the local population and their motivations, identify incentives to cooperate, and only then begin to work together towards common interests.

One Special Forces course quickly comes to mind to bridge this gap: Robin Sage, the culmination exercise for Army Special Forces. Earning the coveted Green Beret [hinges on gaining the support](#) of an indigenous movement to repel an occupying power in the fictitious [People's Republic of Pineland](#). Unfortunately, Robin Sage lacks a maritime, littoral, or even amphibious element, nor does the Special Forces Qualification Course that precedes it.

To gain the maritime expertise, there may be opportunity for a marriage of convenience with a Navy school: the Naval Small Craft Instruction and Technical Training School ([NAVSCIATTS](#)), where NSW and conventional Navy servicemembers provide world-class security cooperation training in an array of tactically- and operationally-focused riverine and littoral topics. Combining the human-centric training of Robin Sage with the technological, engineering, and seamanship skills from NAVSCIATTS would be a win-win for U.S. and partner forces to have the technical skill to navigate the maritime environment as

well as the human skill to navigate seafaring populations, understand their specialized needs, and design operations that seize the initiative in maritime campaigning.

A combined Robin Sage-NAVSCIATTS (RS-N for convenience) program would allow for integrating social movement approaches to build [resilience against subversion and coercion](#), bolster maritime internal defense, and disrupt outside challenges by, with, and through the population, while also addressing unique maritime considerations and core competencies. The maritime space is ripe for this sort of analysis. As Doowan Lee [observed](#), understanding broad socioeconomic processes, political opportunities, organizational strength, and strategic framing is a prerequisite for taking action and maintaining popular support. Ensuring SOF maritime-focused personnel have a baseline understanding of these dynamics would be invaluable to shape conditions in the contact layer where day-to-day campaigning is likely to have greatest impact, and there are [sustained and repeated](#) occurrences of [maritime coercion](#) of [local populations](#).

Unlike Robin Sage's focus on organizing guerrilla forces to expel an invading force, an RS-N course should prioritize building rapport with the resistance auxiliary. This distinction accounts for the goal of campaigning in the human element of the maritime domain: not to impose one's will on an occupying force, but instead maintain presence and respond to the needs of vulnerable seafaring groups. In doctrinal unconventional warfare parlance, the [auxiliary](#) provides logistics, procurement, communications, early warning, distribution, and safe house capabilities. Applied to the maritime domain, these are the mariners and port officials best positioned to engage local populations and sustain day-to-day campaigning. These personnel could consist of either uniformed (military or non-military) or volunteer seafaring personnel and give legitimacy to the activities of a host nation and partner maritime groups. Jumping straight to the "maritime guerrillas" and [gray-zone maritime tactics](#) without sufficiently building deep relationships with the auxiliaries would leave a partner-centric maritime campaign floundering shortly after it started, having failed to establish legitimacy among the local population.

In this vein, a former Navy civil affairs force called the Maritime Civil Affairs and Security Training Command (MCASTCOM) which was disbanded almost a decade ago is also worth revisiting. As populations move towards the littorals, the [expertise of civil affairs practitioners](#) is essential in understanding potential vulnerabilities, relevant area studies, and how both may impact maritime operations. Unfortunately, civil affairs expertise across the Joint Force resides within the Army's SOF formations, and demand for civil affairs expertise has [outpaced supply](#) for more than a decade. To be sure, the Maritime Civil Affairs Teams (MCATs) who performed these exact functions would be a critical linkage between the sea services and relevant populations if they were still in operation today. These small teams proved effective in improving self-reporting of suspicious activity and could

epitomize an ounce of prevention, pound of cure approach to more cost-effective maritime operations to support partners whose water and sovereignty face routine malign incursions.

Human Benefits in the Maritime Domain

Several benefits emerge from a human-centric approach to maritime issues, regardless of who conducts the campaign or how they are trained. First, this focus articulates a [more positive economic and political approach](#) of partner engagement that builds trust and credibility by tackling shared objectives. [Direct engagement](#) to support the motivations of local populations and address their grievances is more likely to [beget long-term political influence](#) and cooperation on more sensitive topics over time.

Second, addressing the human drivers of maritime challenges is more likely to solve the underlying causes of instability or aggression on the water. Take [the Cod Wars](#), for example. Iceland's highly motivated population was determined to protect access to its fishing waters, and the Icelandic Coast Guard's innovative use of non-lethal tools helped deny access to foreign trawlers that were depleting Iceland's fisheries. Taken together, these elements of Iceland's approach ultimately allowed Iceland to prevail over the UK's Royal Navy and its inability to adjust to the terms of their competition. [Human behaviors](#) have a greater role in conflicts' outcomes than technology alone. Assuredly, that logic also extends beyond land-based struggles.

Third, going straight to the human element is cost-effective. Claude Berube's analysis of the maritime non-state actor the Sea Shepherd Conservation Society illuminates this fact: even when their [budgets ballooned](#) following release of *Whale Wars*, Sea Shepherd had an impact on fisheries enforcement and countering Illegal, Unregulated, and Unreported (IUU) fishing that exceeds a \$12 million annual budget. The gross tonnage of its fleet and ability to provide [just a few patrol vessels](#) provides significant return on investment for modest resources. While [presence is indeed important](#) for maritime security, [Sea Shepherd's effectiveness](#) shows that presence is not the preordained solution to maritime challenges on its own. Instead, direct engagement against unwanted human behaviors on the seas distinguishes its success and is instructive for future campaigns in the maritime domain.

Fourth, SOF maritime activities can [inject irregular-focused aspects of deterrence](#) whether integrated or otherwise to complement and buttress other deterrence logics. Human-based maritime activities enhance deterrence by denial and resilience to prevent adversary access to, and leverage over, vulnerable populations. Similarly, [strategic sabotage can also deter](#) or dissuade by holding at risk an adversary's critical maritime infrastructure, energy delivery, and naval assets.

Finally, working with local populations is an important prerequisite to developing non-standard logistics or auxiliary support in conflict. Such [heroic acts of great men](#) were made possible in World War II by the Shetland Bus, a loosely affiliated network of Norwegian fishing vessels who clandestinely transported saboteurs and equipment from the United Kingdom into Nazi-occupied Norway. The Office of Strategic Services (OSS) recognized this requirement and created [a specific Maritime Unit](#) to infiltrate agents and supply resistance groups by sea, conduct maritime sabotage, and develop specialized maritime surface and subsurface equipment.

As David Howarth wrote in [his account](#) of the Shetland Bus, escape or resistance was preferred to capture. But these determined Norwegian sailors, supported by a total of [five British commissioned and non-commissioned officers](#), provided uniquely flexible ways of conducting close reconnaissance, sustainment, and support to the resistance. As Christopher Booth [noted](#), a modern Shetland Bus could easily replicate its predecessor's low-signature approach, but preparations would likely need to take place well before time of need and might be more successful after building trust well ahead of time.

We're Not in Pineland Anymore

A full refocus on the maritime domain must integrate the unavoidable human element of conflict and lessons learned over the last 20 years of counterterrorism operations. Today's maritime challenges reflect the growing dependence of human populations on the seas for everyday life. As such, campaigning approaches must keep human motivations in mind throughout the course of maritime [operational design](#). Doing so may require converging elements of existing SOF training pipelines or blending training exercises for greater joint effect. Nevertheless, these irregular (or non-traditional) approaches to maritime campaigning could be invaluable for preventing conflict while maintaining strategic positions of advantage in daily competition, preparing flexible options for escalation management, and setting conditions to prevail if a naval conflict emerges.

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Main image: Divers assigned to Mobile Diving and Salvage Unit 2 and the Armada de Chile exchange salvage diving tactics. MDSU-2 is participating in Navy Diver Southern Partnership Station, a multinational partnership engagement designed to increase interoperability and partner nation capability through diving operations. (Gregory Juday/U.S. Navy)

Date Created

2023/09/14