

The Shadow War Within the Larger Conflict

Description

How U.S. Special Forces Must Posture for Deep Area Operations in Large-Scale Combat Operations

While the main armies clash, it is in the shadows deep in the enemy's rear that wars are often decided.

Operation Overlord (D-Day), the largest military operation in modern history, is remembered for its daring maneuvers, immense logistical effort, and costly footholds gained in occupied Europe. Lesser known, however, were the approximately 100 Jedburgh teams that operated behind enemy lines to organize resistance networks, communicate targeting information, and divert German combat power away from Allied main efforts. These teams exemplified the value of small, highly trained forces conducting operations deep in enemy territory to support conventional maneuver.

This concept now described as Deep Area Operations (DAO) remains a critical component of modern warfare. One of the central dilemmas facing military leaders today is how U.S. forces will be employed in Large-Scale Combat Operations (LSCO), and how DAO can complement and enable conventional campaigns. This article argues that U.S. Army Special Forces (USSF) are uniquely suited for DAO, but must adapt how they infiltrate, employ forces, and conduct operations to remain effective on the modern battlefield. Using the DOTMLPF framework (Doctrine, Organization, Training, Materiel, Leadership & Education, Personnel, and Facilities), this article offers recommendations to better posture USSF for DAO in LSCO. A robust and well-integrated Special Forces capability is essential for disrupting enemy momentum, creating opportunities for conventional forces, and achieving strategic objectives in the deep area.

Understanding Deep Area Operations

The strategic deep area in Army operations is the region beyond the physical, logistical, or policy-level reach of conventional ground forces (Department of the Army 2025). Historically, this space has been addressed through long-range fires, strategic bombing, and other indirect means to achieve effects that are impractical for large maneuver formations. USSF occupies a unique role in this environment

through its capabilities in unconventional warfare, direct action, special reconnaissance, and information operations.

In a conflict with a near-peer adversary, conventional forces are likely to face a well-defended and heavily contested front line. The adversary's rear areas, however, present opportunities for disruption. In this space, USSF can influence and partner with local populations to generate passive or active resistance, collect and transmit strategic intelligence, and enable precision effects against critical targets. By neutralizing systems that impede conventional maneuver—such as logistics hubs, command-and-control nodes, or air defense assets—USSF can shape conditions for land component commanders. Continued disruption of enemy sustainment forces adversaries to divert combat power away from the front, creating operational opportunities for friendly forces.

The Challenge: Deep Area Operations on the Modern Battlefield

The employment of Special Forces in the deep area is not new. From the Jedburgh teams of World War II to MACV-SOG operations during the Vietnam War, DAO has long been a hallmark of USSF. What distinguishes the modern battlefield, however, is the proliferation of sensors, unmanned systems, artificial intelligence, and near-instantaneous information dissemination, all of which significantly constrain freedom of maneuver in denied areas.

The conflict in Ukraine highlights the degree to which soldiers are detectable on today's battlefield. Cell phones, commercially available surveillance platforms, and AI-enabled video analytics—such as those used in modern smart cities—severely degrade the survivability of small units operating for sustained periods behind enemy lines. These technologies compress decision timelines and reduce the margin for error.

Low-cost unmanned aerial systems (UAS) have further transformed tactical operations. Traditional concepts of supply, casualty evacuation, and force concentration are increasingly untenable under persistent aerial surveillance. Even small logistical movements or casualty collection points can be rapidly detected and targeted. For USSF operating in the deep area, the ubiquity of drones increases the risk of compromise and interdiction.

Information control presents an additional challenge. Misinformation, AI-generated deepfakes, and the rapid spread of content via social media mean that operational security can be compromised by a single post or intercepted transmission. This environment further denies maneuver space and demands disciplined target selection, careful information management, and a reduced physical signature for USSF teams operating behind enemy lines.

Required Adaptations for U.S. Army Special Forces

To remain effective, USSF must adapt to the realities of the modern operational environment. While efforts such as the Army Transformation Initiative, SOF unmanned aerial system acquisition reform, and ongoing doctrinal modernization are addressing these challenges at higher echelons, Special Forces Groups must also adjust how they get to the fight, employ forces, and conduct operations in the deep area.

Historically, Special Forces Operational Detachmentsâ??Alpha (SFODAs) have developed sophisticated infiltration capabilities across the maritime, airborne, and land domains. However, many traditional platforms lack the operational reach required to penetrate modern border control zones. In contested regions, adversary monitoring can extend over 150 kilometers from national borders. Even a highly successful military free-fall infiltration may cover only 20â??40 kilometers, leaving teams dependent on additional transportation mechanisms to reach the deep area.

This reality underscores the importance of leveraging indigenous infrastructure and local networks for infiltration, exfiltration, and sustainment. Survival during the most dangerous phase of unconventional warfareâ??infiltrationâ??depends on time, relationships, and realistic testing of these systems. Special Forces Groups can enhance this capability by developing specialized, small teams focused on building and maintaining the infrastructure required to move personnel and materiel into and out of denied areas.

Employment in DAO also demands scalable force structures. Small, one- to three-person elements can establish access and build options for follow-on forces. SFODAs can then infiltrate to partner with resistance elements, develop intelligence, and disrupt enemy logistics in support of the land component commander.

Direct action against strategic targets presents a particular challenge for infiltrated SFODAs, as such missions significantly increase operational signatures and the risk of compromise. Commanderâ??s Interdiction Forces (CIF), specifically selected and trained to defeat hardened and high-value targets, are well-suited for short-duration strikes in the deep area.

An effective model involves a layered approach: specialized teams establish infiltration and exfiltration systems; SFODAs, partnered with local forces, identify and develop targets such as anti-access/area denial (A2AD) systems; and once a decision is made, a CIF element is infiltrated to prosecute the target and rapidly exfiltrate. This approach allows SFODAs to maintain standoff from the objective, increasing survivability and enabling sustained operations in the deep area.

Modern warfare also enables precision effects at standoff ranges previously unattainable. Low-cost first-person-view drones, often with ranges exceeding 10 kilometers, can destroy or disable strategic targets without placing personnel directly on the objective. In many cases, organic or remotely employed sensors can provide sufficient reconnaissance and battle damage assessment. Adjusting tactics to leverage unmanned systems reduces risk to personnel, preserves combat power, and enables a smaller force to conduct a greater number of missions.

Operation Spider's Web: Modern Irregular Warfare in the Deep Area

Ukraine's Operation Spider's Web provides a contemporary example of effective DAO employing modern tactics. During this operation, four Russian airbases—including one approximately 4,000 kilometers from the Ukrainian border—were targeted using roughly 150 low-cost unmanned systems. The drones were smuggled into Russia and staged near the targets, then remotely operated using local telecommunications infrastructure. More than 40 Russian military aircraft were reportedly neutralized (Bondar 2025).

Several key lessons emerge from this operation. First, success depended on long-term preparation and the development of personnel and logistical systems capable of supporting DAO. The drones were transported using unwitting commercial trucking companies and concealed within modular wooden structures, a process that reportedly took approximately 18 months. This highlights the critical role of time and logistical ingenuity in deep operations.

Second, the operation preserved human capital. By relying on low-cost drones augmented by AI to mitigate communications disruptions—the Ukrainians achieved strategic effects at minimal risk. Even if the operation had failed, losses would have been limited to relatively inexpensive equipment rather than personnel.

Finally, Operation Spider's Web demonstrates the enduring importance of specialized reconnaissance. While the drones executed the strikes, detailed intelligence collection was required to identify, validate, and prioritize targets. The success of the operation was not solely a function of technology, but of its integration with organizational adaptability, deep reconnaissance, and innovative logistics (Bondar 2025).

DOTMLPF Recommendations

Numerous efforts within Special Forces Command are already addressing adaptation for future conflict. The recommendations below highlight achievable steps to improve the posture of USSF for DAO in LSCO.

Doctrine: Existing unconventional warfare doctrine provides a strong foundation for operating in denied environments. A dedicated annex addressing Special Operations Forces in Deep Area Operations within the LSCO framework would establish a clear doctrinal baseline for preparation and employment.

Organization: The integration and protection of specialized teams within Special Forces formations require deliberate consideration. CIF elements and other specialized small teams provide niche capabilities that can offer land component commanders unique options in contested environments.

Training: Revision of Army Regulation 350-1 should prioritize UAS employment, digital force protection, and advanced communications over legacy requirements that are less relevant to modern warfare. Integrated validation exercises that employ SFODAs, CIF elements, and specialized teams together are essential to ensure interoperability in combat.

Materiel: USSF units should prioritize acquiring UAS equipment, cyber warfare tools, and low probability detection communication systems. These capabilities must be readily available and incorporated into realistic training to develop technical proficiency for DAO.

Leadership, Education, and Personnel: The most effective investment in these areas is retaining experienced Green Berets on operational teams for longer periods. The modern Green Beret is expected to master an increasing number of technical skills, yet NCOs often spend only 24-36 months on a detachment before moving to broadening or staff assignments. Experience and effectiveness in DAO are directly correlated with time on a team.

Facilities: SF Groups should consider if they have the infrastructure to sustainably train UAS, establish communication-denied environments, and create large-scale validation lanes. Leveraging existing unconventional warfare training venues, such as Robin Sage, or developing multi-company validation lanes within Groups would enable more realistic and resource-efficient training.

Conclusion

Deep Area Operations in LSCO represent some of the most dangerous missions in the most demanding form of warfare (Department of the Army 2025). With deliberate adaptations to infiltration methods, force employment, and tactical approaches, U.S. Army Special Forces remain uniquely

suited to operate in the deep area. As demonstrated by historical precedents and contemporary conflicts alike, small, well-integrated forces operating in the shadows can shape outcomes far beyond their size—just as the Jedburgh teams did in support of Operation Overlord.

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