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U.S. ARMY WAR COLLEGE CIVILIAN RESEARCH PROJECT

**Initiating the Cognitive Revolution:  
An Examination of Special Operations Military Information Support Operations**

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*The views expressed in the academic research paper are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the official policy or position of the U.S. Government, the Department of Defense, or any of its agencies*

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## Abstract

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The 4<sup>th</sup> Military Information Support Group (MISG) is the only active military information support group in the Department of Defense and operates across the full spectrum of military operations. In 2006, then Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld designated the 4<sup>th</sup> MISG as a special operations unit. In practice and by doctrine, special operations units possess highly specialized skills that they use in the routine execution of high-risk, politically sensitive missions. Prior to 2006, the 4<sup>th</sup> MISG primarily supported general-purpose forces and its mission profile was random, broad, and unremarkable. As a result, implementing and sustaining the elements that facilitate organizational change within the 4<sup>th</sup> MISG, so as to bring its capabilities into line with SOF, will demand an extraordinary shift in how the special operations community employs this unique MISO capability. In essence, the 4<sup>th</sup> MISG's metamorphosis will necessitate not only a complete organizational transformation, but also a matching cognitive revolution within the special operations community. The shape of this shift requires consideration of what the 4<sup>th</sup> MISG's optimal organization would be, as well as the kinds of missions it should execute. This paper discusses how the special operations community should transform and employ its influence forces and why a rapid transformation is essential. To enable this transformation, the author also proposes specific, innovative changes to the 4<sup>th</sup> MISG's organizational structure, target audience analysis, and tactics designed to ensure its full and effective migration into the unique special operations paradigm.

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## INTRODUCTION

*“Special Operations: Operations conducted in hostile, denied, or politically sensitive environments to achieve military, diplomatic, informational and or economic objectives employing military capabilities for which there is no broad conventional force requirement.”<sup>1</sup>*

Each of the military services has a different perspective on the scope and execution of Military Information Support Operations (MISO) – until recently called psychological operations (PSYOP). The U.S. Army has been the most consistent in its approach to influencing the behavior of adversaries and allies since World War II. Unfortunately, over the years the Army’s emphasis on intellectual investment and transformation has failed to keep pace with a rapidly changing geostrategic environment. Most notably, the Army’s primary influence organizations have demonstrated a rigid, unsophisticated understanding of the art and science of changing behavior. As a result, MISO, or psychological operations, is now often thought of as a force specializing only in broadcasting messages using loudspeakers and dropping leaflets from airplanes, rather than as a capability that is manned, equipped, and trained to influence foreign target audiences at all levels.

The 4<sup>th</sup> Military Information Support Group (MISG) is the only active entity in the Department of Defense (DoD) whose unique mission is to directly target and influence audience behaviors, perceptions, and dispositions, and which operates across the full spectrum of military operations. In 2006, then Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld designated the 4<sup>th</sup> MISG as a special operations unit. In practice and by doctrine, special operations forces (SOF) possess highly specialized skills that they use in the routine execution of high-risk, politically sensitive missions.<sup>2</sup> Prior to 2006, the primary function of the 4<sup>th</sup> MISG (known then as the 4<sup>th</sup> PSYOP Group) was to support conventional forces; its mission profile was random, broad, and unremarkable. As a result, implementing and sustaining the elements that facilitate organizational change within the 4<sup>th</sup> MISG, so as to bring its capabilities into line with SOF, will demand an extraordinary shift in how the special operations community trains, equips, and employs this unique MISO capability. In essence, the efforts necessary to complete the 4<sup>th</sup> MISG’s transformation into an effective SOF force capable of meeting current challenges

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will require nothing short of a complete organizational transformation and a matching cognitive revolution within the special operations community.

Special Operations Military Information Support Operations (SO MISO) “are planned operations 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.”<sup>3</sup> Human behavior is extremely complex; it is ever-changing, dynamic, interconnected, and fluid. Relying on the easy and obvious when attempting to persuade and influence foreign audiences often amounts to building bridges to nowhere. The ability to provide the meaningful analysis and creative options required for simply explaining human behavior in the operating environment – much less the subtle skills of conditioning, controlling, and modifying that behavior – will be heavily dependent on a revolutionary change to SO MISO’s conduct and application of influence.

This paper proposes just such innovative changes to the 4<sup>th</sup> MISG’s organizational structure, techniques, and tactics – changes that are critical to the group’s full and effective transformation into the unique special operations force it can and must become. The first section focuses, in very general terms, on how the unit is currently organized and then proposes ways to modify this structure to make it more efficient and effective. The second section discusses the critical core capability of target audience analysis and why the current model needs to be expanded. The final section addresses divisive operations and military deception, and proposes equipment platforms that would help optimize SO MISO forces’ ability to conduct and support special operations.

Even though considerable progress is being made to evolve SO MISO, more work needs to be done. The current model is no longer sufficient, and its structure, basic processes, and suite of equipment is limiting the organization’s ability to evolve into a truly relevant special operations force. The critical challenge we face is how to move forward in designing an agile, flexible, and versatile force that enhances SOF across the spectrum of conflict affecting the human cognitive domain with a level of sophistication never before seen.

## ORGANIZATIONAL EVOLUTION

*“One of SOF’s traits is the ability to quickly adjust to changing environments and situations. This agility is a strength that must be preserved and enhanced. We will pursue all options to streamline organizations, systems and processes with the goal of eliminating redundancies, reducing bureaucratic hindrances, accelerating procedures and gaining flexibility. All leaders must strive to incentivize innovative thinking through unit and command recognition.”<sup>4</sup>*

The 4<sup>th</sup> MISG is the special operations community’s primary informational influence capability – giving the group a singleness of focus it did not enjoy until recently. Today, the unit supports the requirements for Combined Joint Special Operations Task Forces (CJSOTFs) and Theater Special Operation Commands (TSOCs), and it provides Military Information Support Teams (MISTs) to various U.S. embassies worldwide. In addition, the 4<sup>th</sup> MISG plans, integrates, coordinates, and synchronizes MISO activities with all components of U.S. Special Operations Command (USSOCOM), interagency partners, and other governmental agencies.<sup>5</sup>

The current force structure of the 4<sup>th</sup> MISG includes three different types of organizational constructs: regional, tactical, and dissemination. There are five regionally oriented battalions, one dissemination battalion, and one tactical battalion. While each type of battalion has a unique function, they are all heavily dependent on one another’s capabilities.

Regional battalions have two primary functions. They support the TSOCs with cultural expertise, and they routinely deploy MISTs to U.S. embassies within their areas of responsibility to support and execute traditional SOF missions. Each regional battalion consists of a headquarters company, two MISO companies, and a regionally oriented Cultural Intelligence Cell (CIC). The CICs collectively make up the Cultural Intelligence Section (CIS), which provides an invaluable resource to special operations and SO MISO. The CIS analysts generally possess doctoral degrees in various fields of study (e.g., cultural anthropology, political science, history, international relations, and economics), are fluent in at least one foreign language, and routinely produce regionally oriented, MISO-related analytical documents.

The regional battalion MISTs are capable of supporting any of the SOF core activities but specialize in building a partner nation’s information capability and

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producing messages that counter violent extremist ideologies and the organizations that promulgate them. The regional MISTs are USSOCOM's primary instrument to build support within, and counteract extremist overtures toward, local populations through the creation and dissemination of culturally appropriate narratives that are as compelling, if not more so, as those being offered by the adversary.<sup>6</sup> The small size of the teams and their sophisticated training allows MISTs to effectively operate at the highest levels of foreign governments and among our interagency partners.

The regionally oriented MISTs are the nucleus of the MISG capability. They differ from the other MISO organizations not only in their regional focus but also because their missions – which are coordinated with the highest levels of government in foreign countries – are often carried out in an atmosphere of political sensitivity, with commensurately high levels of risk, and therefore have inherent strategic ramifications. Team members require mature diplomatic skills and expertise in liaison activities. The regional battalions have the capacity, skills, and posture to appropriately address the unique nature of today's global threat environment. In fact, no other influence force in the U. S. Army can match the cultural, linguistic, and intellectual skills of a MISO regionally oriented battalion.

The dissemination battalion, which is the largest of the MISO elements, is equipped with organic print, radio, television-broadcast, and product-distribution capabilities. Oddly, while the dissemination battalion possesses the majority of MISO-specific equipment, its operators are not MISO Soldiers. Instead, Soldiers with military occupational specialties in communication, broadcast, and multimedia operate the most sensitive equipment in the MISO inventory – this despite the fact that they likely have no direct experience with this equipment as it is not found in any other Army unit. Nonetheless, because of the equipment-heavy nature of the dissemination battalion, mostly non-MISO Soldiers fill this most manpower intensive element within the 4<sup>th</sup> MISG. They possess neither language skills nor cultural expertise and have no training, on any level, in the execution of influence operations. In addition to the plethora of low-density military occupational specialists, another drawback to the current organizational structure is that separating the deployable, lightweight MISO-specific equipment from the regional battalions, and holding it within the dissemination battalion, is inefficient and

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results in gross underutilization of available resources.<sup>7</sup> Reorganizing and "flattening" the dissemination battalion would help solve this problem.

The 4<sup>th</sup> MISG's tactical battalion is also not regionally aligned. Like the dissemination battalion, it has worldwide responsibility. Its primary focus is to provide routine tactical support to a special operations task force or conventional unit in the event of a contingency. The tactical battalion is equipped with vehicle-mounted, man-portable loudspeakers and a limited portable print capability. In many respects, the tactical battalion is little more than a collection of random MISO Soldiers with a potpourri of different language training and loudspeakers. Ironically, they have "worldwide" responsibility but lack any regional expertise, and are rarely able to communicate with foreign audiences without an interpreter. The undisguised paradox of the tactical MISO formation is that although it has the nominal capability to conduct "face-to-face communication" with foreign populations, its personnel do not collectively speak one designated foreign language, nor do they possess a holistic understanding of any of the cultural environments in which they operate. This illogical situation constitutes a major weakness, given that ground tactical special operation forces expect tactical MISO to identify with and break through the outer crust of foreign populations – providing insight into local psychological vulnerabilities.

It takes many years, if not an entire career, to become truly culturally competent in a specific geographical area. How then can tactical units acquire specific cultural competency when they are charged with global responsibility? Regionally oriented Soldiers, meanwhile, have the capability to execute across the spectrum of conflict. The only difference between the tactical MISO Soldier and the regionally aligned MISO Soldier is equipment. The mission to influence foreign target audiences is the same.

Many different justifications have been proffered for organizing the 4<sup>th</sup> MISG in this uniquely segregated fashion. The argument most frequently made is based on supposed lessons learned from the 1989 U.S. invasion of Panama, OPERATION JUST CAUSE, on the basis of which the tactical companies and the dissemination capabilities were removed from the regional battalions.

"The requirement for the PSYOP task force to simultaneously provide JTF [Joint Task Force] staff support, control tactical assets and develop and disseminate PSYOP products stressed the capabilities of the task force to the breaking point. Of particular concern was

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the inability to control the tactical PSYOP teams. Shortly after the units' return from Panama tactical companies were removed from the regional battalions and a tactical battalion was formed."<sup>8</sup>

A short time later, in 1994, a dissemination battalion was established, which further took MISO-specific equipment out of the hands of the MISG operator. This increasing functional division of labor is largely in keeping with broader modern organizational trends. As one observer stated, "This reduction into parts and the proliferation of separations has characterized not just organizations, but everything in the Western world during the past three hundred years."<sup>9</sup> The impulse to separate out the parts and functions of MISO, in the name of "effectiveness," while superficially seductive, actually constricts innovation, creativity, and adaptability.

The primary factor hindering the effective employment of MISO is its limited organizational design. The most crucial consideration in today's highly charged and unpredictable climate is how to field a force that can operate with joint, interagency, and multinational partners while responding to the full spectrum of possible conflicts. "The complexity of operational environments demands that SOF forces be capable of conducting operations across that spectrum."<sup>10</sup> Despite the sizeable increase in MISO forces over the last decade, only a limited pool can respond immediately in an extremely resource-intensive environment. The current organizational design is not so much absurd as it is out of date. As it now stands, there will always be a deficiency of active MISO forces because the deployable pool is limited by how many of its formations can execute a certain type of MISO. This holds true even though all MISO practices are based on the same basic principles. On the one hand, available troops may not have the right equipment; on the other, they may lack the right occupational specialty or regional orientation.

The current structure of the 4<sup>th</sup> MISG is simply not optimized to execute special operations. In its present state, it does not have the flexibility to respond to unpredictable security environments. A MIST must be able to effectively operate at the tactical, operational, and strategic levels of warfare interchangeably. The ability to do so represents an obvious evolutionary step for the SO MISO force working in the twenty-first century's complex information environment. Arguably, nowhere else within SOF are operational forces separated by function. The current design of MISO confines its

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formations to narrow roles that can only partially contribute to mission success. MISO forces must have the right people, with the right equipment to adequately address the challenges present in hostile and nonhostile environments. We must eliminate the rigid structure of the organization and design a unit of action that is capable of quickly responding to the wide array of challenges that special operations face.

Eliminating the separate tactical designation from the MISO force structure would help ensure that each MIST is organized and equipped to appropriately respond to today's threat environment. Reorganizing the dissemination battalion by moving all deployable print, communications, and broadcast platforms to each regional battalion and converting the majority of low-density communication and audio-visual military occupational specialties to MISO Soldiers would go a long way towards building an organization that is a bona fide, doctrinally valid Army special operations unit.

Unfortunately, the MISO community has always viewed change with skepticism. The reality is that organizational changes in military units can be incredibly difficult and resistance to change is almost a reflex response.<sup>11</sup> But the 4<sup>th</sup> Group is an organization that deals with human behavior, which means that of all Army units, it should be most capable of not only accepting change with equanimity but also responding to changing conditions and requirements quickly and with flexibility.

## TARGETING CULTURAL EXPERTISE

*“Most of culture lies hidden and is outside voluntary control, making up the warp and weft of human existence. It penetrates to the roots of an individual’s nervous system and determines how he perceives the world.”<sup>12</sup>*

The key to conducting effective MISO lies in three operational characteristics: a solid understanding of the target audience, imagination, and experience. Of these three, target audience analysis (TAA) is arguably the most important (and is also possibly the most useful tool that MISO provides to the Department of Defense). TAA is the systematic examination of the attributes of a target audience for the purpose of changing its behavior in a way that benefits mission objectives.<sup>13</sup> TAA is conducted in a series of eight steps: (1) identify and refine target audiences, (2) determine effectiveness, (3) identify target audience conditions, (4) identify vulnerabilities, (5) determine susceptibilities, (6) determine accessibility, (7) develop argument and recommended actions, and (8) refine assessment criteria.<sup>14</sup> Each step is recorded on a worksheet and is a component of MISO product development.

Unfortunately, in current practice TAA is geared only to the production or dissemination of MISO products. And worse, the TAA worksheet itself has become the process, while the actual analysis – the most important element (and not coincidentally the one that requires judgment, intuition, and experience) – has devolved into a checklist. TAA, in effect, stops short of equipping the operator with the ability to understand the psychological and behavioral influences that are prevalent in the operating environment. The narrow focus on the product as the only use for TAA is further propped up by a legacy product-approval process that is cumbersome, bureaucratic, and inefficient. Ultimately, the overly simplified TAA fails to truly inform MISO personnel of the key social and moral influences that operate within a given society. TAA stops drastically short of its very *raison d’être*, which is to equip the operator with the ability to apprise Commanders of the psychological and behavioral implications of conducting special operations in their areas of responsibility.

The missing ingredients in the current TAA recipe are cultural awareness and a holistic understanding of the environment. Human behavior is determined by an extensive “biological and cultural history” and is shaped by the multifaceted conditions

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present in an environment.<sup>15</sup> Without understanding the environment in its full complexity, it will be nearly impossible to change behavior. “Increasingly, social scientists turn to cultural factors to explain modernization, political democratization, military strategy, the behavior of ethnic groups and the alignments and antagonisms among countries.”<sup>16</sup>

In his book on why “culture matters,” Samuel Huntington defines culture as “the values, attitudes, beliefs, orientations and underlying assumptions prevalent among people in a society.”<sup>17</sup> Taking this a step further, U.S. Navy Commander John P. (Jay) Coles defined cultural intelligence “as analyzed social, political, economic, and other demographic information that provides understanding of a people or a nation’s history, institutions, psychology, beliefs (such as religion), and behaviors.”<sup>18</sup> Cultural intelligence can provide us with a means to understand and effectively respond to, or even manage, behavior (social, political, military, and so forth) in other societies.<sup>19</sup> Thus, sometimes the significant cultural dynamic that makes sense of how a society is organized may be rooted in religion and religious education, more than in secular educational or political-legal traditions (which compartmentalize and restrict the role of religion in public life, as is the case in the United States). Indeed, in some societies, religion may be the key to political reactions, tribal or economic relationships, social inequities, or distribution of resources. Recognizing and studying the implications of key psychological factors in a foreign culture extend far beyond attending to a specific behavior. Such recognition opens windows into the very soul of a people. A holistic cultural understanding of the societies in which SOF operates will improve the MISO community's ability to involve itself in and contribute to the mission. Analysis done prior to interaction within a foreign environment, amplified by subsequent on-the-ground experience, will lead to that more holistic “perspective” which MISO personnel need to possess in order to operate above and beyond the narrow requirements of designing any particular MISO product.

Recent experiences in Iraq and Afghanistan, as well as in many other special operations arenas, have proven beyond a doubt that MISO practitioners must be masters of the cultural domain. It is sadly ironic that the current process for achieving this

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mastery could not be less effective. Marine General Anthony C. Zinni expressed his frustration after directing the relief operations in Somalia:

"What we need is cultural intelligence. What makes them [the faction leaders and people] tick? Who makes the decisions? What is it about their society that's so remarkably different in their values, in the way they think, compared to my values and the way I think in my [W]estern, white-man mentality? What you need to know isn't what our intel apparatus is geared to collect for you, and to analyze, and to present to you."<sup>20</sup>

Unfortunately, nearly two decades and at least two wars later, this truth continues to elude the MISO community. If we accept the premise that cultural intelligence is our most effective weapon in understanding how to influence foreign audiences, then the base requirement for MISO is cultural understanding. Cultural expertise should be the influence professional's most prized operational pursuit.

Indeed, the unique value of the CIS for 4<sup>th</sup> MISG is that it is a dedicated organic capability, providing the regional battalions with PhD-level, geographical-area and cultural expertise. In addition to social, economic, religious, political, linguistic, and historical knowledge about particular societies, CIS analysts also possess social or behavioral science expertise (an understanding of how behavior is influenced, which constitutes a skill set distinct from cultural knowledge per se), as well as other useful methodological skills, such as survey design and statistical measurement. Because they are organic assets, CIS analysts are intimately knowledgeable of their battalions' mission plans and ongoing operations; their knowledge of unit mission objectives enables them to sift cultural information quickly and efficiently, and then apply what is relevant and mission enhancing in a way that could never be possible with contracted cultural experts. If a hallmark of SOF is a penchant for creatively incorporating unique and unconventional tools into its arsenal, clearly the 4<sup>th</sup> MISG's CIS is this kind of special asset – of value not only to MISO but available to be leveraged by other SOF components as well. CIS cultural expertise is one of the assets that makes MISO an elite SOF capability.

Becoming a cultural expert is a tall order and could potentially take many years to accomplish. Still, anything short of this goal is costly in terms of mission success; limitations in cultural knowledge – our comprehension of religious, social, political, military, economic, and information-related beliefs and values in a society – will drastically reduce our operational effectiveness in the influence realm. The first step in

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achieving cultural competence begins with in-depth analysis of each of these factors, and that is what the TAA should bring to the table. The MISO Soldier has to understand the key issues in an environment – an individual, intellectual endeavor that starts prior to deployment and does not end until the mission is over. Expanding the Soldier’s understanding of the critical importance of TAA to every mission requires ensuring each Soldier approaches TAA with the same expectations that are associated with requirements to qualify on a weapon system before deployment. Unfortunately, the common procedure is for just one member of an element to conduct the analysis. We cannot truly understand the operational environment without the benefit of strong cultural knowledge – team wide. This requires ground-up research and legwork. One way to increase effectiveness would be to institute a requirement that all MISO Soldiers who are preparing for deployment produce a basic study of the cultural environment in which they expect to operate. Undertaking such an effort, however, means a complete shift in the way we view TAA. “This paradigm shift will involve a major intellectual reorientation that has a pervasive effect on the way in which problems are currently viewed.”<sup>21</sup>

Comprehensive cultural analysis that is continually added to and modified after the Soldier is on the ground will contribute to the success of particular MISO efforts. More important than this benefit alone, however, is the Soldier’s increased ability to offer sound recommendations for Commanders to make decisions, thus contributing to the overall direction and success of an operation. Insight into the values and beliefs, the myriad social connections, and the underlying tensions and divisions within a society, will enable the MISO operator to focus on specific behavioral changes. In light of this, a new TAA model is called for that will examine the unique conditions that govern interaction within a given society. The goal should be to provide Commanders with analysis that is, if not fully predictive, at least able to identify the most likely and unlikely key-actor behaviors (given up-to-date conditions, common cultural strategies and disposition, and institutional or ideological proclivities in a society), enabling them to look at the operational environment through a new and penetrating cultural lens. After team members conduct comprehensive cultural studies and analyze the key factors of behavior modification, the MISO leader can synthesize all relevant data – including new

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information in the operating environment – and provide Commanders with informed assessments of possible outcomes.

MISO soldiers must strive to rise to a new level of cultural competency – attaining a true ability to effectively analyze audience vulnerabilities, as well as identify the implications of conducting special operations in a given area of operations. The MISO practitioner must bridge the gap between generic knowledge and ways to effectively use that knowledge based on conditional events.

"SOF and their unique capabilities are particularly well suited for such complex situations because of their regional familiarity, language and cultural awareness, and understanding of the social dynamics within and among the relevant populations (i.e., tribal politics, social networks, religious influences, and customs and mores)."<sup>22</sup>

Another key element to an improved TAA model is the impact of social media, which are evolving almost faster than our ability to assess its effects on social behavior. MISO, along with the rest of SOF, must adapt to this means of communication. Social media have shed unprecedented light onto what people think and, more importantly, why they think it, as well as offered unparalleled access to those who see value in understanding diverse perspectives. "As the communication landscape gets denser, more complex, and more participatory, the networked population is gaining greater access to information, more opportunities to engage in public speech and an enhanced ability to undertake collective action."<sup>23</sup> The social media revolution highlights the need for TAA to be a living document, not something tied to a static piece of paper. Incorporating new insights from a continuous social media stream, the TAA becomes more than a one-time base document for a particular MISO product. Instead, it becomes an iterative process that serves as a dynamic and detailed method for gathering not just intelligence, but also insights, into audience vulnerabilities, accessibilities, and susceptibilities in a given culture. Access to online social networks provides an understanding of key trends within an online community and arm the influence operator with keen insights into the sentiment of a specific demographic.

"Social networks alone do not change people's minds, instead it is a two-step process. Opinions are first transmitted by the media, and then echoed by friends, family members and colleagues. It is in the second, social step that political opinions are formed. This is the step in which the Internet in general and social networks in particular make a difference. The Internet allows people to privately and publicly articulate and debate a welter of conflicting views."<sup>24</sup>

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That said, use of social media has its limitations and pitfalls, and should be treated as complementary to the overall TAA process, not the centerpiece. The operator's ability to read and comprehend social media sites is of great importance. Complete fluency in key languages, including a grasp of current idiomatic speech (slang, for instance) is a vital, difficult, and much-coveted resource. Language skills, in fact, are a major component of TAA and cultural expertise. There is a direct correlation between cultural intelligence and foreign-language comprehension. The power of language, thought, and linguistic expression are inextricably linked, and through this linkage, fundamental elements of the human psyche are revealed.<sup>25</sup> An understanding of the importance of language proficiency, combined with an appreciation of linguistic and cultural relativity (distinct cultural ideas, specific to a society, which are expressed in language), is a crucial skill set.

Language, as a classificatory system, shapes and expresses cultural perceptions.<sup>26</sup> Putting greater focus on multilingual competence not only affords insight into the cultural orientations of target audiences, but also enhances our ability to understand the environment and respond to situations rapidly. Language proficiency, at its most fundamental level, is the "symbolic significance of the act of communication."<sup>27</sup> In the words of USSOCOM Commander Eric Olson:

"In an ever more complex world, SOF's ability to understand the environment to which we deploy, in order to accurately predict the nuanced impact of our actions will continue to define our force. Our deeper knowledge of micro-regional geography, history, languages, religions, cultures and traditions will continue to distinguish SOF from conventional forces."<sup>28</sup>

Admiral Olson's insight charges us to open our eyes to an entirely new value system, one which unmistakably demands that cultural expertise become the synthesizing ingredient for every MISO warrior. In order to truly be masters of behavioral influence, MISO practitioners must embrace the premise that there is virtually nothing that they do not need to know about a target population. Ultimately, this new approach to cultural awareness will enable MISO to break free of old constraints and roles and provide Commanders with a new and greatly enhanced capability: a sense of social predictability and probable outcomes that directly results from situational interchange in the operating environment.

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### PSYCHOLOGICAL DISLOCATION

*“A strategist should think in terms of paralyzing, not killing. Even on the lower plane of warfare, a man killed is merely one man less, whereas a man unnerved is a highly infectious carrier of fear, capable of spreading an epidemic of panic.”<sup>29</sup>*

Today, the general assumption is that MISO’s primary function is to “win the hearts and minds” of foreign populations, especially in those areas where U.S. troops are deployed. Yet, it is critical that we also focus on affecting the enemy’s morale and degrading his effectiveness. The U.S. Department of Defense exists to project power – put bluntly, “close in with and destroy the enemy.” In its earliest beginnings, MISO – in the form of “psychological warfare,” as it was called – had a much greater role in degrading enemy morale than exists today.

“The executive order creating the Office of Coordinator of Information, headed by Army Col. William Donovan, was issued on 11 July 1941. The general wording of the order allowed Col. Donovan to implement his ideas to create a powerful psychological warfare agency. He proposed initiating an effective psychological counterattack against the Axis Powers, with the first step in this process being the demoralization of the enemy prior to attack. Vast quantities of intelligence would show enemy strengths, weaknesses and vulnerabilities. Following analysis, this information would be used against the enemy in a continuous propaganda counter offensive, combined with a covertly conducted campaign of subversion and sabotage.”<sup>30</sup>

What was once a primary concern has, over time, turned into a secondary effort. In deference to widespread sensitivities over appearing overly belligerent, the objective of attacking and destroying adversary morale has devolved into a strategy focused on accommodating the perceptions of the general populace, or “winning hearts and minds.” The problem we face in the twenty-first century is that this de facto approach has neutered our psychological warfare and political warfare capability. In some cases, we appear to have migrated to public diplomacy and community advertising, while seemingly rejecting other core MISO capabilities, including grey and black messaging.

The tragedy of MISO as a contributor to military missions today is its inability to be the primary means to attack an adversary's will to fight – creating cognitive dissonance in his ranks and leadership, throwing him off balance, and debilitating his combat effectiveness. According to John Boyd, we should consistently

“Penetrate an adversary’s moral-mental-physical being to dissolve his moral fiber, disorient his mental images, disrupt his operations and overload his system, as well as subvert, shatter, seize or otherwise subdue those moral-mental-physical bastions

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connections, or activities that he depends upon in order to destroy internal harmony, produce paralysis and collapse the adversary's will to resist."<sup>31</sup>

This is not to suggest that targeting the population and winning its support are not extremely important. The majority of operating forces and interagency organizations, wherever they operate, grapple with the task of managing the perceptions of foreign populations. SO MISO must be – and it is uniquely trained to be – involved with activities in the civilian sphere. Still, there is danger in assuming that only SO MISO has responsibility for such population-oriented activities. To the contrary, the reality is that every action on today's extremely complicated battlefields has both a psychological impact and a potentially global ripple effect via social media, and efforts to either marginalize the negative impacts or capitalize on the positive ones are a responsibility that rests with every level of command in every organization.

Some argue that the most effective way to undermine an adversary is to erode popular support among the population, and thus, MISO must focus on that outcome before, or even at the expense of, all others. While there is certainly some validity to this premise, it does not necessarily follow that such an approach will immediately undercut adversary effectiveness, as the enemy natively possesses the linguistic and cultural competencies necessary to influence the target audience both consciously and unconsciously and has access to the full spectrum of coercive force (i.e., kidnapping, torture, and assassination) that gives unequivocal weight to its messaging. As a result, the myriad demands of a geostrategic environment characterized by “hybrid threats” make the old “erode popular support – degrade adversary capability” equation much more complicated and less certain or predictable. Today's complicated threats and cynical extremist ideologies, which are not always responsive to civilian sensitivities, require a dedicated force that concentrates its efforts on paralyzing the enemy's psyche – a unit composed of masters at creating and sustaining mental chaos among our adversaries, and thereby neutralizing much of the initial tactical advantage granted the enemy by virtue of its native familiarity with the culture.

Outside of MISO, the SOF core activities are unconventional warfare (UW), direct action (DA), foreign internal defense (FID), special reconnaissance (SR), counterterrorism (CT), counter-proliferation of weapons of mass destruction (CPWMD),

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civil affairs (CA), information operations (IO), security force assistance (SFA), and counterinsurgency operations (COIN). These activities make up the foundation for Army Special Operations Forces (ARSOF) units' support to geographic combatant Commanders and U.S. ambassadors, providing them with the “strategic options that are relevant across the spectrum of conflict from irregular and hybrid to conventional state-on-state war.”<sup>32</sup>

SO MISO intrinsically plays an important role in supporting all of these core activities. That said, one would be hard pressed to articulate exactly how SO MISO complements the unique activities that SOCOM units are manned, trained, and equipped to execute. Doctrinally, MISO is an activity and a capability, whose practitioners mainly perform two tasks, which are MISO and IO.<sup>33</sup> The ambiguity of this description is a reflection of the incompleteness of MISO's transformation as a SOF entity. Additionally, MISO plans and increases the psychological effects of the other ARSOF core activities and advises Commanders on those effects.<sup>34</sup> We instinctively sense the validity of the assertion that MISO can help, but still it is difficult to determine in what way that help is to be framed with regard to one or another core SOF activity. We must articulate a MISO vision firmly tied to each SOF core task, especially the ones directed against the adversary. Commanders should be able to easily visualize what effects MISO will deliver, and how, and have confidence that those effects will be timely and accurate. It is unacceptable for MISO practitioners to rely on what amounts to little more than improvisation or speculative policy interpretation to engage the adversary. This only contributes to the climate of ambiguity and lack of clarity that characterizes the current situation.

SO MISO must enhance SOF operations with a focus on offensive methods to shape the battlefield by complementing current capabilities and influencing human and media networks in accordance with the supported elements' charter. SO MISO actions can be designed to target specific individuals or groups with the intent of achieving a particular outcome, such as removing or undermining key personnel, disrupting the enemy's planning cycle, and influencing the use of communications. In the case of DA, COIN, CT, UW or FID, a divisive campaign is clearly a desirable course of action.

The art and science of divisive operations concentrates on creating disunity and dissension in an enemy's camp. More precisely, it involves planting the seeds of

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dissension and mistrust to produce extreme anxiety, while nurturing a lack of any sense of security.<sup>35</sup> Manufacturing doubt and mistrust is no easy task. The campaign must be psychologically convincing, rational, and consistent with cultural norms. It must exploit inherent cultural sensitivities while promoting the self-deceptive impulses that can lead the adversary to draw his own conclusions. Such an effort requires the planning and synchronization of various activities at different levels to produce complementary effects. What makes the MISO planner effective is his understanding of the target audience's culture, environment, and behavior.

"Breaking the cohesion and spirit of the extremist requires detailed intelligence and cultural insights about the targets. The idea is to create and deliver messages that undermine the image of the enemy leadership in each ring of the metaphoric onion. Play upon the characteristics of these conspiratorial-minded cultures to cause extremist leaders to lose trust in one another and to suspect one another of disloyalty, or even of secretly collaborating with the authorities of infidels."<sup>36</sup>

Rifts are present in every organization. The challenge is to exacerbate those rifts while synchronizing this process with other operations. Take, for example, a terrorist organization whose members must be loyal to and protective of one another, but belong to different ethnic groups. A divisive campaign would intensify the natural divisions that already exist while taking care to avoid inciting broader interethnic conflict within the larger society. A basic principle is that existing cognitions and attitudes are generally consistent with behavioral outcomes.<sup>37</sup> The divisive plan creatively exacerbates those internal stressors, while planting the seeds of distrust and suspicion.

"The effects desired are that psychologically the enemy begins to be: uncertain, to doubt his cause, to doubt his capabilities (and equipment), to believe in his inevitable defeat, to become demotivated, to think poorly, to be fearful, to be suspicious, and to be mistrustful. When one begins to beat an opponent this way (morally-mentally), paralyzing his will, it is only a matter of time before the body (state) follows."<sup>38</sup>

Yet, what remains missing in the current application of SO MISO is a clear articulation of responsibility for focusing on degrading enemy will. There is a lack of definitional clarity regarding which specific responsibilities the 4<sup>th</sup> Group must undertake in a complex special operations security environment.

Another instrumental tactic for SO MISO is military deception. The MISO operator with an effective TAA in his sights is arguably the person best suited to plan military deception operations. Military deception operations mislead adversaries,

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provoke adversary mistakes, and ultimately exploit these missteps. According to Sun Tzu, “all warfare is based on deception.”<sup>39</sup> Yet, it cannot be stressed sufficiently that such an operation can only succeed if it is based upon an accurate assessment of the adversary’s intentions and state of mind.

Strong opposition exists to MISO involvement in military deception operations. One senior leader reportedly stated that “MISO has no business associating itself with such ventures as deception that rely on misperceptions and misinterpretations of the facts among target audiences” and that “MISO must be truth based.”<sup>40</sup> Nevertheless, doctrinally and in practice, MISO planners are best equipped to assist and, in most cases, lead a military deception effort. SO MISO operators understand not only the environment but also perception management. “To effectively employ the art of deception, the deceiver must know and understand the mind of the enemy.”<sup>41</sup> While there are debates concerning truthfulness and suggestions that involvement in deception operations will hurt MISO’s credibility, it is simply embarrassing to suggest that MISO should excuse itself from the systematic effort to disorient our adversaries.

Deception operations require considerable resources, personnel, and time. MISO’s ability to provide SOF units with a dedicated and resourced planning capability for deception – a critical element of warfare – will unquestionably improve efforts to target the adversary.

The use of technology in unique and creative ways is another hallmark of special operations forces. From its earliest foundations, SOF has driven innovation and set the standards for equipment development. Seeking SOF material solutions to address unique challenges, while increasing the effectiveness and lethality of units, is a driving force behind USSOCOM’s acquisition efforts. As MISO continues its evolutionary metamorphosis, two key questions remain unanswered: how should the SO MISO force of the future be equipped, and are there unique pieces of equipment that can increase its effectiveness against the adversary? The category of nonlethal weapons (NLW), which covers a wide array of munitions and equipment including equipment exploiting new advances in sound or light technology, is a promising place to start the discussion.

In accordance with DoD Directive 3000.3, the purpose of less-than-lethal systems is to ultimately reduce serious injuries and collateral damage. “The technology enables

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U.S. forces to reduce unintended casualties and infrastructure damage during complex missions; discourage, delay, or prevent hostile action; limit escalation where lethal force is not the preferred option; protect U.S. forces; and temporarily disable equipment and facilities.”<sup>43</sup> As technology continues to increase the number of NLW options available to SOF, we must devise a way to effectively operationalize systems without overwhelming operators with ever increasing amounts of equipment. The connections between NLW and MISO are easily drawn. MISO is considered to be DoD’s oldest NLW system dedicated to employing a wide variety of means to influence behavior. Sound, light, and microwave systems would naturally complement a number of SO MISO mission sets designed to target the mental and physical processes of the intended audience.

The use of sound as a means to affect enemy morale or communicate with large audiences has been an integral part of MISO for decades. It is a natural evolutionary step for SO MISO to use sound for purposes other than as an information dissemination platform. Using sound as a NLW for crowd control, military deception, or support for any of the core activities would significantly increase SOF’s effectiveness. The Israel Defense Force’s (IDF’s) Scream device causes dizziness and nausea, firing “acoustic bullets” that affect the inner ear and disrupt the vestibular system.<sup>44</sup> The IDF routinely uses the Scream to disperse crowds without resorting to force.

*"The Scream was used at a recent violent demonstration by Palestinians and Jewish sympathizers against Israel's West Bank separation barrier. Protesters covered their ears and grabbed their heads, overcome by dizziness and nausea, after the vehicle-mounted device began sending out bursts of audible, but not loud, sound at intervals of about 10 seconds. An Associated Press photographer at the scene said that even after he covered his ears, he continued to hear the sound ringing in his head."<sup>45</sup>*

Another sound-based NLW is the U.S. Navy’s Long Range Acoustic Device (LRAD), which can weigh between 15 and 300 pounds and emits sounds up to 320 decibels.<sup>46</sup> The LRAD focuses and directs acoustic beams up to 3,000 meters but is most effective at 100 meters. Anyone within 100 meters of a directed LRAD transmission will experience excruciating pain but will not suffer permanent physical injuries.<sup>47</sup> These acoustic systems can be mounted on remote-controlled unmanned aerial vehicles (UAV), unmanned ground vehicles (UGV), or conventional military vehicles, or employed as portable hand-held devices.

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NLWs that use intense light to cause temporary blindness or microwave systems that have other debilitating effects could also potentially contribute to SO MISO.

Recently, a major technological innovation in light technology by Intelligent Optical Systems (IOS) led to the development of a high-powered multicolored Light Emitting Diode Incapacitator (LEDI). The LEDI creates a “wall of light that blinds the adversary and conceals the user's location, giving the user a momentary advantage over the adversary.”<sup>48</sup> The most popular microwave system in DoD’s inventory is the Active Denial System (ADS) currently fielded by the U.S. Marine Corps. The ADS uses microwave technology to create a burning sensation on the skin for distances up to 500 meters.<sup>49</sup> The ADS generates a 95 GHz millimeter-directed energy microwave that will penetrate approximately 1/64<sup>th</sup> of an inch into the skin, causing extreme pain.<sup>50</sup>

Expanding MISO’s ability to enhance other SOF elements in situations calling for less-than-lethal activities could significantly increase efficiencies, particularly since evolving technology will continue to offer new opportunities to incapacitate human targets while decreasing collateral damage. One of the most important considerations for future SOCOM forces is the “15-minute kill,” or “extended duration incapacitation – an ability to disable people without permanently injuring them.”<sup>51</sup> As USSOCOM continues to lead the effort to synchronize an NLW strategy for SOF, its leaders should consider selecting SO MISO to serve as its light, sound, and microwave nonlethal weapon specialists.

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### CONCLUSION

MISO (formerly PSYOP) has been a prominent part of special operations from its inception. Only recently, however, has MISO taken its place as a true elite force and been acknowledged as a key element in USSOCOM's strategic direction. For too long MISO has been associated with marketing or advertising. MISO is neither. It is a unique SOF capability, but it requires a new definition, innovative tactics, and new missions. As Dr. John Lenczowski, eloquently argues:

"The area of the greatest structural, professional and cultural weakness is in our government's inability to influence foreign public and elite opinion. Specifically, our government fails to take fully into account the role of information, disinformation, ideas, values, culture and religion in the conduct of foreign and national security."<sup>52</sup>

MISO's evolution is at a critical juncture, and the cognitive revolution must begin. Future MISO elements must be organized and armed with the methods and equipment to optimize their ability to influence human behavior, thereby allowing MISO to fully contribute to special operations. As SOF continues to study prospective changes in the MISO force, the highest priority should be given to MISO's ability to master the socio-cultural domain. More efficient organizational design, deeper cultural expertise, and enhanced strategies for defeating the mind of the enemy must be our top three priorities. MISO tradecraft can benefit the national interest in ways not yet seen – but only if we get this transformation right.

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ENDNOTES

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- <sup>1</sup> “Joint Publication 3-05, Special Operations” (Washington: Joint Chiefs of Staff, 18 April 2011) I-1.
- <sup>2</sup> Ibid, I-2.
- <sup>3</sup> Ibid, II-16.
- <sup>4</sup> Eric T. Olson, “USSOCOM Commander’s Guidance for 2011,” 11 January 2011, 3.
- <sup>5</sup> 4<sup>th</sup> Military Information Support Group Command Brief, 13 April 2011.
- <sup>6</sup> “Enabling Concepts: Employment, Intelligence, Command & Control, Sustainment, Supporting the Capstone Concept for Special Operations” (November 2008), 25.
- <sup>7</sup> My observations and conclusions come with multiple years of service in 4<sup>th</sup> MISG where, from 2000 – 2008, I served as a battalion operations officer, battalion commander, and group deputy commander.
- <sup>8</sup> Dennis P. Walko, “Psychological Operations in Panama during Operations JUST CAUSE and PROMOTE LIBERTY,” *Psychological Operations Principles and Case Studies* (Maxwell Air Force Base: September 1996), 275-76.
- <sup>9</sup> Margaret J. Wheatley, *Leadership and the New Science* (San Francisco, CA: Berrett-Koehler, 1999), 29.
- <sup>10</sup> "Army Field Manual 7-0" (Washington, February 2011), 1-1.
- <sup>11</sup> U.S. Army War College, *How the Army Runs: A Senior Leader Reference Handbook 2009-2010* (Carlisle, Pennsylvania: Create Space, 2010), 1.
- <sup>12</sup> Craig Storti, *The Art of Crossing Cultures* (Yarmouth, Maine: Intercultural Press, 1990), 51.
- <sup>13</sup> “Army Field Manual 3-05.301 Psychological Operations Process Tactics, Techniques and Procedures” (Washington, DC, August 2007), 8.
- <sup>14</sup> Ibid, 2-4.
- <sup>15</sup> B.F. Skinner, *Science and Human Behavior* (New York: The Free Press, 1953), 433.
- <sup>16</sup> Lawrence E. Harrison and Samuel P. Huntington, *Culture Matters* (New York: Basic Books, 2000), xiv.
- <sup>17</sup> Ibid, xv.
- <sup>18</sup> Coles, John (Jay) P., *Incorporating Cultural Intelligence into Joint Doctrine*, IO Sphere, Joint Information Operations Center, spring 2006, 7.
- <sup>19</sup> Wayne Conaway and Terri Morrison, *Kiss, Bow, or Shake Hands* (Avon, MA: Adams Media, 2006), ix.
- <sup>20</sup> Anthony C. Zinni, “Non-Traditional Military Missions: Their Nature, and the Need for Cultural Awareness and Flexible Thinking,” in *Capital “W” War: A Case for Strategic Principles of War*, ed. Joseph L. Strange (Quantico, VA: U.S. Marine Corps War College, 1998), 267.

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- <sup>21</sup> Richard Rose, *Lesson Drawing in Public Policy: A Guide to Learning across Time and Space* (New Jersey: Chatham House Publishers, 1993), 26.
- <sup>22</sup> “Joint Publication 3-05, Special Operations” (Washington: Joint Chiefs of Staff, 18 April 2011), xii.
- <sup>23</sup> Clay Shirky, “The Political Power of Social Media,” *Foreign Affairs*, vol. 90, no. 1 (January/February 2011): 29.
- <sup>24</sup> *Ibid*, 34.
- <sup>25</sup> Noam Chomsky, *Language and Thought* (Kingston, Rhode Island: Moyer Bell, 1993), 10.
- <sup>26</sup> John Field, *Psycholinguistics* (London: Routledge, 2004), 162.
- <sup>27</sup> Craig Storti, *The Art of Crossing Cultures* (Yarmouth, Maine: Intercultural Press, 1990), 90.
- <sup>28</sup> Eric T. Olson, “USSOCOM Commander’s Guidance for 2011,” 11 January 2011, 3.
- <sup>29</sup> B.H. Liddell Hart, *Strategy* (London: Faber and Faber), 212.
- <sup>30</sup> Clayton D. Laurie, *The Propaganda Warriors* (Kansas: University of Kansas, 1996), 79.
- <sup>31</sup> John Boyd, “Patterns of Conflict” brief, December 1986, <http://www.d-n-i.net/boyd/pdf/poc.pdf>.
- <sup>32</sup> Torchbearer National Security Report, *U.S. Army Special Operations Forces: Integral to the Army and the Joint Force*” (Virginia, 2010), 12.
- <sup>33</sup> Jeffrey Hasler, “Defining War 2011,” *Special Warfare*, vol. 24, no. 1, (January-February 2011): 15-20.
- <sup>34</sup> *Ibid*, 20.
- <sup>35</sup> Arthur S. Reber and Emily S. Reber, *Dictionary of Psychology* (London: Penguin Books, 1985), 375, 508.
- <sup>36</sup> J. Micheal Waller, *Fighting the War of Ideas like a Real War* (Washington, DC: Institute of World Politics Press, 2007), 131.
- <sup>37</sup> Lawrence Grossberg, Ellen Wartella, and D. Charles Whitney, *Media Making: Mass Media in a Popular Culture* (London: Sage Publications, 1998), 280.
- <sup>38</sup> Jay Kreighbaum, *An Indirect Approach to Warfare: Attacking an Enemy’s Moral Forces* (Maxwell Air Force Base: Air Command and Staff College, 1997), 34.
- <sup>39</sup> James Clavell, *The Art of War, Sun Tzu*,” (New York: Delacorte Press, 1983), xi.
- <sup>40</sup> Curtis Boyd, “The Future of MISO,” *Special Warfare*, vol. 24, no. 1, (January-February 2011): 26.
- <sup>41</sup> Mark Johnson and Jessica Meyeraan, “Military Deception – Hiding the Real – Showing the Fake” (Norfolk, VA: Joint Forces Staff College, 7 March 2003), 5.

<sup>43</sup> James C. Duncan, "A Primer on the Employment of Non-Lethal Weapons," accessed 10 February 2011, <http://www.au.af.mil/au/awc/awcgate/law/nonlet2.pdf>.

<sup>44</sup> David Hambling, "Israel's Arsenal of Less Lethal Weapons," accessed 15 June 2011, <http://www.popularmechanics.com/technology/military/weapons/israel-non-lethal-weapons>.

<sup>45</sup> *CBS News World*, accessed 15 June 2011.  
<http://www.cbsnews.com/stories/2005/06/10/world/main700979>.

<sup>46</sup> LRAD Corporation, accessed 15 June 2011, <http://www.lradx.com>.

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>48</sup> Intelligent Optical Systems, accessed 15 July 2011,  
<http://www.intopsys.com/nonlethal.html>.

<sup>49</sup> Active Denial System, accessed 15 July 2011, <http://www.activedenialsystem.net>.

<sup>50</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>51</sup> Grace V. Jean, "Invisibility, Nighttime Sensing Top SOCOM's Science and Technology Priorities," *National Defense*, May 2011, 34.

<sup>52</sup> John Lenczowski, *Full Spectrum Diplomacy and Grand Strategy* (Washington, DC: Institute of World Politics Press, 2009), 1.

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**ABBREVIATIONS AND ACRONYMS**

ADS	Active Denial System
ARSOF	Army Special Operations Forces
CA	Civil Affairs
CIC	Cultural Intelligence Cell
CIS	Cultural Intelligence Section
CJSOTF	Combined Joint Special Operations Task Force
COIN	Counterinsurgency
CPWMD	Counter-Proliferation of Weapons of Mass Destruction
CT	Counter Terrorism
DoD	Department of Defense
DA	Direct Action
FID	Foreign Internal Defense
IDF	Israel Defense Force
IO	Information Operations
IOS	Intelligence Optical Systems
LEDI	Light Emitting Diode Incapacitator
LRAD	Long Range Acoustic Device
MISG	Military Information Support Group
MISO	Military Information Operations
MIST	Military Information Support Teams
NLW	Nonlethal Weapons
PSYOP	Psychological Operations
SFA	Security Force Protection
SOF	Special Operations Forces
SO MISO	Special Operations Military Informations Support Operations
SR	Special Reconnaissance
TAA	Target Audience Analysis
TSOC	Theater Special Operations Command

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UAV	Unmanned Aerial Vehicles
UGV	Unmanned Ground Vehicles
USASOC	United States Army Operations Command
USSOCOM	United States Special Operations Command
UW	Unconventional Warfare