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## Canadian Special Operations Forces Command in the Realm of Great Power Competition

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#### Service Paper

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# CANADIAN SPECIAL OPERATIONS FORCES COMMAND IN THE REALM OF GREAT POWER COMPETITION

## AIM

1. This service paper aims to analyse and discuss the role of Canadian Special Operations Forces Command (CANSOFCOM) in the realm of Great Power Competition (GPC). Over the past two decades, many of CANSOFCOM's mission sets focused on Counter-Violent Extremist Organizations (C-VEO) operations. However, the Future Operating Environment (FOE) will see more state-led and state-sponsored conflict, including an increasing number of cyber-attacks, more economic and legal warfare, and more kinetic activities below the threshold of traditional conflict. As a result, CANSOFCOM, as part of the greater CAF, will need to adapt its roles, missions, and tasks to the new paradigm of GPC.

## INTRODUCTION

2. Depending on the definition of warfare, some great powers may already be at war with Western nations, and examples abound. China detained and held Michael Kovrig and Michael Spavor for 1019 days in perceived retaliation for Canadian authorities arresting Meng Wanzhou at the request of the United States.<sup>1</sup> Cyberattacks on Canadian networks have increased by 150% in the past year. These attacks are difficult to attribute, but many are suspected of originating from China or Russia.<sup>2</sup> China emplaced sanctions on Canadian wheat in 2019, causing a significant degradation on farmers' livelihoods and creating economic angst in the prairie provinces. In his book, *The Dragons and The Snakes*, US Senior Defense Advisor Dr. David Kilcullen defines China's warfare style as "conceptual envelopment", which uses avenues other than kinetic actions, such as economic or legal actions, to conduct warfare. He defines Russia's warfare style as "liminal [threshold] warfare", in which Russia conducts most warfare activities below the traditional threshold of kinetic action while rising above the threshold episodically to conduct kinetic actions.<sup>3</sup> As adversarial state actors confront Western nations, they seem to focus primarily on the United States as the world's only superpower. Canada also faces a similar focus based on its proximity to the US and close historical ties, whether by accident or design. How should Canada's National Security (NS) apparatus respond?

3. The Government of Canada (GoC) has recognized the threat from GPC. The 2020 National Security and Intelligence Committee of Parliamentarians' (NSICOP) annual

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<sup>1</sup> Joan Bryden et al., "Kovrig and Spavor Back in Canada After nearly Three Years Detention in China," *National Post*, September 25, 2021. <https://nationalpost.com/news/canada/kovrig-and-spavor-back-to-canada-after-nearly-three-years-detention-in-china>.

<sup>2</sup> Christopher Nardi, "More than Half the Ransomware Attacks in Canada Target Critical Infrastructure," *National Post*, December 6, 2021. <https://nationalpost.com/news/politics/over-half-of-known-ransomware-attacks-in-canada-targeted-critical-infrastructure-providers-cse>.

<sup>3</sup> David Kilcullen, *The Dragons and the Snakes: How the Rest Learned to Fight the West* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2020), 167-216.

report lists five broad threat streams that the GoC must counter.<sup>4</sup> Two of these threat streams, Espionage, and Foreign Interference and Malicious Cyber Activities, are GPC-centric. Therefore, it behooves CANSOFCOM, as one of the NS functional arms of the CAF, to develop capabilities to counter these threats in concert with their NS partners. Other Government Departments (OGDs) such as the Canadian Security and Intelligence Service (CSIS) and the Canadian Security Establishment (CSE) are looking at the GPC problem set. Based on their current missions sets and focus, they are taking increased action against these threats.<sup>5</sup> Specifically, these organizations are focusing on sensing and attributing state actors' activities below the threshold of traditional warfare. CANSOFCOM can add value in these areas.

4. CANSOFCOM brings bespoke capabilities and assets to the GPC problem set. CANSOFCOM's value proposition to the GoC in GPC should focus on global access and placement, sensing, attribution, informing decision making, and shaping. These are all mission sets that can give the GoC decision advantage. More specifically, CANSOFCOM's value proposition is highest in the shaping phase of conflict (known as Phase 0 in military vernacular) and conducting non-kinetic and kinetic intelligence gathering actions to inform GoC leadership decision-making. Similarly, CANSOFCOM can enable OGDs by providing access and placement for OGD kinetic and non-kinetic effects in non-permissive and denied environments. These may be environments where OGDs would not otherwise have access or assess the risk level as to high for physical presence without CANSOFCOM support. Expanding on the above mission sets will lead to a more productive discussion on CANSOFCOM's role in the GPC paradigm.

## DISCUSSION

5. What will the FOE look like in the realm of GPC? CANSOFCOM defines several megatrends in their most recently published FOE document. Particularly germane to GPC are the adversarial megatrends of technological innovation, its use in warfare and the use of political and economic means to exert power globally.<sup>6</sup> Both China and Russia are already using these trends to conduct their versions of warfare. Myriad examples of China using their "conceptual envelopment" strategy abound. In addition to increasing cyber-attacks, economic sanctions, and legal battles, they use their soft power globally to increase their influence and reach. For example, they have formally recognized the Taliban government in Afghanistan and now can provide the Taliban funding and weapons, although there are no reports that this is currently happening.<sup>7</sup> In Africa, through China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), they are leveraging the economic poverty of many African nations to provide fiscal and infrastructure stimulus in return for access and placement in the region.<sup>8</sup> Additionally, the first Chinese expeditionary base is

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<sup>4</sup> National Security and Intelligence Committee of Parliamentarians, *NSICOP Annual Report 2020* (Ottawa: Government of Canada,[2021]).

<sup>5</sup> Mr. Dan Rogers, Conversation with Deputy Chief SIGINT, November 23, 2021.

<sup>6</sup> Major Colin Bylsma, *Future Operating Environment Handbook* (Ottawa: CANSOFCOM,[2017]).

<sup>7</sup> "China's Reluctant Taliban Embrace," last modified September 25, accessed December 15, 2021, <https://www.eastasiaforum.org/2021/09/25/chinas-reluctant-taliban-embrace/>.

<sup>8</sup> Pearl Risberg, *The Give and Take of BRI in Africa* (Washington: Center for Strategic and Institutional Studies,[n.d.]).

situated in Djibouti, in Northern Africa.<sup>9</sup> More broadly, China's power index has seen an exponential increase over the past 20 years. In his book, *Why Nations Succeed and Fail*, hedge fund manager and author Ray Dalio writes that China's power has risen to a point where it rivals that of the US, while US power has declined over the past 15 years.<sup>10</sup> Annex A graphically illustrates these relative power dynamics. With these competing hegemonies conducting adversarial activities against each other in various aspects of power, there is a significant risk that China and the US will fall into the Thucydides trap, and the GoC must be postured to defend its national interests from a potential near-peer conflict.<sup>11</sup> When Russian intents, effects, and desired end-states are added to this equation, the problem set for Canada and Western nations becomes even more complex.

6. Russia conducts a similar spectrum of operations as China, but with different perceived foci, weights of effort, and desired end states. For Russia, the near fight aims to exert influence over its former soviet republics, with additional focus on regional influence through proxies. For example, Russia used unidentified soldiers (wearing no discernable patches or flags) to hold ground during the annexation of Crimea in 2014.<sup>12</sup> Another example of low-to-no attribution warfare was shown when Russian military contractors were suspected of conducting offensive actions in Syria. In late 2018, Russian paramilitary soldiers (suspected to be the Wagner group) attempted to seize oil fields near Deir al-Zour.<sup>13</sup> While ultimately unsuccessful due to USSOF's presence in the region and their massive kinetic response (over 300 Russian paramilitaries were suspected killed through USSOF kinetic response), Russian paramilitaries demonstrated an extremely high level of combined arms manoeuvre. Russia has never admitted any association to the attack.<sup>14</sup> In late 2021, Russia has postured over 100,000 soldiers on the border with Ukraine. This action has stoked fears of an invasion of the former Soviet state and caused NATO country policymakers and military leaders to enter into a cycle of contingency planning for potential retributive measures such as canceling the NordStream 2 pipeline or removal of Russia from the SWIFT (Society for Worldwide Interbank Financial

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<sup>9</sup> "The Only Place in the World China has A Military Base: Djibouti," last modified December 22, accessed December 29, 2021, <https://www.ankasam.org/the-only-place-in-the-world-china-has-a-military-base-djibouti-v/>.

<sup>10</sup> Ray Dalio, *Principles for Dealing with the Changing World Order: Why Nations Succeed and Fail* (n.p.: Simon and Schuster, 2021), 38, 64. Ray Dalio judges a nation's relative power based on 18 determinants: Location in Economic Cycle, location in cycle of internal order or disorder, location in cycle of external order and disorder, education, innovation and technology, cost competitiveness, military strength, trade, economic output, trade, economic output, markets and financial center, reserve currency status, geology, resource allocation efficiency, acts of nature, infrastructure and investment, character/civility, governance and rule of law and gaps in wealth, opportunity and values.

<sup>11</sup> "The Thucydides Trap," the Slate Group, last modified June 9, accessed December 30, 2021, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2017/06/09/the-thucydides-trap/>.

<sup>12</sup> Massimo Annati, "Hybrid Warfare," *Military Technology Group* 3 (2021), 19. <https://web-s-ebshost-com.cfc.idm.oclc.org/ehost/pdfviewer/pdfviewer>. No country identifier on a uniform is a violation of International Humanitarian Law (IHL).

<sup>13</sup> "The Puzzle of Russian Behavior in Deir Al-Zour," last modified July 5, accessed October 26, 2021, <https://warontherocks.com/2018/07/the-puzzle-of-russian-behavior-in-deir-al-zour/>.

<sup>14</sup> USSOF TF CMDR, Conversation with USSOF Commander, December 3, 2018. Russian military commanders denied the presence of any Russian military member during the attack on the Deir al-Zour oilfields, even after asking the US kinetic response to end so the dead could be collected.

Telecommunications) global payment system.<sup>15</sup> Additionally, Russia maintains and employs an active offensive cyber capability, targeting Canadian data of national interest. For example, Russia was suspected of trying to steal COVID-19 vaccine data in mid-2020.<sup>16</sup> How does CANSOFCOM help the GoC defend its national interests against deliberate or collateral attacks from Russia, China, or other near-peer adversaries?

7. CANSOFCOM recognizes that in the realm of state-driven adversarial competition, unlike most C-VEO missions, the formation may be more likely to serve in a supporting vice supported role. This paradigm shift is fully embraced by CANSOFCOM leadership. The primary output of CANSOFCOM is to provide SOF effects on behalf of the GoC in support of the national interest, regardless of scope. While many of the specific task sets within CANSOFCOM's broad GPC mission sets are held at a higher classification level for operational security reasons, the broad tasks of sensing, attributing, informing GoC decision making, and shaping can be discussed in macroscopic terms.

- a. *Sensing and Attributing.* In a conventional army context, manoeuvre units place their sensors as far forward in the battlespace as possible to detect and react to adversarial activities. The same principle holds for SOF sensing in a GPC context. Practically, that means SOF access and placement globally and optimizing technical and tactical capabilities proximate to adversarial states to shape and attribute their actions. Given the small size of CANSOFCOM relative to other SOF nations, these access and placement nodes should be co-located with allies to economize effort and should contain only the most essential capabilities (e.g., logistics, communications) to provide the requisite outputs. These global nodes will serve primarily for technical and tactical assets to sense in a pan-domain manner. This includes the physical space as well as the cyber and electro-magnetic (EM) domain. Importance must be placed on sensing in the traditional aspect, using people as physical sensors, but in a less conventional manner as defined through traditional warfare (e.g., snipers). Specific consideration must be given to physical sensing covertly and clandestinely, especially in non-permissive environments. In a technologically denied environment, physical sensors using little to no technology will be more critical to success. In a 2021 paper by The Royal United Services Institute (RUSI) called *Sharpening the Dagger*, they argue that SOF sensing in a GPC environment must be as technologically austere as possible due to the adversarial ability to detect even the most innocuous of signals. Furthermore, they argue that the traditional SOF

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<sup>15</sup> "Russia-Ukraine Border: NATO Warning Over Military Build-Up," last modified November 15, accessed December 27, 2021, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-59288181>; "US Threatens to Block Nord Stream 2 Pipeline Startup if Russia Invades Ukraine," last modified December 7, accessed December 27, 2021, <https://www.spglobal.com/platts/en/market-insights/latest-news/oil/120721-us-threatens-to-block-nord-stream-2-pipeline-startup-if-russia-invades-ukraine>.

<sup>16</sup> "Canada Names China, Russia as Main Cyber-Crime Threats; Sees Risk to Power Supply," last modified November 18, accessed December 27, 2021, <https://www.reuters.com/article/canada-cyber-idINL1N2I41U1>.

operator has most likely already been attributed during previous missions, so consideration must be given to using other methods to conduct physical sensing operations (e.g. persons not associated with SOF units or even the military).<sup>17</sup> Regardless of the tactical method of sensing and attributing, the covert or clandestine manner in which CANSOFCOM conducts these mission sets will significantly enable the broader NS apparatus to shape the environment and better inform GoC senior leaders.

- b. *Informing GoC Decision-Making and Shaping.* Once CANSOFCOM senses and attributes in the GPC environment, these data must serve to provide decision-quality intelligence on adversarial activities to GoC senior leaders, up to and including the Prime Minister (PM). This intelligence must be communicated quickly, clearly, and objectively to provide option space for the GoC to consider action, either through CANSOFCOM or another NS OGD partner. The formation of a standing Canadian National Security Committee (NSC), a key recommendation of a 2021 report from The Center for International Governance Innovation (CIGI), would aid in discussing adversarial state activities and Canada's potential responses.<sup>18</sup> The formation of this committee is outside CANSOFCOM's sphere of control but should be recommended to GoC senior decision-makers at every opportunity. In addition, access and placement nodes described in the previous section can serve to forward stage tactical CANSOFCOM or OGD elements for follow-on shaping operations to further inform GoC decision making, prepare the environment for OGD actions, or commence an organic Find, Fix, Finish, Exploit, Analyze, Disseminate (F3EAD) cycle. CANSOFCOM's global reach and access, bespoke technical and physical sensing capabilities, and a profound sense of purpose to defend the national interest provide the GoC with a spectrum of options to counter the growing threat of adversarial state warfare.

## CONCLUSION

9. CANSOFCOM has recognized that GPC will influence the future of warfare and has been shifting its focus of specific bespoke programs towards countering the threat that adversarial states pose. Despite the dearth of conventional kinetic conflict, challenging actions by these adversaries suggest that future conflicts will not commence, or even exist, in the conventional space. The GoC, the CAF, and CANSOFCOM face new threats from this emerging paradigm of state-led competition and must adapt to a newer modality of conflict. CANSOFCOM leadership understands its operational role in the GPC environment. They must focus their efforts on the policy enablement and presentation of options to the GoC to further develop, deploy, and employ capabilities to

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<sup>17</sup> Jack Watling, *Sharpening the Dagger: Optimizing Special Forces for Future Conflict* (Whitehall: Royal United Services Institute for Defence and Security Studies,[2021]).

<sup>18</sup> Aaron Shull and Wesley Wark, *Reimagining A Canadian National Security Strategy* (Waterloo: Centre for International Governance Innovation,[2021]).

sense, attribute, inform decision-making, and shape the environment on behalf of the GoC.

## **RECOMMENDATIONS**

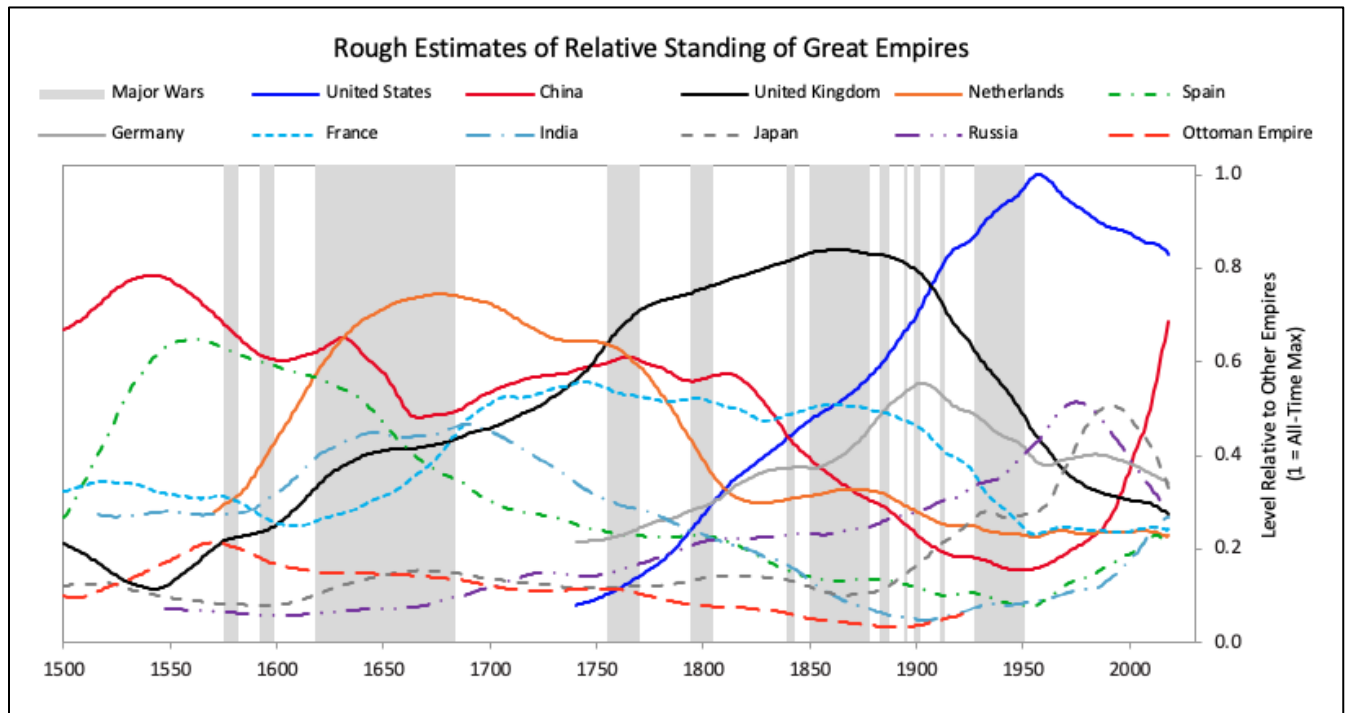
10. To optimize its contribution to future GPC conflict, CANSOFCOM should:
  - a. Establish access and placements nodes integrated with allies to cover sensing functions globally. The focus should be placed proximate to where future GPC activities would occur (e.g., Southeast Asia, Eastern Europe), but global placement should be maintained indefinitely to ensure persistent global access;
  - b. Increase focus on developing covert and clandestine capabilities within CANSOFCOM, specifically relating to sensing in denied environments. This includes the CAF legal and policy framework to recruit, support, and enable personnel and operations;
  - c. Advocate for the formation of a standing Canadian NSC with representation from the CAF and CANSOFCOM; and
  - d. Increase advocacy for submission of Requests for Assistance (RFAs) from OGDs to CANSOFCOM for the delivery of effects to enable OGD operations in the GPC environment.
11. Through perseverance, consummate professionalism, strategic engagement, and continual development and refinement of options to counter GPC aggression, CANSOFCOM can cement its value proposition to the GoC and integrate more holistically with the NS apparatus. With this focus, CANSOFCOM will better protect the national interest and Canadians at home and abroad.

## **Annex:**

Annex A – Rough Estimates of Relative Standing of Great Empires (Based on 18 Determinants of Power)



Annex A – Rough Estimates of Relative Standing of Great Empires (Based on 18  
Determinants of Power)<sup>19</sup>



<sup>19</sup> Dalio, *Principles for Dealing with the Changing World Order: Why Nations Succeed and Fail*, 36.

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