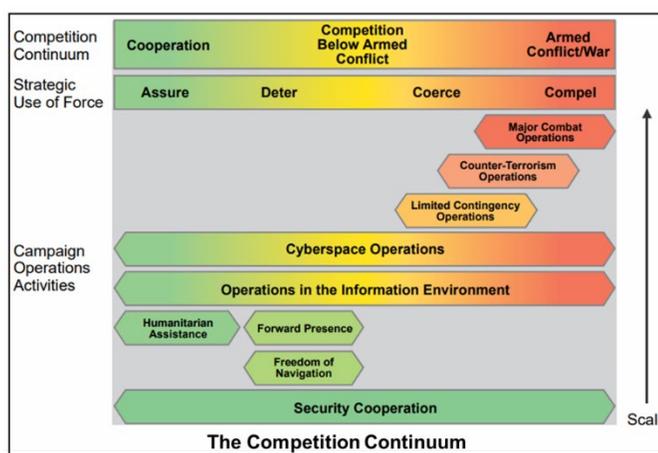


## SPECIAL OPERATIONS FORCES WITHIN THE COMPETITION CONTINUUM

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### INTEGRATED CAMPAIGNING

The [Joint Concept for Integrated Campaigning](#) (JCIC) describes the competition continuum of armed conflict through cooperation (See figure, “The Competition Continuum”). Fundamentally, special operations force (SOF) are an integral part of joint force campaigning and fits within this model.



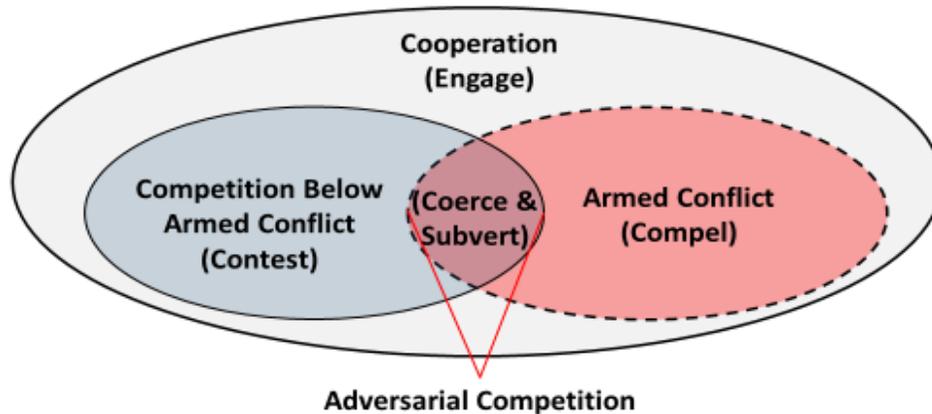
### THE COMPETITION CONTINUUM

Competition is a fundamental aspect of international relations. As states and non-state actors seek to protect and advance their own interests, they continually compete for diplomatic, economic, and strategic advantage. To better adapt to the changing environment, the joint force has adopted a framework for understanding, describing, and participating in a competitive operational environment. Rather than a world at peace or at war, the competition continuum describes a world of enduring competition conducted through a continuous mixture of cooperation, competition below armed conflict, and armed conflict. US Special Operations Command (USSOCOM) defines competition as the interaction among actors in pursuit of the influence, leverage, and advantage necessary to secure their respective interests.

The three broad categories of strategic relationships allow planners the ability to frame military activities across campaigns and operations. Planners should not view the categories in a linear fashion; campaigns and operations can begin within any of the categories; accelerate, surge, or decrease in scope and intensity; and occur concurrently. The overlapping in the figure, “Interrelation of Actions within the Competition Continuum,” represents the intersection of Department of Defense (DOD) activities that can occur within these three categories to assure partners in cooperation

compete against adversaries below the level of armed conflict, coerce or subvert adversaries when competition moves towards armed conflict, and compel enemies

### Interrelation of Actions within the Competition Continuum



during war. At the intersection of competition and armed conflict lies adversarial competition typically a SOF operating space.

### Interrelation of Actions within the Competition Continuum

SOF are guided by the following principles of competition:

- ★ **Orient campaigns on US interests.** Campaigns should center on US interests and—in the context of global campaign plans—determine how actors threaten those interests or how to exploit opportunities to advance that interest relative to the actor.
- ★ **Conduct integrated campaigning.** SOF should enable joint force core warfighting functions and contribute through tasks beyond the capability of conventional counterparts.
- ★ **SOF acts on a global scale and over time.** The distribution and activities of SOF should reflect a comprehensive understanding of national priorities in time and space, not just in theater, but regionally as well as globally.
- ★ **Exploit asymmetries and leverage indirect approaches.** Campaigns should incorporate a strategic and operational understanding of asymmetries that exist between US and adversaries' interests, strategies, cultures, postures, capabilities, and relationships.
- ★ **Employ unorthodox methods.** SOF are inherently limited in resources, which almost always bear a significant opportunity cost when employed. Within a

compound approach, campaigns should strive to direct SOF in ways that fully realizes its potential effect in the strategic environment.

## **SOF COOPERATION**

Typically, SOF play a crucial role in cooperation activities. Cooperation activities are normally enduring with no discrete start or end. Relationships with the allies or partners are in place and will continue for the foreseeable future with mutual benefit to both the US and its partners. In some cases, however, cooperation in specific areas with a partner whose overall relationship with the US is neutral, or even adversarial, may be necessary. Cooperative activities can take many forms, from security force assistance with a partner in a quiet region to multinational operations and activities in an armed conflict. The common thread is that campaigning through cooperation is a purposeful activity to achieve or maintain policy objectives. SOF are typically used to build partner capacity, integrate partner capabilities into joint operations, help understand the operational environment, and prepare/shape conditions for follow-on joint force activities.

Campaigning through cooperation requires patience, consistency, and empathy. The most productive relationships take time to build. A partnership is unlikely to reach its potential if the joint force approaches military engagement as discrete events rather than as part of a deliberate, continuous process. SOF commanders and staffs should have an understanding of the environment, a realistic appraisal of the partner's objectives, and the nature of the partner's relationship with the US to derive a range of feasible and productive military options that lead to sustainable and acceptable end states for the US and its partner.

## **SOF COMPETING BELOW THE LEVEL OF ARMED CONFLICT**

Competition below armed conflict tends to occur over extended periods. In comparison to armed conflict, actions are often more indirect and the expenditure of resources less intense, thus allowing for a more protracted effort. As an inherently constrained and measured approach, these campaigns are not designed to achieve quick results. To compete during these operations, SOF adopt a long-term approach; agile enough to react to rapid changes in the political, diplomatic, and strategic environment. During these activities, SOF set conditions to enable the maximum range of options to accommodate and respond to changing political and diplomatic environment. When properly executed, competition below armed conflict creates strategic opportunities for the US and its partners. The methods employed in competition below armed conflict will vary with the situation, but successful SOF action features the following characteristics.

- ✦ Provide understanding of how relevant actors will perceive action or situations.
- ✦ Conduct a broad array of activities: Establish access to critical areas, forward positions units, establish appropriate and timely presence, organize exercises, share intelligence, prepare the environment for crisis response, and conduct operations in

the information environment, to include efforts to counter and undermine the competitor's narrative.

- ★ Continually assess the competitor's intentions and capabilities, which will change over time. For these actions to have tangible effects on a competitor's behavior, it is essential to have a deep understanding of competitor perceptions and decision-making, as well as the close integration of diplomatic, informational, military, and economic efforts.

## **SOF IN ARMED CONFLICT**

One implication of the competition continuum is that it is not solely sufficient to excel in campaigning through armed conflict. Even in an international armed conflict, success requires the skillful application of both cooperation and competition below armed conflict. If these are ignored or treated as ancillary to the armed conflict effort, then the joint force is at increased risk for failure to meet some or all of the desired objectives. Commanders and staffs should be aware of the interrelated nature of these various elements. SOF should be aware that while engaged in armed conflict, they may be required to conduct cooperation and competition below the level of armed conflict activities within the theater of operations, or globally. During armed conflict, SOF conduct core activities and other operations that enable joint force objectives.

Rarely do wars end with a complete end of armed conflict. Wars disrupt political, social, and economic structures, networks, and institutions to the point it is often impossible to simply return to a pre-conflict state. Destruction of government and societal institutions can create conditions for intense competition among internal, regional, and global actors seeking to retain or gain power, status, or strategic advantage within a new order. The joint force might be directed to fight in an armed conflict against enemy combatants who become guerrillas, warlords, or criminal militias. Global or regional competitors can then exploit these conditions by supporting these groups as proxies or surrogates to continue the armed conflict. Therefore, the immediate "post-war" period still requires the joint force to campaign through a mixture of cooperation, competition below armed conflict, and armed conflict. SOF typically play a crucial role in ensuring transitions between phases of operations and campaigns, and as environments transition between cooperation, competition below the level of armed conflict, and armed conflict.

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