Addressing the high-end threat: Special operations in a renewed era of great-power competition

The return of great-power rivalries and a reduced focus on counter-terrorism are changing the role of special forces. Andrew White reports

After nearly two decades of operations focused on counter-terrorism and counter-insurgency (COIN) campaigns, US Special Operations Command (USSOCOM) finds itself at the centre of a strategic shift to contingency planning for countering peer and high-capability adversaries across current and future operating environments.

US Air Force operators from the 22nd Special Tactics Squadron prepare to survey an airfield during a culmination exercise at Yakima, Washington, on 12 March. USSOCOM is shifting its focus from countering terrorists and insurgents to countering peer and high-capability adversaries. (USAF/Staff Sgt Ridge Shan)

Emerging threats include Russian intimidation of NATO’s eastern flank, with the Baltic states of Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania especially fearful of an invasion similar to the 2014 annexation of Crimea, then in Ukraine. Elsewhere there are increased nuclear activities in Iran and North Korea,
while China has adopted an expansionist strategy across the Asia-Pacific region, most visibly through military base development in the South China Sea, and is increasing its engagement in Africa. Such moves are indicative of a return to great-power competition.

Many of these concerns were outlined by General Kenneth McKenzie, commanding general of US Central Command (USCENTCOM), during his posture statement to the House Armed Services Committee on 10 March. Discussing the contemporary operating environment in relation to USCENTCOM activities, Gen McKenzie described a resurgent Russia in the command’s area of operations, the “continuing asymmetric campaign of violence and coercion by Iran, and the emergence of China as our pre-eminent economic and military power competitor”.

“The nature of war is unchanging; the character of war has evolved,” Gen McKenzie said. “The joint force must posture globally with the ability to balance multiple priorities and tasks, from combat with peer competitors to expeditionary counter-terrorism operations, understanding that the nation’s top defence priority must relentlessly focus on adversarial great powers that possess the power and means to destroy our country.”

He noted that Iran “lacks the capability to destroy” the United States, but warned, “Its regime’s hatred of the US and growing arsenal of ballistic missiles, cyber reach, and the depth and breadth of its terror networks clearly position it as a priority, although clearly and inarguably not the main one.”

Any shift away from counter-terrorism and COIN missions towards more conventional state-on-state operations against China, Iran, North Korea, or Russia will have significant implications for USSOCOM and the international special forces community.

Special operations forces (SOF) command components in the US and their international partner forces outlined a number of considerations to Jane’s as they seek to enhance capabilities for state-on-state combat, resistance operations, and information warfare. Many of these considerations are being examined at a national level and in a multi-lateral context, given that the contemporary operating environment features growing international co-operation in missions and training.

**Multi-national concern**

Special forces leaders from across NATO convened in Ottawa, Canada, in October 2019 to discuss the role of international special forces in peer-state competition, crisis, and conflict. Led by the outgoing commander of NATO Special Operations Headquarters (NSHQ), US Navy (USN) Vice Admiral Colin Kilrain, the event was designed to urge SOF partners from across the alliance to put the “meat on the bones and get at the heart of competition”.

In an after-action review Vice Adm Kilrain disclosed how SOF employment in the context of great-power competition had first been discussed by NSHQ and its partner forces at a similar meeting in Dublin, Ireland, six months earlier. “SOF’s ability to think outside the box, be the tip of the spear, and thrive in contested spaces makes NATO SOF the perfect contributor to an overall alliance...
solution,” he said. “We set the stage in Ireland and made a compelling case that we need to provide SOF advice for this [great-power competition] challenge.”

Tor Bukkvoll, senior research fellow at the Norwegian Defence Research Establishment, said international SOF units have an important role to play in supporting operations in the context of great-power competition. While acknowledging that great-power competition is “significant” in Europe, he claimed that Russia is an “assertive” power rather than a “resurgent” one, in contrast to China.

“[Russian] foreign policy has become far more proactive and aggressive despite a stagnant economy,” he noted. “This state of affairs is likely to continue, not necessarily because Russia wants to be in conflict with the other European powers, but because the country demands to be treated like a 19th century great power. Few countries in Europe are ready to do that in 2020.”

Despite the contrasts between China and Russia, Bukkvoll highlighted common threads between the countries’ activities, including around the spreading of information online and diplomatic and military interventions.

[Continued in full version…]

(721 of 4138 words)

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