

# **The Use of Special Operations Forces in Support of American Strategic Security Strategies**

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## Introduction

*The only way human beings can win a war is to prevent it.* –General George Marshall

Hollywood shaped the world's perception of United States Special Operations Forces (USSOF) when the blockbuster movie *Rambo* first hit the screens in 1982. More recently, Sony's *SOCOM 4* and Activision's *Modern Warfare* series of video games have transported gamers into the world of Special Operations Forces (SOF) on daring missions to save humanity from rogue states and international terrorists. While each is entertaining, special operations, at the strategic level, have much more to offer. Operating primarily in the political domain of warfare, SOF should expand their capacity to enable friendly nations to combat regional threats while at the same time it must maintain their current capability to conduct precision strategic strikes. Both of these elements of special operations are necessary to reduce the likelihood of the United States becoming involved in major combat operations. As Admiral William McRaven, the current commander of United States Special Operations Command (USSOCOM) states, "the direct approach alone is not the solution to the challenges our nation faces today."<sup>1</sup> He goes on to state that the indirect approach<sup>2</sup> of empowering host nation forces is essential to changing the strategic environment.

## The Strategic Context

The United States met the 21st century involved in conflict. Before the end of 2001, the nation was embroiled in operations in Afghanistan in response to the 11 September terrorist attacks on the U.S. In the years that followed, those operations expanded to the Philippines, Iraq, the African Trans-Sahel, and the Horn of Africa. Globalization, or the continued connecting of markets, communication, and technology, pulls the underdeveloped world forward at an unaccustomed and uncomfortable pace. Regional terrorist organizations have leveraged the power of the internet to collaborate and morph into transnational actors.<sup>3</sup> The 2012 Arab Spring revolution which has affected Tunisia, Egypt, Libya, Yemen, and Syria, among others, is changing the political landscape of the Middle East.<sup>4</sup> Demands for energy and natural resources continue to grow as a cause of conflict between under-resourced populations.<sup>5</sup> These challenges surmount those which can be dealt with through military actions alone.

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## Special Operations Force Employment

How should USSOF be employed to best support our nation's security strategy? In order to answer that question, a common definition of strategy must be developed. There are many sources to draw from to define the concept of strategy. In *On War*, Carl von Clausewitz defines strategy as "the use of engagements for the object of war."<sup>6</sup> It should be noted that Clausewitz was focused on a militarily-kinetic definition of strategy, as would be expected during the early 19th century. The military, in his day, was used to fight battles; Napoleon's Grande Armée did not perform humanitarian relief operations nor engage in counter-nuclear proliferation operations. In Clausewitz's time, armies fought armies. This fact shaped Clausewitz's definition of strategy to the point where it is not well suited for use in this paper. Another, more contemporary author, Sir B. H. Liddell Hart, stated in 1967 that strategy was "the art of distributing and applying military means to fulfill the ends of policy."<sup>7</sup> This definition is somewhat better as it allows for the use of any military means to achieve policy objectives. What is missing in Liddell Hart's definition, as is in the definition proposed by Clausewitz, is the concept of a plan; this is where a strategy can fail. One might take the Phase 5 planning<sup>8</sup> in Iraq as an example of having a strategy, but not effectively turning that strategy into a plan for all to follow. The limitation of using a classically-oriented military definition is that each was developed to support the work for which written. A more inclusive definition, based on modern language and thought, is contained in the current Oxford Dictionary. This source defines strategy as "a plan of action designed to achieve a long-term or overall aim."<sup>9</sup> Here the Oxford definition shows strength; for a strategy to be effective it must be able to be comprehensively communicated in the form of a plan for all to follow. For the purpose of this paper, combining the three above thoughts, military strategy is defined as a plan of action, using military means, to achieve political ends. Utilizing this definition of strategy leads to defining the domain in which special operations can be employed.

Historically, each of the service components has attempted to define in which environment their particular capabilities are most effective. Major General Billy Mitchell, whom some might argue is the father of the modern U.S. Air Force, defined air power as "the ability to do something in or through the air."<sup>10</sup> Rear Admiral Alfred Thayer Mahan, naval historian and theorist, claimed to have coined the term sea power. Though not directly defined by Mahan, his writings indicate that he understood sea power meant both command of the sea through naval superiority and privileged access to foreign commercial markets which a world class Navy provided.<sup>11</sup> Land power, as defined by the U.S. Army's *Field Manual 3-0 Operations*, is "the ability—by threat, force, or occupation—to gain, sustain, and exploit control over land, resources, and people."<sup>12</sup> The focus of land power is to compel an enemy to do the nation's will or to deploy to an environment for the purpose of creating stability.

## SOF Power

Understanding the strategic utility of special operations requires defining the domain in which special operations are most effectively employed, and thus what power they hold as a component. Unlike air power, sea power, and land power, little work has been done to define the separate and distinct domain for SOF. This lack of a collective definition may be attributed to the fact that each of the services contributes functionally-oriented forces to USSOCOM's warfighting capability.

During the summer of 2011, USSOCOM's Joint Special Operations University (JSOU) held the first SOF power workshop. Representatives of the command's service components met to attempt to understand and define the domain of special operations or as they termed it "SOF Power."<sup>13</sup> While an official definition was not adopted, there was agreement for the need of a description of SOF power.<sup>14</sup>

The original SOCOM Pub 1, written in 1996, stated "Special operations encompass the use of small units in direct or indirect military actions that are focused on strategic or operational objectives."<sup>15</sup> Clausewitz stated that "war is a true political instrument."<sup>16</sup> If therefore, the purpose of a special operation is to achieve a strategic-level objective, and the strategic level of warfare is an extension of politics, then the domain in which special operations are most effective is not a physical domain such as the land, sea, or air, but instead an intangible one—the political domain.<sup>17</sup> SOF power is, then, the ability to execute tactical actions which create a strategic or political effect. The greatest of these contributions is when SOF are utilized to influence the pre-crisis decision-making processes of the enemy leadership. This aspect will be discussed, in detail, later in this essay.

If one accepts that the domain of special operations is in the political realm, then the current joint definition of special operations must be modified to focus the force's employment. *Joint Publication 3-05, Special Operations* defines a special operation as "requiring unique modes of employment, tactical techniques, equipment and training often conducted in hostile, denied, or politically sensitive environments and characterized by one or more of the following: time sensitive, clandestine, low visibility, conducted with and/or through indigenous forces, requiring regional expertise, and/or a high degree of risk."<sup>18</sup> This definition has a very kinetic slant, most obviously shown in the line "often conducted in hostile, denied or politically sensitive environments." This doctrinal definition shapes how SOF and conventional force leaders view the employment of special operations, and it is not particularly applicable with respect to shaping operations prior to or post-conflict. At the very minimum, the doctrinal definition should be amended to replace politically sensitive environments with the phrase politically *significant* environments to focus planners on working in areas where SOF can have strategic political effects.

A better definition is "special operations are tactical activities which result in political and strategic-level effects. Special operations are conducted by highly trained

and educated operators due to the significant, primarily political, risk of mission failure or exposure.”<sup>19</sup> This proposed definition better defines an effect that military planners should attempt to achieve rather than simply defining the particular roles and missions SOF perform. These roles will shift and adjust as the future operating environment morphs and new political and strategic challenges emerge.

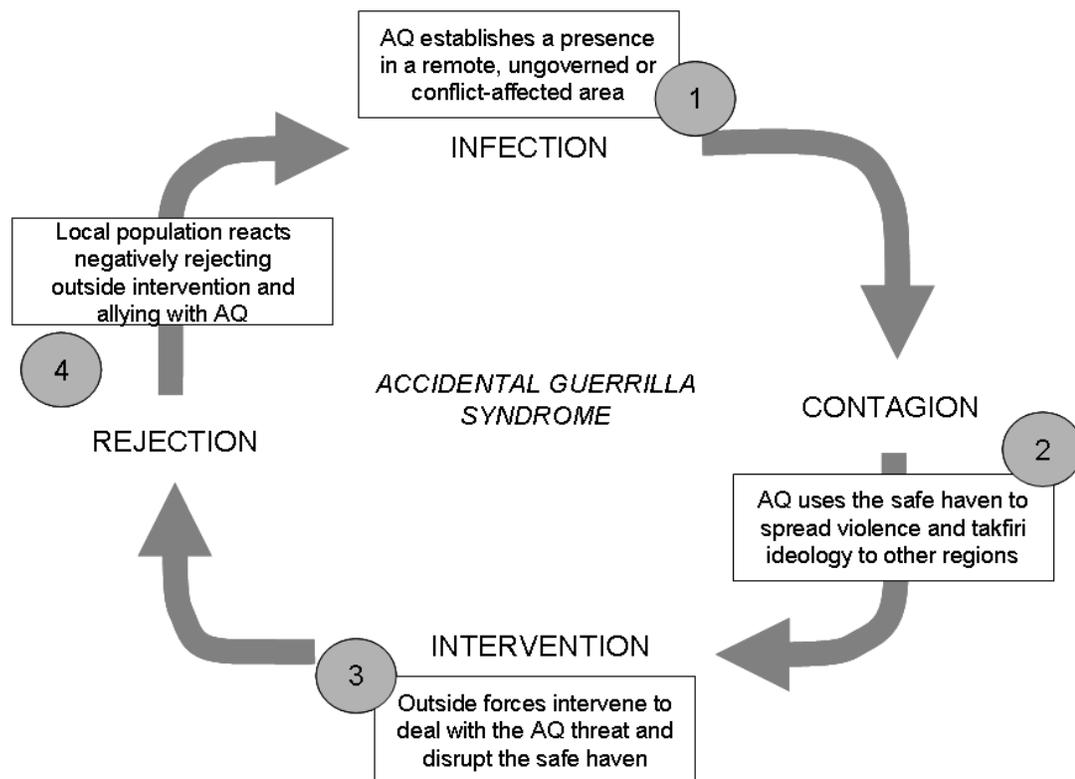
How then, should a special operations force focused on achieving political and strategic results, be utilized to achieve the greatest effect? To determine this, one must examine the existing political-level strategy documents.

The two main sources of unclassified political guidance on security are the 2010 *National Security Strategy* (NSS) and the January 2012 *Sustaining U.S. Global Leadership: Priorities for 21st Century Defense*. There are a number of key points in each of these documents which lead to a special operations strategy tied to political effects and long-term international order. While making it clear that the U.S. must complete the war in Afghanistan, the NSS dedicates a major section to the idea of enhancing international order as a catalyst for international security. “No one nation can meet the challenges of the 21st century on its own, nor dictate its terms to the world.”<sup>20</sup> Likewise, the NSS goes on to state that “our mutual interests must be underpinned by bilateral, multilateral, and global strategies that address underlying sources of insecurity and build new spheres of cooperation.”<sup>21</sup> The more recently published *Priorities for 21st Century Defense* echoes many of the same themes; the United States must work “with allies and partners to establish control over ungoverned territories and directly striking the most dangerous groups and individuals when necessary.”<sup>22</sup> What becomes clear after analyzing both documents is, in order to create a stable security environment in the 21st century, the United States military must be prepared to operate during pre-crisis (Phase Zero) periods, alongside regional partners and power-states to prevent conflict rather than waiting until after a crisis breaks out and it enters a reactionary posture.

Then how might SOF best contribute to U.S. national security? General Charles Wald, in “The Phase Zero Campaign,” noted that engaging a population prior to a crisis was traditionally non-doctrinal for the military.<sup>23</sup> Wald points out there were traditionally only four phases of a military campaign, the first of these being “deter.” Deterrence theory is widely discussed and debated but generally equates to using military power to prevent an enemy from acting. The problem with military planning that does not address a situation until the deterrence is required is that it fails to address the underlying political and security challenges in a threatening region. If political and security issues can be addressed before they become a threat to U.S. interests, a stable, nonthreatening, environment can be created. Joint doctrine was modified for this reason and campaign planning now begins with Phase Zero “shape” actions. The challenge is “In many instances, Phase Zero involves execution of a broad national strategy where Department of Defense (DOD) is not the lead agency.”<sup>24</sup> Special operations planners should be

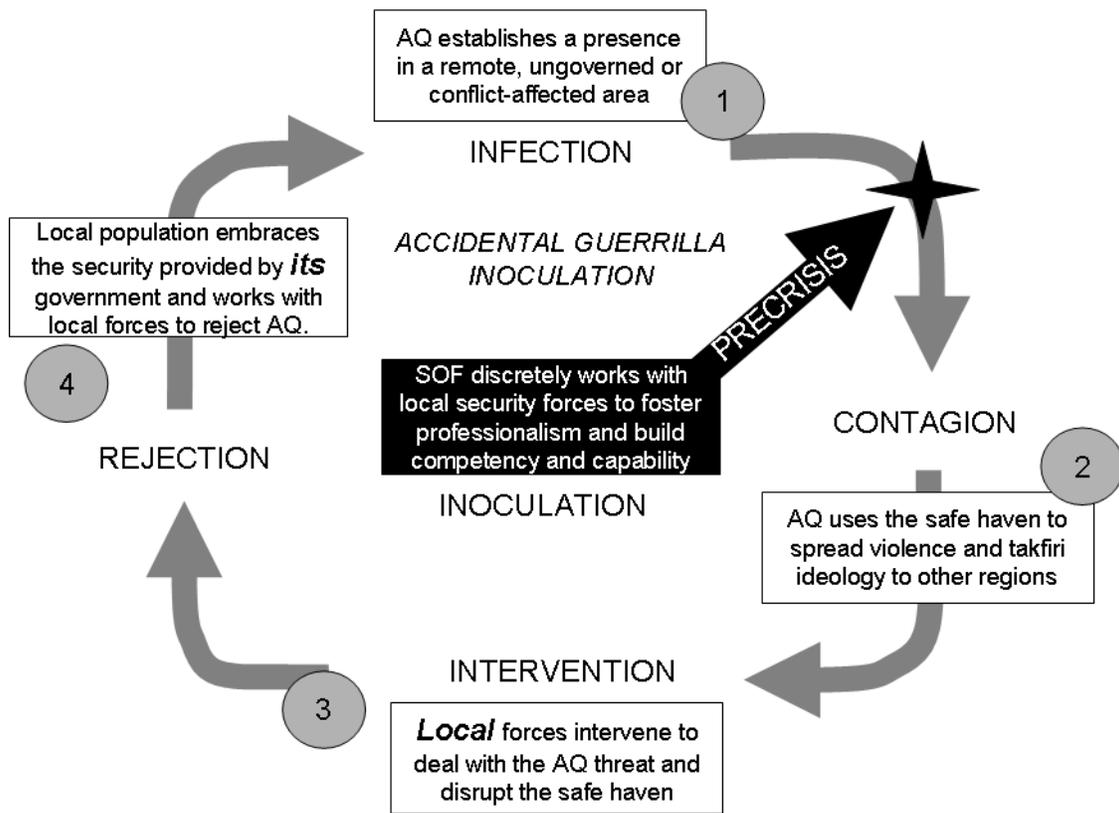
looking to Phase Zero, though, as an opportunity for “developing allied and friendly military capabilities for self-defense.”<sup>25</sup>

By shaping national and regional security in a pre-crisis environment, SOF are capable of setting the stage to enable our partners to deal with localized, radical extremist organizations before they have a chance to network and expand into regional and global threats. “Working by, with, or through genuine alliances and local partnerships wherever possible—would probably be much more successful than a policy of direct U.S. intervention.”<sup>26</sup> This conclusion is drawn from evidence that overt operations by the U.S. inside a sovereign state harm the legitimacy of the indigenous government which appears to be strong-armed by the U.S.



As shown above, Dr. David Kilcullen proposes a model for what he terms the *Accidental Guerrilla Syndrome*.<sup>27</sup> Though his model is focused specifically on the al-Qaeda (AQ) extremist organization, it is useful from the vantage point of how networked terrorist organizations might develop and spread their influence within a nation or region. Dr. Kilcullen uses the analogy of a disease to communicate his theory on how insurgent or terrorist organizations expand. It begins as a localized threat. When outside forces intervene the “disease” grows based on the local population’s rejection of the “occupying” force.<sup>28</sup> Special operations forces have the unique capability to act as an immunization to control the disease if they are employed (to continue the analogy) as a

preventative inoculation. The below model builds on Dr. Kilcullen’s work by adding a SOF “injection” and modifies the now positive effects.



One might argue that this inoculation is something any force could perform and is not solely a SOF mission. The counter-argument is SOF “inoculations” normally take place in foreign nations where the presence of U.S. conventional forces feeds the adversary’s disinformation efforts, or the enemy’s use of propaganda to show America as acting imperialistically. By using small, discrete teams, SOF work with local security forces while avoiding the perception of the U.S. as an occupying force. This unobtrusive employment methodology supports the second half of the paper’s proposed definition of special operations “the significant, primarily political, risk of mission failure or exposure.” When the U.S. needs to work in regions of the world where the presence of a large U.S. military footprint is not acceptable, SOF can help professionalize the local security forces and make the environment unwelcome to radicalized actors. To the counterpoint, the use of SOF in a more obvious manner, in regions where the U.S. desires to show influence, provides a cost-effective manner of “showing the flag.”

The question is: does this approach to operations work? While it is typically difficult to prove a negative or to find concrete examples of preventative operations that negated the need for a conventional military operation, some do exist. One notable example is Plan Colombia; the U.S.-backed plan to fight narco-terrorism at the turn of the

century. “Over the course of a decade ... a few hundred U.S. special operators were able to strengthen ... security forces and ... stabilize regions important to U.S. interests.”<sup>29</sup>

The government of Colombia had been fighting a decades-long war with the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC) and the National Liberation Army (ELN) since the mid-1960s. Due to the lack of effective security being provided by the central government, local land owners began to organize and form independent self-defense forces who ultimately joined together to create the right-wing United Self Defense Forces of Colombia.<sup>30</sup> In their battles for control of territory and security, each of these three organizations turned to narco-trafficking and kidnapping for ransom as methods of funding their efforts. Throughout the final decades of the 20th century, Colombia was a hotbed for drugs and violence punctuated by the operations of Pablo Emilio Escobar, the drug lord in charge of the infamous Medellín Cartel. Following limited success in counter-narcotic operations during the early 1990s, President Bill Clinton launched the Plan Colombia policy which called for SOF to “build and train a large and capable Colombian special operations command and a highly proficient special police unit.”<sup>31</sup> Each element of USSOCOM contributed to the success of Plan Colombia. A concerted effort made in Colombia by small special operations units from each of the services, even while major combat operations were ongoing in Iraq and Afghanistan, has not gone unnoticed. The forces trained by USSOF are now capable of full spectrum special operations. Since 2001, the production of cocaine in Colombia is down by 72 percent.<sup>32</sup> The guerrilla organizations mentioned above have stopped their kidnapping for ransom campaign and, as of 24 November 2012, the peace talks between the FARC and the government of Colombia are off to a good start.<sup>33</sup> What makes this special operation an even bigger success is that not only have the Colombian SOF effectively secured the environment in preparation for the peace process, but they are now helping to train security forces in every Central American nation except Nicaragua.<sup>34</sup> This train-the-trainer approach by SOF is now helping to create a stable Central America with nations able to protect their own security without a major investment by U.S. forces.

Plan Colombia is not a “one off” success story, Operation Enduring Freedom – Philippines, the Georgia Train and Equip Program, America’s frame-working of the NATO Special Operations Headquarters (NSHQ) and the partnering of Special Operations Command Europe and Romanian special forces in International Security Assistance Force are all based on working with allies and partners to spread security through special operations capability. “At the very heart of our work at the NSHQ is the underlying principle of working together to build an enduring human network dedicated to enhancing security through increased special operations capacity and capability.”<sup>35</sup> Each of these examples is indicative of special operations having effects which resonate at the political-level as nations work together, through SOF, for shared security interests.

### **What Makes SOF Special?**

One would rightly recognize that conventional forces also align their actions in support of American security strategies. What then, makes SOF special in this regard? The answers lay both in the organizational makeup and employment methodologies of SOF. Special operations are most successful when employed in a low-profile manner. This characteristic, unlike conventional force operations, allows the U.S. to employ SOF in regions where outside assistance may be politically unpopular or where the presence of American military may not be appreciated. The sheer number of nations in which SOF have ongoing deployments and operations, with a lack of corresponding media or public outcry is indicative that SOF have been capable of operating without inciting undue attention to their actions.<sup>36</sup> Were the same true of major conventional forces, the media would be covered with outcries of global American imperialism.

The second characteristic of SOF which makes them more appealing than conventional forces for employment during shaping operations is the way in which special operations are executed. Planning for special operations, in the case of sustained employment, is generally driven by a bottom-up approach. Consequently, once deployed into a situation and given clear commander's intent and a mission statement, tactical operations are generally proposed and planned by the lowest echelon of command. This is a double-edged sword in regard to unity of effort. First, provided there is a comprehensive understanding of the effect that the organization is trying to achieve, tactical units are best able to assess (based on their first-hand knowledge) what needs to be done to achieve success. Secondly, and more negatively, if there is *not* a well-communicated goal, tactical units' efforts may not be as synchronized as they should be. Applying this notion in regard to strategic security assistance, provided a well-communicated effect is transmitted across the force, tactical units have the ability to tailor their training focus to best support the overall goals of the NSS. The challenge is ensuring that every echelon of command down to the smallest team understands how their pieces fit in to the global synchronization. This also requires that special operators are exposed to an understanding of national security strategies at a point in their careers earlier than their conventional counterparts. This is because it is very likely that the senior special operator in a country could be a captain (mid-level officer) supported by an extremely experienced noncommissioned officer or warrant officer. Such an arrangement would be unprecedented in a conventional force and is the reason for the second half of this paper's proposed definition, of special operations: "... conducted by highly trained and educated operators due to the significant, primarily political, risk in the event of mission failure or exposure."

### **Conclusion**

The United States has entered a period of fiscal austerity which will force the DOD to address how it can most effectively utilize each of its elements of power to ensure

national security. The cost of going to war continues to rise and, therefore, the U.S. should be very leery about investing its national treasure in conflicts where its own national security is not directly threatened. Instead, we must work with like-minded Allies,<sup>37</sup> regional powerbrokers, and friendly nations to enable them to best counter local and regional threats. USSOF possess a unique capability to operate in a pre-crisis context to provide security force training in a low visibility profile in politically charged situations. This capability, though, has not been globally coordinated by USSOCOM, nor has the concept of how a regional security force training campaign might lead to stability and U.S. national security. In order to be successful in countering the threat to global stability and security brought by radical extremists, the DOD must move beyond clandestine raids. Only by working before a crisis occurs to develop partner forces capable of professional employment to counter national and regional threats to stability will America be successful in ensuring its national security.

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## Endnotes

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<sup>1</sup> William H. McRaven, *SOCOM Posture Statement*.

<sup>2</sup> For the purpose of this paper the indirect approach will be defined as actions taken to shape the environment in order to make the effects of hostile actors limited or non-existent. This approach is different from the direct approach which entails directly targeting enemy forces with kinetic effects.

<sup>3</sup> Neil Nagraj. "Colombian FARC rebels, al-Qaeda Joining Forces."

<sup>4</sup> Fouad Ajami. "The Arab Spring at One: A Year of Living Dangerously."

<sup>5</sup> Transatlantic Academy, Unprecedented Global Resource Demand.

<sup>6</sup> Carl von Clausewitz, *On War*, 128.

<sup>7</sup> J. Boone Bartholomees Jr, "Theory of War and Strategy," 14.

<sup>8</sup> A detailed description of military campaign phasing can be found in *Joint Publication (JP) 5-0 Joint Operation Planning*.

<sup>9</sup> Oxford Dictionaries, Strategy Definition.

<sup>10</sup> William Mitchell, "Winged Defense," 1-2.

<sup>11</sup> Gordon A Craig, Felix Gilbert, and Peter Paret, "Makers of Modern Strategy" 451.

<sup>12</sup> Army Field Manual (FM) 3-0, "Operations," February 2008, 1-15.

<sup>13</sup> Joint Special Operations University, SOF-Power Workshop Report, Cover-1.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, 17.

<sup>15</sup> U.S. Special Operations Command, "Special Operations in Peace and War," 1-2.

<sup>16</sup> Clausewitz, 87.

<sup>17</sup> The author would like to express his sincere appreciation for Mr. Richard Newton, Joint Special Operations University, providing a sounding board for theories and concepts. Mr. Newton's thoughtful questioning helped the author develop this concept.

<sup>18</sup> Joint Publication (JP) 3-05, GL-12.

<sup>19</sup> This definition was collaboratively developed by the author, Colonel Ferdinando Salvati, ITA Army, former NSHQ Deputy Chief of Staff for Training and Readiness and Captain James Emmert, U.S. Navy, former NSHQ J-7, Director of Training and Education. The definition was submitted in 2012 for inclusion into NATO *Allied Joint Publication 3.5, Special Operations*, which at the time of writing, is still under revision.

<sup>20</sup> National Security Strategy, 40.

<sup>21</sup> National Security Strategy, 40.

<sup>22</sup> Sustaining U.S. Global Leadership, 1.

<sup>23</sup> Charles F. Wald, "The Phase Zero Campaign," 72-75.

<sup>24</sup> Wald, 73.

<sup>25</sup> Joint Publication (JP 3.0), V-8.

<sup>26</sup> David Kilcullen, "The Accidental Guerrilla," 15.

<sup>27</sup> Kilcullen, 35.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, 38.

<sup>29</sup> Linda Robinson, "The Future of Special Operations."

<sup>30</sup> Waddell, Jeffrey. "United States Army Special Forces Support to 'Plan Colombia,'" 2.

<sup>31</sup> Robinson.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>33</sup> BBC News. "Colombia Farc Rebels Optimistic About Cuba Peace Talks."

<sup>34</sup> Robinson.

<sup>35</sup> Lieutenant General Frank Kisner, to the author, email, 10 January 2013.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>37</sup> Kisner, to the author, email, 16 December 2012.