The war on terrorism began spectacularly with the lightning campaign to overthrow the Taliban government in Afghanistan and smash their al-Qaida allies. In the last months of 2001, the combination of the indigenous forces of the Northern Alliance, a few dozen embedded Green Berets and CIA officers, and a heavy dose of U.S. airpower was enough to overthrow the Taliban and seize control of the country. From this auspicious start, it became clear that special operations forces (SOF) were a critical component of U.S. counterterrorism strategy. In the public imagination, only the ubiquitous drone, quietly preying on terrorists in the ungoverned spaces of the Middle East and Africa, can outdo a team of operators as the emblematic instrument of the “war on terror.” Indeed, the use of these covert masters of special operations has paradoxically become routine and expected.

Over the past 15 years of constant deployment throughout the world, the special operations forces of the U.S. military, in close partnership with the intelligence community, have developed into a highly efficient and effective counterterrorism force with globe-spanning reach. High-profile exploits—such as Task Force 145’s successful tracking of the infamous leader of al-Qaida in Iraq Abu Musab al-Zarqawi in 2006 or the renowned SEAL raid on Osama bin Laden’s compound in 2011—dramatically display SOF’s centrality in the U.S. counterterrorism
A SOF-centric counterterrorism approach has many limits.

machine, while near-constant deployments to train, advise, and assist partner forces demonstrates the quiet constancy of their role.\textsuperscript{1} However, notwithstanding the countless tactical and even operational successes, a SOF-centric counterterrorism approach has many limits. Often, counterterrorism efforts are put on autopilot, with little thought to overall strategic direction or the efficient use of forces. In addition, the high operational tempo takes a heavy toll on personnel, machines, and institutions. Finally, because of the more secretive nature of SOF, government oversight and direction is often too limited, potentially undermining the effort.

Counterterrorism and counterinsurgency are sometimes compared with fighting crime: victory does not mean an end to the problem, but rather reducing the violence to the point where normal life for most people is possible. With this standard, the United States has succeeded—for Americans at home at least. The United States has remained remarkably secure from foreign terrorist groups, but this has come at a price in treasure, lives, and strategic opportunity costs. The global war on terror is entering its seventeenth year, even if it no longer explicitly goes by that name, and the United States has special operations forces deployed around the world. Such an approach involves near-endless deployments and combat as well as a world-spanning presence and campaign. As the SOF role has grown operationally, however, it has been relegated to the political margins in Washington, leaving the operators with dwindling strategic direction and raising the risk of operational and strategic overstretch. It is time for a renewed discussion about the United States’ counterterrorism mission.

This article is exclusively focused on SOF’s counterterrorism role and activities, and does not consider the wide-range of applications for special warfare and surgical strike beyond the counterterrorism mission. Though special operations forces will remain a critical component of national power, whether that means facing the hybrid threat of “little green men” in Eastern Europe or a conventional war in the Asia-Pacific, that goes beyond the scope of this piece.

In the first section, we briefly explore how SOF have become one of the preeminent instruments of U.S. counterterrorism efforts, and even foreign policy more generally. The next section analyzes the various functions of SOF in their counterterrorism mission. The third reviews the political and strategic advantages of SOF, and the fourth assesses their limits. We conclude with a call for a renewed debate about the role of SOF in U.S. foreign policy today.
How Terrorism Got SOF on Top

After the creation of modern special operations forces in World War II, military establishments considered them misfits of only peripheral utility. SOF units became another competitor within the military’s inter- and intra-service rivalries over missions and resources. For many in the military, special operations represented a distraction or waste compared with the core purposes of their respective branches and services. The U.S. military’s general view was that SOF should serve as an auxiliary component, such as conducting deep reconnaissance, in support of the main conventional effort in the planned wars of Europe or Northeast Asia.

Yet the special operations community, often over the fierce objections of traditional military leadership, benefited from key political patronage and protection to grow and expand within the military establishment. As the United States and the Soviet Union battled over the developing world, SOF independence grew in the context of fighting Marxist insurgencies. The SOF community, in particular the U.S. Army Special Forces (Green Berets), was tasked with countering the plethora of Soviet-supported guerrilla movements that sprang up across Africa, Asia, and Latin America through unconventional warfare. These covert operations were usually directed from the highest political levels, but they generally remained far removed from the rest of the U.S. military and public attention.

The first golden age of SOF was the Vietnam War. In the first years of the war, the Green Berets were at the forefront as they worked to train, advise, and assist the South Vietnamese military and mobilize local forces against the Viet Cong. In neighboring Laos, Green Berets and the CIA worked together to train the Laotian military as it fought the North Vietnamese-supported Pathet Lao insurgency. However, once President Lyndon B. Johnson deployed the regular Army in 1965, most special operations forces were soon sidelined to continue their own war, often with notable but isolated successes, or else forced into a subordinate supporting role for conventional forces. Nonetheless, valuable theories and methods were developed. Even though SOF suffered dramatic reductions to their numbers and funding following the pullout from Vietnam, the war provided the foundations and experience in running a special operations-centric campaign.

The end of the Vietnam War represented a low point for the U.S. military, and also corresponded to the rise of left-wing, nationalist liberation, and (in the 1980s) Islamist terrorism. The Provisional Irish Republican Army and the Red Army Faction struck the heart of Western Europe, while others, such as the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine and Lebanese Hizballah, developed novel tactics by hijacking airliners and suicide bombing. This relatively new threat required a novel solution: small elite units trained for direct action. Thus, over the course of the 1970s and 1980s, the United States (like many of its Western allies) stood up new units—the Army’s 1st Special Forces Operational
Detachment-Delta (or Delta Force) in 1977 and the Naval Special Warfare Development Group (more commonly known as SEAL Team Six or DEVGRU) in 1980—with counterterrorism as a core mission requirement.

Despite or perhaps due to having distinct and unconventional responsibilities and often independent operations, SOF remained almost a stepchild within the command structure and broader military culture. In practice, the various SOF units often enjoyed better interservice cooperation with fellow SOF components than intraservice cooperation with the various conventional branches. Tragically though, it took the spectacular failure of Operation Eagle Claw in 1980, the joint service SOF rescue attempt of the embassy hostages in Tehran, to spur the establishment of the Joint Special Operations Command (JSOC), tasked with studying, planning, and executing joint special operations missions worldwide. Following the Goldwater-Nichols Act in 1986, JSOC was subsumed under a new unified combatant command, Special Operations Command (SOCOM). SOCOM oversees all the respective services’ SOF components (although they maintain their service specific commands and institutional connections), enabling the community to gradually compete with the political power of their conventional comrades.

The 1980s and 1990s had plenty of opportunities for special operations: from training anti-communist paramilitaries in Central America to counter-narcotics operations in South America, all the way to responding to terrorist plots around the Mediterranean and Europe. However, U.S. SOF generally remained out of the headlines unless something went wrong. In 1993, U.S. forces suffered 18 dead in Somalia in the “Black Hawk Down” incident, where a compromised Delta Force and Ranger raid to capture a Somali warlord turned into a day-long city-wide battle. Such debacles stood in stark contrast to the positive publicity of the British Special Air Service storming of the Iranian Embassy siege in 1980 or the French National Gendarmerie Intervention Group’s dispatch of Air France hijackers in 1994. Instead, most of the notable U.S. SOF operations at the time were in quiet support of larger conventional operations including Grenada in 1983, Panama in 1989-1990, the Persian Gulf in 1990-1991, and Bosnia in 1992-1995.

The 9/11 attacks were a sea change. The “war on terror” meant that for the first time in modern American history, the greatest threat to national security was not a nation-state but a network of groups and individuals within a larger global movement. The unique security challenges of terrorism are ideally suited to the strengths of special operations forces. JSOC, as the parent of the United States’ premier counterterrorism units that also already enjoyed an established

The unique security challenges of terrorism are ideally suited to the strengths of SOF.

However, U.S. SOF generally remained out of the headlines unless something went wrong. In 1993, U.S. forces suffered 18 dead in Somalia in the “Black Hawk Down” incident, where a compromised Delta Force and Ranger raid to capture a Somali warlord turned into a day-long city-wide battle. Such debacles stood in stark contrast to the positive publicity of the British Special Air Service storming of the Iranian Embassy siege in 1980 or the French National Gendarmerie Intervention Group’s dispatch of Air France hijackers in 1994. Instead, most of the notable U.S. SOF operations at the time were in quiet support of larger conventional operations including Grenada in 1983, Panama in 1989-1990, the Persian Gulf in 1990-1991, and Bosnia in 1992-1995.

The 9/11 attacks were a sea change. The “war on terror” meant that for the first time in modern American history, the greatest threat to national security was not a nation-state but a network of groups and individuals within a larger global movement. The unique security challenges of terrorism are ideally suited to the strengths of special operations forces. JSOC, as the parent of the United States’ premier counterterrorism units that also already enjoyed an established
cooperative relationship with the intelligence community, logically took a leading role in this new war.

Although less dramatic than the killings or arrests of high-value terrorists, the liaison and training skills that SOF honed in the anti-communist counterinsurgency era became invaluable again against jihadist-linked insurgencies around the Muslim world. With the exception of the major American war efforts in Iraq and Afghanistan, SOF were (and still are) often in a supporting role working “by, with, and through” partner nation forces—be they national militaries or local militias—that do much of the heavy lifting in counterterrorism and counterinsurgency operations. In Africa alone, the U.S. SOF presence has grown almost exponentially since 2006, to a current presence of 1700 personnel operating in 20 countries in nearly 100 different training, advising, and assistance missions. In 2016, as part of the global campaign against al-Qaida, the Islamic State, and their many affiliates and offshoots, American operators were present on every continent except Antarctica, primarily in small training and liaison roles to support partner nation capacities in their respective fights against jihadist-inspired terrorism and insurgency. Small can mean small—in 2013, the United States sent around 10 people to Mali to provide “liaison support” for the French and Malian troops fighting a jihadist rebellion.

The “war on terror” has transformed SOCOM. As a result of its new global mandate, it has more than doubled in size since 9/11, commanding around 70,000 personnel at the start of 2017 compared with 33,000 in 2001. The majority of this growth has been auxiliary personnel (intelligence, logistics, communications, etc.) essential to support the increased deployments and operational tempo. During the Obama administration, while conventional forces were coming home and having their budgets cut by sequestration, SOF were largely spared the cuts and maintained a growing list of deployments. SOCOM’s areas of operation have also steadily increased: in 2009 it was 60 countries, a year later it was 75 countries, in 2013 it reached 134 countries, and in 2015 it expanded to a record 147 countries. It has remained at about that level, with a presence in approximately 70 percent of the world’s nations.

Another significant change for SOCOM and JSOC has been the effective transition from “supporting” to “supported” command—a seemingly minor linguistic change that has tremendous bureaucratic consequences. When SOCOM was established, it was meant to coordinate the organization, training, and procurement for all the U.S. military’s SOF, but operations fell under the discretion of the respective combatant commands (although JSOC did have a small operational

SOCOM’s operations have increased from 60 countries in 2009 to 147 in 2015.
mandate). Starting with the invasion of Afghanistan, SOF increasingly took the
lead in operations both on the ground and in headquarters, particularly as
JSOC was given greater responsibility for the counterterrorism mission.7 Because
of the global nature of the threat, particularly al-Qaeda and later the Islamic State
which spanned multiple regional combatant commands, there was a reasonable
justification for SOCOM to take a new leading role.

But the risk is that without a clear strategy, a powerful command with a narrow
counterterrorism mission and a global reach could unintentionally do more harm
than good. In practice, JSOC operates in coordination with and under the
authority of the regional combatant commands, but that does not always result
in complementary efforts between SOF and regular forces. It is prudent to
ensure the secrecy and urgency assigned to various SOF missions—such as a
minor commando raid in Yemen or signature strike by drone in Somalia—is actu-
ally justified beyond the minor immediate benefit considering the potential risk of
inadvertently destabilizing and undermining other longer-term local efforts.

This fifteen-year global counterterrorism campaign has been remarkably success-
ful. Despite the exaggerated fears of the public and the alarmist rhetoric of some of
the political class, U.S. counterterrorism efforts have accomplished their primary
responsibility of protecting the United States and the lives of her citizens. There
have been no mass-casualty attacks on the U.S. homeland even a fraction of the
scale of 9/11, and the most lethal attacks, such as the 2016 shooting in Orlando,
have been done by so-called lone wolves with no serious overseas connections.
Moreover, while terrorism (and violence generally) has increased in the Middle
East, especially with the rise and now fall of the Islamic State, the United States
has still realized concrete accomplishments against al-Qaida and other groups.

U.S. counterterrorism strategy typically aims to confine terrorist groups to a
shrinking environment in which to operate, as SOF trainers and advisers build up
and buttress local security forces, while simultaneously paralyzing and eventually
destroying terrorist groups’ leadership through SOF direct action and airstrikes.
This basic approach has been applied from West Africa to the Philippines, and
regardless of whether there is only a small covert team or a large multinational occu-
pation, SOF have come to the fore. This political shift has even been demonstrated
in the officer promotion rolls with SOF commanders taking top commands oversee-
ing all forces. Thus after 15 years, this globe-spanning counterterrorism war is essen-
tially being planned, commanded, and fought by operators.

What Is So Special about Fighting Terrorists?

In the public’s imagination, a typical special operation evokes the mission to kill
Osama bin Laden, with prototype stealth helicopters covertly delivering a SEAL
team deep into hostile territory to assault a terrorist compound in the dead of night. This kind of direct action, as it is known, is an important aspect of the SOF counterterrorism playbook, but it is only one end on a broad spectrum of special operations. Special operations forces perform a wide variety of other missions relevant to counterterrorism.

The original function of special operations forces was unconventional or irregular warfare. This is a broad term with a long-storied evolution, but it generally covers activities including subversion, sabotage, and intelligence, as well as training, advising, and assisting local guerrilla forces all while in hostile or politically sensitive territory. The new official definition of special operations is “operations conducted by, with, or through irregular forces in support of a resistance movement, an insurgency, or conventional military operations,” as clearly demonstrated most recently in the campaigns against the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria. Unconventional warfare remains the primary emphasis of the Army Special Forces, which is why their training includes extensive language and cultural studies for their respective group’s regionally specific area of responsibility.

In a counterterrorism context, unconventional warfare is essential to dealing with the ungoverned spaces where terrorist groups flourish. While ideally the United States would work with a partner government to reestablish governance in those areas and deprive groups their use as safe havens, this is impossible in some situations because there is either no government partner (e.g. Somalia for much of the last three decades) or the government is unacceptable or illegitimate to the United States (e.g. Syria). Special operations forces can still operate in these ungoverned spaces and identify and support local partners, like village militias or rebel guerrillas, to resist or even push back against any relevant terrorist groups without also supporting the state. In practice, this support can range from providing rudimentary combat skills instruction for militiamen all the way to training an expeditionary guerrilla force with embedded SOF elements for offensive military operations.

A similar mission to unconventional warfare that is often conducted by SOF is foreign internal defense (FID). FID entails any efforts by U.S. forces supporting the actions of a partner nation “to free and protect its society from subversion, lawlessness, insurgency, terrorism” or any other security challenges. As recent American experiences building up government forces in Iraq and Afghanistan show, this task is not necessarily exclusively assigned to SOF. Nevertheless, FID has become one of the core functions of SOF in the war on terrorism. In most of the dozens of countries American SOF operate in around the world, their primary task is building indigenous security/military capacity through training and advisory missions.
A serious problem with FID, however, is its potential for mission creep. In any generic fragile state dealing with jihadist violence, SOF may initially be confined to training partner forces outside the conflict zone. However, if the partner forces remain unable to deal with the violence, the trainers may then escalate to advising their partners in the field. If the fight continues going poorly, it is not implausible especially in a scenario with corrupt and incompetent security forces propping up a fragile government, that SOF could get drawn into actively assisting in combat and even performing direct action. In addition, just the presence of American personnel can draw the attention of hostile groups, perversely causing more violence and further inflaming a conflict.

Special operations forces are a critical component of the counterterrorism intelligence apparatus because they provide on-the-ground information in otherwise inaccessible territory. Aerial and satellite reconnaissance cannot see through walls (at least not entirely), cannot search a room, and most importantly cannot speak with people. Signals intelligence, that is all intelligence concerning electronic signals like radio communications and phones, has been exceptionally valuable to understanding, tracking and targeting terrorist organizations, but there is inevitably some information that still requires the ability to question and interact with a community or individual suspects. In addition, since many of the U.S. electronic surveillance capabilities have become public knowledge, some organizations, like al-Qaida, have encouraged their members and affiliates to avoid electronic communications altogether, although with only limited success.

In a tactical context, direct reconnaissance is essential for the effective application of airpower. Combat controllers, working either independently or assisting partner forces, exponentially increase the utility of American airpower by coordinating airstrikes with the factors on the ground to achieve far greater impact. In a technical sense, this may mean providing more accurate coordinates and instruction on delivering ordnance, but there are many other contextual elements to the battlefield such as the enemy’s morale or the presence of civilians that may be invisible to an aerial observer.

Counterterrorism efforts also at times require direct action. Direct action is a broad category that inevitably covers a wide range of operations. The DOD captures this spectrum by defining direct action as all short-duration strikes or offensive action by SOF “in hostile, denied, or politically sensitive environments … to seize, destroy, capture, exploit, recover, or damage designated targets.” In the context of counterterrorism, this generally means the targeted killing or capture of suspected terrorists or rescuing hostages. Of course, during a direct action mission, SOF will also be conducting intelligence gathering and reconnaissance, which could then spawn more direct action.

As commander of JSOC from 2003 to 2006, General Stanley McChrystal made his reputation in Iraq by bringing in civilian intelligence analysts to work directly
with his operators that were collecting all sorts of data in the field. The model McChrystal’s team developed became known as “find, fix, finish, exploit, and analyze,” (or F3EA, since the military has never said no to an acronym). Bringing together all the sources of intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance (ISR) collected by civilian agencies, regular forces, and operators, JSOC was better able to locate, track, and engage the enemy. After killing or capturing the enemy, this combined team of the intelligence community, military ISR assets, and SOF has been able to generate both immediate real-time exploitable information as well as longer-term thorough analysis to then restart the process, creating an escalating loop that theoretically would unravel the entire targeted terrorist organization.

Despite their portrayal in the media, the U.S. SOF community encompasses much more than just the trigger-pullers. As mentioned earlier, each service maintains its own special operations command with a range of constituent units. The Army has the largest component with approximately 27,000 soldiers from the regular Army, National Guard, and Army Reserve. The United States has two special mission units: the Army’s Delta Force and Navy’s DEVGRU, elite units that perform the most politically sensitive or operationally difficult assignments. In the field, they generally operate in non-permanent, mission- or operation-specific task forces, and often under direct JSOC authority outside of the traditional command structure. As the premier counterterrorist units, they are tasked with the direct action missions against high priority targets such as the Bin Laden raid. They can also be used for short-term intelligence or reconnaissance missions, whether in plainclothes in the hostile slums of third-world megacities or trekking through the most remote corners of the world.

The majority of SOF activities and thus the units that perform them fall under two broad categories: special warfare and surgical strike. The best example of special warfare is unconventional warfare, but it includes all long-term activities by specially trained forces that have a deep understanding of local cultures and languages, and seeks to work “with” and “through” partner forces. Surgical strike refers to those often shorter-term activities in hostile or politically sensitive environments against designated targets including direct action and reconnaissance. Army Special Forces are the archetype of SOF (and the oldest in continued existence). Although more than capable of performing surgical strike missions, especially after years of experience in Iraq and Afghanistan, the Green Berets are the military’s premier special warfare specialists, ideal for training African militaries struggling with jihadist insurgencies or training and assisting Kurdish Peshmerga to push back the Islamic State. On the other hand, surgical strike experts—such as the 75th Ranger Regiment, Marine Raider Regiment, and SEAL Teams—are best tasked with reconnaissance and direct action assignments against those same jihadist opponents.
The Most Efficient Instrument

Special operations forces have become the default military instrument for a variety of reasons, but one of the simplest explanations is they are the best for the most immediate security challenges facing the United States in the post-9/11 era. In addition, they are highly competent: they practice the most exclusive selection, undergo the most rigorous training, and develop the most flexible skills. Beyond the functional competency to perform key counterterrorism missions covertly in hostile territory like train, advise, and assist; reconnaissance; intelligence collection; and direct-action raids; SOF provide some notable additional advantages over alternative instruments.

Special operations forces have the smallest footprint in the military, since the primary operational element will range from a team of half a dozen or so to generally at most a company-size force of about 120 men. This makes it easier for the United States to have influence and operate in places that would otherwise bristle at or outright reject any overt American military presence. Because of the ubiquity of relatively benign U.S. train, advise, and assist missions throughout the world, it is often considerably less politically costly for nations to host a small light-footprint SOF element under the same training guise as opposed to a larger, more permanent conventional presence like an airbase. This dynamic can be seen throughout Africa with the many “lily pads” of SOF-operated “temporary” drone bases combined with traditional partner military training missions.17

Special operations forces can also often be cheap—at least by comparison. Certainly, individual operators represent a massive investment compared to the average soldier, sailor, airman, or Marine—for example, it is estimated to cost over $350,000 to train a single SEAL.18 However, the overall low personnel numbers and their relatively modest support requirements represent a significant savings compared to a brigade combat team or carrier strike group. The opaque nature of special operations only exacerbates the already difficult task of comparing “apples to apples” costs within the byzantine accounting processes of the Pentagon. Nonetheless, a 2016 Congressional Budget Office report tallied the annual operating cost (direct support, indirect support, and overhead, but not deployment, training, or procurement) of all the services’ special operations units to be just over $19 billion a year.19 A single carrier strike group (of which there are currently 10), for comparison, costs about $2.5 million a day or almost a billion dollars a year in direct operating costs alone,20 while a regular infantry brigade combat team (there are currently 14 in the Regular Army) has an annual cost of around $1.2 billion.21
Limits on SOF

The U.S. military, with special operations forces at the forefront, will soon have been at war for 17 consecutive years. While the strain on the forces has ebbed and flowed with the invasions, surges, and drawdowns in Iraq and Afghanistan, the campaign has nonetheless never fully abated. The goal of destroying al-Qaeda, the perpetrators of 9/11, and any of their affiliates has resulted in an ever-expanding campaign with increasingly global commitments while still operating primarily under the same legal authorization. There have been changes, such as the evolutions in methods and tactics from the rise of drone technology to shifting indigenous forces into the forefront of the fight. Unfortunately, after more than a decade and a half there has not been a thorough strategic reassessment of these desired ends (is it now eliminate all jihadist groups?), the most effective means (ever more SOF?), nor the ideal ways to accomplish those ambiguous ends (support any government or local militia willing to cooperate?). Instead, SOF have been tasked with an expanding list of groups to target and countries to secure without a clear plan beyond neutralizing threats to an ill-defined, but expansive interpretation of American national interests. These special operations forces continue to effectively execute this counterterrorism mission tasked to them at the cost of a never-ending war footing.

If one of the greatest challenges facing SOF is human and institutional overstretch for a seemingly never-ending global counterterrorism campaign, one obvious solution would be to compensate by expanding the force. Indeed, this is what has already been done, although not all growth targets were actually met. The growth of SOF since 2001, particularly the support personnel, has been essential to running the globe-spanning operations. Yet despite more than doubling in size and tripling in budget, the military has become dependent on its SOF personnel consistently volunteering for multiple tours, in many cases regular deployments for up to a decade or more. Efforts to better stagger deployments have a positive impact, but ultimately the problem will remain as long as SOF remains the dominant instrument of this long and ever-growing crusade.

Nonetheless, from a basic personnel perspective, the high physical and mental minimum requirements inherent to special operations will limit the number of recruits that can apply, much less pass. In addition, while some units allow some exceptional incoming recruits to volunteer (e.g. Rangers, Green Berets, and SEALs), others (e.g. Marine Raiders and Delta Force) only select in-service by extending invitations to the best experienced personnel, which requires a
pool of quality veterans to choose from. This becomes an increasingly hard ceiling on both the pool of qualified individuals and training capacity.

Thus, continuing to expand SOF will likely produce diminishing returns, considering the dual risk of lowering standards and the opportunity costs for other branches. Without dramatically increased defense spending and a substantial military buildup (neither politically likely nor necessarily strategically prudent), any further growth in SOF will necessitate capability trade-offs and cuts for other branches.

SOF are also difficult to oversee. Because they often operate in small numbers, covertly, and in remote parts of the world, it is difficult for even well-informed observers to know their activities, let alone busy members of Congress and a distracted public at large. The deaths of four U.S. special operators in Niger in 2017 exemplifies this issue—leading politicians expressed dismay at the deaths of Americans in a location almost no one knew they were fighting in and claimed ignorance of their presence.²³

This oversight is especially important because SOF are highly proficient and operate below the radar screen. They can, and should, be used to intervene in areas where traditional forces would fall short. However, because they lack the numbers and firepower of traditional forces, they cannot accomplish many missions. Their presence risks expanding wars to new areas without a proper debate and strategy. In addition, using SOF for counterterrorism risks a neglect of other SOF roles—a form of strategic opportunity costs. For example, with a bellicose Russia operating a form of shadow warfare, SOF could play a greater role countering Moscow. With the rise of China, SOF might reconsider its traditional role as a supplement to conventional forces.

Continuing to expand SOF will likely produce diminishing returns.

Looking Twice at SOF

Instead of trying to outgrow the challenge of overstretch and strategic drift, the United States should reassess when and how SOF are employed in global counterterrorism efforts. One straightforward solution is to delegate some missions to other units, ideally the cases where SOF are not necessarily the most efficient tool for the mission. In the spring of 2017, the U.S. Army stood up the first of a planned six security force assistance brigades (SFABs) to free up both regular brigade combat teams and SOF trainers.²⁴ If this effort is successful, SOF assets can be more efficiently focused on remote, politically sensitive, and/or clandestine train, advise,
and assist missions, leaving the training of more established partner militaries to a SFAB. This same logic also applies to cases of SOF being utilized in seemingly conventional military operations. In such cases, regular forces should often be used.

The U.S.-led global counterterrorism effort has helped protect the U.S. homeland and disrupt terrorist networks and plots. However, the counterterrorism effort and the SOF community would be best served if the White House, Congress, and Pentagon jointly and openly addressed core objectives, strategy, and legal authority, all of which have languished and mutated in a political purgatory. Such an effort would require assessing the effectiveness of our counterterrorism efforts to best inform the major budgetary and organizational decisions that need to be made on the future structure of the force and appropriate role of SOF.

The United States has developed a nearly globe-spanning counterterrorist apparatus, with hundreds of national and subnational partners, maintaining continuous pressure on its core adversaries. It is still a serious challenge to fully annihilate a terrorist organization, but the United States has been successful, even by its arguably unrealistically high standards, in disrupting al-Qaida and the Islamic State. The problem is this machine has been running for years in the shadows without much scrutiny and often without strategic direction. Special operations forces, the primary counterterrorism instrument, cannot run on autopilot if they are to be at their most effective.

Notes


