



Navigating Great Power Competition: The Role of Special Operations Air Power in a Multipolar World

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Exercise Solo Flight

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NAVIGATING GREAT POWER COMPETITION: THE ROLE OF SPECIAL OPERATIONS AIR POWER IN A MULTIPOLAR WORLD

“The challenge for air forces looking to be ready for the next, most likely irregular, conflict is to restore the airpower expert on the ground, a regionally accultured, embedded specialist who is able to provide the human interface at the local level, and to use the capabilities of modern airpower as an effective deterrent to conflict.”¹

-Richard D. Newton, *The RAF and Tribal Control*

The 2017 United States (U.S.) *National Security Strategy* and the publicly released summary of the 2018 *National Defense Strategy* both acknowledge that the U.S.-led rules-based international order is being challenged by growing strategic competition, most notably from a rising China and an emboldened Russia. The unipolar moment in which “the scale of American power and the absence of alternative economic or security powers left the United States broadly in command of the dynamics of international order”² is ending. The resulting resurgence of Great Power Competition (GPC) signals not only a shift in global power dynamics but also poses profound implications for international relations, global security, and the future of conflict. While multipolar GPC has occurred throughout history, there are essential elements of the contemporary GPC that make it unique. These include the unprecedented level of global economic entanglement, emerging technologies as a means of competition, and the lethality of modern weapons including nuclear weapons.³ The National Security Strategy notes “many actors have become skilled at operating below the threshold of military conflict – challenging the United States, our allies, and our partners with hostile actions cloaked in deniability.”⁴ This “nuanced form of warfare where antagonists seek limited political victories, as opposed to outright military triumphs”⁵ is referred to as the Gray Zone.⁶

The Gray Zone is characterized by pursuing political objectives through integrated campaigns, employing mostly non-kinetic tools, striving to remain below the threshold of conventional conflict, and moving gradually towards its objectives with patience and a long-term

¹ Richard D. Newton, *The RAF and Tribal Control: Airpower and Irregular Warfare between the World Wars* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2020), 157. doi:10.2307/j.ctvwh8dfv.

² Bruce Jones, *China and the Return of Great Power Strategic Competition* (Washington: The Brookings Institution, [2020]). <https://www.proquest.com/reports/china-return-great-power-strategic-competition/docview/2577486130/se-2?accountid=9867>

³ Thomas F. Lynch III, "The New Era of Great Power Competition and the Biden Administration: Emerging Patterns and Principles," *Joint Forces Quarterly* 103 (2021), 18-33. <https://ndupress.ndu.edu/JFQ/Joint-Force-Quarterly-103.aspx>

⁴ White House, *National Security Strategy of the United States of America*, Washington, D.C., December 2017, 3.

⁵ Jahara W. Matisek, "Shades of Gray Deterrence: Issues of Fighting in the Gray Zone," *Journal of Strategic Security* 10, no. 3 (2017), 2. doi:10.5038/1944-0472.10.3.1589. <https://www.proquest.com/scholarly-journals/shades-gray-deterrence-issues-fighting-zone/docview/2205358716/se-2?accountid=9867>

⁶ Also seen as “Grey Zone”, depending on nationality of the author employing the term. For consistency this paper will use the ‘Gray’ spelling.

vision.⁷ Michael Mazarr of the Strategic Studies Institute at the US Army War College proposes that Gray Zone Tools and Techniques fall into the following categories: economic, military, informational, political, and other. Within the military category of Gray Zone tools, he includes the sponsoring of proxy activities and expanded military assistance in targeted regions. In the Gray Zone, traditional methods of warfare are often “imprudent or inefficacious”⁸ as the risk of escalation to more all-encompassing forms of conflict is too great. In this case, Irregular Warfare (IW), which is defined by the US Department of Defense as “a violent struggle among state and non-state actors for legitimacy and influence over the relevant population(s),”⁹ provides a more suitable range of options to employ. Where traditional warfare is focused on the opposing force elements, IW by contrast, focuses on influencing a population to gain or erode support for the adversary’s government. IW includes counterterrorism, unconventional warfare, foreign internal defence, counterinsurgency, and stability operations. IW is a core mandate of Special Operations Forces (SOF) and therefore SOF will be the most affected by GPC.¹⁰ Employing SOF in ‘train, advise, and assist’ missions to build partner capacity is a key activity of a successful IW strategy in a GPC era. This may include multinational training and exercises, or training teams and advisors to build partner capacity, foster interoperability, and develop positive relationships. It could even extend to include humanitarian and disaster relief assistance or support to noncombatant evacuations. While SOF and air power integration has occurred with relative success in a counterterrorism role,¹¹ the efficacy of SOF air power has yet to be fully realized ‘left of bang’ in a foreign internal defence or stability operations role. This paper will examine how great powers compete to gain power and influence in a multipolar world, the role of Special Operations Forces (SOF) in the Gray Zone, and how air power can be better integrated with SOF to enable strategic competition aims in the future.

POWER AND INFLUENCE IN A MULTIPOLAR WORLD

In a Unipolar International Order, influence is easily exercised by the dominant power. The costs and benefits associated with complying with the wishes of the hegemon are simply too great for smaller states to ignore.¹² As such, not much attention needs to be paid to the mechanisms of influence by the dominant power. However, in a Multipolar World where the Great Powers are competing for power and influence this no longer holds true. Theorist Robert

⁷ Michael J. Mazarr and U.S. Army War College Carlisle, *Mastering the Gray Zone: Understanding a Changing Era of Conflict*, 2015). <https://apps.dtic.mil/sti/pdfs/AD1000749.pdf>.

⁸ Sean R. Coffman et al., *Perception is Reality: Special Operations Forces in the Gray Zone*, 2016).

⁹ Deputy Secretary of Defense, *Irregular Warfare (IW)*, DOD Directive 3000.07. Washington D.C.: Deputy Secretary of Defense, 2014.

¹⁰ "Irregular Warfare in a New Era of Great-Power Competition," last modified -05-20T07:30:48+00:00, accessed Apr 5, 2024, <https://mwi.westpoint.edu/irregular-warfare-new-era-great-power-competition/>.

¹¹ Richard Newton and Thomas Searle, "Full Article: SOF, Airpower, and Special Operations Airmen: Limited by our Own Imaginations," *Special Operations Journal* 2, no. 1 (01 June, 2016a), 33-46. doi:<https://doi.org/10.1080/23296151.2016.1165579>.

¹² Ciwan M. Can, "Small Power Strategies Under Great Power Competition," *International Politics* (2024). doi:<https://doi.org/10.1057/s41311-023-00552-7>.

Dahl proposes that, for the purposes of many analyses, the terms “power” and “influence” in international relations (IR) theory can be used interchangeably.¹³ Contrary to the stance of some IR theorists, Dahl argues that influence is relational, causal, and purposive.¹⁴ This is the stance to which this paper will adhere. Effectively, influence arises from the interaction between two actors, where the influencer prompts a change in the behavior of its target, noting that the influencer must possess the ability to steer the target's behavior in the direction so desired by the influencer.

Contrary to Orthodox Realists who argue that weak states have little impact on the global world order, Hanna Samir Kassab asserts that the vulnerabilities of weak states can have a significant impact on the capabilities of great powers. This is because “prestige is integral to great power behavior [sic]... to gain prestige, great powers must intervene and interfere in the affairs of weaker states. One of the requirements of being a world leader is having followers.”¹⁵ Motivated equally by a desire to increase their own prestige and influence and the commensurate aim of denying the same to their competitors, great powers will court the patronage of weaker states to expand their own spheres of influence. We see this concept manifest during foreign internal defence and stability operations conducted by the SOF's of Great Powers. As Great Powers seek to expand their global influence by metaphorically seizing and holding human terrain, they intervene in the affairs of weaker states. In the most benevolent cases, this is done in the context of providing assistance to combat violent non-state actors or to increase partner capabilities but in more nefarious instances can also seek to destabilize duly elected governments as was seen with Russia's ‘little green men’ incursion into Crimea in 2014.

As noted by Tim Nichols, a return to GPC is likely to result in fewer direct conflict scenarios between the Great Powers as there is an acceptance that “a third world war—[is] a conflict that would have no unscathed victors.”¹⁶ He further highlights that within this framework, “strategic influence remains a goal for competitors, and indirect paths—taken via proxy forces...may be the most effective.”¹⁷ The employment of proxy elements in warfare is not a novel concept. Myriad states have employed proxy actors throughout history. Indeed, proxy warfare was the norm during the Cold War as the United States and the Soviet Union sought arenas in which to compete that did not increase the risk of escalation that could lead to nuclear

¹³ Robert Alan Dahl and Bruce Stinebrickner, *Modern Political Analysis*, 6th ed. (Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice Hall, 2003), 12.

¹⁴ Dahl and Stinebrickner, *Modern Political Analysis*, 17.

¹⁵ Hanna Samir Kassab, *Weak States and Spheres of Great Power Competition* (Milton, UNITED KINGDOM: Taylor & Francis Group, 2020), 13. <http://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/cfvlibrary-ebooks/detail.action?docID=6198517>.

¹⁶ Tim Nichols, "Special Operations Forces in an Era of Great Power Competition," *The Kissinger Center Papers - Johns Hopkins School of Advanced International Studies* (-05-02T12:41:13-04:00, 2023). <https://sais.jhu.edu/kissinger/programs-and-projects/kissinger-center-papers/special-operations-forces-era-great-power-competition>.

¹⁷ Nichols, "Special Operations Forces in an Era of Great Power Competition," *The Kissinger Center Papers - Johns Hopkins School of Advanced International Studies*.

war. This provides a useful parallel case study for the current era of GPC and suggests that we will likely see a similar phenomenon occur. Geraint Hughes defines proxy warfare as that “in which belligerents use third parties as either a supplementary means of waging warfare or as a substitute for the direct employment of their own armed forces.”¹⁸ Proxy wars and the employment of proxy forces reduce the dangers of conflict escalation by “distancing a sponsoring state from direct combat and keeping its involvement indirect, if not deniable.”¹⁹ Proxy wars will remain the norm for the foreseeable future as the US, China, and Russia seek to exert influence but remain cognizant that, “a traditional war between the great powers would pose huge military, political, and financial risks for the states involved and cause unimaginable destruction even without the use of nuclear weapons.”²⁰ Instead, it is more likely that competing states will seek to operate in the Gray Zone and opt to employ proxy forces in concert with covert special operations forces to achieve their objectives while remaining below the threshold of direct conventional military conflict.²¹

Research by Jacob Shapiro and Liam Collins shows that during the last era of strategic competition, the Cold War, IW was “a central feature of almost all conflicts involving great powers.”²² Specifically, “the United States and the Soviet Union competed by training and equipping proxies while avoiding direct conflict and its corresponding risk of nuclear escalation.”²³ A similar approach can be seen occurring in real-time with the war in Ukraine, Russia’s approximately 6,000 nuclear weapons make any direct intervention in Ukraine by a NATO country riskier than any rational political leader will tolerate.²⁴ Instead, “the United States [and its Allies] has prioritized training, equipping, and advising Ukrainian forces (the influence portion of IW) rather than direct engagement.”²⁵ As a result, the war in Ukraine can be viewed as a proxy conflict despite the direct involvement of Russian forces. The deliberate avoidance of direct engagement by the US and NATO allies imposes limits on the conflict that will, hopefully, prevent it from escalating to a wider war. As explained by Laura Jones of the Irregular Warfare Initiative, “embracing irregular warfare provides a state the ability to take the advantage in open conflict, and out-compete nation-state adversaries, ensuring that any breakout of armed conflict occurs on the periphery or through proxies and can be contained.”²⁶ IW is a critical component

¹⁸ Geraint Hughes, *My Enemy's Enemy: Proxy Warfare in International Politics*, 1st ed. (Portland, Or: Sussex Academic Press, 2012), 2.

¹⁹ James Kenneth Wither, "Outsourcing Warfare: Proxy Forces in Contemporary Armed Conflicts," *Security and Defence Quarterly* 31, no. 4 (2020), 34.

²⁰ Wither, "Outsourcing Warfare: Proxy Forces in Contemporary Armed Conflicts," 18.

²¹ James Kenneth Wither, "Outsourcing Warfare: Proxy Forces in Contemporary Armed Conflicts".

²² Jacob Shapiro and Liam Collins, "Great Power Competition Will Drive Irregular Conflicts," *War on the Rocks* (Apr 8, 2024). <https://warontherocks.com/2024/04/great-power-competition-will-drive-irregular-conflicts/>.

²³ Alexandra Chinchilla et al., "Irregular Warfare in Strategic Competition," *Defence Studies* 24, no. 1 (2024), 149.

²⁴ "Why the US Won't Send Troops to Ukraine," last modified -02-25T12:20:00-05:00, accessed Apr 16, 2024, <https://www.vox.com/policy-and-politics/2022/2/25/22949351/ukraine-russia-us-troops-no-fly-zone-nuclear-weapons>.

²⁵ Chinchilla, "Irregular Warfare in Strategic Competition," , 149

²⁶ Laura Jones, "The Future of Warfare is Irregular," *The Fletcher Forum of World Affairs* 46, no. 2 (2022), 3.

of GPC, it is in and of itself a means of strategic competition, and Western powers need to be prepared to conduct IW to achieve strategic political aims.

It stands to reason that when great powers commit resources in an attempt to increase their sphere of influence, they aim to have a lasting effect. Emily Meierding and Rachel Sigman's research applies Dahl's conceptualization of power and influence to examine the mechanisms of international influence in the current era of GPC and to determine the criteria to have a lasting impact. Underpinning their work is the observation that "examining states' resources and activities alone... does not fully explain how they cultivate international influence or speak to the actual impact of their power."²⁷ Rather, they contend that it is the combination of power resources, influence activities, and power mechanisms that dictate the amount of influence that is achieved and ultimately results in target state behaviour changes. Importantly, the model proposed by Meierding and Sigman highlights that to successfully create influence, influence activities must seek to activate specific power mechanisms as "power mechanisms are the bridge between a state's influence activities and actual influence. They explain why a targeted state would adjust its behavior per an influencer's preferences."²⁸ These power mechanisms consist of reward, punishment, expertise, attractiveness, and recognition. The mechanisms are then further categorized into leverage mechanisms (reward and punishment) and affective mechanisms (expertise, attractiveness, and recognition). If lasting behaviour changes are desired, then the influencing state must deliberately employ influence activities that utilize the power mechanism most likely to elicit the desired change in the target state. They conclude that "activities that mobilize expertise, attraction, and recognition mechanisms have the greatest potential for developing and maintaining influence."²⁹ This model is useful for considering contemporary great power interventions in the Sahel region of Africa.

With the US, Russia, and China all seeking to increase their respective spheres of influence in Africa, the continent is emerging as an important theatre of Gray Zone competition. Since 2010, the US has invested an average of \$15 billion annually in security sector assistance in Africa.³⁰ Similarly, China's 2006 Africa Policy states "China will promote high-level military exchanges between the two sides and actively carry out military-related technological exchanges and co-operation. It will continue to help train African military personnel and support defense and army building of African countries."³¹ Often regarded primarily as a counterterrorism problem, the Sahel region is rich in potentially critical mineral supplies and home to significant

²⁷ Emily Meierding and Rachel Sigman, "Understanding the Mechanisms of International Influence in an Era of Great Power Competition," *Journal of Global Security Studies* 6, no. 4 (December, 2021), 4. doi:<https://doi.org/10.1093/jogss/ogab011>.

²⁸ Meierding and Sigman, "Understanding the Mechanisms of International Influence in an Era of Great Power Competition," 6.

²⁹ Meierding and Sigman, "Understanding the Mechanisms of International Influence in an Era of Great Power Competition,".

³⁰ Meierding and Sigman, "Understanding the Mechanisms of International Influence in an Era of Great Power Competition," 9.

³¹ Government of China, *China's Africa Policy*, (2006).

political instability. Coups in Mali, Guinea, and Burkina Faso are symptomatic of the “civilian government’s perceived inability to control the jihadist threat.”³² This has created an opportunity space for Russia to steadily gain partners in the region by offering stabilization support to the new governments. It is possible that “Moscow’s increasing ambitions to position itself as an ally to African countries and stoke anti-Western sentiment could turn the continent into a flash point in the global strategic competition between Russia and the West.”³³ Additionally, China plays a dominant role in resource extraction in an increasing number of countries in the Sahel region, which also grants it increasing influence in the internal affairs of those countries.³⁴ Further, China conducts \$254 billion in trade with African countries compared to only \$64 billion by the US, this not only provides influence but access to valuable natural resources and critical minerals.³⁵ Cumulatively, this adds to the strategically complex space as the three great powers compete for influence with China and Russia seeking to gain support for their visions of a revised international order based on weakened Western influence and enabled by African frustration over their lack of representation in international institutions.³⁶

As it pertains to security sector influence activities Meierding and Sigman found that basing and equipment programs are not particularly effective for generating sustained international influence noting, “the delays associated with equipment transfers, recipients’ inability to use or maintain US systems, and mismatches between the equipment the US supplies and recipient states’ needs compromise these activities’ ability to mobilize either leverage or affective mechanisms and generate influence.”³⁷ Conversely, they found that training programs had a significant positive effect in terms of generating sustained influence. Their analysis points to the importance of recognition as an influence-building tool. When treated as capable partners the resulting social capital makes continued partnership with the US attractive to African governments. As China and Russia focus their efforts on activities that primarily activate the leverage mechanisms of reward and punishment, the US and its allies should tailor their interventions in the Sahel to employ the affective mechanisms of expertise, attractiveness, and recognition to create and sustain influence. Foreign internal defence and stability operations will be key activities to support this aim.

THE ROLE OF SOF IN GRAY ZONE CONFLICT

The NATO Allied Joint Doctrine for Special Operations AJP-3.5 explains that special operations are unique from other military operations due in part to the degree of political risk that exists, specific operational techniques that are employed, and the extent to which indigenous

³² Shapiro, "Great Power Competition Will Drive Irregular Conflicts,"

³³ "Russia’s Growing Footprint in Africa," last modified December 28, accessed Apr 24, 2024, <https://www.cfr.org/backgrounder/russias-growing-footprint-africa>.

³⁴ Shapiro, "Great Power Competition Will Drive Irregular Conflicts,"

³⁵ "Russia’s Growing Footprint in Africa,"

³⁶ "Russia’s Growing Footprint in Africa," last modified December 28, accessed Apr 24, 2024, <https://www.cfr.org/backgrounder/russias-growing-footprint-africa>.

³⁷ Meierding and Sigman, "Understanding the Mechanisms of International Influence in an Era of Great Power Competition," 15.

assets are used.³⁸ These are reasons why SOF are employed in proxy conflicts where the political risk is high and deliberate engagement with indigenous forces is a strategic requirement. Commensurate with the first SOF truth, humans are more important than hardware, and IW is a core mandate of special operations forces partly because “SOF heavily specialize in building relationships to further military engagement, security cooperation, and deterrence.”³⁹ Their ability to work ‘by, with, and through’ partners is critical to success in this paradigm. Competitive strategies to garner influence in the Gray Zone must include IW tactics executed by SOF and focused on building and maintaining partnerships to create a geostrategic positional advantage. IW is a core mandate of SOF and therefore these forces will be particularly impacted by great power competition and must begin to posture for conflict within this paradigm now.

As China, Russia, and even Iran, increasingly employ proxies more countries are likely to become unstable. The demand for Western special operations forces to be employed in IW by providing foreign internal defence, as well as support to stability operations, is likely to increase.⁴⁰ In February of 2023, Seth Jones, Senior Vice President of the Center for Strategic and International Studies, testified before the US House Armed Services Subcommittee on Intelligence and Special Operations on the subject of how global competition is transforming the employment of SOF around the world. In his testimony, he explains that in this era of increasing tension between the West and the revisionist powers of Russia, China, and Iran “irregular warfare will likely be a major—if not the major—type of struggle between the United States and its competitors.”⁴¹ This assertion is based on the assessment that conventional conflict between these major powers, particularly with the risk of nuclear escalation, is simply too economically, environmentally, and militarily devastating to be likely.

As noted previously in this paper, SOF must begin to reorient for mission sets more applicable in the age of GPC. This inherently means that leaders and decision-makers must “adapt to realities which require a recognition that overwhelming lethality needs to be accompanied by other options.”⁴² A significant piece of that role and the most observable contribution that SOF can offer within this paradigm is its ability to work with allies and partners.⁴³ Scott Morrison explains, “Local forces empowered with indigenous knowledge and information, enabled with advice and assistance, are capable of eroding an adversary’s balance

³⁸ NATO Allied Joint Doctrine, AJP 3.5, 2019.

³⁹ “In the Gray Zone, this Much is Black and White: SOF must Develop Partner and Ally Nation Capabilities,” last modified -12-13T11:08:40+00:00, accessed Apr 30, 2024, <https://mwi.westpoint.edu/in-the-gray-zone-this-much-is-black-and-white-sof-must-develop-partner-and-ally-nation-capabilities/>.

⁴⁰ “Irregular Warfare in a New Era of Great-Power Competition”

⁴¹ Seth G. Jones, “The Role of Special Operations Forces in Great Power Competition,” (Wed, 02/08/ - 12:00, 2023). <https://www.csis.org/analysis/role-special-operations-forces-great-power-competition>.

⁴² Wendell B. Leimbach and Susan D. Levine, “Winning the Gray Zone: The Importance of Intermediate Force Capabilities in Implementing the National Defense Strategy,” *Comparative Strategy* 40, no. 3 (2021). doi:<https://doi.org/cfc.idm.oclc.org/10.1080/01495933.2021.1912490>.

⁴³ Nichols, “Special Operations Forces in an Era of Great Power Competition,”

over time.”⁴⁴ Returning to Meierding and Sigman’s findings, one recalls that the key to creating lasting influence impacts is the forging of genuine military partnerships. Morrison also emphasizes this point, “global networking of SOF builds relationships that engender trust and confidence among different national SOF elements enabling more effective, efficient, and coherent multinational employment and collaboration.”⁴⁵ For the US and its Western Allies to build and maintain the relationships necessary to sustain positive effects in the battleground of global influence, and to counter attempts by Russia and China to do the same, SOF must be “deployed to shape the strategic environment—in other words, to induce adversaries and partners alike into modifying their strategic preferences and capabilities.”⁴⁶ This will be best achieved through the SOF roles of foreign internal defence and stability operations.

TOWARDS BETTER SOF-AIRPOWER INTEGRATION

Richard Newton and Thomas Searle of the US Joint Special Operations University, state that “special operations forces and airpower are the two most flexible, but least understood, elements of Western military power. Misunderstanding has led to missed opportunities which we can no longer afford as we face an expanding array of complex, dynamic threats.”⁴⁷ While there have been historical examples of SOF-air power integration being done successfully, this has too often occurred as the result of necessity rather than evolving from deliberate thought or planning. Canadian Armed Forces Doctrine defines air power as the “element of military power applied within or from the air environment to achieve effects above, on, and below the surface of the Earth.” The British Ministry of Defence takes a slightly different approach and defines air power as “using air capabilities to influence the behavior of actors and the course of events.”⁴⁸ Regardless of the definition to which one ascribes, air power can enhance government legitimacy, project national sovereignty, and obtain asymmetric advantage when air superiority can be obtained. Aside from the lethal kinetic effects that airpower can provide in a high-intensity conflict, airpower also enables governments to have “unimpeded access to all territory to demonstrate governance and legitimacy by delivering goods, services,

⁴⁴ Scott Morrison, "Redefining the Indirect Approach, Defining Special Operations Forces (SOF) Power, and the Global Networking of SOF," *Journal of Strategic Security* 7, no. 2 (2014), 50. doi:10.5038/1944-0472.7.2.6. <https://www.proquest.com/scholarly-journals/redefining-indirect-approach-defining-special/docview/1618206560/se-2?accountid=9867>.

⁴⁵ Morrison, "Redefining the Indirect Approach, Defining Special Operations Forces (SOF) Power, and the Global Networking of SOF," *Journal of Strategic Security*.

⁴⁶ Russell A. Burgos, "Pushing the Easy Button: Special Operations Forces, International Security, and the use of Force," *Special Operations Journal* 4, no. 2 (6 November, 2018), 109-128. doi:<https://doi-org.cfc.idm.oclc.org/10.1080/23296151.2018.1522754>.

⁴⁷ Richard Newton and Thomas Searle, "SOF, Airpower, and Special Operations Airmen: Limited by our Own Imaginations," *Special Operations Journal* 2, no. 1 (2016b), 33-46. doi:<https://doi-org.cfc.idm.oclc.org/10.1080/23296151.2016.1165579>.

⁴⁸ Ministry of Defence. (2013). Joint Doctrine Publication 0-30: UK air and space doctrine. Shrivenham, UK: Development, Concepts and Doctrine Centre, U.K. Ministry of Defence.

and humanitarian relief.”⁴⁹ In an era of increasing GPC where the fight for influence is vital, SOF-air power integration presents a space for Western militaries to gain a distinct advantage.

In high-end conflict scenarios, high-tech systems can undoubtedly create asymmetric advantage, however in Gray Zone conflict a broader range of tools is required as competitors seek to remain below the threshold of direct armed conflict. Experts, including Mazarr, suggest the need for “small but dedicated special operations and covert action units uniquely trained for gray zone contexts, likely including regionally aligned special operations forces with world-class language skills and local socio-political awareness”⁵⁰ as well as a better balance between additional military and non-military capabilities. While the ‘Afghan Model’⁵¹ demonstrated the capacity for SOF-linked air power to precisely and decisively strike targets nearly at will in an uncontested air environment this, as observed by Newton, will be “largely irrelevant in culturally and ideologically driven conflicts dominated by interactions in the human domain.”⁵² In a battle for influence where the preponderance of effort resides in the spheres of foreign internal defence and stability operations the ability to precisely find and strike a target is of only limited utility.

The employment of air power in an IW context traces its roots to the interwar years and the British colonial constabulary efforts in the Middle East. Largely motivated by fiscal limitations, the British adopted an aircraft-centric approach to control their newly acquired territories.⁵³ Through the employment of British Special Service officers to act as liaisons the Royal Air Force (RAF) created a direct and credible link with the population and local government. Britain’s strategic goal was to prevent conflict, strengthen governance, and maintain internal peace.⁵⁴ Their success in accomplishing this aim can be attributed in large part to the ability of their embedded officers to build and maintain relationships with indigenous communities and leadership and in “shaping local perceptions of airpower’s capabilities to maintain peace and stability.”⁵⁵ This enabled the success of both the air policing mandate and the development of regional stability through the leveraging of non-kinetic air power to be employed for air transport, medical evacuation, and communications support (news, mail, government official visits) to isolated communities. By determining what support would influence local

⁴⁹ Kevin D. Huebert and Naval Postgraduate School Monterey CA, *The Role of Airpower in Irregular Warfare for the 21st Century*, 2009), 51.

https://web.archive.org/web/20181024132204id_/https://www.dtic.mil/dtic/tr/fulltext/u2/a514119.pdf

⁵⁰ Michael Mazarr, *Mastering the Gray Zone: Understanding a Changing Era of Conflict* Strategic Studies Institute, U.S. Army War College, [2015]).

⁵¹ The ‘Afghan model’ uses indigenous allies to replace American conventional ground troops by exploiting U.S. airpower and small numbers of American special operations forces in a direct action context.

⁵² Newton, *The RAF and Tribal Control: Airpower and Irregular Warfare between the World Wars*, 155

⁵³ Kenneth P. Werrell, "The RAF and Tribal Control: Airpower and Irregular Warfare between the World Wars," *Air Power History*, 2020, . <https://www.proquest.com/magazines/raf-tribal-control-airpower-irregular-warfare/docview/2425610897/se-2?accountid=9867>.

⁵⁴ Newton, *The RAF and Tribal Control: Airpower and Irregular Warfare between the World Wars*

⁵⁵ Newton, *The RAF and Tribal Control: Airpower and Irregular Warfare between the World Wars*

leadership to support government authority the RAF's air power presence was able to prevent conflict.

Similar to how the RAF leveraged the non-kinetic aspects of air power to strengthen governance of their territory, so now must Western SOF conceive of air power as a tool to support proxies with the aim of increasing their stability and improving their resiliency against foreign malign influence. Importantly, the ability to do this effectively does not necessarily rely on the employment of exquisite technologies but instead on air power-minded individuals working with local government or leadership to leverage the available air assets to best use. As the RAF learned in Iraq, Transjordan, and Aden during the inter-war period, developing relationships with local leaders, adapting measures to local habits and customs, and providing services to isolated populations are central to success in maintaining peace and stability.⁵⁶ In a contemporary context, this could be perceived as the ability to support local government in providing food and medical supplies to at-risk populations, aiding disaster relief efforts, strengthening local air defence against external threats, and improving the reconnaissance and observation capacity of sovereign territory.

Col John Jogerst of the US Air Force noted in a 2009 article that although the US Air Force performs well in a counterinsurgency role, that fact is now strategically irrelevant. He bluntly states that "the critical capability involves building the partner nation's indigenous airpower."⁵⁷ Conventional forces are ill-prepared to do that and are more likely to seek decisive battles where overwhelming firepower can be brought to bear. This is not a recipe for success in Gray Zone conflict, where the main effort should be on building the capacity of the host nation or proxy force's capacity to exercise control over their own territory. Col Jogerst further argues that a deliberate effort to create and sustain a foreign internal defense capability for the US Air Force is required.⁵⁸ However, the incorporation of air power specialists within SOF can achieve a similar effect with a smaller resource bill than the establishment of a dedicated US Air Force Wing. Additionally, conducting operations by, with, and through indigenous and proxy forces is the purview of SOF, not the conventional force. It is true that "many countries facing insurgencies or harboring terrorists have no effective airpower. Some have aircraft but poor recruiting, training, command, or sustainment capabilities."⁵⁹ It is within this niche that Western SOF should focus its efforts for the greatest effect. Within the framework of GPC and proxy war, SOF air does not need to be focused on a particular platform to achieve effectiveness, and certainly not on an exquisite platform capability. Rather, it should focus on matching the level of technology suitable for the partner nations or proxy forces it wishes to support and then focusing on capability, affordability, maintainability, and commonality with other nations in the target

⁵⁶ Newton, *The RAF and Tribal Control: Airpower and Irregular Warfare between the World Wars*

⁵⁷ John D. Jogerst Col, "Preparing for Irregular Warfare," *Air & Space Power Journal* 23, no. 4 (2009), 68. <https://www.proquest.com/scholarly-journals/preparing-irregular-warfare/docview/217771108/se-2?accountid=9867>.

⁵⁸ Jogerst, "Preparing for Irregular Warfare," *Air & Space Power Journal* 23, no. 4 (2009).

⁵⁹ Jogerst, "Preparing for Irregular Warfare," *Air & Space Power Journal* 23, no. 4 (2009), 77.

region.⁶⁰ The future of SOF air power is platform agnostic but requires a deliberate mindset shift on the part of SOF operators, leadership, and aviators.

This is easier said than done. As defined by Edgar Schein and Peter Schein, organizational culture is defined as an accumulation of shared learning experiences within a group as it responds to external pressures and internal adaptations.⁶¹ They argue that lessons based on shared learning experiences, once identified as valid, are adopted and then subsequently taught to new members of the group as fact. At present Western forces have an entire generation of leaders who have come of age during the American hegemony and the era of the Global War on Terror. As “culture is often deeply embedded and changes slowly over time,”⁶² unsurprisingly, this experience has indelibly shaped Western military culture. One of the byproducts of this experience is a perception of the role of SOF as a primarily counter-terrorism force. This cultural bias manifests clearly in the opinions surrounding the role of aviation in SOF, “too many SOF airmen are of the opinion that they do not do special operations, but rather they only support special operations. Or worse, that the only role for SOF air is precision air mobility in a direct action context.”⁶³ The trouble with culture is that it can become so ingrained that those within it struggle to see its impact and do not question it. Newton and Searle explain that “Clinging to this view [of SOF air] cheats our nation and our allies out of the full benefits of airpower and could doom SOF aviators to irrelevance in the future.”⁶⁴ In an era of strategic competition for influence, this is something that Western nations can ill afford.

To support the enhancement of a proxy force’s organic airpower capabilities Western SOF aviators should turn their efforts to these non-kinetic aspects. A significant challenge in the worldwide application of airpower is airfield restrictions. Short runways with low weight-bearing capacity and limited support infrastructure will substantially limit the ability of exquisite aviation technologies to be employed in many potential operating environments where the West aims to compete with Russia and China for access. As a result, Kevin Huebert correctly identifies that “The most economical solution to develop a fleet of IW aircraft would be to focus on short take-off and landing capabilities, rugged design to enable austere operating locations and turboprop aircraft to minimize hazards when operating from the austere locations.”⁶⁵ To take Huebert’s proposal further, the aviators assigned to conduct these roles should be SOF aviators and they must be specifically trained to engage with local forces and leadership to provide advice on improving indigenous support and operational capabilities to operate fleets of aircraft to meet their specific needs. It is in the building of these partnerships that SOF aviation will play a vital role in the future of GPC. George Hock Jr. recommends that Western SOF aviation focus on

⁶⁰ John D. Jogerst Col, "Preparing for Irregular Warfare," *Air & Space Power Journal* 23, no. 4 (2009).

⁶¹ Edgar H. Schein and Peter Schein, *Organizational Culture and Leadership*, 5th Edition (Wiley, 2016), 6.

⁶² Canada Dept. of National Defence, *The Path to Dignity and Respect: The Canadian Armed Forces Sexual Misconduct Response Strategy*, 2020), 12.

⁶³ Newton, "SOF, Airpower, and Special Operations Airmen: Limited by our Own Imaginations," 43.

⁶⁴ Newton, "SOF, Airpower, and Special Operations Airmen: Limited by our Own Imaginations," 43.

⁶⁵ Huebert, *The Role of Airpower in Irregular Warfare for the 21st Century*, 53

developing a capacity to mentor proxy forces in the operation of rugged fixed-wing, short-takeoff and landing platforms and suggests the Pilatus PC-6 Turbo Porter and the Basler BT-67 as examples.

Deeply rooted in the doctrine established by Billy Mitchell, Western Air Forces have historically shied away from maintaining a fleet of inexpensive, multi-role, low-technology aircraft. Instead, they have emphasized an advanced technology approach that focuses on kinetic and offensive capabilities. For example, the employment of complex remotely piloted aircraft gathering intelligence and conducting surgical strikes.⁶⁶ As George Hock Jr. advocates, to be successful in future IW campaigns that focus more on foreign internal defense and less on counter-terrorism, Western forces must “must overcome its tendency to develop an expensive technological solution, opting instead to build expanded capability by using experienced Air Force personnel to cross-train as air advisers who operate and maintain IW aircraft with partner nations.”⁶⁷ This will require a deliberate investment in the development of innovative, capable leaders who understand at a conceptual level that flexibility and adaptability are critical to this mission set. These SOF aviators “must receive training and education in the capabilities and limitations of airpower; moreover, they must unapologetically articulate airpower concepts and doctrine to the joint community, members of other services, and personnel assigned to other government agencies.”⁶⁸ As Gray Zone operations struggle to build and maintain influence over proxy forces and partner nations, non-kinetic airpower capabilities represent an invaluable tool to provide partner nations with a capability to address internal defence and governance challenges. The development of sustainable and supportable air power will significantly aid proxy forces’ ability to independently resolve internal challenges and an increased ability to cooperate with Western forces when required.⁶⁹

⁶⁶ George H. Hock Jr, USAF, "Closing the Irregular Warfare Air Capability Gap: The Missing Puzzle Piece: Rugged Utility Aircraft and Personnel," *Air & Space Power Journal* 24, no. 4 (2010), 57-68.

<https://www.proquest.com/scholarly-journals/closing-irregular-warfare-air-capability-gap/docview/868266709/se-2?accountid=9867>.

⁶⁷ Hock, "Closing the Irregular Warfare Air Capability Gap: The Missing Puzzle Piece: Rugged Utility Aircraft and Personnel," *Air & Space Power Journal* 24, no. 4 (2010), 58

⁶⁸ Allen G. Peck, "Airpower's Crucial Role in Irregular Warfare," *Air & Space Power Journal* 21, no. 2 (2007). <https://www.proquest.com/scholarly-journals/airpowers-crucial-role-irregular-warfare/docview/217802599/se-2?accountid=9867>.

⁶⁹ Maj W. Stark, "Relevance of Airpower in Irregular Warfare " Canadian Forces College, (2014).

CONCLUSION

While progress has occurred in terms of integrating air and special operations in a direct action context, true integration suited for the forms of IW necessary for GPC remains elusive. This challenge has two core aspects. First, the air forces' inherent bias towards high-end technology platforms and, second, "too many SOF airmen are of the opinion that they do not do special operations, but rather they only support special operations"⁷⁰ and that SOF air is only applicable to direct action. In this era of GPC wherein our adversaries will seek to win without fighting by exerting geopolitical influence across the globe, Western nations must seek to strengthen the resilience of weaker states and seek to create robust relationships with partner nations to deter the expansionist desires of the revisionist powers, namely Russia and China. To do so they must pursue competitive strategies in the Gray Zone leveraging IW tactics focused on developing partnerships, "the concept must include the use of SOF to work by, with, and through partner nations for foreign internal defense and resistance activities."⁷¹ SOF aviation will play a key role in this concept but only if they prioritize capabilities and roles to employ 'left of bang' in the areas of foreign internal defence and stability operations. Critical to these efforts will be a focus on "developing the host nation's capacity to provide safe and reliable airpower"⁷² which will be most effectively achieved using relatively inexpensive, multi-role, low-technology aircraft in combination with air power experts embedded as specialists to provide that human interface at a local level to enable partner forces to mature their indigenous air power capacity.

⁷⁰ Newton, "SOF, Airpower, and Special Operations Airmen: Limited by our Own Imaginations," 33-46

⁷¹ "In the Gray Zone, this Much is Black and White: SOF must Develop Partner and Ally Nation Capabilities,"

⁷² Newton, "SOF, Airpower, and Special Operations Airmen: Limited by our Own Imaginations," 33-46

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