

Special operations forces and great power competition

Talent, technology, and organizational change in the new threat environment

About the authors

John Taft | jotaft@deloitte.com

John Taft is a specialist leader for Deloitte Consulting LLP. Taft is a retired special forces colonel, United States Army War College Distinguished Graduate, combat veteran, and recipient of four Bronze Star Medals for combat deployments in support of Operation Iraqi Freedom.

Liz Gormisky | lgormisky@deloitte.com

Liz Gormisky is a senior consultant in Deloitte Consulting LLP's Cyber practice, where she supports cybersecurity readiness and technology enablement for the defense sector. Prior to joining Deloitte, she was the cybersecurity reporter for a defense magazine. She holds an MA in security studies from Georgetown University Walsh School of Foreign Service and a BA in international relations from the University of Pennsylvania.

Joe Mariani | jmariani@deloitte.com

Joe Mariani is a research manager with Deloitte's Center for Government Insights. Mariani's research focuses on innovation and technology adoption for both commercial businesses and national security organizations. Mariani's previous experience includes work as a consultant to the defense and intelligence industries, high school science teacher, and Marine Corps intelligence officer.

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Introduction

One of the most successful organizations in the world does not have billboards or stock options or championship trophies. It is most successful when no one knows it is even there. US Special Operations Forces (SOF) is exactly that organization. Over decades of honing its craft, the SOF community has become the go-to organization for many of today's most challenging missions.

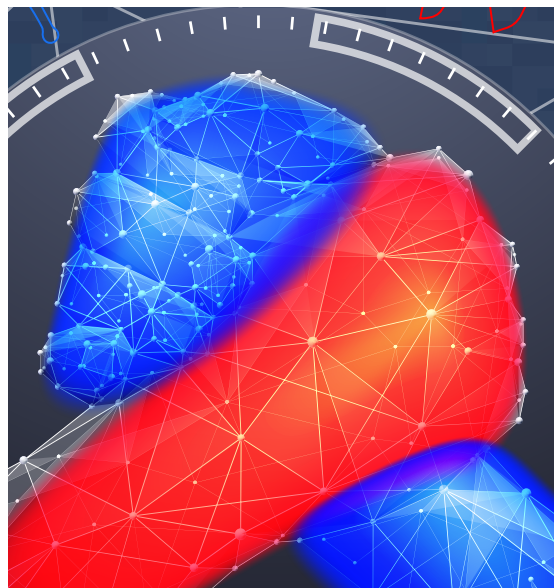
SOF HAS SPENT decades becoming a leading expert in countering terrorism, but its targets are changing. New threats are rising, and SOF is tasked with achieving comparable excellence in a wider—and perhaps more demanding—mission set. Tactics such as hacking that were once the purview of rogue sub-state actors are now the chosen methods of the world's great powers. SOF must continue its current mission while adapting to great power conflict on new and unexpected battlefields.

So how does a world-leading organization pivot to become an expert in something entirely new? How does a large organization of 70,000 people adopt an entirely new strategy? In an age of exponential technology, these are questions facing not only SOF but also many other organizations across government and nearly every industry.

We asked leading thinkers in the SOF community how the military's elite are tackling the challenge:

- Representative James Langevin, chair of the House Armed Services Committee's Subcommittee on Intelligence, Emerging Threats, and Capabilities;

- Dr. Michael Vickers, former Undersecretary of Defense for Intelligence;
- Lieutenant General (retired) Ken Tovo, former commander of Army Special Operations Forces; and
- Mark Mitchell, principal deputy assistant secretary of defense for special operations/low-intensity conflict.



Success in a changing world

Great power competition returns

UNRIVALED SUCCESS CAN sow the seeds of its own demise. When competitors cannot keep up, they seek to change the rules of the game.¹ Retired Lt. Gen. Ken Tovo found a similar situation facing US forces, in which adversaries sought new ways to challenge American power after Desert Storm.

“[Our adversaries] did what any good adversary would do,” he said. “They searched for our weaknesses, and invested heavily in asymmetric techniques, hybrid warfare. It’s an ability to get right to the heart of a nation’s power, its people. And arguably, our adversaries are doing this better than we are.”

Society, technology, and warfare are all about to change in a way that is revolutionary, not evolutionary.

Tovo recently retired from his post as commanding general of the Army’s Special Operations Command. A career Special Forces officer, Tovo served in West Germany, the first Gulf War, refugee relief operations in Northern Iraq, noncombatant evacuation operations in Sierra Leone, peacekeeping operations in Bosnia on two occasions, five tours in Iraq, one tour in Afghanistan, and multiple leadership posts in the SOF community. In short, he has experienced first-hand the history of US military operations since the Cold War.

Vickers agreed that our adversaries have become stronger than ever: “Today we face perhaps the greatest threat environment since the end of the Cold War. The further you go out, the more dangerous it gets, especially when you combine advances in technology with the rise of really capable adversaries.”

Vickers knows the challenge of fighting a really capable adversary from a position of weakness—after serving in SOF, he led the Central Intelligence Agency’s small-footprint effort to oust the Soviet Union from Afghanistan (you may remember him as the whiz kid in *Charlie Wilson’s War*). He later served in a number of government roles, including as the assistant secretary of defense for special operations, low-intensity conflict, and interdependent capabilities, and later as undersecretary of defense for intelligence.

With their broad perspectives on conflict, Vickers and Tovo see US adversaries’ new strategies not as isolated tactics but as part of larger societal trends. For example, digital influence operations are only effective because of the extent to which we use digital technologies in all aspects of our lives.

“Society, technology, and warfare are all about to change in a way that is revolutionary, not evolutionary,” said Tovo. “Artificial intelligence [AI], quantum computing, greater data storage, autonomy—all of that will change society as a whole, but it will really change warfare.”

Vickers concurred and noted that multiple types of technology will affect society, war, and SOF. Advances in technology will also be weaponized, such as hypersonics, directed energy, and ubiquitous surveillance and identity technologies.

Vickers further sees those macro trends are directly driving the security situation that SOF must navigate: “The resumption of great power competition is our biggest threat. At the highest end, we’re really facing something new—the biggest economy we’ve ever faced, nothing like it

US adversaries are gaining an advantage by using entirely other means—without fighting directly, they are attacking US democracy, stealing critical technologies, undermining alliances, and coercing partners.

in the 20th century. Technologically, it’s getting more competitive. The real threat is from those who intend to exceed us in every domain.”

How can the US military and SOF meet those challenges? That’s a question that Mark Mitchell thinks about a lot. A retired colonel from Army Special Forces, Mitchell served in Iraq, both during Desert Storm and through many tours during

Operation Iraqi Freedom. But he is most known for his courage under fire during the earliest days of the war in Afghanistan, for which he received the first Distinguished Service Cross awarded since the Vietnam War, a recognition second only to the Medal of Honor. Today, Mitchell serves as the principal deputy assistant secretary of defense for special operations/low-intensity conflict.

“Conceptually, we’re prisoners of our own experience,” Mitchell said. He noted that SOF has been engaged in counterterrorism and counterinsurgency operations, which consist principally of raids, precision air strikes, and similar “direct action” operations. Meanwhile, US adversaries are gaining an advantage by using entirely other means—without fighting directly, they are attacking US democracy, stealing critical technologies, undermining alliances, and coercing partners.

Mitchell explained, “We have not fully identified how we beat their revisionist strategy,” and the role of SOF can—and probably should—be markedly different in this conflict.

“Sun Tzu said the acme of strategy is to win before you fight. And I don’t think we’ve got to the point yet where we identify how we beat their strategy,” he said.

Adapting to change requires hard choices

RECENT HISTORY IS littered with examples of leaders being caught out by unexpected change. Just try to find a video rental store today, now that we can stream movies directly from our smartphones. For SOF, staying at the front starts with understanding what is changing—and what stays the same.

“I think what’s really happened is that the environment in which we have to perform our missions has changed yet again,” Tovo said. “Our time in Iraq and Afghanistan forced us to focus on that kind of conflict. That’s all we had time for. So now we’re a force optimized for that kind of conflict, but we still need to swing to higher-end conflict. In a way, this is just business as usual. Great power competition has been around a long time, and we knew it was coming back.”

Yet the great power competition of the 2020s will not be the same as that of a century ago.

“You have to take each [potential conflict], one by one, and analyze [its] unique conditions,” Vickers said. “Any East Asian conflict scenario would be an air, sea, space, and cyber fight, not a big land role ... In Europe, on the other hand, the big challenge is information warfare, and if there ever were a fight, it would be an air-land conflict.”

The fact that each threat dictates a completely different style of conflict means that SOF cannot be everything everywhere. That forces some hard choices.

“Should [Army Special Forces’] 3rd Special Forces Group (Airborne) be focused completely on the counter-terror aspect in North Africa? Or should they be looking at East Asia as well?” Tovo asked. “At some point, we’ve got to make choices. From a resourcing perspective, you have to make choices about what you’re investing in. If you’re preparing for the counter-terror fight, are you missing the investment in counter-thermal imaging technology? In information? Countering sophisticated electronic collection? Ability of your air platforms to operate in denied airspace?”

Answering those questions lies at the heart of strategy. In fact, it is the definition of strategy. A. G. Lafley, former CEO of Procter and Gamble, described strategy as “an integrated set of choices that uniquely creates sustainable advantage.”² Strategy is a theory for how to win, pure and simple.

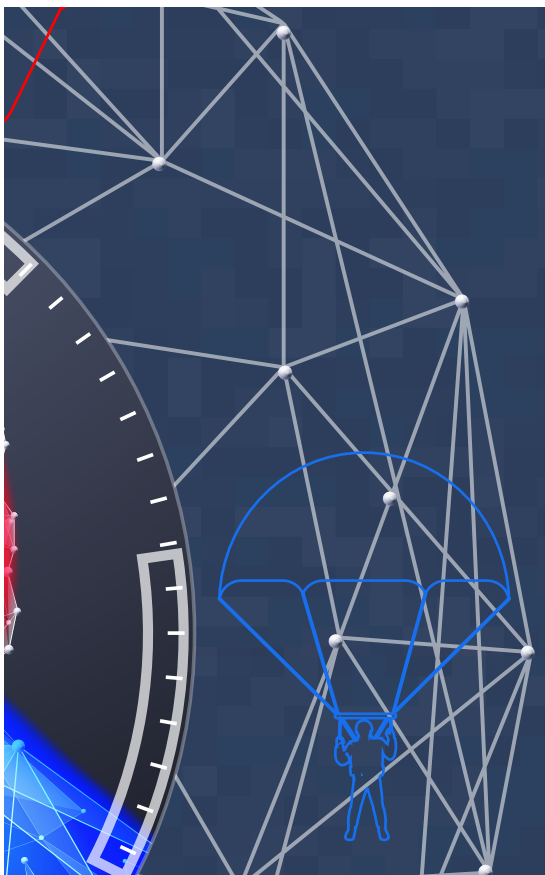
Tovo takes a similar approach, explaining “executing strategy is all about making decisions. And right now, I’m not sure we’re prioritizing among the risks, and then enforcing that strategic prioritization down the chain. In a sense, it’s great that DoD [Department of Defense] is trying to get its house in order, but what is the nation’s approach to strategy?”

Vickers agreed: “The fundamental problem across the board is, ‘Do I have a coherent strategic and operational concept to generate campaign effects and obtain strategic goals?’ You have to think differently.”

A new strategy starts with finding competitive advantage

CHANGING CIRCUMSTANCES REQUIRE a new strategy. To think differently, you need to start at the beginning and ask the most basic questions about why SOF exists in the first place.

Tovo has led SOF organizations for decades, and he has seen special operators deployed all over the world, for seemingly every conceivable mission. Yet his answer for why we have SOF is straightforward.



“I want as much influence around the world as I can; the main competition [is] where SOF lives.”

— *Dr. Michael Vickers*

“We have SOF to do things that the conventional forces can’t do—whatever that is,” he said. “If the conventional forces can do it, you don’t need SOF.”

As a member of the House Armed Services Committee, Rep. James Langevin has a direct role in charting the path for SOF. His goal is to “ensure that SOCOM [Special Operations Command] teams are used because they are the right fit for a mission and that mission is a priority for our nation.”

What begins to emerge is a picture of what makes SOF unique, and what its competitive advantage is. SOF is different than conventional forces, and its strategy needs to start with what conventional forces cannot do but what SOF can.

According to Tovo, that means a SOF strategy based on personal relationships: “Special operators are the premier practitioners of the indigenous approach to warfare. We’re the guys who actually like working with foreign partners, foreign militaries, and foreign populations. That’s what we select and train our special operators for. And that’s an enduring SOF mission that will still be around even when we have high-end conflict with autonomous swarms and AI.”

The relationships formed by SOF, even during peacetime or in training, are key, because when conflicts start, those relationships remain in place and can be a key asset. Vickers explained this focus on relationships as a tool of influence: “Great power conflict does require changes—strategically, operationally, tactically, technologically—particularly direct conflict. But great power direct conflict shouldn’t dominate the force. I want as much influence around the world as I can; the main competition [is] where SOF lives.”

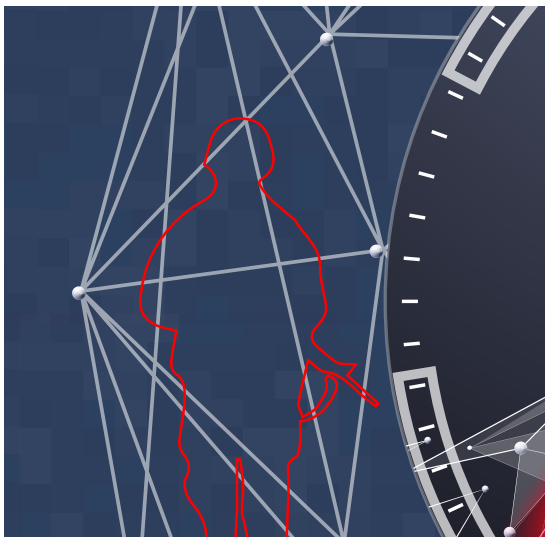
The new technology environment only amplifies the challenges of finding spheres of influence in increasingly unfriendly territories.

“Once you’re in, you’re the hunted,” he continued. “You’re the hunted in a way we just haven’t been before. In an information-dense environment, with facial recognition, digital dust, DNA dust, and your higher profile, it’s a lot harder to sustain [anonymity] for any significant period. It’s a very different clandestine environment than anything we’ve faced. So, while we’d love to do unconventional activities, they require living with communities, taking risks, and finding sanctuaries. To do that, tradecraft has to change. All the tools to get in, operate, and resupply, all have to change.”

People are the critical capability

NEW STRATEGIES REQUIRE new capabilities, but for SOF—amidst new tools and technologies—the importance of the individual operator can be lost. Building a future special operations force means continuing to attract the best talent. Management researchers may have only recently begun to promote the hiring of candidates based on personality traits and not on specific skills or experiences, but the SOF community has known that for decades.³

“We are selecting and assessing individuals based on a series of character traits that all add up to what we believe is the right kind of person to do this work,” Tovo said. “It’s always being refined, especially as we now try to apply big data and machine learning to finding people. What is it in someone’s background that allows them to succeed?”



We can't allow ourselves to become prisoners of our experience in the counter-terror fight.

“In the end, we’re looking for people who are empathetic, adaptive problem-solvers, who don’t freak out in the complexity of chaotic situations,” he continued. “One of my predecessors used to say, ‘Our job is to wade into chaos and manage it.’ Our missions are often undefined—go in and figure it out, you tell us what the mission is. Write your own problem statement.”

The needs of great power competition do change some things. If the force is to operate in denied areas (areas under enemy control in which supporting forces can’t operate) with new technologies, it is going to need more languages, deeper local knowledge, and greater technical skills. Finding the right people with those skills—or the aptitude to quickly absorb those skills—may mean bringing people in, and even back in, from some unusual places. At the Office of the Assistant Secretary of Defense for Special Operations/ Low-Intensity Conflict, Mitchell spends a lot of time working on personnel, though the core personnel policies are owned by the military services, and in some cases, written into US Code.

“If I could change one thing? Personnel policies,” he said. “People are more important than hardware—SOF truth number one. If

we open our aperture a bit and tried some new approaches, we'd get more and different talent that could help us solve some of these problems. We need to start finding people who have real depth in countries and cultures.

“Our constructs that have served us for the past 30 years are not well suited against an advanced state actor, with biometrics and other cutting-edge technologies,” he continued. “We can't allow ourselves to become prisoners of our experience in the counter-terror fight.”

In the end, thinking differently is best done when people from different backgrounds, experiences, and perspectives come together. That can mean bringing in entirely new types of people, or it can mean giving current operators new experiences.

“I would like to see us to keep a better pulse on industry. But that requires people to develop relationships, and frankly to stay put for a long time—not just stay for two years

and move on. And not to spend a few years in Silicon Valley and then leave the force,” Mitchell said. “In terms of force structure, it will require changes—it will mean maintaining a higher number but more flexibility. When we design the force, we don't do it with any of this needed flexibility in mind, so we can't absorb those departures without it impacting readiness.”

Finding new perspectives can also mean changing *who* comprises the force. As Vickers said, “For much of the mission, you're crazy not to use women. You're crazy not to use all the capabilities of our diverse population.”

Langevin agreed: “As I look at our Special Operations Forces today, I see a growing need to widen our recruiting and talent pool to gain a broader set of skills, perspectives, and experiences in SOCOM. The talent that is available in the United States is absolutely incredible, and I would like to see USSOCOM look at how it advertises and recruits Special Operations personnel with an eye towards casting a wide net.”

New strategy, new missions, new roles

IF A FORCE with new capabilities is to take on a new strategy, many of its roles and relationships with other organizations will need to change as well. For SOF, these changing roles can best be seen through its use and collection of intelligence.

First and foremost, great power competition creates a need among SOF for intelligence about a new adversary. Mitchell believes that to counter an adversary, “you need a really in-depth understanding of their thought processes and their strategies. What are they trying to do?”

SOF’s emphasis on relationships and building a network plays a crucial role in intelligence collection.

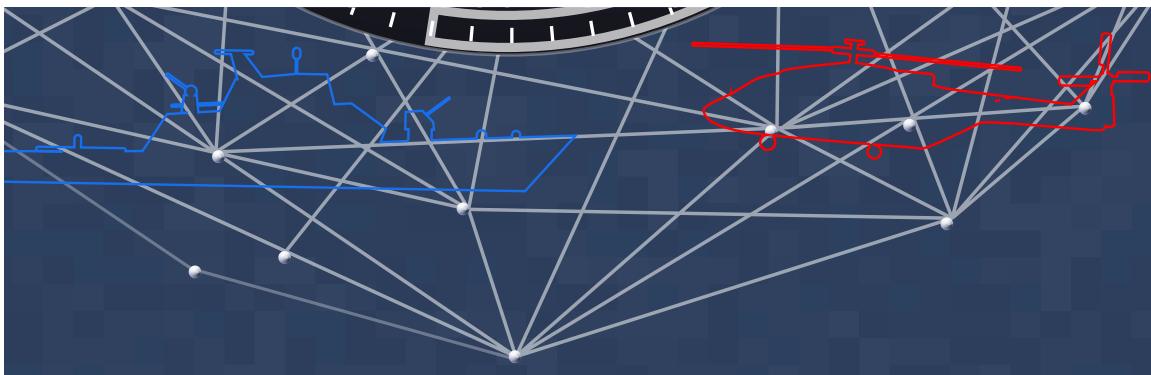
“Where I see SOF playing the greatest role is by being in position globally as tensions begin to rise. Have a deep network in place on day one,” Mitchell said. “These strategies have a long lead time to be viable. When you should start setting up that network, the risk is high, and the crisis is far off. You start to build and maintain human networks

and physical infrastructure, SOF together with the intelligence community. Otherwise, when the crisis hits, you haven’t laid a survivable foundation.”

The good news is that such a foundation is already being laid. The organizational changes needed to put survivable collection networks in place have already taken place.

“In a proxy competition between great powers, there is a key role for SOF to develop an intelligence capability to report on how you win such a competition,” Vickers said. “At USD(I) [Under Secretary of Defense for Intelligence], I established the Defense Clandestine Service. That’s where the fight is—it’s not just a kinetic fight, it’s an intellectual fight.

“If you look at our biggest levers—intelligence, military, diplomacy, and development—we’ve been able to see the biggest return from intelligence,” he continued. “Working with our partners and allies, training, collaborating, we’ve been able to nip a lot of things in the bud.”



No winning alone

NO PERSON OR organization exists in isolation. All are part of larger networks. The success of a car company has much to do with the success of its suppliers and vice versa.⁴ Just as a new strategy may change the roles an organization can play, it may also change how that organization relates to other organizations in its network. For special operations forces built to operate with foreign partners on foreign soil, that network is fundamentally about partners and allies. Few organizations within the military have as much direct experience working with partners and allies as SOF.

“One of the great strategic strengths of the US is our network of partners and allies,” Vickers said.

Tovo agreed: “We create genuine capabilities. I think our time in Iraq with ISOF [Iraqi Special Operations Forces], for seven or eight years, is a great example. Creating a capability, really from scratch, not only is that tactically and technically proficient but is also values-driven. And the Iraqi special operators’ conduct was different—they treated their population differently, as professionals. We lived together, ate together, 24/7 with them. They were a partner, not a tool.”

Yet there have also been limitations to the current approach to partnership.

“We’ve had lots of failures [working with partners],” Vickers said. “In Iraq, we poured in a lot of money, built an army, and we saw it collapse. Where we’ve tried to do

capacity building, we’ve seen some benefits, but we don’t see strategic benefits.”

To realize the full potential of SOF’s expertise in partnership may require understanding the network of the partner nation as well.

“Security forces are part of society,” Vickers said. “One of my complaints about SOF is that SOF would only want to partner with the commando or counter-terror [CT] units. So, they end up training one incredible CT unit, but you don’t win wars with that.

“Where we do have success is like with the Afghan Local Police,” he continued. “You take someone already invested in their community, you give them some tactical and operational training, and they’re motivated to protect their village. You’ve turned the village into a more cohesive defense unit, and we did that enough to have an effect against the Taliban. You get a better return than years of effort elsewhere. It wasn’t that the commandos weren’t perfectly trained; it was that the police were everywhere, and they were defending their own villages.”

This is exactly what Vickers sees more of in the future: “a very small but persistent, high-quality presence that can orchestrate and bring in other capabilities as needed. It’s a messy world, but if you want to have useful effects in these countries, more authorities and smaller forces give you the bigger bang for your buck.”

Institutionalizing innovation

NEW CAPABILITIES, ROLES, and relationships need support to succeed. If change is going to stick, change needs to be institutionalized into every part of an organization, from training to policies to management. For an organization such as SOF that is facing an ever-changing environment, that means retaining the very ability to adapt to change; it means institutionalizing innovation.

“For us, innovation is not just adding new technology to an old concept of employment. If all we’re doing is just adding new technologies, we’re screwing up,” Mitchell said. “Real innovation requires not just new technologies, but new organizations, new concepts of employment, new strategies.”

Success or failure of an innovation enterprise will likely depend on whether SOF can develop technologies and platforms aligned to execute a strategy.

He uses music players as an example, noting nothing “particularly special” about the first touchscreen music players, just a combination of technologies already on existing MP3 players. When companies launched online music stores, however, it upended an industry, paving the way for an integrated system of music, audiobooks, and other media.

“Now you say, I’m no longer battling the music industry—the music industry reaches customers through me. I’m the channel,” Mitchell said. “The lesson is that it can’t just be new technology—there has to be some innovation in organizational structure and employment techniques and authorities.”

But how can SOF institutionalize that degree of innovation?

“One of the most important things we can do to encourage innovation is give the Department of Defense research and development teams the confidence that if they try something in good faith, we will back them,” Langevin said. “Not everything we prototype will come to fruition, and that is a risk we will have to accept. We cannot be afraid to fail. However, when we do fail in something, we need the department to learn from the experience and be transparent with Congress.”

“In the SOF community, we’re pretty open to innovation. It’s our lifeblood,” Mitchell said. “Yet SOCOM has never had an experimental force to try out different configurations, concepts of employment. Most of our innovation took place at the tactical level, bottom-up, operator-driven.”

Creating the top-down support for innovation across an organization requires different and unfamiliar experiences and products.

Once the platform is aligned to strategy and the adversary, SOF must foster a defensewide enterprise nimble enough to develop the right technologies quickly and find the right partners.

“You need people who are really creative. You don’t want a force that’s just composed of operators,” Mitchell said. “You need some iconoclasts, some creative designers, and some people with deep knowledge of your adversary and their strategies, and a willingness to push the limits of what’s possible and go out there and employ it.”

One valuable lever is thinking about the future systematically. When Tovo ran the Army’s SOF community, his task to the G-9 [Futures Directorate] was, “Don’t hold yourself to too high a standard. You’re not going to predict the future. Nobody’s done it yet.

“Our past experiences are not sufficient to inform what we might face in the coming years,” he said. “While we can’t predict the exact path of the future, we can predict the arc of change.”

Success or failure of an innovation enterprise will likely depend on whether SOF can develop technologies and platforms aligned to execute a strategy. The engineering challenges of the new strategy must become the starting point for future innovation.

“Infiltration and tradecraft. How do I enable you to defeat sensors? Standoff attack,” Vickers

gave as an example. “A lot of these are solvable problems, we just haven’t asked. They may be hard and expensive, but they’re solvable.”

For Vickers, designing a platform is as much a question of strategy as it is achieving a feat of engineering.

“What happens now, where the service buys a platform and SOF modifies it, is not going to work,” he said. “Usually when you go wrong in building systems, it’s because you don’t understand your problem enough. Partly that’s your own strategy, and partly that’s how your adversary will respond.”

Vickers explained the importance of adversary reaction using the example of the Army’s ultimately canceled Future Combat Systems (FCS) program. FCS enhanced an area of fighting where the Army was already proficient in open battlefields. Seeing this, adversaries simply moved to the cities.

Once the platform is aligned to strategy and the adversary, SOF must foster a defensewide enterprise nimble enough to develop the right technologies quickly and find the right partners.

“The Department’s RDT&E [Research, Development, Test, and Evaluation] enterprise is complex and comprises numerous agencies, offices, labs, academic partnerships, test and evaluation entities, and partnerships with the private sector, including small businesses,” Langevin said. “While the system is charged with delivering the best capabilities to the warfighter, cumbersome regulation and uncertainty in recent budget cycles often makes it difficult for the department to attract and engage with small- and medium-sized businesses and harness their talents. Success lies in harnessing the full weight of American innovation for our warfighters.”

Success in the future

AS THE THREAT landscape changes and great powers collide, success will likely be defined by those who are able to understand that change and craft new strategies to suit it. Changing the course of a 70,000-person organization at the top of its game is not easy. For SOF, there is the lesson that even the largest changes start small with strategic vision, capabilities to match it, and people to champion it.

1. Take a structured approach to strategy.

“It’s about making tactical choices that build up to strategic effect,” Vickers said. “It’s got to start with a good diagnosis of the world. What do you want me to do? What do I have to do? What capabilities do I need to do it? Go through that exercise of understanding the military’s broader role, then the SOF role, and then the acute problems to solve for.”

2. Align capabilities and tools to that strategy. Technology is a driver of change for every organization that cannot be overlooked. “The

worst thing is losing the technology race,” Vickers said. “I’d sacrifice some current capabilities, so I don’t fall behind in AI and autonomy.” Technology, however, should be rooted in the organization’s strategy and core values, and not be just for technology’s sake.

3. Develop and empower people. People, Tovo asserted, will always remain the core: “People will still matter in the future, and we are the force that is able to work with an indigenous partner to achieve an aim. [W]hat we senior leaders really want to know is: what are [our partners’] motivations? What are their intentions? What are they really trying to accomplish? And what’s their capability? And that can really only be understood through human interactions.

“In the end, all conflict is about people,” he said. “I don’t think we’re ever going to get to a place where war is divorced from people and societies.”



Endnotes

1. For more on this concept, see Thurston's hypothesis on why large incumbents typically fail at disruptive innovations that shift the basis for competition. An excellent description can be found in Michael Raynor, *The Innovator's Manifesto* (New York: Random House, 2011).
2. A. G. Lafley and Roger Martin, *Playing to Win: How Strategy Really Works* (Boston: Harvard Business Review Press, 2013).
3. For more on the link between personality traits and job performance, see Carol Dweck, *Mindset: The New Psychology of Success* (New York: Ballantine Books, 2016).
4. Mike Armstrong, Will Engelbrecht, and Eamonn Kelly, *Business ecosystems come of age*, Deloitte University Press, 2015.

Acknowledgments

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Industry leadership

Dennis Schultz

Enterprise operations principal | Deloitte Services LP
+1 703 519 2434 | lmcguire@deloitte.com

Gordon Hannah

Principal | Deloitte & Touche LLP
+1 703 597 9278 | ghannah@deloitte.com

Patrick O'Brien

Managing director | Deloitte & Touche LLP
+1 571 882 6541 | patobrien@deloitte.com

Frank Strickland

Managing director | Deloitte Consulting LLP
+703 408 6592 | fstrickland@deloitte.com

Kwasi Mitchell


Principal | Deloitte Consulting LLP
+1 703 945 7951 | kwmitchell@deloitte.com

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Editorial: Aditi Rao, Blythe Hurley, Abrar Khan, and Rupesh Bhat

Creative: Sonya Vasilieff

Promotion: Alexandra Kawecki

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