Special Ops Leaders: SOFs Essential but Must Not Lose Irregular Warfare Skills

ARLINGTON, Va. — Because of their agility and relatively low cost, special operations forces (SOF) will continue to play a key role in meeting the global security threats, even with the new emphasis on preparing for the return of great power competition. But SOF and the conventional joint forces must not lose the irregular warfare skills honed in nearly two decades of conflict, two top Special Operations civilian leaders said Feb. 5.

Russia and China are engaging in activities below the level of armed conflict to challenge America's global influence, but "that is SOF's specialty," Owen West, the assistant defense secretary for Special Operations and Low-Intensity Conflict (SO/LIC) said.

Addressing the National Defense Industrial Association's annual SO/LIC conference, West said he did not think the Special Operations Forces would have to change to meet the new era of competition, but the entire defense departments will "have to establish an understanding of what irregular warfare is."

"Clearly we have adversaries that are playing by a different set of rules" that the United States would not adopt. "But at some point, we have to understand the rules by which they play," West said.

West repeatedly cited the flexibility and relative low cost of small SOF units and their global footprint, so wherever an adversary appears, SOF can respond. He said one of his jobs as head of SO/LIC is helping the Special Operations Command determine what its priorities are.

“We have to be cheaper, but we have to be flexible and shift forces to the new priorities,” he said.

Speaking earlier, Andrew Knaggs, the deputy assistant defense secretary for Special Operations and Combating Terrorism, said the “National Defense Strategy” created last year by then Defense Secretary Jim Mattis has become the “foundational document” that is shaping Defense Department policies and the way it sees itself, the world and the future.

The mandate from that strategy means “DoD will likely operate with a smaller footprint overseas,” meaning that “agility will be more important for success.” And because adversaries are employing irregular warfare tactics to undermine the foundations of U.S. global status, the department must preserve the lessons learned from two decades of irregular warfare and counter-terrorism operations. And it will need “to reorient that to the era of great power competition.”

Knaggs recalled the U.S. military’s history of shifting from the irregular warfare on the Western frontier to high end conflict in the two world wars, “which left us unprepared for irregular war far into Vietnam.” And then again in Afghanistan and Iraq, “we have favored conventional approaches over IR. When given an opportunity to right-size the force, we too often have gone to the conventional approach, which leaves us unprepared for the broad spectrum of threats we face today.”

The current adversaries “have shown the ability to use IR tools to reshape the environment” in which U.S. forces must operate. “We should do the same,” he said.

West made similar points, noting that under the “National Defense Strategy” irregular warfare had become a part of department policy in an effort to end the “boom and bust” practice of standing up and shutting down irregular warfare capabilities.

The policy now is to establish a standard so that a part of

the joint force will be ready for irregular warfare. “SOF has always been a part,” he said.

Responding to questions from an NDIA moderator, West said the charges of allegedly criminal actions against a number of SOF personnel is “not indicative of what the force is.”

But he said the alleged actions can erode the trust within the command and “if this trust is jeopardized in any way, it is felt well beyond our walls and will affect the whole force.”

All allegations of criminal behavior will be fully investigated and anyone found guilty will be punished, he said.

West said he did not think the decade-plus of intense operations was a cause for the alleged misbehavior, but if he knew what the cause was, “we’d have fixed it.”

While citing the value of SOF’s low cost “compared to some of the high-end weapons,” West said SOCOM and his office were disappointed that the Air Force stopped its quest to buy a cheap, turbo-prop light attack aircraft, which would have been geared to low-intensity conflict.