

# SOF and the ARG/MEU

Achieving asymmetric advantage

by Maj Michael Stevens

***“A BHAG—big hairy audacious goal, is a huge and daunting goal ... it is clear, compelling, and unifying ... a change-the-industry style goal.”<sup>1</sup>***

***—John Doerr in Measure What Matters***

The strength of an institution can be measured by its willingness to question long-standing practices and approaches. The *2019 Commandant’s Planning Guidance* and *Force Design 2030* are doing this, considering how the Amphibious Ready Group (ARG)/MEU is signaled out for long overdue change.<sup>2</sup> Furthermore, a requirement for the MEU to successfully compete and achieve asymmetric advantage in the gray zone is noted—a key aspect in its transformation.<sup>3</sup> Amplifying this change, recent discussion from the Commandant in the *Marine Corps Gazette* highlighted the criticality of persistent, relevant competition in the gray zone for the Service.<sup>4</sup> However, the knowledge, expertise, and partnerships to effectively compete in the gray zone do not exist across the FMF.

The *2018 National Defense Strategy* and *National Military Strategy* provide foundational guidance for U.S. special operations forces (USSOF) to enable the DOD to address particular challenges of great power competition (GPC) and achieve competitive advantage below armed conflict. Through USSOF’s ability to create outsized effects, it generates options in competition that garner the United States a position of strength. A more complete, collaborative partnership with USSOF

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is necessary to evolve the ARG/MEU’s capabilities to achieve advantage in the gray zone, thus rebuilding the formation’s relevance. The rationale follows and includes necessary changes for the ARG/MEU as well as areas of collaboration—all to strengthen the formation’s value proposition to its Services and the Nation. Such analysis entails the entire formation, with a primary focus on the MEU as the more flexible element toward change.

## **A Changed Environment**

U.S. traditional military responses have proven ineffective to address gray zone tactics. Our adversaries and competitors note the limitations of U.S. military power and understand our policy basis to employ military forces. U.S. military responses to aggression primarily consist of physical deterrence, strike delivery, and the sale of weapons to partners,<sup>5</sup> yet none of these compel adversaries and competitors to deviate from their malicious actions in the gray zone.

Through the gray zone, hostile actors exploit the relative sanctity of under-governed spaces across physical, virtual, interstellar, and cognitive domains. These competitive spaces can be contested and denied realms, where freedom of action and influence is adroitly usurped through a combination of ambiguity, obfuscation, and a complex use of multiple elements of national power—all of which downplay a possible kinetic response.<sup>6</sup> This helps to restrain the United States and its partners, as such a response becomes more alarming in environments with already heightened political risk, thus hastening the possibility of miscalculation. Further, the erosion of our technological superiority contributes, as competitors can contest our actions across all domains. With such factors increasing, the gray-zone actions of adversaries and competitors will continue, as these and other actions impose costs (notably sowing internal dissent) *outside of combat* that have a stronger effect on the United States and achieve their policy objectives.

Within U.S. Indo-Pacific Command (USINDO-PACOM), this is evident through Chinese aggression across multiple domains. China uses military and paramilitary forces to subvert alliance cohesion, erode societal resilience, and undermine our Nation’s position on key issues through actions in the gray zone.<sup>7</sup> Particularly, China’s disinformation campaigns, its actions to contest a nation’s sovereignty through ambiguous maritime altercations, building physical terrain, and utilization of political warfare to implant coercive means of Chinese influence across its regional neighbors—all are gray zone tactics China successfully executes through non-traditional use of force.<sup>8</sup> Yet, none

of these tactics are challengeable by the ARG/MEU.

As witnessed over the last several years, provocative activities in the gray zone can rapidly emerge, signaling a need for credible contact layer forces to contest subversive actions while also managing a complex situation before it turns into a geopolitical crisis.<sup>9</sup> The complexity of the gray zone is unpredictable in its escalation spikes, yet this does not spell opportunity for most blunt and surge forces, as their focus resides on armed conflict—ill-prepared for asymmetric engagement. This is the dilemma of the gray zone; it requires a responsive force with the ingenuity to contest asymmetric actions while also possessing the lethality, technicality, and persistency to manage escalation and deter aggression. This is the crisis response capability necessary for the modern era, which requires clear-eyed recognition across the Service.

**Transformational Change**

The ARG/MEU is predicated on naval power projection, with the ability to rapidly deploy crisis response-oriented forces to quell escalation or respond accordingly to combat operations amongst its capabilities. Yet, China focuses not on matching such power projection within USINDO-PACOM

but on *denying* this capability from being employed.<sup>10</sup> From its developments in precision weapons to low-intensity tactics in the gray zone, these means are highly successful in neutralizing a U.S. naval response. A new approach is necessary to compete.

U.S. Special Operations Command (USSOCOM) is in the midst of an organizational shift toward GPC, with a large focus on enabling competition below armed conflict. USSOF are extensively investing in irregular warfare as the capability to challenge the gray zone tactics of our adversaries and competitors.<sup>11</sup> To maximize USSOF's small footprint and collective punch as a joint force enabler, a closer partnership with SOF can enable the ARG/MEU to compete *now* in the gray zone. USSOF are the predominant element to achieve effects prior to the initiation of major conflict, as SOF can illuminate, deter, and deny the actions and hostile intent of adversaries and competitors through their wide range of statutory capabilities across all domains.

**SOF-ARG/MEU in the gray zone**

The ARG/MEU requires modernization to compete in the gray zone. Multiple areas to achieve closer SOF-ARG/MEU collaboration are to follow, with a focus on asymmetric capability,

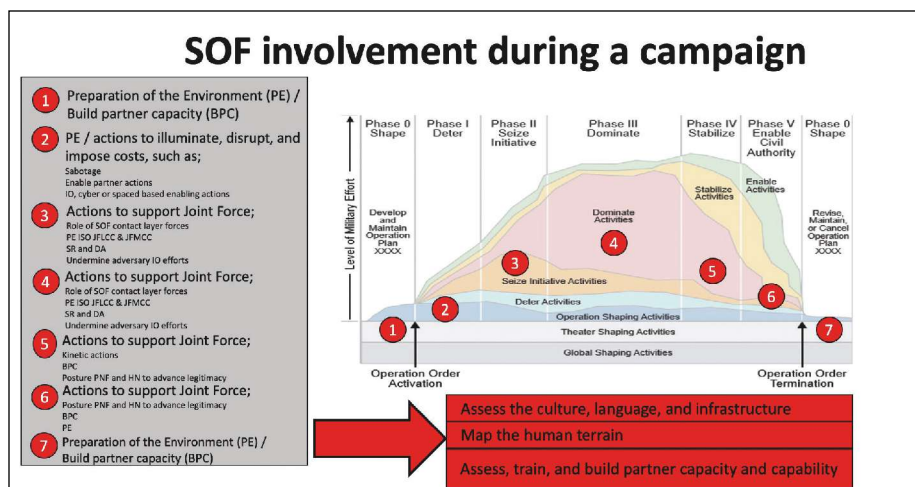
exploring why SOF is necessary to the formation's growth.

The ARG/MEU executes a *reactive* operational approach, maintaining its readiness to respond as required. But the very character of this relationship inhibits the formation's functionality to address modern gray-zone tactics. As adversaries and competitors foment disorder through non-attributable gray zone tactics—such as proxy warfare, disinformation campaigns, and support to extremist activities—the ability to challenge these actions demands persistency, expertise, and relevance. To do this, USSOF applies a *preemptive* approach that shapes and influences environments to avert conflict and manage escalation at all levels of warfare. Known as an indirect approach, this method aims to address instability via partner actions *by, with, and through* local forces, aided by a deep understanding of regional and cultural dynamics.<sup>12</sup> This method strengthens regional alliances, reduces financial commitments through savings in persistency, and provides U.S. policy makers greater decision space while avoiding the political sensitivities of deploying U.S. forces en masse.

Of note, a means of partnership does exist through the USSOCOM Special Operations Forces Liaison Element (SOFLE) program with the ARG/MEU. The program has aided closer SOF-ARG/MEU integration and interoperability through greater responsiveness to combatant command campaign activities, a requirement that dates to its 2014 inception. Yet, the SOFLE program cannot be the means to evolve the ARG/MEU to counter coercive gray-zone tactics. Aside from limits in availability, the SOFLE suffers capability disparities because it lacks consistency in its application of SOF understanding toward gray-zone tactics.

**Maritime Gray-Zone Actions**

USINDO-PACOM's expansive maritime domain presents a region where the ARG/MEU is likely to encounter Chinese gray-zone tactics. If a hypothetical situation emerges where ambiguous Chinese forces challenge a regional neighbor with a rudimentary yet veiled



**Figure 1. Terms in graphic are: JFLCC—Joint Force Landing Component Commander; JFMCC—Joint Force Maritime Component Commander; SR—Special Reconnaissance; DA—Direct Action; IO—Information Operations; PNF—Partner Nation Forces; and HN—Host Nation. For further understanding of terms, reference Joint Publications (JP) 3-31 Joint Land Operations (JFLCC term), JP 3-32 Joint Maritime Operations (JFMCC term), JP 3-05 Special Operations (SR, DA, as well as PE and BPC terms), and JP 3-13 Information Operations. (Graphic courtesy of author.)**

littoral blockade, setting the way for an infiltration of irregular forces under a false narrative of legitimacy, would the ARG/MEU be capable of providing the *necessary response*? While the merits of this and other factors can be debated, the political sensitivity surrounding the issue will impact the ARG/MEU's ability to respond. As the formation is built toward a combat orientation, its size, speed, and capabilities challenge the ARG/MEU's engagement. The ARG/MEU's capacity and brute strength are self-limiting factors in the gray zone; a finesse, precise, lethal force with a discreet application is necessary for asymmetric actions.

Through USSOF's low-visibility actions and capabilities, it conducts irregular warfare as it prepares environments and deters aggression to support a Geographic Combatant Command's (GCC) objectives. USSOF's access and placement to conduct preparation of the

the situation warrants delicate response options. SOF use its increased access and resources to further illuminate the environment, leverage its relationships to enable a partner response because of political sensitivity, or impose multi-domain or transregional costs through irregular means. Furthermore, SOF's ability to discredit illegitimate narratives is bolstered by its expansive target development, indigenous expertise, and adaptive in realtime processes that enable widespread flexibility and sweeping support across the U.S. National Command Authority.

### Chinese Political Warfare

Another hypothetical situation could be this: a host of Chinese political warfare actions are occurring across an USINDO-PACOM country that is the location for an ARG/MEU security cooperation exercise. Chinese actions across political, economic, diplomatic,

exercise restrains ARG/MEU influence; here, the ability to counter and impose costs in this long game are of most significance. The MEU's isolation at-sea, albeit with short term disembarkments such as this, deny the formation the ability to truly shape their operating environments and domains. This largely nullifies their high-demand, low-density resources the necessary time to assess, characterize, and influence environments.

One of USSOF's key attributes is mastery of the human domain. The ability to gain cognitive influence across this domain requires a *persistent presence with access and placement*, enabled by extensive human-terrain expertise. USSOF expends extensive resources building resistance networks to counter gray-zone disinformation and deter hostilities through its multinational partnerships, which strengthen partner resiliency and national resolve to challenge Chinese political warfare. Further, SOF takes irregular actions to impose costs and create dilemmas on Chinese coercive behavior as required. SOF's efforts contribute to eroding competitor willpower to intervene, making these actions imprudent and unwise for its sponsors.

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environment, build partner capacity, and execute asymmetric options—to include but not limited to surrogate use, sabotage, and other actions to degrade and disrupt the projection of national power—impose unique costs and place dilemmas upon adversaries and competitors to enable a competitive advantage for the United States. This array of activities provides greater options for U.S. policy makers but also is skillfully executed to sustain actions below armed conflict—right in the gray zone.

Through its global support networks and partnerships, SOF are well positioned to respond. SOF maintain an array of multi-purpose, low-visibility maritime vessels that operate across various sea surfaces. Here, such platforms are not to facilitate kinetic actions; rather, they sense and understand the environment, since the political sensitivity of

informational, and cultural spheres are gaining momentum; in particular, a range of Chinese security forces are active within the country. Chinese forces span from defense industry engagement to a maritime, land, air, and cyber domain presence that includes actions with coastal mariners, infrastructure and development sectors, and civil aviation. This hypothetical nation is seeing degrees of both witting and unwitting capitulation to Chinese influence across its society.<sup>13</sup>

The ARG/MEU is representative of the U.S. strategic action and commitment to the hypothetical nation, with the capacity to serve as an illustrious example of U.S. inspiration. Despite the ARG/MEU's shining example to its host nation partners, the formation is ill-suited to counter Chinese political warfare. The duration of the brief

### BHAG: Big Hairy Audacious Goal

A bolder, new approach is offered. This model positions the ARG/MEU for greater effectiveness, modernizing to meet the demands of gray zone activities and asymmetric warfare. It requires adaptive thinking, a preference of non-conformity over institutionalization, and a prominent focus on the success of the joint force.

The ARG/MEU adjusts its naval expeditionary readiness posture, thus becoming a more adaptive, networked, and distributed force. Through greater persistence and increased forward distribution, *select* ARG/MEU forces operate in prioritized areas where the formation supports gray zone activity. Such forward distribution occurs jointly with USSOF in a unified partnership as an enhanced force conducting asymmetric activities in the gray zone. In this capacity, SOF aid the ARG/MEU in gaining positions of global advantage

much earlier, in all domains, to gain dominance in the decision cycle.

The MEU and USSOF can jointly develop capability that is purpose built to characterize and influence networks and environments, deter modern aggression, and maximize strengths toward greater responsiveness. Through this model, the MEU leverages SOF's global network, an optimized nexus that increases access, resources, and relevancy to a common cause.<sup>14</sup> Such a means enables SOF to influence the strategic landscape for operation approval and amplify whole-of-government assistance across the national power sphere. Additionally, this forward distribution requires non-traditional deployment lengths and frequency, supportive of dynamic force employment and forward force maneuver in the 2018 NDS.<sup>15</sup> When required by the GCC, distributed ARG/MEU forces can re-aggregate either at sea or another expeditionary location.

Yet for this to succeed, a change to the ARG/MEU's command and control (C2) structure is necessary. The formation's current approach to C2 focuses on delivering massed combat power ashore, while another unit commands ARG/MEU forces during an operation. The gray zone's complex nature requires a well-honed, all-domain C2 capability that firmly understands the environ-

ment and creates options that maximize initiative through responsive and adaptive means, all while exercising authority over dynamic operations that span domains and levels of war. Through a joint, integrated command structure, the ARG/MEU is bolstered through

**... the ARG/MEU is bolstered through SOF's global access ...**

SOF's global access, information advantage, and ability to drive targeting enabled by its increased authorities and permissions. This leads to a more joint, interoperable force achieving asymmetric effects for the GCC through greater unified action, and is supportive of joint all-domain C2.

Further analysis of the organic MEU capability is also required to maximize effects achieved. A prioritization is to be on scalable, precise, and complementary forces that tangibly contribute to achieving advantage in the gray zone. USSOF would enable specific SOF integration and interoperability training with the ARG/MEU to occur prior to deployment, establishing relationships with forces that will share forward areas of

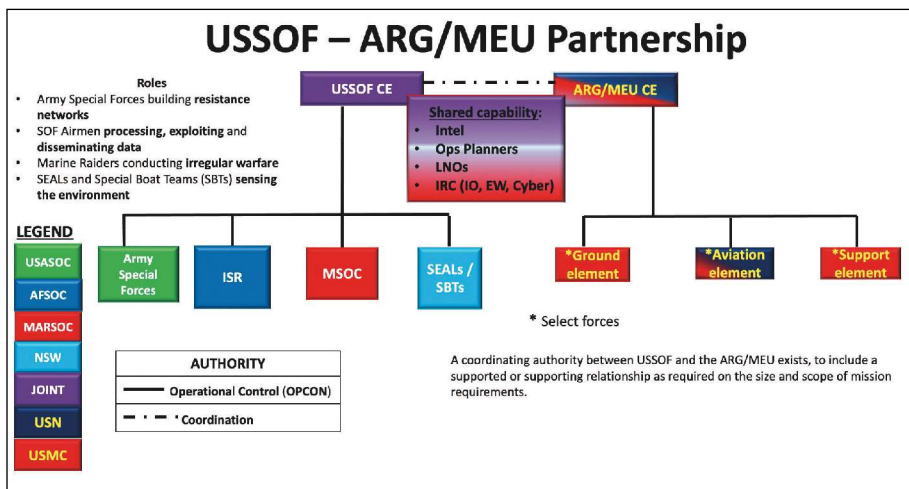
operation, build partner capacity opportunities, and modernize crisis response means.

**Setting the Conditions**

To harness SOF's utilization of asymmetric warfare, the ARG/MEU requires greater flexibility from both its Navy and Marine Forces (NAVFOR/MARFOR) higher headquarters. This dual-prong means of naval command has complicated the ARG/MEU-SOF relationship through its lack of SOF understanding and convoluted bureaucracy—a hindrance to SOF-ARG/MEU interoperability. Through greater collaboration between the theater special operations command (TSOC) and the NAVFOR/MARFOR, SOF and the ARG/MEU can more effectively address gray zone activity. Timely staff planning can support the development of an integrated operational approach that channels the capabilities of USSOF and the ARG/MEU to contest gray zone actions. This level of staff coordination requires substantial joint planning to develop the ends, ways, and means to achieve effects for the GCC, as gray zone activities can take significant time to plan operations, receive approvals, and execute—emphasizing the importance of a closer partnership between the TSOC and NAVFOR/MARFOR commands.

Service- and theater-level exercises serve as a great way to strengthen this operational-level relationship. With the Services focused on readiness towards near-peer combat operations, the level and type of naval exercises have intensified. However, many of these exercises are largely focused on major combat operations, missing the pivotal phases of shape and deter—where gray zone activity is at its peak. Failure to emphasize these phases may result in the naval Services missing this key area to strengthen joint lethality via gray zone actions. SOF are an able and willing partner, with resources at every SOF service component and TSOC to build SOF understanding through exercises.

Concepts also require greater analysis to enable SOF-ARG/MEU interoperable actions in the gray zone. As expeditionary advance base operations



**Figure 2.** Figure depicts one possible example of an ARG/MEU-USSOF partnership. Terms are: CE—Command Element; USASOC—U.S. Army Special Operations Command; AFSOC—Air Force Special Operations Command; MARSOC—Marine Forces Special Operations Command; NSW—Naval Special Warfare Command; ISR—Intelligence, Surveillance, and Reconnaissance; MSOC—Marine Special Operations Company; LNOs—Liaison Officers; IRC—Information Related Capabilities; and EW—Electronic Warfare. (Graphic courtesy of author.)

(EABO) unfurl in concept and execution, the access and understanding of USSOF's operations are critical in supporting EABO. This is where USSOF's indirect approach is instrumental, as the relationships that SOF build are vital to the success and survival of EABO platforms. Contrary to some ideas on the topic, it will not be EABO Marines foraging for food and supplies on desolate islands; rather, it will likely be the relationships that USSOF maintains with its partners to *enable and set the conditions* for EABO success. Through non-traditional support means, aided by SOF's low-visibility actions, EABO platforms can receive sustainment, timely intelligence, mobility support, and improvements in survivability necessary for their success across the conflict continuum.

### Final Thoughts

The Services have interpreted GPC as a return to major combat operations. As strategic value in military strength certainly exists, it does not equate to relevance for all forces. The ARG/MEU remains a force fixated on readiness toward higher end combat operations, a posture that largely nullifies its utility in the gray zone. The complexities of the gray zone demand forces with persistence, can shape all-domains, and are competitively focused below armed conflict to impose a wider variety of costs and manage escalation. While crisis escalation is unpredictable, this modern era requires more innovative approaches to respond to aggression; size and strength alone have proven an ineffective deterrence toward asymmetric actions in the gray zone. China's cunning actions and non-attributable manner within the gray zone will continue in part as long as the United States presents traditional military responses as deterrence.

Our Nation needs forces that are globally integrated, can provide all-domain solutions across the conflict continuum, and enable a competitive advantage in support of joint forces. Together, with its spirit, resources, and expeditionary prowess, the ARG/MEU can harness USSOF's asymmetric capabilities to compete in the gray

zone. Multiple areas of cooperation exist for the ARG/MEU-SOF team to counter and combat malign behavior across the gray zone, to include bold ways that strengthen joint lethality. As our adversaries and competitors have learned to effectively sterilize the might of our military strength, adaption in our competitive approaches is necessary to deter, contain, and neutralize these actions below armed conflict. Yet, the willpower for daunting change must be resolute and ready to confront whatever obstacles lie ahead as the Service cannot build readiness for the gray zone alone.

### Notes

1. John Doerr, *Measure What Matters: How Google, Bono, and the Gates Foundation Rock the World with OKRs*, (New York, NY: Portfolio Penguin, 2018).
2. Gen David H. Berger, *38th Commandant's Planning Guidance*, (Washington, DC: 2019); and Gen David H. Berger, *Force Design 2030*, (Washington, DC: 2020).
3. *Force Design 2030*. It is noted that some military theorists debate the use and existence of the terms gray zone, asymmetric warfare, and similar others. It is not beneficial to entertain such dialogue here, as extensive literature exists on these and other terms, as they are now widely accepted amongst DOD senior leaders.
4. Gen David H. Berger, "The Case for Change: Meeting the Principle Challenges Facing the Corps," *Marine Corps Gazette*, (Quantico, VA: June 2020).
5. Stephen M. Walt, *The Hell of Good Intentions: America's Foreign Policy Elite and the Decline of U.S. Primacy*, (New York, NY: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2018).
6. Adam L. Silverman, "Getting to the Left of Boom in 21st Century Warfare," *The Cipher Brief*, (July 2020), available at <https://www.thecipherbrief.com>.
7. Ross Babbage, "Winning Without Fighting: Chinese and Russian Political Warfare Campaigns and How the West Can Prevail: Volume I," (Washington, DC: Center for Strategic and Budgetary Assessments, 2019). Babbage's piece discusses the concept of political warfare and its utilization to undermine traditional means of Western power and achieve political objectives. Other similar approaches are unrestricted warfare and use of proxy forces to wage low

intensity conflicts to enable sponsor plausible deniability and neutralize effects of Western powers and coalitions.

8. Ibid. Babbage defines political warfare as "diverse operations to influence, persuade, and coerce nation states, organizations, and individuals to operate in accord with one's strategic interests without employing kinetic force."

9. Department of Defense, *Summary of the 2018 National Defense Strategy of the United States of America: Sharpening the American Military's Competitive Edge*, (Washington, DC: 2018). The contact layer is a layer of the NDS's global operating model.

10. David Ignatius, "Think We Have Military Primacy Over China? Think Again," *Washington Post*, (May 2020), available at <https://www.washingtonpost.com>.

11. Important to note the unclassified Irregular Warfare Annex (2020) to the NDS, as it distinctly states a requirement for the Services and the joint force to institutionalize IW as a core competency.

12. The indirect approach is USSOF's method for working with partner forces through many of its statutory capabilities, to include unconventional warfare, foreign internal defense, and security force assistance. This approach empowers SOF partners at multiple levels, strengthening their resilience and capacity to lead in a conflict or prolonged struggle while USSOF remain in an advisory role.

13. "Winning without Fighting." Babbage notes multiple areas that Chinese political warfare influence is felt across a nation.

14. The Global SOF network is the ability of USSOF to create and sustain shared consciousness across an interconnected web of global SOF operators, teammates, and partners, imbued with empowered execution to maximize efforts towards an issue. Gen McChrystal's book, *Teams of Teams-New Rules of Engagement for a Complex World*, is an excellent source of further detail.

15. *National Defense Strategy*.

