# THE FUTURE OPERATING ENVIRONMENT

**Over the next decade, Army special operations forces will remain actively engaged in protecting our homeland and our national-security interests abroad.** Our force will be called upon to face a number of threats occurring in multi-dimensional, hybrid-operating environments. It is imperative that our force understands not only the threats that may develop over the next decade, but also the changing environment in which we will be called to operate.

**Future Operating Environment.** As we project beyond Iraq and Afghanistan, we will face a challenging security environment. We are not returning to a pre-9/11 era of operations nor the Cold War-era where competing superpowers created a fairly predictable, if tenuous, world order. Instead, this new world will be characterized by an irregular balance of power between both state and non-state actors. It will present a dynamic operating environment that is characterized by uncertainty. The shift in the nation's tolerance away from large-scale joint operations, coupled with the complexity of the future operating environment, create a growing gap between national action and inaction – this changing dynamic could give our adversaries broader freedom of action and encourage increased instability. The reality of this changing paradigm requires USASOC and the U.S. Special Operations Command to build new strategic options for the nation.

Future threats will range from standing conventional and unconventional forces to irregular militias and paramilitaries to terrorist groups, criminal elements and any number of hybrids. The interaction of several variables within the environment, including human behavior, assures both fog and friction.

We will increasingly act in multi-dimensional, hybrid operating environments, which will require the force to operate within, and seamlessly shift between, ethnic enclaves in the center of sprawling megacities and austere rural villages. These diverse operating environments will also test support elements, including logistics, intelligence and communications. While the rise of non-state and

## FUTURE THREATS >

Over the next decade, the ARSOF Soldier will be called on to put all of his training to the test in ungoverned and under-governed parts of the world, as well as in urban centers. As borders become more porous and threats evolve and build, the problem set confronting the force can be divided into three subsets:

### PERSISTENT CHALLENGES

Throughout the international community, there are persistent strategic challenges: acquisition and allocation of natural resources, the balance of population between urban and rural communities and the establishment of communications. How our allies deal with these strategic challenges will ultimately shape the world in which ARSOF operates.

### EMERGING CHALLENGES

In an era of constrained budgets and limited resources, ARSOF must take a realistic look at the emerging challenges of today to prepare for the world of 2022. Asymmetric threats and pre-emptive cyber attacks from both state and non-state actors will characterize regional challenges in the next decade.

### UNCONVENTIONAL CHALLENGES

The combination of unconventional challenges ranging from transnational terrorism, dispersion and access to weapons of mass destruction, organized criminal networks and the privatization of force could expose the United States to serious threats within the undergoverned regions of the world.

transnational actors will serve to complicate U.S. government actions throughout under-governed nations, we cannot afford to discount the actions of state-sponsored actors who operate much like other violent extremists organizations, only with the state's direction and support. Countries where state-sponsored, non-state and transnational actors operate typically have weak and corrupt central governments, high unemployment, exorbitant poverty levels, limited internal infrastructure, deep ethnic and religious divisions and a history of humanitarian issues. It is in these regions of the world that ARSOF units will be the force of choice.

Several aggravating factors will influence the way we operate:

- **Geopolitical Constraints:** Our battlespace will contain agile state actors and non-state actors operating across borders of sovereign nations and outside of declared combat zones.
- **Policy Limitations:** Forward presence will be affected by a reduced budget and national reluctance to act overtly and unilaterally.
- **Hostile nation states:** These states will be more capable and want more resources, but still will be unable to match U.S. forces.
- **Threat networks:** These networks (comprised of both state-sponsored and non-state terrorist groups) will remain active; their attacks will have greater impact; they will use more sophisticated techniques; and they will retain freedom of maneuver.

Conditions across the strategic environment indicate future conflict will not be confined to one category. It will range in scope from major conventional conflicts to humanitarian support and nation-building missions. Very capable adversaries will continue to challenge U.S. interests globally, while rising military powers will work to advance their regional and global interests. Enemies will seek to exploit their asymmetric advantages wherever possible; USASOC's training; education, capabilities and concept development must reflect this reality.

The momentum of human interaction is reaching unprecedented levels; enabled by generational leaps in personal communication technologies and an associated social-media explosion, with little to no state control of those technologies and applications.

We must be prepared to conduct special operations in more restrictive areas than those that we have experienced in Iraq and Afghanistan over the past decade. As the challenges for access and placement increase, infiltration and exfiltration options will be reduced and ARSOF will become the more subtle option for decision makers to affect desired change and meet future threats.

## DEVELOPMENT IMPLICATIONS >

**Leader Development**

Leaders must be able to deal effectively with the complexity and uncertainty of potential operating environments, be culturally aware, understand the information environment, master consequence management and be prepared to conduct decisive actions.

**Training Development**

Training venues must reflect an understanding of the influence of various cultures and actors present in potential operating environments including the use of cultural and language role players.

**Capabilities Development**

Capabilities development must anticipate the operational needs of commanders and incorporate the adaptability inherent in commercial off-the-shelf technology to support the near future.

**Concepts Development**

Accounting for adaptive adversaries requires scenario-based concepts that are informed by collaboration from ongoing operations but look well beyond the current fight.