

# SPECIAL OPERATIONS—AN ARMY CORE COMPETENCY

By Lt. Gen. Charles T. Cleveland  
and  
Lt. Col. Stuart L. Farris

**T**he American wars in Iraq and Afghanistan are stark reminders of several timeless military lessons. One is that war is characterized by chance, friction and uncertainty. Another is that war is a human endeavor, a battle of wills fought between thinking, highly adaptive opponents. A third is that superior firepower, technology and tactics are ultimately no substitute for superior strategy. Finally, war is much easier to begin than it is to end.

As the Army and other principal landpower stakeholders—the U.S. Marine Corps and U.S. Special Operations Command—move forward, they cannot afford to forget these lessons. They also must take the time to think about and adequately capture some new lessons. One is the

## Change or Face Irrelevance

I encourage all to read this essay on how Special Operations fit into Army doctrine. Lt. Gen. Cleveland and Lt. Col. Farris are challenging us, in light of recent experiences and how warfare is changing, to rethink some fundamental assumptions and approaches.

Readers may not agree with all that they say, but the challenge they put to all of us is reminiscent of a former Army Chief of Staff: change or face irrelevance. Their suggestions are also a call to the profession: Each of us has a responsibility to our Army's future. Join the dialogue—make your contribution.

Send your comments to [armymag@ausa.org](mailto:armymag@ausa.org) or send a letter to ARMY Magazine, 2425 Wilson Boulevard, Arlington, VA 22201.

—Gen. Gordon R. Sullivan, USA Ret.  
President and Chief Executive Officer,  
Association of the U.S. Army

U.S. Army/Sgt. Daniel P. Shook



*A U.S. Army Special Forces operational detachment alpha soldier stands guard as Afghani commandos conduct a clearing operation in Afghanistan's Kandahar Province.*

increased relevance of special operations. U.S. Army Training and Doctrine Command's anticipated recognition of special operations as an Army core competency represents an important first step toward better providing the President, Congress and the American people with an Army that is capable of many missions at many speeds, at many sizes, and under many conditions, and one that can operate in any environment.

**P**roducing meaningful change within the Army begins with identifying and filling existing gaps in doctrine. Army Doctrine Publication (ADP) 3-0 *Unified Land Operations* recognizes two Army core competencies: combined arms maneuver and wide-area security. ADP 3-0 states: "It is the integrated application of these two core competencies that enables Army forces to defeat or destroy an enemy, seize or occupy key terrain, protect or secure critical assets and populations, and pre-

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vent the enemy from gaining a position of advantage."

Combined arms maneuver is defined as "the application of the elements of combat power in unified action to defeat enemy ground forces; to seize, occupy, and defend land areas; and to achieve physical, temporal, and psychological advantages over the enemy to seize and exploit the initiative. It exposes enemies to friendly combat power from unexpected directions and prevents an effective enemy response." Wide-area security is defined as "the application of the elements of combat power in unified action to protect populations, forces, infrastructure, and activities; to deny the enemy positions of advantage; and to consolidate gains in order to retain the initiative."

These are certainly necessary Army core competencies, as they accurately describe capabilities and functions required by a preponderance of Army forces, yet we have learned they remain insufficient to adequately address the full range of existing threats. They do not sufficiently account for the increasingly relevant competencies that special operations forces bring to bear in modern conflict. This includes the critical ability of working to prevent conflict—or, perhaps more practically, working by, with and through regional allies, partners and host-nation forces toward what could be described as managing conflict. In other words, special operations play a key role in helping to keep conflict and violence within the limits of political tolerance—at a manageable level—negating, or proving an alternative to, the perceived need for large-scale, long-term and costly military interventions. One only needs to look to the contemporary examples of Army special operations' contributions in the Philippines, Colombia, Yemen, North Africa and El Salvador to recognize and understand the value of this ability.

Recognizing special operations as an Army core competency has become self-evident. Army special operations forces' (ARSOF) special warfare and surgical strike capabilities are the envy of militaries throughout the world. They are the scourge of global terrorists, insurgent movements and hostile nations seeking to intimidate and oppress those who desire and respect the values of peace, freedom, equality and opportunity.

ARSOF played vital roles in the Afghanistan and Iraq campaigns, working at levels of unprecedented scope, scale and precision to disrupt and dismantle the al Qaeda and Taliban networks; serving as an economy of force to



effectively hold three Iraqi mechanized corps in place during the 2003 invasion of Iraq; and working to build competent and credible Afghani and Iraqi national security forces. Within the context of the broader war on terrorism, ARSOF, in conjunction with joint partners, continue to constitute the de facto main effort, conducting persistent, patient and precise small-footprint operations in countries throughout the Middle East, North Africa, the Central Asian states and South America.

**F**urthering the argument, the 2012 defense strategic guidance, *Sustaining U.S. Global Leadership: Priorities for 21st Century Defense*, highlights the strategic relevance of special operations by stating: “Whenever possible, we will develop innovative, low-cost, and small-footprint approaches to achieve our security objectives.” The document also identifies counterterrorism and irregular warfare, countering weapons of mass destruction, and stability and counterinsurgency operations as among the primary missions for U.S. armed forces. Cross-referencing these missions with the definition of special operations and the inherent capabilities that ARSOF bring to bear, it becomes readily apparent that ARSOF are ideally suited to perform and support these very missions.

Why haven’t special operations previously been recognized as an Army core competency? The short answer is that special operations were not considered especially relevant to the form of war for which the Army has spent the majority of the post-World War II era preparing itself. In other words, within the context of 20th-century industrial-age warfare, special operations were viewed as a complementary effort to the campaign but not considered in and



*Top: 75th Ranger Regiment soldiers conduct operations at Camp Roberts, Calif. Left: A Special Forces team sergeant leads commandos across a stream during an operation to disrupt insurgents in Kabul Province, Afghanistan.*

*Members of the 10th Special Forces Group call in an operation schedule during Emerald Warrior, an annual two-week joint/com-bined tactical exercise sponsored by U.S. Special Operations Command.*



DoD/Tsgt. Bradley C. Church, USAF

of themselves essential. For example, during the Cold War, ARSOF were prepared to conduct unconventional warfare in occupied areas of Europe, mobilizing partisan auxiliary, underground and guerrilla forces to disrupt the occupying forces of the Soviet Union and Warsaw Pact. Unconventional warfare was a supporting effort to—if not a distraction from—the main efforts of massed Infantry and armored forces that would fight it out in the main battle area.

**T**hat, however, is no longer the case. The emergence of al Qaeda, our experiences in Iraq, Afghanistan and even Vietnam, and the anticipated regularity of irregular and hybrid conflict in the 21st century taught—and continue to teach—us that special operations forces and the competencies they bring to bear are an essential component of 21st-century military campaigns. Their relevance in understanding, shaping, deterring, disrupting, fighting and defeating unconventional, irregular and hybrid threats is without question. Perhaps most importantly, special operations forces have the ability to build relationships and capacity with allied and partner-nation forces abroad.

U.S. Army Training and Doctrine Command's anticipated recognition of special operations as a doctrinal Army core competency will have some important effects that will make the Army a more capable, relevant warfighting institution. First, it will serve to ensure that special operations activities and capabilities are further integrated and codified in Army doctrine, professional military education, combat training center exercises and war games. This should result in a better trained, more educated and better integrated force, one that better understands and respects

the capabilities and limitations that both special operations and conventional forces bring to the fight and how these forces can best be integrated and employed to accomplish the mission. As an Army, we are always better when we work together to appropriately tailor, blend and employ our suite of capabilities—and therein lies the art. It should also provide for more thorough and holistic operating concepts that better account for the Army's contributions to preventing and shaping conflict. Finally, recognizing special operations as a core competency should go a long way toward mending the long-standing (but often unspoken) divide that unfortunately exists between Army conventional and special operations forces. If there is one thing we have learned over the past 12 years of war, it is the power of interdependence, that the sum of our actions will always be greater than the individual parts.

There is no longer any room within the Army for a union-card, us-versus-them mentality between the members of its conventional and special operations forces. As the Army draws down and becomes smaller, the more special and expert everyone in it has to be. Looking to the future, what we absolutely cannot do is allow Army conventional and special operations forces to retreat to their respective foxholes and begin to refortify the walls of a by-gone era. The recognition of special operations as an Army core competency will go a long way toward ensuring those walls remain in the proverbial dustbin of history. More importantly, it offers a key first step toward ensuring the Army—as the linchpin of strategic landpower and the joint force land fight—is better able to provide a broad range of viable strategic options to defend America and its interests across the spectrum of conflict. ★