



Versatility at the Tip of the Spear:

*Food Security and
the Utility of SOF*

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The full use and utility of special operations forces has been underappreciated in the context of food security.

It is food (in)security that lies at the heart of every conflict today and yet invisible to most in its most fundamental context as a matter, and driver, of global security and defense. Special Operations Forces (SOF) offer unique capabilities that can respond best to USAID Administrator Samantha Powers' concluding statement in the 2022-2026 U.S. Global Food Security Strategy that, "Conflict remains the single largest driver of food crises worldwide, so the Strategy also leverages investments in conflict mitigation, peacebuilding, and social cohesion." [1] The COVID pandemic has brought our global food systems to the public eye, and it is the Russo-Ukrainian War that has made the fragility of the food system all the more visible and hard-felt.



“Conflict remains the single largest driver of food crises worldwide, so the Strategy also leverages investments in conflict mitigation, peacebuilding, and social cohesion.”

USAID Administrator Samantha
PowerFeed the Future Global Coordinator

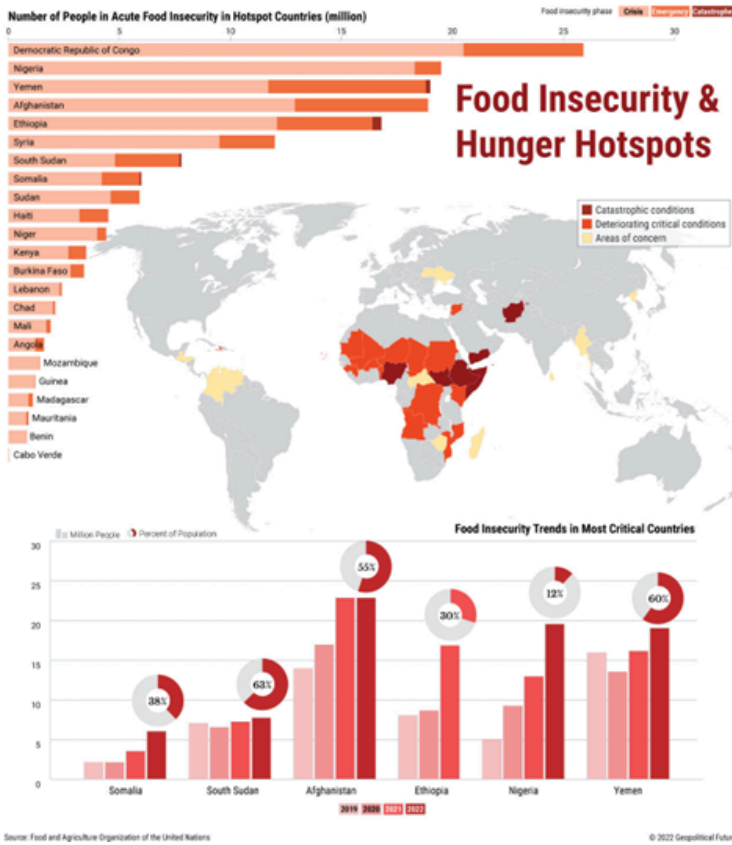
Even before Russia invaded Ukraine, the global economy was suffering from the repercussions of several man-made conflicts, climate shocks, COVID-19 and rising costs—with devastating consequences for poor people in low-income and developing countries.

"The war in Ukraine—a major “breadbasket” for the world—is deepening these challenges on an unprecedented scale. In the immediate, swift and bold action is required by both wealthy and low-income nations to avert humanitarian and economic catastrophe. Looking forward, the international community should learn two key lessons from the Ukraine crisis." [2]

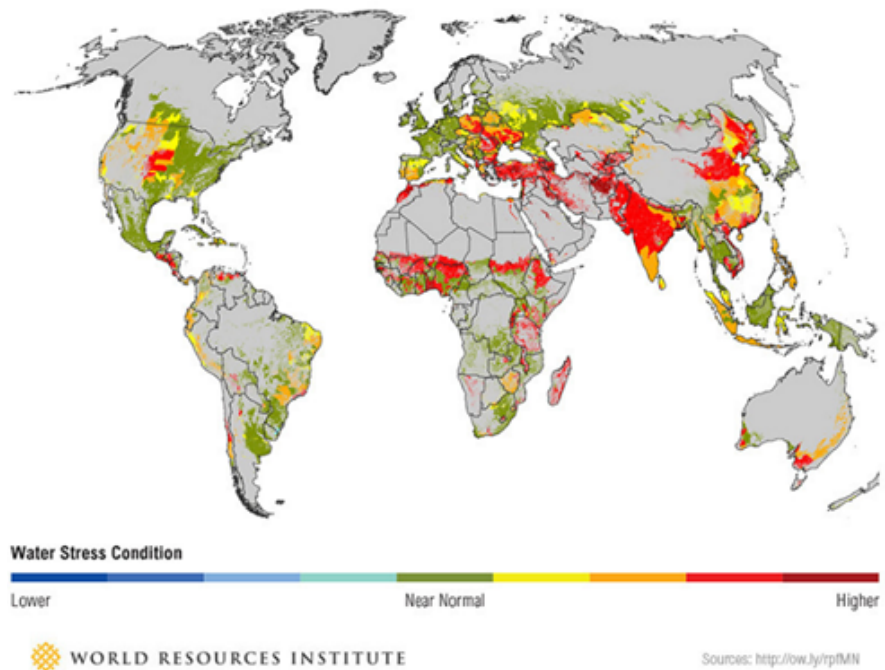
First, that we live in an increasingly interconnected world and would be remiss if we ignored food insecurity and conflict challenges in any part of the globe as someone else’s problem. Secondly, it is critical for the international community to go beyond immediate stopgap measures; to not only address the root causes for these challenges but to also reexamine the agricultural and energy policies that underpin our global economy. The landscape of international conflict today is filled with examples of nation-state armed conflict such as that between Ukraine and Russia, and conflicts taking place amongst and between nation-states, terrorist organizations and mercenaries such as in the Sahel. [3] There are other layers of conflict which increasingly involve nation-state offensive cyber-attacks on critical infrastructure, economic and societal targets. The most recent Microsoft Digital Defense report illustrates this trend with their graphics showing that nation-state cyber-attacks targeting critical infrastructures has doubled from 20% to 40. [4] The physical and digital terrain is widely understood as the battleground space in international conflict; however, this is only the tip of the iceberg of conflict.



What lies underneath is a large mass of interconnected and intertwined constants and currents of conflict. These include the geopolitics of economics, where goods are (and are not) adequately produced, how they are sourced, and how they are manufactured. They include sanctions that implicate all members of the sanctioned state and impair the development of populations. Increasingly more important are the impacts of climate change where adverse environmental events create ripple effects and waves around the world which are felt in different ways. For some it could be drought, for others it could be flooding. At the very primordial level of the Maslow’s hierarchy of needs, which all other needs rest on, is the foundation of physiological needs, which includes food.[5]



Water stress will increase in many agricultural areas by 2025 due to growing water use and higher temperatures (based on IPCC scenario A1B)



Today more politicians are asking about food insecurity and more governments are inquiring about food availability in their countries. Now is the time to start talking about how the military, specifically special operations forces, or SOF, can be leveraged to be a part of mitigating, managing, preventing and anticipating food insecurity challenges.

This paper seeks to unpack the global food security challenges through the lens of the compound security dilemma, to articulate special operations competencies and core activities use cases, and highlight the key partners and allies who are an integral part of integrated deterrence in combating the precarious state of global food insecurity.



02

Food Security, Food Systems - Unavoidable Threat Multiplier

In 1996 the World Food Summit concluded with an agreed upon definition for food security. They defined it as “when all people, at all times, have physical and economic access to sufficient safe and nutritious food that meets their dietary needs and food preferences for an active and healthy life.” [6] Within this definition they unpacked four critical dimensions to food security: (1) availability (2) access (3) utilization (4) stability which can be seen in the table below. [7]

Physical AVAILABILITY of food	Food availability addresses the “supply side” of food security and is determined by the level of food production, stock levels and net trade.
Economic and physical ACCESS to food	An adequate supply of food at the national or international level does not in itself guarantee household level food security. Concerns about insufficient food access have resulted in a greater policy focus on incomes, expenditure, markets and prices in achieving food security objectives.
Food UTILIZATION	Utilization is commonly understood as the way the body makes the most of various nutrients in the food. Sufficient energy and nutrient intake by individuals is the result of good care and feeding practices, food preparation, diversity of the diet and intra-household distribution of food. Combined with good biological utilization of food consumed, this determines the <i>nutritional status</i> of individuals.
STABILITY of the other three dimensions over time	Even if your food intake is adequate today, you are still considered to be food insecure if you have inadequate access to food on a periodic basis, risking a deterioration of your nutritional status. Adverse weather conditions, political instability, or economic factors (unemployment, rising food prices) may have an impact on your food security status.

Figure 1 Food Security: Food and Agricultural Organization of the United Nations

The source of food insecurity arises when there are problems in one or more parts of the food system. The term “food system” includes the entire life cycle of food from production, to processing and packaging, to distribution and retail, to consumption and waste which is generated throughout the cycle. The following graphic by the Oxford Martin Programme on the Future of Food at Oxford University[8] illustrates how food systems are affected by environmental drivers such as climate change and water availability, and as socioeconomic drivers such as technology, governance, as well as conflict and war.

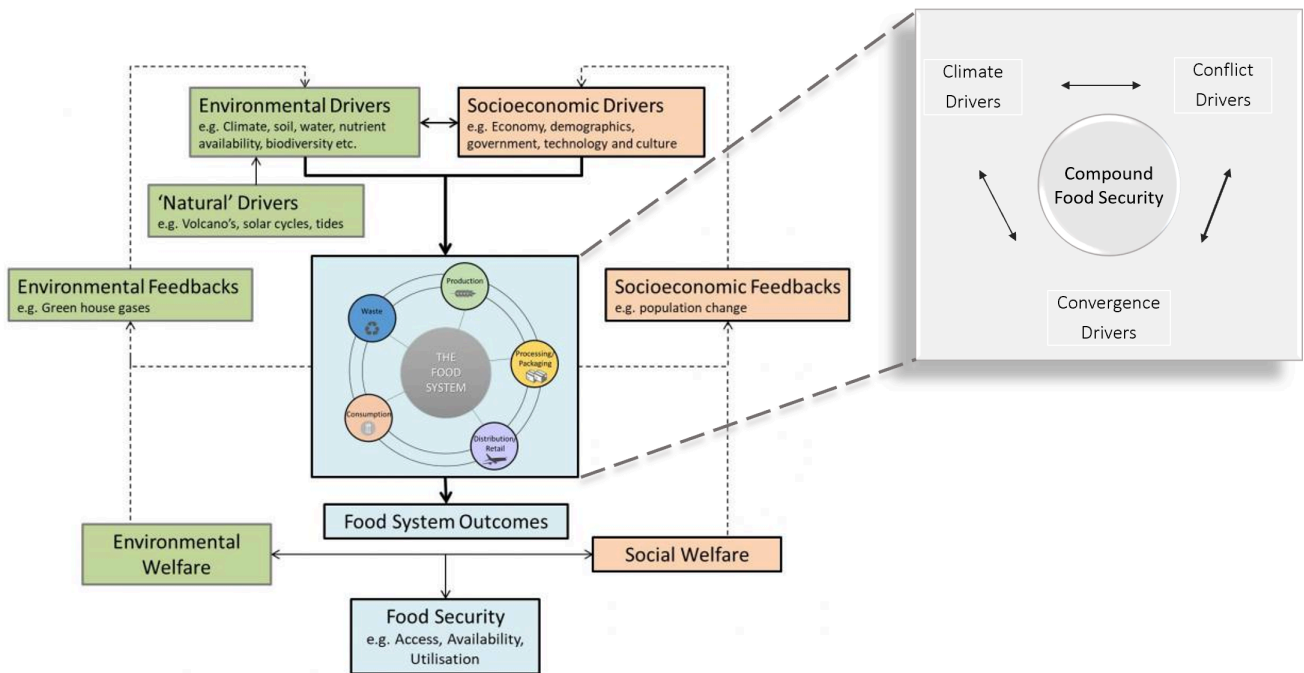


Figure 2 Oxford Martin Programme on the Future of Food, Oxford University
 (Adapted from Ericksen 2008) - readapted by the authors to include the Compound Food Security triad

The graphic above provides an insightful lens into how we can understand the interlinkages between climate change, food access and availability – of the actual system nodes where the intersectionality of threats to food security occur – and how all this can create a domino effect that provides grounds for displacement, migration and conflict within and outside the boundaries of a state. In Nigeria, water scarcity, due largely to climatic change, has created conflict between pastoralists seeking land for their livestock to graze and agriculturalists who are struggling to produce crops. In recent years this conflict has resulted in more deaths than those caused by Boko Haram’s terrorist activity in the country.[9]

This is just one example of how food insecurity has undermined development and security, but there are many more outside of Africa; such as in Yemen where malnourishment rates are highest in the world[12] and the Houthi militia continue to conduct attacks.[13] In Latin America almost a quarter of the population are struggling to have access to a healthy diet as food prices (and fuel) have risen during the pandemic and have been further exacerbated by the war in Ukraine.[14] There is a similar parallel of food insecurity in the Asia Pacific region where global events have created rippling effects.[15] Speaking at the 2023 Munich Security Conference, David Beasley, the former Executive Director of the United Nations World Food Programme said that the food security situation was getting worse and that he anticipates a food availability problem by the end of the year.[16] Separately, the United Nations International Organization for Migration (IOM)'s Displacement Tracking Matrix[17] makes the displacement arising from climate, food insecurity and conflict more visible. Their interactive maps show the displacement in Western Afghanistan due to drought,[18] displacement due to food insecurity in Niger,[19] those who are on a migratory path through Colombia[20] and demographic pattern of exodus migrations out of Iraq (which are predominantly those who are in the prime labor market age).[21] All these situations are characteristic of growing novel complexity endemic to modern conflict and security -- dynamics best described and understood in terms of compound security and perhaps best understood through the analytical lens and theoretical framework and apparatus of compound security competition (CsC).[22]

Syria:

The Convergence of Climate Change, Conflict, and Food Insecurity

The intersection of conflict, climate change and food insecurity has been well documented in Syria. Before the uprising that began in 2011, Syria experienced the most severe drought on record. According to the United Nations, 75 percent of Syria's farms failed, and 86 percent of the livestock died between 2006–2011. Human-influence climate change increased the probability of severe and persistent droughts in the region making the occurrence of this 3-year drought 2 to 3 times more likely than by natural variability alone.[10] Three of the four worst multi-year droughts in Syria's history have occurred in the last 30 years.

By 2016, Syrians fleeing the fighting contributed to the largest global refugee crisis since the end of World War II. The number of internally displaced Syrians was and is the major cause of the country's hunger crisis, along with significantly decreased agricultural production. Both sides of the conflict, the Syrian government and its rebel opponents, have used starvation as a military tactic. Columbia University Earth Institute Dr. Richard Seager said, this is the "single clearest case" ever presented by scientists of climate change playing a part in conflict.[11]



The Compound Security Dilemma of Food Security

In the U.S. Department of Defense, 2014 Quadrennial Defense Review, climate change is described as a threat multiplier that can impact and affect other threats to security. [21] Years later in 2021, the Biden Administration Interim National Security Strategic Guidance (INSSG), emphasized the “intersectionality of threats,” and gray zone conflict. [21] The following year when the 2022 National Security Strategy (NSS) was published there were several mentions of the interconnectedness of food security, climate change, economics, conflict and health including an anticipation of what would happen when they are not addressed together: “Tensions will further intensify as countries compete for resources and energy advantage—increasing humanitarian need, food insecurity and health threats, as well as the potential for instability, conflict, and mass migration.” [23]

“Tensions will further intensify as countries compete for resources and energy advantage—increasing humanitarian need, food insecurity and health threats, as well as the potential for instability, conflict, and mass migration.”

Following the NSS the U.S. Department of Defense released their 2022 National Defense Strategy (NDS) highlighting the growing importance and threats emanating from transboundary challenges such as climate change and food systems, while recognizing the need to “build resilience in the face of destabilizing and potentially catastrophic transboundary challenges, which increasingly strain the Joint Force.”[26]

This intersectionality of threats and transboundary challenges expands the problem space in which countries need to grapple with and “strain the Joint Force” as the NDS articulates. The security dilemma of the 20th century international environment is a dilemma defined primarily by physical material-based security threats of a military nature – has now given way to a new 21st century security dilemma, one aptly regarded as the “compound security dilemma”.

In the 21st century, traditional security concerns over material resources (i.e., access to oil and other scarce resources) are less and less divorceable from issues of human security (i.e., local concerns and challenges over food shortages, health concerns, human rights protections, etc.). Notably today, there is a depreciating relevance and viability for the division between the national and the international domains; and the gap between domestic and foreign policy and policymaking is closing.

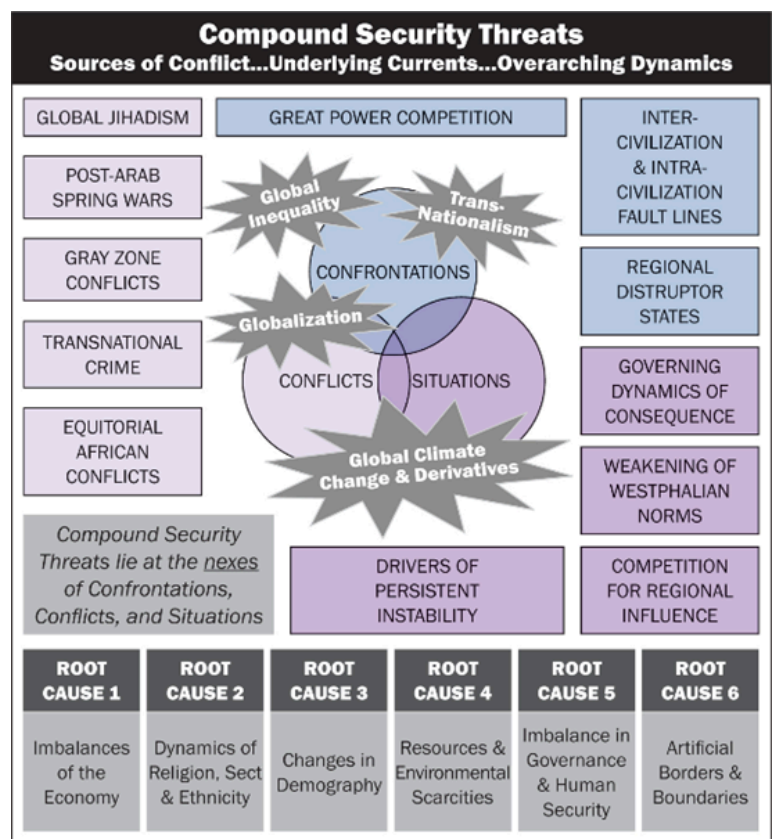


Figure 3 The Compound Security Threat (Wilson and Smitson, 2020)

The compound security perspective understands threats to be “compounded largely because their root causes and underlying conditions (or currents) have been allowed to persist unaddressed or under-addressed.”[27] Figure 3 illustrates the sources of conflicts, underlying currents and overarching dynamics distinctive of compounded security threats which intersect and build on each other.

Using the lens of compound security, the graphic below illustrates the three major drivers of Food Insecurity as a compound security dilemma and competitive challenge. Climate, Conflict and Convergence drivers. Climate to include environmental changes and disasters such as tsunamis and floods as well as climate related changes such as excessive heat and drought. Conflict drivers which include tension between ethnic groups and religions as well as migration due to conflict which compounds security challenges. Convergence drivers speak to factors relating to physical terrain and human terrain coming into coincidence, and include a wide range of drivers including access to natural or non-natural resources, water, ports, highways, as well as technological change creating asymmetric power challenges to the status quo.

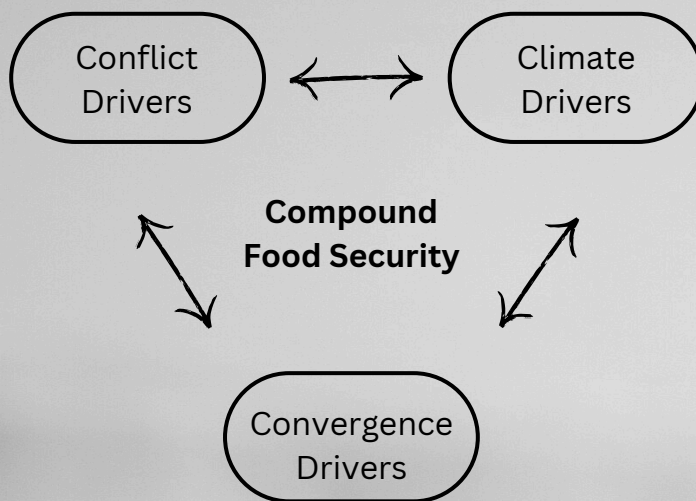


Figure 3 The Compound Security Threat
(Wilson and Smitson, 2020)

As food security is so critical to human life, economic prosperity and national stability, today's levels of food insecurity require the full use of all instruments of power. One of which is the military, which has an important role to play in managing food security and the unique abilities of special operations forces have a critical role to play.

To address the compound security threats affecting food security, a comprehensive DIME strategy (Diplomacy, Information, Military and Economics) , in the context of the 3-Ds (Development, Diplomacy and Defense) is needed. While many policies to manage food security challenges include most of the DIME elements, the military component has not been leveraged to its full-spectrum (i.e., nonlethal/preventive, in addition to traditional lethal uses) extent.

Specifically, the use of special operations forces (SOF) in the context of food security has been largely overlooked. The competencies and range of skills that SOF has are invaluable in managing compound food security threats. The next section delves into the relevance and value proposition of US Special Operations across the spectrum from peace to war.





03

The Utility of Special Operations Forces in relation to Food Security

The past two decades of the 'War on Terror' have defined a generation and have shaped the identity of many servicemembers, particularly special operations forces. Special operations became synonymous with counter terrorism operations, and as a means of lethal direct action. So much so, that many in the military as well as across the civilian government entities have regarded the utility of SOF as primarily a wartime tool and a means for counter terrorism.[28] This is far from the fuller history, culture, identity, and capabilities of special operations and SOF.



Image credit: Spc. Steven Hitchcock, US Army

While this highly visible, highly kinetic counter terrorism role has garnered coverage in the news and in film, it does not reveal the level of expertise and experience 'with and through local partners' – to get to those points of action.

These 'other-than-direct action' SOF expertise include:

Unconventional Warfare & Peace Operations: the understanding, often through language and cultural training and education, of how resistance movements or insurgency groups work to coerce, disrupt or overthrow governments or occupying powers by operating through or with an underground, auxiliary, and guerrilla force in a denied area. Ethiopia is an obvious case where unconventional factors were not well thought in the build-up to civil war and the weaponization of food .[29]

Irregular Warfare & Peace Operations: The draft DOD Directive (DoDD) 3000.07 includes the newly agreed upon definition of irregular warfare: "Irregular Warfare (IW) is a form of warfare wherein states and non-state actors campaign to assure or coerce states or other groups through indirect, non-attributable, or asymmetric military activities. IW is as strategically important as traditional warfare (TW)."

Relative to food security, SOF's unique access and placement in countries and communities around the world has garnered wisdom over the counter-terrorism era via conducting peer-to-peer bidirectional sharing of knowledge and understanding that generate truths and intentions when they are not so easily recognizable to a civilian eye.

Where state and non-state actors campaign to assure or coerce states or other groups through indirect, non-attributable, or asymmetric activities. [30] Irregular warfare or IW has become a term used daily in the current era of strategic competition primarily in the context of counter terrorism, but less is said about the value proposition of SOF's access and placement in countries and communities around the world conducting peer-to-peer bidirectional sharing of knowledge and understanding that solidifies truths and intentions.

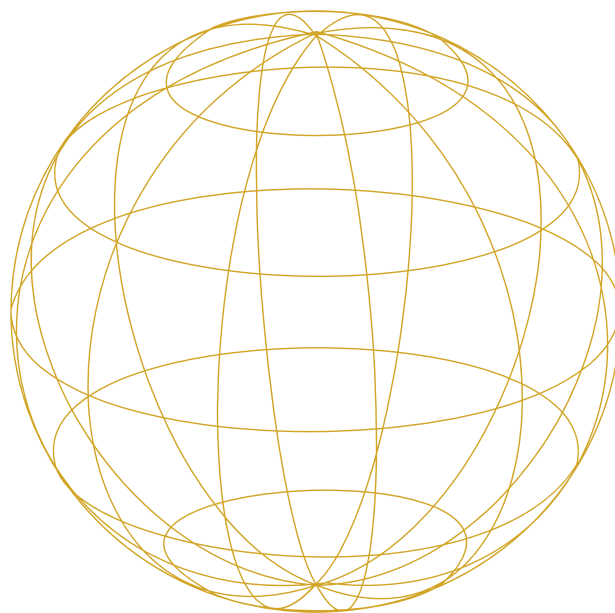
Asymmetric/Hybrid Uses of Force: where defense and security operators gain operational environment context through firsthand observations of the threat to inform solutions in order to spark change within the fielded and institutional forces.[31] In food security, satellites and sensors help inform weather patterns, seasonal shifts, or El Nino Southern Oscillation-like patterns, which can influence harvest and agricultural yield. Similarly, in the context of food security, SOF's relationships on the ground serve as a human domain sensor. It is only the local wisdom that can detect and identify certain triggers that would cascade into problems.

Asynchronous Uses of Force: leveraging OODA (observe-orient-decide-act) Loop [32] mentality for what happens in a conflict between conventional and unconventional actors where the start of a conflict between attacker and defender is almost always asynchronous. The link with unconventional actors has been made clear in the ongoing Syria crisis where conventional and unconventional stakeholders are campaigning against one another. This asynchronous unconventional special operations advantage provides civilian stakeholders with critical perspective and situational awareness on the more obvious conventional ramifications.

The policy engagement of the office of the Assistant Secretary of Defense for Special Operations and Low-Intensity Conflict (ASD/SOLIC)[33] has the understanding and knowledge to shepherd the above through political channels ushering in SOF's soft skills of relationship building, trust making, language and cultural appreciation that have been developed over the decades into a now fourth generation of special operators who are now emerging with this training and education built into the early-year curriculums.

When conducting operations US Special Operations Forces do not operate alone, they do so “alongside the U.S. Government Interagency, as well as with Allies/Partners.”[34] In doing so the special operations community cultivates unique competencies such as (and not limited to):

- Means to build and support resilience and resistance. US Special Operations has a history of helping allies and partners “in their efforts to build national resilience and resistance against predatory, subversive, gray zone threats and by helping to shape mutually beneficial security environments through our foreign assistance and security cooperation programs.”[35]
- Unique intelligence gathering and bespoke technological capabilities. In doing so special operations bring unique capabilities that the conventional force is not fit to deliver.
- SOF are uniquely trained and postured to participate across domains and conflict spaces, including the informational and cognitive space to help shape and support friendly efforts and operations across the strategic, operational and tactical continuum.
- The relational competencies and global integration across Commands and the convening power across partners nations, intelligence communities and indigenous communities, positions SOF as a unique resource to utilize in conflict related matters taking place below the threshold of warfare.



These competencies are part of SOF's history and heritage as a follow and support element to political statecraft. This remains true today as special operations can be leveraged as part of comprehensive integrative solutions in the pursuit of preventative defense and integrated deterrence. Being a prominent part of the 2022 U.S. National Security Strategy, Integrated Deterrence calls for a more intentional integration of all state powers and authorities in the face of today's security challenges.[36] Expanding on this issue, Dr. Mara Karlin, the Assistant Secretary of Defense for Strategy, Plans and Capabilities said "Deterrence means building a combat credible force across all domains and across the full spectrum of conflict." [37]

Integrated Deterrence

The United States has a vital interest in deterring aggression by the PRC, Russia, and other states. More capable competitors and new strategies of threatening behavior below and above the traditional threshold of conflict mean we cannot afford to rely solely on conventional forces and nuclear deterrence. Our defense strategy must sustain and strengthen deterrence, with the PRC as our pacing challenge.

Our National Defense Strategy relies on integrated deterrence: the seamless combination of capabilities to convince potential adversaries that the costs of their hostile activities outweigh their benefits. It entails:

- **Integration across domains**, recognizing that our competitors' strategies operate across military (land, air, maritime, cyber, and space) and non-military (economic, technological, and information) domains—and we must too.
- **Integration across regions**, understanding that our competitors combine expansive ambitions with growing capabilities to threaten U.S. interests in key regions and in the homeland.
- **Integration across the spectrum of conflict** to prevent competitors from altering the status quo in ways that harm our vital interests while hovering below the threshold of armed conflict.
- **Integration across the U.S. Government** to leverage the full array of American advantages, from diplomacy, intelligence, and economic tools to security assistance and force posture decisions.
- **Integration with allies and partners** through investments in interoperability and joint capability development, cooperative posture planning, and coordinated diplomatic and economic approaches.

Integrated deterrence requires us to more effectively coordinate, network, and innovate so that any competitor thinking about pressing for advantage in one domain understands that we can respond in many others as well. This augments the traditional backstop of combat-credible conventional and strategic capabilities, allowing us to better shape adversary perceptions of risks and costs of action against core U.S. interests, at any time and across any domain.

Figure 5 Integrated Deterrence: 2022 U.S. National Security Strategy

The integrated deterrence approach spans the entire spectrum of cooperation, competition, conflict, and warfare through allies and partners, and across domains and regions. There is only one military entity whose competencies are at the intersection of this type of integrated deterrence and that is special operations forces. The 'soft power' of SOF is one of its strongest assets in the today's compounded and complex security environment as SOF can convene the stakeholders described in the Integrated Deterrence strategy together for comprehensive integrative solutions.

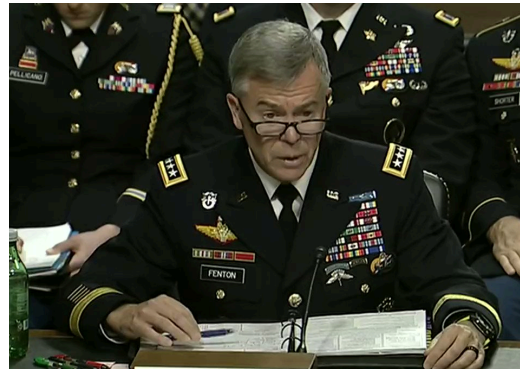
In this sense, we must rediscover the value of special operations, one that is technologically enabled and operates at the intersection of threats – regardless of where they fall on the conflict continuum.[36]

SOF's Convening Power and Civilian-Military Relations

Speaking at the Senate Armed Services Committee posture hearing, Commanding General of the U.S. Special Operations Command, General Fenton said "Partners and allies are absolutely a key focus. We are about partnerships, about friendships, about the power of many to make us all stronger. It is the speed of trust, the speed of relationships with the partners and teammates around the world." [37]

"Partners and allies are absolutely a key focus."

*General Fenton, Commanding General
U.S. Special Operations Command*



In compound food security dilemmas, SOF's convening potential is underutilized and underestimated. SOF can leverage its own soft power competencies and those of its allies and partners through its 'JIM-C' network comprised of joint military entities (the 'J'), the USG interagency (the first 'I'), the United Nations and the intergovernmental apparatus (the second 'I'), multinational representatives (U.S. allies and an expanding set of partners, the 'M'), and a diverse set of private sector stakeholders that include military industrial members, multinational corporations, domestic businesses, and the vast non-governmental community (the 'C').

An example of SOF's convening utility is in the Global South countries where dire food shortages are present. These countries have difficulty doing their own convening when dealing with food security because of its intersectional complexity. Clusters of sectoral bodies led by host-country Ministries exist for agriculture, water, economic growth, nutrition and trade but their own multisectoral coordinating mechanisms remain constrained. Both sector-specific and multisectoral coordinating mechanisms rarely include significant military representation. [38]

SOF's value proposition in this equation is to offer convening and organizational planning leadership in these gaps. It can do so via two ways: 1. through host-country Ministries of Defense or Security via in-country defense attachés, and 2. via Embassy Country Teams, where it can make its 'soft power' case to the Chief of Mission, USAID, USDA and other involved agencies to greenlight SOF participation and leadership in existing food security-related mechanisms. SOF's unique competencies that involve human security in relation to conflict will help close the gap of relative perspective that is often missing from civilian-dominated discussion and solution-sets.

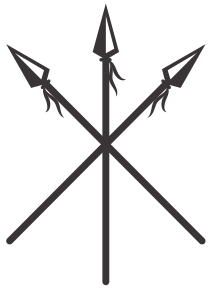
SOF's convening power within the 'J' of the JIIMC is also imperative. It is not only DOD's SOF who have built this 'soft power' expertise and experience. Many primary European and Asian partners are more integrated in certain regional contexts than the Americans are. Their insights are also disconnected from the main coordination and collaborative networks within these affected countries.

Another valuable SOF attribute in country-specific food security dilemmas is the relationship it has with counterpart defense and security entities. Ultimately it is these entities that are best fit to lead a unified military and military-support approach to food security as well as lead host-government authorities to maximize contribution of all instruments of national power to related emergencies, stresses and of course, conflict situations. SOF can assume the lead military partner role in situations where host-country capacity and initiative are stabilized and effective.

However, the role of SOF is not limited to its competencies and convening authority, it also has been tasked over the decades with core activities which can be leveraged in food security situations. The next section delves into the core activities of US Special Operations and how they can be leveraged to reduce, mitigate and manage the consequences of food insecurity.



2014 Operation United Assistance. The Army services, in support of USAID, provided medical, engineering and other assets to fight against the Ebola virus outbreak in West Africa, particularly Liberia



04

The Use of Special Operations Unboxing the Spear Heads in the SOF Toolkit

Special operations have long been considered the “tip of the spear” for the Nations they serve; a well and hard-earned reputation, from the U.S. historical perspective tracing back to the colonial and revolutionary period. However, the tip of this spearhead has many different facets, sharpened for various purposes over time, and that can be leveraged depending on the specific mission established and directed by civilian authority. In essence, as the former President of the U.S. Joint Special Operations University (JSOU) Dr. Ike Wilson says, “This next Age of use and utility of special operations and SOF is already witnessing a rediscovery of the fuller, comprehensive instrumental purposes of SOF, where the new sharpest facets of the SOF tip of the spear are proving to be less the direct action lethal uses of SOF, and more about the non-lethal—with emphasis on uses of special operations for the production of asymmetrical positional advantages, for the achievement of producing wins, without fighting.” [39]

In relation to food security there are several “beyond lethal direct action” special operations core activities where SOF can be employed to provide assistance and support. They are: Civil Affairs Operations, Foreign Humanitarian Operations, Foreign Internal Defense, Military Information Support Operations and Special Reconnaissance. [40]





Civil Affairs Operations

The purpose of Civil Affairs Operations (CAO) is to “enhance the relationship between military forces and civilian authorities in localities where military forces are present.” SOF professionals are also multilingual and culturally literate which helps reinforce CAO activities. The current state of challenges to food security around the world and its impact as a threat multiplier has been noted by the military.

“When a war breaks out, we focus on bringing that war to a resolution that is long lasting. Food insecurity does not contribute to those goals.”

Speaking on this issue, commanding general of the 351st Civil Affairs Command, General Christopher J. Dziubek, explains the challenges food insecurity brings to the military mission: “When a war breaks out, we focus on bringing that war to a resolution that is long lasting. Food insecurity does not contribute to those goals.” [41]

Civil Affairs professionals have been postured on this issue through the course on Agricultural Development for Armed Forces Pre-Deployment Training (ADAPT) tailored to train soldiers on the “tactical level agricultural security skills training program that provides DoD Civil Affairs practitioners with fundamental, quick impact agriculture, food security assessment and rapid intervention techniques for those deploying to at-risk, rural regions.” Separately this training prepares SOF to be able to coordinate food and agricultural related security situations “within the operation, actions and activities of supported combatant commanders.” [42]

This agricultural development approach in support of conflict reduction has already proved useful in places such as Afghanistan during stability operations in 2013 where SOF Civil Affairs professionals leveraged their ADAPT training and network of host nation entities as well as US government agencies to conduct effective food security related operations. [43]

The ADAPT training is based on using the military in support of agriculture development as a conflict mitigation tool. [44] In today's contemporary environment this training and agriculturally minded approach to conflict delivered through Civil Affairs operations to further relationships with the host nation's military forces and civilian authorities lends is valuable mechanism on its own, however it is also compatible to another SOF core activity – Foreign Humanitarian Operations.

Vignette:
Food Insecurity and the Utility of Civil Affairs Operations



CHEMERIL, Kenya -- August 15, 2006 -- Guam Army National Guard Specialist Ignacio Rosario of Chalanpago Guam immunizes a goat with the help of local Pokot herders. Picture source: US Army

In the Northern Rift Valley Province of Kenya, at a livestock watering hole protected by a prickly cactus bushes, 96th Civil Affairs Battalion Civic Action Team made up of U.S. Air Force physician, one U.S. Army veterinarian, one U.S. Army Reserve veterinarian and one U.S. Army Reserve animal care provider and accompanied by East African Community (EAC) soldiers and locals, were greeted by herds of goats and sheep already sequestered in two holding pens. The tribal leader of these nomadic people who owned the animals had spread the word about the upcoming Veterinarian Civic Action Program(VETCAP). VETCAPs are frequently part of Humanitarian Assistance (HA) operations. Based on guidance from local Kenyan veterinary health officials the CA team vaccinated sheep and goats for sheeppox and goatpox (Pox) and goats for Contagious Caprine Pleuropneumonia (CCPP). In addition to vaccinating the goats and sheep, the team did other minor surgery and preventive medicine procedures on the animals. Overall, more than 2000 animals were treated. This Civic Action Team example in Kenya is replicated hundreds of times a year in several countries, but particularly in underdeveloped countries where animals are an important food source for survivability.



Foreign Humanitarian Operations

Foreign Humanitarian Operations include “the range of DOD humanitarian activities conducted outside the US and its territories to relieve or reduce human suffering, disease, hunger, or privation.”

Special Operations Forces have an important role to play in supporting food security within foreign humanitarian operations – particularly in environments that are experiencing armed conflict and in environmental terrains that are hard to reach.

Using the United States Institute of Peace diagram of the Curve of Conflict [45], there are several spaces where SOF can provide assistance to support global food security challenges across the conflict curve. Prior to armed conflict, whether it is at the routine diplomacy or the crisis diplomacy stage, special operations can contribute agricultural knowledge and infrastructure to support agricultural capacity building and resilience. This can include assisting with the installation of drip irrigation systems or providing support to local entities in getting aid to areas and vulnerable populations that are difficult to reach using traditional means. Another example of this could include delivering drought proof seeds to needed areas. During the armed conflict stage special operations can support the protection of non-combatants and food assets and infrastructure by providing military support and protection to humanitarian efforts such as those from the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) or the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID).

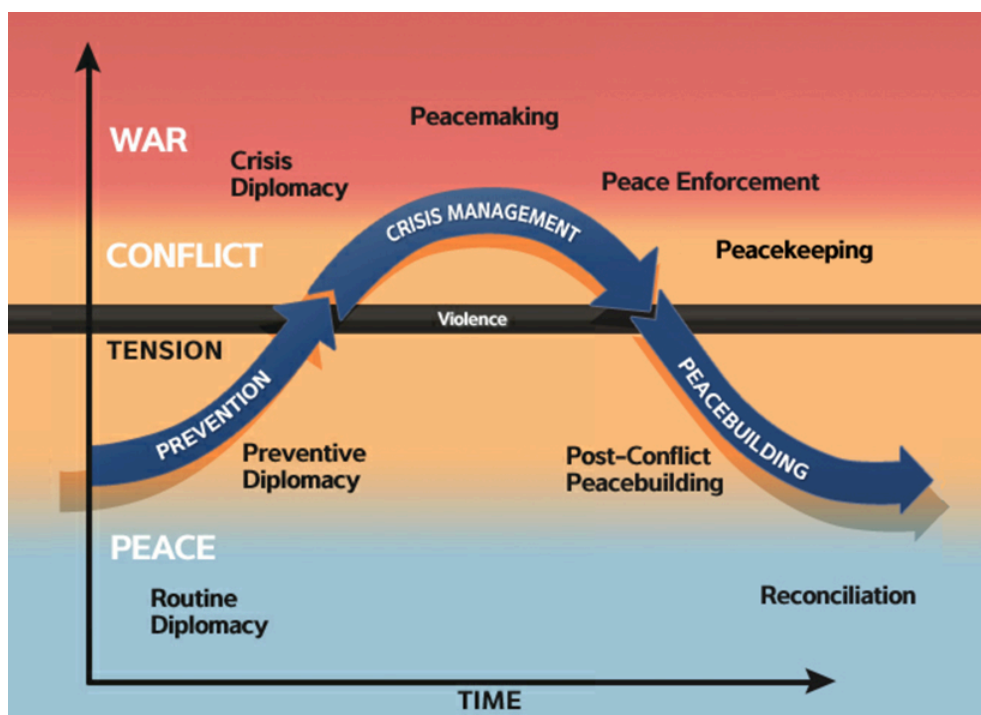


Figure 6 Peace and War Continuum: United States Institute of Peace (USIP)
adapted from Michael Lund

When it comes to food security, the value of special operations forces conducting foreign humanitarian operations cannot be overstated; and should not be underestimated. Especially when this SOF core activity can be force multiplied with another SOF core activity – Foreign Internal Defense.



Foreign Internal Defense

Foreign Internal Defense (FID) activities include a range of “activities that support a host nation's internal defense and development (IDAD) strategy and program designed to protect against subversion, lawlessness, insurgency, terrorism, and other threats to their internal security, and stability, and legitimacy.”

Food insecurity tends to be coupled with other challenges such as poor governance, instability and criminal activity. In the case of Northern Nigeria “the high rate of insecurity and communal conflict in the northern part of the country has taken its toll on both food security and economic growth in that region.” [46] While in the Horn of Africa, as a result of climate change, droughts have resulted in an increasingly challenging situation amid crop failures and animal deaths stressing food availability. These conditions have contributed “to increasing food insecurity, heightened competition over resources, and internal displacement and emigration (primarily to neighboring countries, including Kenya and Ethiopia).” [47] This environment creates fertile grounds for crime and terrorism to prosper, and indeed the 2022 Global Terrorism Index has found Sub-Saharan Africa to be the global epicenter of terrorism. [48]

Over twenty years of waging direct action special warfare during the Global War On Terror (GWOT) have left Special operations forces with an unrivaled and extensive experience with counter terrorism, dismantling terrorist networks and constraining their ability to operate, through the conduct of lethal ‘capture or kill’ operations, actions, and activities. [49]

Looking at the longer histories and heritage of SOF, however, -- beyond the GWOT -- we can see and begin to once again reappraise the more comprehensive, full-spectrum readiness uses and utilities of SOF; identities of SOF that transcend the lethal, and find more promising preventative nonlethal utilities of special operations.

Foreign Internal Defense (FID) operations are a prime expression, offering ‘Resiliency & Resistance’ strong-pointing support to help host nations protect against terrorism and many of the other stability and security challenges that governments must manage in the face of food insecurity. This SOF expertise is a foundational mission set that has the power to strengthen any food security effort.

However, as with any military operation, or any new change, effective communication about the situation and the operation is critical to its success. This is why Military Information Support Operations come hand in hand with a military effort in support of food security.





Military Information Support Operations

Military Information Support Operations (MISO) are conducted across domains and “are planned to convey selected information and indicators to foreign audiences to influence their emotions, motives, objective reasoning, and ultimately the behavior of foreign governments, organizations, groups, and individuals in a manner favorable to the originator's objectives. These on-going and enduring activities are coordinated with U.S. government agencies and implemented in accordance with U.S. law and DoD policies.”

This SOF core activity is instrumental to supporting the other core activities. In the case of MISO activities in support of food security related missions, SOF would create their own communication toolkit, much like that of the United Nations' FAO's tailored food security communications toolkit.[50] As in the FAO toolkit it would include a communication plan with media assets for a variety of audiences and mediums such as TV, radio, social media etc. This public facing communication would focus on what the military operations are doing in support of food security. Separately, there would be other lines of effort in the MISO activities that would focus on managing and minimizing criminal, terrorist, or adversarial actor influence.

The U.S. Special Operations Command recently stood up the Joint MISO WebOps Center (JMWC) to improve joint posturing on web related MISO activities.[51] This is an additional asset that SOF brings to the table that can be leveraged to support food security operations.





Special Reconnaissance

Special Reconnaissance encompass “actions conducted in sensitive environments to collect or verify information of strategic or operational significance.” Food insecurity is a compounded problem set which, as we have seen above, manifests in places where there is weak governance, poor security, criminal activity, climate change, water scarcity and terrorism – but also proxy warfare activity, some of which is conducted below the threshold of warfare.

Special Reconnaissance activities have an important role to play in supporting host nations in their fight against terrorism, sabotage of agricultural infrastructure and assets, combat mercenaries as well as proxy warfare from adversarial nation states.

In hostile environments, special reconnaissance enables humanitarian operations and can mean the difference between getting lifesaving supplies and food to needed communities. It can also be part of a food security Foreign Internal Defense mission to assist the host nation military in conducting special reconnaissance in support of food security assets and infrastructure.



Image credit: U.S. Air Force

The complexity of compound food security challenges today require that all instruments of power bring all their tools, capacities and capabilities to the table. The versatility and asymmetric nature of special operations can play a critical role in support of political, economic and military interests relating to food security.

The contemporary food situation presents an opportunity for the Special Operations community to lead a more comprehensive input into the host-country platforms that attempt to prevent, manage and resolve food insecurity dilemmas. Doing so inserts a critical military voice capable of parlaying dimensions of conflict into problem and solutions sets that are often characterized by non-military stakeholders in sectoral areas that involve agriculture, health, economic growth, and trade.

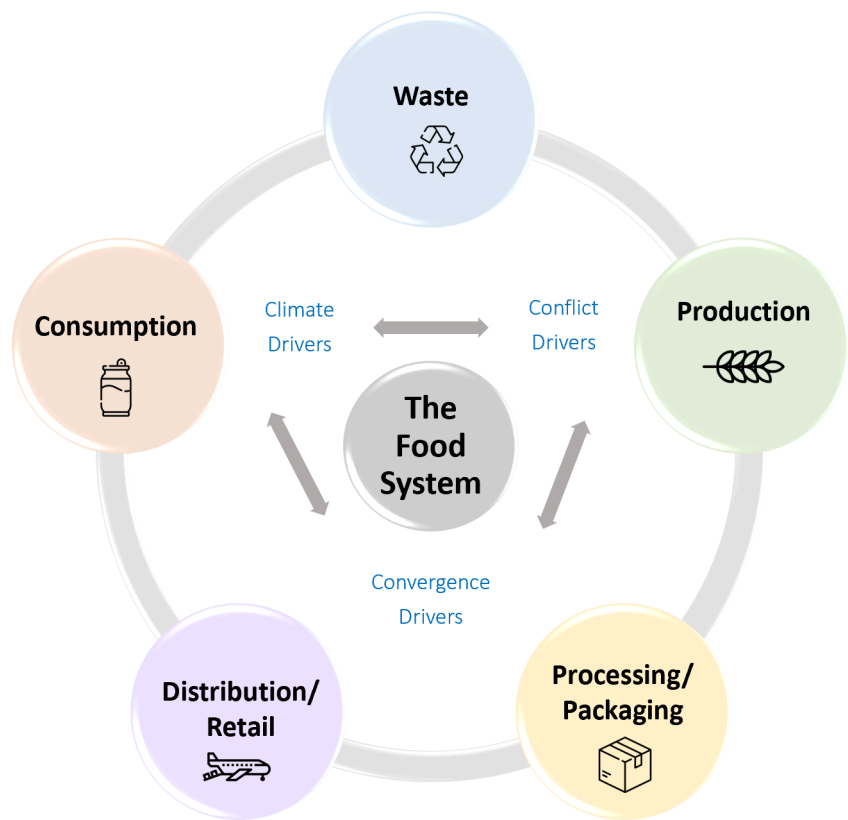


Figure 7 Compound Security Drivers placed inside the Oxford Food System Diagram



Similarly, military leadership could consider a more strategic approach in Global and Theater Campaign Plans to build investment into state relationship building and prevention assistance to take during periods of peace and stability.

Much can be applied from the fourth 'SOF Truth' of taking advantage of situations below the level of conflict to engage more directly with partner nations who tend to operate best within peer-to-peer constructs that embody the 'by, with and through' SOF mentality. As Global and Theater Campaign Plans become more encompassing of compound security threats such as those that involve basic human needs, the Pentagon should also consider revisiting the authorities and permissions that enable greater agility, efficiency and responsiveness at the field-level to minimize delays that allow tension, unrest and violence to spiral viciously without civilian-led control.

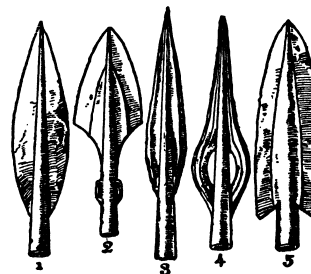
SOF Truths

1. Humans are more important than hardware.
2. Quality is better than quantity.
3. Special Operations Forces cannot be mass produced.
4. Competent Special Operations Forces cannot be created after emergencies occur.
5. Most special operations require non-SOF support.

The contemporary environment of the Compound Security Competition; and global compound food insecurity requires nothing less than a convening of all available instruments of force, governmental and nongovernmental, public and private and commercial, aimed toward what the famed US statesman, George Kennan, called "strong pointing" national statehoods.

When Executive Director of the World Food Programme Cindy McCain concluded to Politico, that the role of U.S. leadership in food security was to 'be on top of this', her final point was that 'most of the land is going to be really torn up as a result' .[52] Her characterization of the consequence of food insecurity can be seen today in Ukraine, Syria, Ethiopia and many other contexts where these countries have been physically and socially torn up as a result. The host country stakeholders managing compound food security dilemmas need U.S. Special Operations expertise to better understand the human domain of the human conflict terrain. This however does not need to implicate the United States or its Special Operations Forces to command or fund it all. On the contrary, it's SOF's 'by, with and through' approach that can convene JIIM-C stakeholders, led by those of the host country, to enable them to fill the missing chair at the food security partnership table. It is U.S. Special Operations who can inform host country key stakeholders with the value-add experience without having to 'intervene' itself. This is SOF's competitive advantage, because affected countries understand that these problems are predominantly their own, and utilizing peer-to-peer relationships to influence more genuine and authentic problem solving is the best and most durable solution.

Globally, there is an ongoing shift from a balance of power environment of geopolitical competition to one of greater instability and unpredictability. To command in such transformative times, leaders should consider the art, science and craft of special operations as part of their food security toolkit. The way forward must be one of intentional, purposeful and thoughtful collective action to address the compounded nature of the global food security situation.



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Dr. Wilson (colonel, U.S. Army, retired) is a professor and former president of JSOU. He has earned a reputation as a versatile and innovative soldier-scholar. A decorated combat veteran with multiple combat tours in the Balkans, Iraq, and Afghanistan and extensive operational experience across the greater middle east, he is a nationally and internationally recognized advocate for change in how America understands and deals with matters of security affairs and uses of force in times of peace and war—particularly at a time when disruptive change continues to outpace the ability of organizations and organizational leadership to think and act fast and effectively.

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