COMMENTARY

The SOCOM Rorschach: Identity, Technology, and the Future Hidden in a List

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ABSTRACT

This commentary reads one of U.S. Special Operations Command's current procurement solicitations as a Rorschach test, revealing the command's institutional vision for the future fight. While the Broad Agency Announcement (BAA) for Technology Development and Advanced Technology Development nominally supports a wide range of capabilities, in practice it tilts heavily toward technologies favoring direct action. This emphasis raises concerns about strategic tunnel vision—and about an overreliance on automation, artificial intelligence, and other high-end tools—at the expense of operations grounded in the human domain. This commentary argues that if U.S. Special Operations Forces (SOF) are serious about staying ahead in the next fight, they should view the BAA not as a shopping list but as a mirror of institutional identity, bias, and habit—one that invites reflection on whether their technological aspirations are building future advantage or merely reinforcing the battles of the past.

KEYWORDS

automation; acquisition; Broad Agency Announcement; Rorschach; F3EAD

If one were to ask a dozen U.S. Special Operations Forces (SOF) operators from different branches to comment on U.S. Special Operations Command's (SOCOM) solicitation for new and disruptive technologies, each would likely offer a distinct interpretation of the document outlining SOF's future technological capabilities. The Broad Agency Announcement (BAA) for Technology Development and Advanced Technology Development, first published in 2020 and updated seven times since, functions much like a Rorschach test: what one sees in it often reflects one's operational priorities, experiences, and biases.[1] Operators focused on kinetic action may view the BAA as an important endorsement of AI-enabled tools and precision weapons, while those engaged in indirect, relationship-based missions might interpret the same

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document as a troubling indication that the human domain is being eclipsed by machines. Some may even believe that SOCOM's push for technological superiority could sideline their hard-won fieldcraft. The BAA not only reveals SOCOM's strategic direction—it also exposes tensions within the force over what will constitute relevance, value, and readiness in the future operating environment.

The Rorschach test, developed by Swiss physician Hermann Rorschach (1884-1922), is a psychological assessment in which individuals interpret a series of inkblots. Designed to uncover underlying thoughts, emotions, and personality traits, it analyzes the subjective meanings people assign to ambiguous stimuli. Here, the Rorschach framing is useful because it highlights how the BAA can elicit vastly different interpretations among SOCOM personnel. Just as inkblots invite projection, the BAA prompts readers to see their own concerns and aspirations reflected in its language.

This commentary is another Rorschach reading—not of individual SOF, but of SOCOM itself. It rests on the understanding that the BAA is not merely a list of desired technological innovations but also a reflection of how SOCOM envisions the future operating environment and the capabilities it believes will be necessary to maintain relevance and effectiveness. So, what does the wish list indicate to the author?

An Echo of GWOT

During the Global War on Terror (GWOT), the high-volume targeting cycle "Find, Fix, Finish, Exploit, Analyze, Disseminate" (F3EAD)—developed under the leadership of Joint Special Operations Command (JSOC) in the mid-2000s—made the news and even reached bestseller lists. Roger D. Petersen succinctly sums up the concept:

> Once a target was found, drones helped fix that target's location. Combat teams finished the target (capturing or killing), but now specialists accompanied the combat team and immediately exploited the information found on laptops, flash drives, and cell phones. With ever-expanding data, a rapid analysis of the new information created the ability to immediately seek new targets. The cycle was reduced from days to hours.[2]

During GWOT and beyond, some within the U.S. SOF community voiced concerns about an overreliance on kinetic operations, arguing that the prominence of direct action came at the expense of a balanced integration of non-kinetic capabilities. The BAA validates this concern. At the outset, the procurement document affirms that direct action and counterterrorism are "expected to remain key to SOF operations."[3] Within its Intelligence, Surveillance, and Reconnaissance (ISR) capability area, the BAA places significant emphasis on technologies designed to locate, identify, and track individuals. This includes stand-off biometrics systems that use multimodal data—such as facial features, iris patterns, gait, and heartbeat—as well as sensor fusion systems capable of covertly recognizing and following individuals or vehicles at long distances (greater than one kilometer).[4] Furthermore, the BAA seeks "tailorable non-lethal and lethal effects to best meet mission objectives."[5] Such capabilities are foundational to "find-fix-finish" missions.

A key lesson from GWOT was the critical importance of integrating intelligence exploitation with rapid information sharing. The BAA reinforces the "exploit-analyze-disseminate" elements by seeking technologies that enable immediate processing and dissemination of data at the point of action. These include edge analytics, which allows operators to process data directly in the field rather than sending it to a centralized facility—

enabling notably faster insights.[6] The BAA also calls for AI-powered decision aids to help operators make more effective choices in complex situations, such as predicting adversary movements or intentions. Augmented reality (AR) displays, likewise highlighted in the BAA, overlay digital information onto a real-world view, providing immediate, relevant insights directly to an operator's vision—while reducing dependence on multiple screens.[7] Collectively, these capabilities embody the high-tempo, information-dominant mindset refined during years of GWOT.

Notably, the BAA positions frontline operators and AI to assume roles once reserved for exploitation specialists, handling the analysis of media devices such as laptops, flash drives, and cell phones directly in the field. Forensic tools outlined in the BAA support this shift by enabling on-site data extraction and rapid target development.[8] This merging of collection, analysis, and action at the tactical edge echoes the F3EAD cycle but compresses it even further—from hours to minutes or less.

All this suggests that in the renewed era of great power competition, SOCOM is leveraging emerging technologies to operationalize certain lessons of the GWOT era. This strategic continuity may prove advantageous for SOF missions in which acting on real-time intelligence with speed and adaptability remains decisive—particularly in high-stakes domains like countering weapons of mass destruction. The urgency is underscored by a thirteen percent rise in global nuclear weapons spending, which reached a record $91.4 billion in 2023.[9] The Arms Control Association warns that "the threat of further escalation, proliferation, and even the use of nuclear weapons or attacks on nuclear installations [is] a real possibility."[10] In this context, SOCOM's tech-enabled direct-action capabilities may not only shape future battlefields—they may help prevent catastrophes.

Harnessing the direct-action experience gained during GWOT and integrating it with emerging technologies is not inherently problematic. However, relying on these technologies out of habit raises concerns. Scholars have argued that the two decades following 9/11 profoundly shaped SOCOM's organizational priorities.[11] According to Cole J. Livieratos, GWOT "helped SOCOM's direct action units lock in leadership positions and sustain institutional arrangements that continued to prioritize the use of force."[12] This mindset has been repeatedly acknowledged and appears to persist beyond the official end of GWOT, suggesting a problematic path dependence within SOCOM. By definition, "[i]nstitutions become path dependent when that path satisfies, or at one point satisfied, the preferences of the most important actors in the institution … once the institution is path dependent, change only succeeds insofar as it keeps the institution on the same path."[13] To avoid this pitfall, SOCOM requires a high degree of institutional self-awareness—including mechanisms for critically reflecting on its own strategic assumptions and leadership dynamics.

One such mechanism lies in how SOCOM personnel engage with the BAA process itself. Rather than treating the BAA merely as a procurement tool for acquiring cutting-edge technologies, targeted interaction with it can be reframed as an opportunity for deliberate strategic introspection. By involving a broader range of operators, planners, and analysts in shaping BAA priorities and evaluating proposals, SOCOM could surface implicit assumptions about its preferred modes of operation and challenge inherited biases. When personnel are encouraged to question not just what technologies are being pursued but why—and to what end—they contribute to an organizational culture that is more self-aware and adaptive. This reflective approach positions the BAA not only as a vehicle for technical innovation but also

as a forum for debating the command's trajectory in light of strategic realities and emerging threats.

Non-Kinetic Missions

Many of the technologies outlined in the BAA are not inherently tethered to kinetic missions; they may be flexible tools capable of serving a wider array of operational purposes. Autonomous systems originally designed for reconnaissance and targeting in contested environments, for instance, can be repurposed for humanitarian assistance. In such contexts, these systems can monitor affected regions, map infrastructure damage, support logistical coordination, and facilitate the delivery of medical supplies, thereby enhancing SOF's ability to contribute meaningfully to stabilization and resilience-building efforts. This adaptability illustrates how emerging technologies can serve as instruments of soft power, enabling SOF to build trust, forge local partnerships, and influence contested human terrain without the use of force.

Foreign Internal Defense (FID) offers another example of how technologies can extend beyond direct action. The BAA highlights augmented and virtual reality tools that could significantly enhance training and capacity-building with partner nations. A virtual reality platform, for instance, could simulate geographically and culturally specific training environments, allowing SOF teams to rehearse complex operations with foreign counterparts in realistic scenarios before deployment. Moreover, the interpersonal and instructional nature of FID relies heavily on language skills. The BAA includes a real-time translation device designed to aid communication with non-English speakers, which could help advisors liaise more effectively with local troops and officials.[14] Seen in this light, BAA technologies offer more than tactical enhancements; they represent potential enablers for more nuanced forms of engagement that are increasingly vital in today's gray zone and strategic-competition environments. The challenge, then, lies not in the nature of the technologies themselves but in the intent—and, perhaps most importantly, the imagination—with which they are integrated into SOF missions.

MISO – The Outlier

Military Information Support Operations (MISO) is unusual among SOF's indirect missions because the BAA gives it explicit and sustained attention.[15] The 2024 amendment represented a tactical orientation toward MISO, treating it primarily as a battlefield enabler rather than a comprehensive influence capability. The focus centered on portable systems designed to enhance operator effectiveness at the point of contact, emphasizing technologies that would allow personnel to collect local data and dynamically adjust messaging.[16] This approach prioritized operational flexibility and responsiveness.

The 2025 amendment signals a paradigmatic shift toward a more comprehensive, campaign-oriented approach to information operations. Rather than merely enabling tactical responsiveness, the new emphasis on planning tools—such as the capability to "construct comprehensive models of entire societies"—indicates a move toward predictive analysis and strategic planning.[17] This technological evolution allows military planners to simulate various courses of action within complex social systems before engaging real audiences, potentially reducing the risk of counterproductive messaging while maximizing the strategic impact of influence operations. This transition from battlefield support to campaign-level capability

represents a maturation of MISO as a discipline, complete with dedicated resources for systematic analysis, comprehensive planning, and institutional oversight. The shift aligns with SOCOM's broader strategic emphasis on information operations as a core competency, reflecting an understanding that modern conflicts are increasingly shaped in the information domain. [18]

U.S. SOF must now ensure that personnel development, organizational processes, and institutional structures are properly aligned to leverage the sophisticated technological capabilities effectively—and this is likely to pose a challenge because the U.S. Army Special Operations Command (USASOC) has not conducted a comprehensive capabilities-based assessment of its MISO workforce in over twenty years.[19] This assessment gap represents a significant institutional blind spot that could undermine the effectiveness of even the most advanced technological systems.

Irregular Warfare

The BAA identifies Irregular Warfare (IW)—and its subset, Unconventional Warfare (UW)—as a core SOF mission. [20] While the solicitation does not foreground IW/UW-specific technologies, several listed items hold latent potential for such missions. For instance, low-profile radio technologies could prove vital for secure communications under oppressive surveillance. Similarly, advanced signature management tools could help Special Forces Detachment Alphas (SFODAs) maintain a low profile while operating among partner insurgent forces in denied environments. Advanced data analytics for discerning patterns in ambiguous information environments may also support IW/UW campaigns by enabling SFODAs to identify both emerging threats and opportunities within complex social, political, and cultural landscapes.[21] In such cases, the burden shifts to Special Forces themselves—their hallmark adaptability and mission-driven creativity will be essential in repurposing general-purpose technologies for IW/UW contexts. However, the effectiveness of future IW/UW cannot rest solely on operator ingenuity. If SOCOM seeks to revitalize IW/UW as core missions, some of its technology investments must be shaped with the unique requirements of these missions in mind.

The BAA emphasizes advanced automation, AI, robotics, and networked ISR/communications capabilities. If adopted across the SOF enterprise, these technologies could displace some traditional SOF skills. Take, for example, the previously mentioned translation system.[22] Reliance on automated translators risks further eroding operators' foreign language skills.[23] Likewise, an overreliance on AI-based tools such as sentiment analysis could undermine Special Forces' regional expertise by diminishing the need for nuanced human interpretation of cultural cues and local social dynamics.[24] Reduced ability to independently gauge local populations' true sentiments may foster dependency on such tools—ultimately limiting an operator's capacity to navigate complex environments without technological mediation. A further challenge could be the frequent need to update, recalibrate, or repair sophisticated devices, creating not only maintenance fatigue but also diverting precious training hours away from IW/UW fieldcraft toward software management.

AI-Based Decision Assistants

Potentially more concerning is the BAA's call for extensive automation across the observe–orient–decide–act (OODA) loop. [25] In practice, this could mean AI-enabled systems

recommending courses of action or autonomously controlling unmanned platforms in real time. While such capabilities may enhance operational tempo and reduce cognitive load in high-stakes environments, they also carry significant risks. Overreliance on automated decision aids could erode the very traits that have traditionally defined SOF effectiveness: individual initiative, tactical improvisation, and decentralized command. Junior leaders—once trained to operate with autonomy and confidence in ambiguous situations—may come to defer critical decisions to algorithmic outputs, weakening their capacity for independent judgment and reducing their exposure to the trial-and-error experiences that cultivate adaptive leadership. Furthermore, in contested environments where communications may be disrupted or AI systems degraded, the sudden loss of automation could leave units unprepared and vulnerable. Thus, if not carefully integrated, automation may undermine the human agility it is intended to enhance.

SOCOM must therefore tread carefully: the adoption of AI should aim to augment—not replace—the judgment, adaptability, and ingenuity of its operators. One promising example of this principle lies in the potential integration of autonomous systems with brain–machine interfaces (BMIs), a technology explicitly prioritized in the BAA.[26] Since the late 2000s, BMIs have been explored for their ability to monitor and interpret brain activity in real time.[27] If developed to be sufficiently rugged and reliable for operational environments, these systems could serve as cognitive sentinels—detecting signs of temporary neurological impairment, for example, due to information overload or blunt-force trauma. By continuously monitoring neurophysiological indicators, a BMI could trigger pre-programmed thresholds that prompt an autonomous system to assume partial control, stabilize the situation, and alert nearby teammates. In this model, autonomy does not replace human agency it acts as a contingency mechanism designed to extend and protect it under extreme conditions. Such conditional integration of autonomous systems with other emerging technologies may offer a pathway for SOCOM to harness innovation while preserving the core human competencies that lead to SOF success. Currently, BMI-based automation is largely in the research and prototyping phases, moving from feasibility demonstrations to real-world applications in domains such as air traffic control.[28] The DoD has heavily invested in BMI development, and according to a RAND report, the technology is expected to become available to personnel starting 2030.[29] SOCOM may already be engaged in classified prototype testing.

Closing Thoughts

Another important factor the BAA may mirror is the broader compartmentalization within the U.S. defense acquisition ecosystem. Rather than being neglected, some SOF capabilities may be pursued through alternative acquisition pathways better suited to their sensitive, specialized, or cross-agency nature. Cooperative agreements and Other Transaction Authorities (OTAs), for example, allow SOCOM and other DoD components to engage with non-traditional partners that may offer innovative solutions in areas such as information operations, psychological influence, and civil–military engagement but do not typically participate in competitive defense contracting. Similarly, SOCOM can use awards to fund research in socio-cultural dynamics, behavioral science, or language technologies—fields critical to influence and stability operations. In parallel, some of the most sensitive or strategically ambiguous capabilities, particularly those associated with influence campaigns and support to resistance movements, are likely managed through classified programs or coordinated through interagency

partnerships with the Intelligence Community, the Department of State, or specialized Joint Task Forces. These mechanisms provide both operational discretion and flexibility, but they also obscure the full picture of how SOCOM prepares for its broader, less kinetic mission sets. This underscores a key limitation in interpreting SOCOM's strategic intent solely through the BAA—and signals a good moment at which to begin drawing this commentary to a close.

There is a natural human tendency to assume the future will look like "more of what we do best." This tendency is rooted in a cluster of well-documented cognitive and institutional biases, of which path dependence is but one. Projection bias leads individuals and organizations to overestimate the persistence of current preferences, capabilities, and strategies, causing them to believe that what is effective today will remain so tomorrow. Closely related is status quo bias, a preference for maintaining existing practices even in the face of changing conditions, which reinforces institutional comfort zones and discourages critical reassessment. Functional fixedness—treating familiar tools and methods as usable only in their customary ways—narrows the search for alternatives and increases the chance that organizations over-apply existing competencies to new problems. At the organizational level, the availability heuristic amplifies this dynamic by prompting leaders to base decisions on the most vivid examples of success, which are often tied to historical strengths. Together, these interlocking biases can lead even high-performing institutions like SOCOM to unconsciously imagine a future that confirms their current identity rather than one that challenges it.

This commentary has suggested treating the BAA as more than an outline of technological requirements. It has approached it as an artifact of institutional identity, perpetuating strategic assumptions, priorities, and biases. While industry partners may read the BAA as a roadmap, SOCOM itself may benefit from using it as an instrument of critical inquiry—one that highlights misalignments between present assumptions and likely future challenges, reveals blind spots in planning, and helps shape more forward-looking adjustments. One way to treat the BAA as more than a roadmap is to approach it as data. Focus areas could be coded by mission category and technology readiness level, with special attention to how often the language emphasizes "operator-at-the-edge" capabilities versus partner-force or strategic effects. Tracking these weightings across successive amendments would make implicit priorities visible rather than assumed. To complement this, SOCOM could institute a red-team review for each amendment—tasked not with blocking technologies, but with identifying recurring biases and recommending counter-weights in evaluation criteria, such as explicit scoring for partner-force outcomes or human-domain effects. Such steps could help ensure that acquisition documents support a more balanced and future-oriented vision, rather than habitually amplifying historical strengths. This does not mean discarding notably hard-earned lessons of the GWOT era—but rather applying them less broadly and more deliberately in service of national security.

Endnotes

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