Special Operations Forces in Unlit Spaces: Understanding the World’s Dark Spots in the Context of SOF Operational Planning

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Foreword

Relatively little literature exists discussing unlit spaces. This paper attempts to clarify the concept of unlit spaces as an umbrella term for a multitude of potential political areas of interest using the context of categories of unlit spaces. The question of an unlit space is a question of what characteristics make a space fall under this categorization. Factors highlighting the governing structure in relation to the darkness of an area are particularly important for SOF operational planning because the sensitivity of SOF operations is proportional to the extent with which the United States decides to take intrusive actions into a region. This is especially true with regard to SOF missions that take place within the human domain. It is the human domain that makes an unlit space unique and distinct, and it is the human domain that creates accessibility risks to SOF. The author looks at case examples of Afghanistan and Somalia and how their unique settings during different time periods factor into planning considerations for conducting unconventional warfare in such unlit spaces.

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20 June 2014
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Introduction

In 2011, Admiral Eric T. Olson, then commander of U.S. Special Operations Command (USSOCOM), highlighted a strategic focus for Special Operations Forces (SOF). He discussed placing greater emphasis on the “unlit spaces” around the globe to “deal with the emerging threats from the places where the lights aren’t.” Admiral Olson was referring to an illuminated image of Earth viewed from space at night which depicts concentrations of city lights and zones of darkness. While this is a partially useful description of potential problem areas, it lacks comprehensiveness and overgeneralizes strategic shaping of SOF potential. USSOCOM should further define what comprises those “unlit spaces” before committing resources to them. This monograph attempts to define more clearly what the unlit spaces are and what their implication are for the use of SOF. It will also offer a more comprehensive framework with which to analyze SOF options.

When looking at unlit space, the central thesis to consider is that the ability of SOF to operate in unlit spaces varies based on the unique characteristics affecting accessibility of those areas. The typology of unlit spaces means many things. It entails various characteristics causing an area to appear dark. Those characteristics demand distinct accessibility considerations that affect the feasibility of SOF missions in those unlit spaces. SOF missions conducted in the human domain, such as unconventional warfare (UW), incur unique risks associated with the nature of the human environment. Since the nature of the human domain can vary widely even within an unlit space, SOF planners must fully understand the physical and cultural nuances of the operational environment.

Methodology

First, this monograph will examine how certain characteristics of unlit spaces impact SOF operational planning. This research is relevant for SOF operational planners for two reasons:

- Discussions in academia and government affecting policy decisions and the use of SOF often point to the typologies outlined in the Framework for Unlit Spaces (table 1, pages 14–15) as potential security concerns. Those security concerns drive operational planning toward the use of SOF to address whichever factors relate to national security in those typecast areas. When Admiral Olson discussed unlit spaces as an area for future SOF operations, he described a common association of seemingly troubled areas that might affect national security.
• Since there is a tendency to associate broad geopolitical characteristics with potential trouble, there should be some clarification regarding what specific characteristics may or may not affect SOF operational planning. The Framework for Unlit Spaces narrows an overarching category into more manageable characteristics related to the context in which SOF teams might actually operate.

This monograph adjusts current typologies to redefine them in more operational terms. Although scholars and military practitioners describe various unlit spaces in numerous terms, the Framework for Unlit Spaces captures only five dominant characterizations. This is done to preserve broad generalizations of those areas that are repeatable throughout most global environments. It is also done to identify the majority of today’s ecopolitical environments in which SOF might operate. For instance, the virtual Internet domain falls into a category of unlit space, but that category is not particularly useful for the scope of this monograph since planning considerations accounted for here comprise physical interactions of SOF teams and people.

Second, a connection will be made between those typologies and certain SOF capabilities impacted by unlit spaces. USSOCOM employs a wide range of SOF specialties with varying mission-specific tasks. The Framework for Unlit Spaces accounts for most operational environments in which joint SOF may operate. Barring legal restrictions and political will, the United States has the capability of projecting SOF into virtually any environment, lit or unlit. Therefore, this monograph deliberately narrows its focus to U.S. Army SOF conducting unconventional warfare because UW operations deal specifically with personal engagements to affect political outcomes. This monograph draws heavily on the body of scholarly work that relates political structures to state conditions. The classic example of this is seen in space imagery of the Korean peninsula in which a distinct line between North and South Korea visibly demonstrates development in South Korea and the lack of development in North Korea.

Finally, two case examples—Afghanistan and Somalia—will demonstrate how the political environments in conjunction with the physical environments during two different time periods present altogether different UW planning considerations. Both Afghanistan and Somalia fit into categories of unlit spaces detailed in the Framework for Unlit Spaces. These two case examples will demonstrate that categorizations such as failed and failing states do not sufficiently portray the kind of environment SOF operators may contend with when conducting special operations within them. They will also demonstrate that in spite of an overarching categorization, an area may actually simultaneously fall, at least partially, under several categorizations of unlit spaces, further complicating SOF operational art.

Literature Review

Generally, there are two camps that attempt to identify causality associated with states’ conditions. One camp suggests that a state’s progress is related to economic policies. Paul Collier and Daren Acemoglu are two examples of prominent economists perpetuating economic factors. The other camp suggests the form of governance affects the progress potential of a state. The Polity 4 Project, a program of the Center for Systemic Peace, is an example of an index emphasizing the system of governance as a critical determining factor for future conflict. This monograph will explore factors related to the governance debate. Factors highlighting the governing structure in relation to the unlitness of an area are particularly important for SOF planning because the sensitivity of SOF operations is proportional to the extent to which the United States decides to take intrusive actions into a region. Moreover, governance
is an entirely human interaction and, as will be seen, the human domain is a critical planning component of SOF missions. Furthermore, as this monograph will detail, one of the purposes of SOF is to influence the system of governance in an area.

Other methods of measuring states and areas entail much greater details and information regarding available resources, social trends, neighboring states and cultural norms. These factors are useful for gaining a greater understanding of the operational environment, but they are not as much a determinant to conduct SOF operations as they are a determinant of how to conduct operations. The effect of governance in unlit spaces matters because the characteristics of those spaces present various risks to both the SOF operator and operational end states. When Army Special Forces conduct unconventional warfare, for example, the initial-entry phases are often considered the most vulnerable because they pose the greatest risk to forces and to mission (figure 1).

An abundant amount of material is available defining special operations. For instance, the current USSOCOM commander, Admiral William H. McRaven, wrote a study of various SOF missions conducted since 1940. In it, he measures a vulnerable period of “relative superiority” after which SOF operations stand the greatest chance of success. He defines this vulnerable period as “a condition that exists when an attacking force, generally smaller, gains a decisive advantage over a larger or well-defended enemy.” In current U.S. Army doctrine, the idea of relative superiority relates to actions that “seize, retain and exploit the initiative to gain and maintain a position of relative advantage.” One argument proposed here is that when SOF conduct UW in unlit spaces they seize the initiative during two critical periods. The first is upon initial entry and contact with resistance elements. The second is after early confidence-building operations begin to have intended effects against a designated antagonist. Understanding the period of critical vulnerability is linked to understanding the nature of the unlit space because an unlit space is by definition dangerously void of hospitable alternatives.

Since certain SOF operations, like UW, involve the human domain, the cultural context of an area factors into operational planning after a SOF operation is underway when that period of relative advantage is gained. Prior to that, political elements weigh heavily on whether to conduct an operation and in which form of covert and clandestine manner it is conducted.
Therefore, unlit spaces, while necessarily complex in their cultural and geographical contexts, are better analytically considered with factors that make them fall under the “unlit” categorization, which in areas with people tend to lean toward the political, i.e., governing determinants.

Accessibility is an important element of any geopolitical space. Accessibility relates to the ease, method and ramifications of breaching another party’s (nation, territory, zone, scope of business, etc.) claim to control. Operationally it entails activities to encroach upon sovereignty as well as security measures to counter similar encroachments. Furthermore, the nuances of access extend into intangible domains such as cyber and various layers of space. International laws and prevailing *jus cogens* international relations influence the extent to which governments, businesses and private ventures seek to gain access and counter access within accepted and legitimate norms. The Joint Operational Access Concept (JOAC) 2012 is one attempt to grasp the complexity of such nuanced and vital accessibility concerns.\(^\text{10}\)

While there is a wide body of research discussing failed states and ungoverned spaces, an emerging area of research discusses the potentiality of security threats from highly governed areas. Those are the megacities, the extremely well lit spaces. This monograph will not attempt to analyze SOF operational planning in those spaces. Instead, this monograph suggests that not all threats emerge from areas void of governance and development. For example, one body of research demonstrates that the United States has been more vulnerable to threats emerging within the nation than to those from outside.\(^\text{11}\)

Recent strategy and policy documents, such as the National Security Strategy, the National Military Strategy and the Quadrennial Defense Review, indicate a growing need for specialized forces to deal with emerging uncertainties.\(^\text{12}\) Specifically, SOF are identified as the unit of choice for providing sustained, scalable and cost-effective means to engage with unstable or undergoverned areas.\(^\text{13}\) Moreover, given that these documents note the prevalence of an uncertain future, they further indicate the need to increase the use of SOF as a responsive and flexible operational link to global strategic aims. For instance, USSOCOM is the proponent for global missions such as counterterrorism and Security Force Assistance (SFA).\(^\text{14}\) Admiral Olson discusses the practical application of tactically employing SOF to fulfill strategic aims through the longstanding leadership of SOF in Combined Joint Special Operations Task Force–Philippines (CJSOTF-P).\(^\text{15}\) Specifically he addresses SOF leadership of CJSOTF-P where general-purpose forces provide direct support to SOF for activities deemed Irregular Warfare (IW).\(^\text{16}\)

One of the more compelling reasons for an emphasis on SOF to focus on aspects of IW comes from Department of Defense Directive (DoDD) 3000.07, which details efforts and responsibilities for IW. USSOCOM is chartered with developing “SOF capabilities for extending U.S. reach into denied areas and uncertain environments by operating with and through indigenous foreign forces or by conducting low visibility operations.”\(^\text{17}\) Therefore, the role of SOF in unlit spaces is worth further exploration because the idea that SOF operators need to go into those spaces seems plausible on the surface but in practice is nuanced by the particularities of a given point in space at a given point in time.

**Unlit Space Typologies**

What are the unlit spaces? From a merely technical perspective, they encompass the broad swath of terrestrial space on the globe that literally has little to no light when viewed from space at night. The NASA Visible Lights image shows the Earth’s areas of light and dark (figure 2).\(^\text{18}\)
At first glance, the implication of Admiral Olson’s intention seems obvious: to bring light to the darkened spaces. However, some of those spaces will remain void of light for the foreseeable future. Some of those spaces are darkened for ecological reasons. Some are void of light for ecopolitical reasons. Some are void for reasons related to failed systems of self-determination and development. Since the end of the Cold War, the international community has placed greater attention on less developed nations. Various terms used to describe areas of concern include failed states, failing states, fragile states, ungoverned spaces, undergoverned spaces and now unlit spaces. Each connotes a unique set of conditions; therefore, each implies potentially unique sets of criteria for SOF consideration. If USSOCOM intends to seek out those unlit spaces, defining what they are may help determine SOF solutions to either gain access or engage with these areas and the people who inhabit them on a persistent basis.

Unlit spaces

Unlit spaces describe geographic regions characterized by their ecology and their condition of habitability. Geographic regions include water, arid and desert zones, dense forested and tropical jungle regions, and freezing and frozen lands. In terms of actual terrestrial space, naturally occurring dark areas make up most of Earth. Consequently, little to no human activity appears to be going on. However, those areas should not be discounted altogether. In fact, much human activity does occur in those areas. For instance, the world’s oceans contain the majority of trafficable lanes of commerce through which the majority of the world’s consumable goods travel. Protecting free access to shipping lanes is a major security priority not only for the United States but for many countries engaged in international trade. Recently the Department of Defense issued new guidance redirecting the efforts of the Department of Defense (DoD) to the Western Pacific and East Asian regions. Therefore the question USSOCOM must answer is to what extent can it cover areas such as the world’s waterways, and with what resources?

Unlit spaces also characterize the habitability of a place. Uninhabitable areas consist of regions such as the arctic poles, severely arid lands and numerous deserted islands. Islands in particular represent a vast unlit range because they extend throughout the major oceans and
seas. Their implication to USSOCOM is arguably minimal yet not insignificant. For instance, targeted SOF efforts by various SOF specialties may be used to curtail terrorist transit havens through island networks in the Philippines. What is important to understand with regard to the uninhabitable areas is that their implication for SOF application may require more targeted and coordinated approaches for very specific purposes.

The habitable areas, however, comprise a different set of characteristics requiring much broader ranges of SOF and whole-of-government interorganizational cooperation. Habitable areas fall into various categories as discussed below. They are generally areas where people live and may be governed by some form of either state or local governing apparatus. Since there are similarities among the types of unlit spaces, one will find overlaps in terms of either specific examples or general characteristics. For example, North Korea is a habitable yet unlit space. Depending on how one empirically measures data, North Korea may either be considered a fragile state or a failing state. As USSOCOM attempts to address unlit spaces, they must consider what characterizes the area and to what extent the area is accessible to determine which resource best suits a particular unlit space. To help understand potential SOF implications, the following Framework for Unlit Spaces analysis provides an analytic tool with which to gauge a best approach.21

Fragile states

Fragile states are those that face difficulties providing public goods.22 Public goods are common to all population groups making up a society and generally cannot be provided for any length of time by private businesses. Paul Collier suggests the two primary public goods are accountability and security.23 For practical reasons societies coalesce around an apparatus—the state or governance apparatus—to collectively provide security to the masses to fulfill a way of life and institute accountability to preserve the rule and order of that way of life. States that have trouble doing those two things have trouble promoting prosperity within their borders and with other international interests. Consequently, fragile states may begin to appear attractive to groups seeking to take advantage of the government’s limited control. Egypt and Pakistan are two examples. Neither is necessarily nonfunctioning in terms of state governance. Both maintain valid interests in the international community. Both face mounting troubles providing public goods for security, economic or governance reasons. Yet both are arguably on the verge of slipping into an irrecoverable domestic mess that will require international intervention to reverse.

Approaching these states from a USSOCOM perspective requires close cooperation with other government agencies, namely the Department of State. Since fragile states enjoy a relative measure of sovereign freedom, overt intervention measures risk devaluing the credibility of established relationships. Whole-of-government strategies necessitate cooperative partnerships for military-to-military exchanges and training. And, given that the states enjoy a relative measure of sovereignty, imposed intervention is a highly unlikely and more probably problematic approach. Therefore, USSOCOM might seek invitation to these states for such events as training exchanges or aid opportunities.

Failing states

Failing states are similar to fragile ones except that they have succumbed to domestic and/or international pressures. In failing states the state apparatus reaches a tipping point in which it can no longer provide some public goods. Additionally, they demonstrate no immediate signs of recovery. Unless something dramatic happens, such as a sudden altruistic regime change or a massive international intervention, the state governments will most likely crumble. Syria is
a good example today of a failing state. One might also consider Afghanistan and Nigeria to be failing states because neither demonstrates progressive growth potential without significant international support. Furthermore, their security situation has deteriorated to the extent that it strangles the potential for peace and growth. Significant deterioration is operationally problematic for combatant commands and others like USSOCOM because intelligence operations, specifically human intelligence (HUMINT)-type operations, may present particularly problematic solutions.25 Again, without significant international support, these states would surely fail.

Accessibility to failing states depends on three factors: the extent to which the state is out of control, the international restrictions limiting interventions and sovereign restrictions limiting intervention. Afghanistan is currently not as limited because much of the territory remains under international control. Therefore gaining access is arguably easier through existing international aid, security and development architectures. Syria, however, poses a greater accessibility problem because the state’s sovereign restrictions severely limit external intervention. International restrictions, particularly by countries with unique interests such as China and Russia, place significant international pressure on overt and covert interventions. It can be especially tricky to do anything in these states because of the unstable nature of domestic and international security and politics.

Failed states

Failed states are those that have ceased to function. They lack the capacity and domestic capability of governing and of providing public goods. Somalia is the classic example of a contemporary failed state. For several years Somalia has topped indices of failed states. For over 20 years, Somalia has not had a functioning government. It has been ruled by anarchy and more recently by terrorist groups such as al Shabaab. Like failing states, the failed states are unstable. However, their accessibility may be more opportune depending on the kind of threat one is willing to endure relevant to the scope of strategic interest. Arguably, interventions in these states pose fewer international political problems because there is little the international community can do to block intervention. Moreover, strategic interests in places such as Somalia do not challenge the international community in toto; interests tend to be regional or, in most cases, highly localized.

Operational planners should not presume that a lack of vital national interests correlates to a calculated lack of security interest. The United States learned this harsh lesson on 11 September 2001 after the United States and others largely ignored Afghanistan through the 1990s. Afghanistan’s failed condition led to the emergence of Taliban governance, which hosted al Qaeda’s operations. Although recent experiences fighting terrorist networks encourage greater attention to failed states, and conveniently failed state indices make for attractive discussion think pieces, there is ample evidence of threats originating in very successful states. The United States, for instance, hosts a growing threat of Somali al Shabaab terrorists. This presents a significant legal challenge for both operational and strategic intelligence planners; they must link failed states with their diaspora hosts to observe signals intelligence (SIGINT) and HUMINT trends. Therefore, the challenge for operational planners will be to balance the potential of a threat with national and international interests.

Ungoverned spaces

Ungoverned spaces are generally characterized by either disputed territories or failed states. The overlap between ungoverned spaces and failed states is intentional because a complete
lack of a governing system is characteristic of ungoverned spaces. Again, Somalia fits this description. So too did Iraq and Afghanistan before instating a form of governance. It is important to distinguish between failed and ungoverned because the duration of ungovernance may be temporary, as it is with an international intervention (e.g., Iraq and Afghanistan).

The potential duration of ungovernance in failed states factors into accessibility. When the state of ungovernance is limited and under external international control, access falls largely on the international apparatus upholding state control. Long-standing failed states such as Somalia present a different set of circumstances. The matter of accessibility is altogether different, however, in disputed territories because domestic sovereignty and international control can clash, as is the case with the border region of Afghanistan and Pakistan.

These areas might seem necessarily ripe for SOF intervention because strategic U.S. policies reinforce the singular military capability of force projection principally with respect to defeating terrorist networks. This interesting license to interdict terrorist networks outweighs cooperative international reliance and to date has been largely unopposed. SOF, therefore, enjoy a certain measure of freedom of access for the time being. One should expect that freedom of access to diminish as international attention turns away from concentrated efforts toward other international or domestic matters.

**Undergoverned spaces**

Undergoverned spaces are one of the more unique areas that are “unlit.” In undergoverned spaces, host states either cannot provide public goods or have little to no interest in providing public goods to a region within their sovereign borders. One of the problems with gaining access to undergoverned spaces is that they are often located within a state’s borders. The Federally Administered Tribal Area (FATA) region of northwest Pakistan is one of the more illustrative examples of an undergoverned space. The Pakistan government has little to no control over the fragmented populations and infrastructure throughout the FATA. Consequently a vacuum of public governance power exists. This poses two problems. First, access to these areas is problematic because the hostile and often lawless environments prevent legitimate overt access and significantly challenge covert access. Second, despite significant militant control, these regions remain within sovereign borders and states prefer authorized cooperation when external bodies conduct operations, particularly military operations, within their sovereign borders. Intervening either covertly or through clandestine operations may threaten insecurity between partnered nations.

When states conduct unilateral military operations into sovereign territory, they place excess strain on diplomatic relations and may even risk ruining relations. Therefore, the use of SOF should be extremely judicious, with careful consideration of political and international backlash. The consequences should be balanced against the overall importance of strategic and international interests. Arguably these areas are accessible, especially by SOF, but only at a potential cost to state relations.

**Other spaces**

The moniker “unlit spaces” is an overgeneralization that provides a convenient illustration of potential problem areas. USSOCOM should be careful not to overgeneralize a characterization of areas of concern because they may become too easily fixated on an appealing problem set. The proposed attention to “unlit spaces,” while seemingly necessary, may overlook an emerging area that does not fall within the scope of the aforementioned trouble zones.
These areas are not “unlit.” Rather, they are extremely well lit. These are the megacities such as Mexico City, Cairo and Jakarta.40 A number of potential problems arise from these massive urban centers including significant resource demands, crime, youth explosions and unemployment.41

USSOCOM should consider whether cyber and space represent unlit spaces, too, and if they have implications for SOF. The cyber realm is certainly something SOF should consider as national policies place greater emphasis on either protecting or combating cyber threats. The JOAC identifies space and cyberspace as two emerging areas relevant to strategic security.42 Of interest to USSOCOM is the JOAC’s assessment of SOF’s role in addressing strategic access areas. The JOAC contends that:

special operations forces are valuable for locating, targeting and destroying key enemy capabilities, as well as for cultivating indigenous resistance elements that can help disrupt the anti-access/area-denial strategy. Like space and cyberspace forces, special operations forces likely will be in position, often operating in denied territory, in advance of the commitment of major forces to set the conditions for the employment of those forces.43

Finally, virtual social spaces may comprise an additional space that is theoretically unlit. This realm may exist within the cyber domain; however, further research should clarify the meaning of and implication of virtual gathering places such as social media, blogs, Internet sharing services, etc. For operational planners and for the purpose of USSOCOM, virtual social spaces consist of actual (virtual) locations where people gather. These locations are real because individuals participate in the social behavior of human interaction. They are virtual because those human interactions take place in a domain in which direct contact between individuals is not a prerequisite.44 Virtual spaces may ultimately become a much greater component of future SOF planning because, as the two case studies will demonstrate, societies that disseminate information through social connectedness may use alternative technological mediums to extend their social reach instantaneously.

SOF Capabilities and Limitations

Generally, USSOCOM employs SOF along two lines of effort. One is a direct line that entails direct action, strike-type missions. The other is indirect and entails partnered actions including unconventional warfare and civil affairs.45 Army doctrine delineates the two lines of effort more specifically as “surgical strike” and “special warfare” (table 2).46

“SOF are inherently joint.”47 This monograph, however, deals primarily with Army SOF given that Army SOF comprises a large portion of the USSOCOM architecture. U.S. Army Special Operations Command (USASOC) designates specific units to perform designated special warfare and surgical strike tasks (figure 3). Special operations core activities include the following:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Special Operations Core Activities</th>
<th>Direct/Surgical Strike</th>
<th>Indirect/Special Warfare</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Direct action</td>
<td>Unconventional warfare (UW)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Special reconnaissance</td>
<td>Foreign internal defense</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Counterproliferation of weapons of mass destruction</td>
<td>Security force assistance</td>
<td></td>
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<td>Counterterrorism</td>
<td>Counterinsurgency</td>
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<tr>
<td>Military information support operations (MISO)</td>
<td>Information operations</td>
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<tr>
<td>Military information support operations (MISO)</td>
<td>Civil affairs operations</td>
<td></td>
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</tbody>
</table>

Table 2 – Special Operations Activities Comparison
SOF direct-strike capacities exist under a cloak of secret and ultra-secret operational units and missions. Those mission sets certainly are concerned with the nature of unlit spaces insofar as discrete targets might persist in them. However, technology, unique training and the element of surprise enable those kinds of SOF missions to take place in spite of the area. Recent examples include the raid to capture (and ultimately kill) Osama bin Laden in Abbottabad, Pakistan; kinetic targeting in Yemen and Somalia; and the killing of Somali pirates in 2009. Each of these SOF operations was conducted in unlit spaces, but their surgical nature was irrespective of geopolitical location.

SOF operations that take an indirect approach, such as UW, require a more comprehensive understanding of the operational environment because forces will operate in a human domain attempting to disappear into the population. That disappearing act is why the UW planner must take a closer look at the unlit space to see why it is unlit and how the nature of the area’s darkness affords the SOF element physical and virtual maneuver space. The relative advantage in UW comes from the interplay of two forces.

The process of entering an unlit space is as much a tactical feat as it is a strategic challenge because of issues related to accessibility. Entering Somalia under the guise of humanitarian assistance in the early 1990s was an altogether different environmental dynamic from entering Somalia after the famed “Black Hawk Down” incident in 1993. Moreover, entering Somali in 2011 at the height of the al Shabaab movement—and even today after the al Shabaab movement has been reduced significantly—presents tactical challenges as well as international legal hindrances. Once SOF breach the accessibility challenges, their physical decisive advantage is buttressed with the cognitive obstacle of gaining and maintaining momentum with a resistance force. The notorious instigator of community uprisings, Saul Alinsky, warns, “A tactic
that drags on too long becomes a drag. Man can sustain militant interest in any issue for only a limited time, after which it becomes a ritualistic commitment. SOF planners, therefore, must understand why a space is unlit when conducting indirect SOF operations more so than when conducting direct or surgical strike operations.

Since the nature of UW operations is, by definition, politically sensitive, an array of domestic and international legalities restricts the extent to which U.S. forces interfere with a state’s governance. When SOF engage in UW, they assume a high degree of risk in terms of the legality of the operations and with respect to individual legal protections as either combatants or noncombatants. When employing SOF to achieve strategic aims, the joint force commander and USSOCOM consider certain criteria. When zooming into the characteristics of unlit spaces, SOF planners must examine two in particular: operational feasibility and justification of the risk.

Joint elements of operational design, especially the end state, objectives and effects, shape the way a UW plan will coerce, disrupt or overthrow belligerent governance. Before gaining access to a denied area the SOF UW planner examines the operational environment for factors related to current governing conditions within a territorial space. Those current conditions determine the feasibility of inserting a team or teams to interact with selected resistance elements. Operationally, an unlit space should provide a feasible realm in which SOF may operate. For instance, a huge portion of the Earth is covered by oceans and seas, but those areas (naturally unlit) are limiting both in scale and in scope, making them practically infeasible to many kinds of SOF operations.

Commanders, to include theater commanders, assume a high level of risk when they employ SOF. However, indirect operations are especially dangerous because they occur secretly between the political tensions of opposing actors. Hence operational UW planners should heed the classic warning by Colonel C. E. Callwell:

The commander who takes the field against guerrillas or savages or hill-men must make up his mind to strike hard, to move rapidly in spite of the impediments which encumber him, to pursue relentlessly after a victory has been won and to seize the first possible moment for a counterstroke should he meet with reverse.

This monograph looks at the case examples of Afghanistan and Somalia and how their unique settings during different time periods factor into planning considerations for conducting unconventional warfare in particular. Unconventional warfare planning provides a useful lens to view the characteristics of unlit spaces. When SOF planners consider UW options, they apply a large proportion of their planning efforts to understanding the operational environment. The Army manual for the conduct of unconventional warfare highlights understanding the operational environment as the “most important” consideration. That is why identifying unlit spaces on an image of the Earth only begins to orient an operational planner to a geographic location. Within that darkened geographic location exists a wide variety of characteristics, physically and socially, that shape the ability to conduct SOF operations.

Access

Feasibility becomes, first and foremost, the determining factor in whether unconventional warfare even makes sense as a strategy. The extent to which the U.S. government can access an area is entailed in a feasibility assessment. Questions such as how hostile is the prevailing power and how active is a black market inform not only commanders but policymakers if SOF
can feasibly penetrate and shape an environment. Furthermore, international and domestic U.S. laws weigh heavily into decisions and into the execution of such sensitive accessibility operations as unconventional warfare. Some of those unique authorities are derived from Title 10 and Title 50 authorizations. However, U.S. policies that grant special permissions, such as the wearing of certain uniforms and clothing articles, may protect SOF domestically but not internationally. Therefore, the legal ramifications of accessing unlit spaces must be carefully considered.

Richard Kugler, in a recent study for the Institute for National Strategic Studies, makes the following observation with regard to the future of accessibility:

Gaining access to contested zones, it [QDR 2010] claims, is critical to the U.S. strategy of forward defense and power projection in multiple regions, including the Middle East and Asia. In the past, it argues, this capacity could often be taken for granted, but in tomorrow’s world, this no longer will be the case because potential adversaries are striving to acquire military capabilities that, unless countered, could deny access to U.S. forces, thereby permitting uncontested aggression by them.

When discussing accessibility one must distinguish between two definitions of accessibility. First, accessibility in geopolitical and strategic terms refers primarily to technological and homeland defense measures taken by a state to protect itself from sophisticated military encroachment. Countermeasures to such attacks are called anti-access measures and deal largely with preventing technological intrusion. Naval offensive and defensive deterrents such as submarines comprise a class of anti-access technologies. Land- and sea-based surface-to-air and surface-to-surface missiles make up another line of anti-access defense. More recently, anti-access to network infrastructures comprises yet another technological layer of defense in which states prevent other states from accessing information. That is why Cortez Cooper discusses China’s broad “system-of-systems” approach to denying access. His testimony implies that anti-access is in large part a defensive technology of technological systems. Conversely, one could interpret that access or accessibility comprises those technological activities one does to intrude into another state’s space.

A second definition of access is the physical breaching of an area. Countermeasures to this definition include area-denial strategies that inhibit the maneuver of external forces within an area. The projection of SOF power to gain an information advantage requires physically operating within a denied area. The JOAC addresses both technological access and power projection access as an “ability to project military force into an operational area with sufficient freedom of action to accomplish the mission.” The questions facing a SOF UW planner include: Can we get into an unlit space? If so, how? Those questions, seemingly simple, actually entail a deeper understanding of why an unlit space is dark. While geography is an obvious factor, social and political factors pose more nuanced risks that must be mitigated at both the tactical and operational levels to promote conditions of relative advantage. SOF poses technical expertise, equipment and training to overcome the physical environmental factors. Operational planning mitigates the risks associated with the nuanced, political and social factors.

The ability to enter an area and conduct SOF operations is a function of the physical environment, the characteristics of governance and social norms that either restrict, limit or allow entry into the area of interest. Although social norms constitute one function of access, they may not be as prohibitive to SOF as governance and the physical environment. This is in part because certain SOF missions, such as UW, rely on some form of an established link to elements of the social network before those operations are considered. Establishing those initial
contact links occurs through covert and other clandestine measures. Ultimately SOF cooperates with agencies establishing those links and in some circumstances may even cooperate with agencies such as the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) to conduct covert actions. Generally, however, the broader SOF roles for indirect operations remain more clandestine than covert.

Moreover, SOF operations such as UW include politically sensitive activities within an international legal gray context. By definition UW involves the overthrow of a presiding governing power. The governing situation relates to the way rules and laws are enforced, which correlates to the type and degree of risk associated with a clandestine SOF mission. The association does not state that the greater the lawlessness the greater the risk to forces and vice versa. Rather, the uniqueness of the enforcement mechanisms within an area affect both the extent to which SOF maintain the cover of their activities and the extent to which the U.S. strategic ends and operational means allow for political risks.

Finally, the physical environment—the literal unlit condition—matters in the early phases of a UW campaign because a period of critical vulnerability occurs during the infiltration and link-up stages (figure 1). SOF training and organizational equipment and technologies make the practical aspect of entering unlit spaces fungible. Theoretically SOF can go anywhere. Yaneer Bar-Yam points out that Special Forces’ “effectiveness in the recent war in Afghanistan demonstrated how the climate difference between the jungles of Vietnam and the mountains of Afghanistan was not as important as the similarity in the need for small independent teams and highly individualized training.” That is one reason why UW doctrine prioritizes the geography and political characteristics ahead of economic, social and other characteristics when formulating an area study. Thus, when SOF planners need to consider entering an unlit space, the factors of governance and the physical environment outweigh the social factors insofar as access is concerned.

Case Studies

Afghanistan and Somalia, both in the early 1990s and today, illustrate how different so-called unlit spaces have distinctly unique characteristics that affect the application and efficacy of utilizing SOF. In the early 1990s, Afghanistan was a failed state. The rise of the Taliban led to a form of governance, but that form of governance was not recognized by most of the international community. Consequently, Afghanistan remained somewhere in the range of a failing and failed state. The SOF approach to accessing Afghanistan in late 2001 accounted for the difficulty of entering loosely sovereign borders and raising an “insurgent” alliance to overthrow the Taliban. Today, Afghanistan could be categorized as trending toward a more stable fragile state with one exception. There remains heavy external control by the United States and International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) partners to transition to legitimacy in terms of governance and security. Furthermore, even as a fragile state on the road to recovery, there remain other forms of unlit sub-state space internally, such as the ungoverned Shahiddi Hassas district of Uruzgan province. It is the mismatch of these different areas that is important to understand because each requires a different approach to engagement. (See figure 4, page 16, for Somalia and Afghanistan as unlit spaces.)

Similarly, Somalia has travelled through a range of unlit-space categories. When the Muhammad Siad Barre regime collapsed in 1991, Somalia quickly fell from a very fragile state to dominate the definition of a failed state. Somalia remained failed for almost two decades, but while the country as a whole was failed, areas of Somalia were not. In fact, those areas, such
as Somaliland and Puntland specifically, developed their own forms of governance in reaction to the complete lack of centralized governmental control. However, in places like Puntland, which developed its own independent government, that informal, undergoverned phenomenon devolved from a semi-legitimate polity to shadow governance controlled by pirates and the economy of piracy. Today, Somalia is taking real steps toward legitimizing a central government complete with a new constitution and a domestic economy staged to propel the country toward some sort of legitimate independence from outside intervention. What these two case studies will show is that unlit spaces comprise greater complexities than merely a geographic location without light. They entail nuances of governance that affect the feasibility of access by SOF to employ U.S. national strategic interest generally and USSOCOM missions specifically.

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Location</th>
<th>Characteristic</th>
<th>Categories</th>
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<tr>
<td>Unlit Spaces</td>
<td>Dark areas on Earth as seen from space. Reference NASA Earthlights Project.</td>
<td>Water</td>
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<td>Arid desert zones</td>
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<td>Jungle/heavy forest</td>
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<td>Freezing/frozen lands</td>
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<td>Uninhabited</td>
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<td>Inhabited</td>
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<tr>
<td>Ungoverned Spaces</td>
<td>Virtually no state apparatus to reach population groups and provide public goods.</td>
<td>Disputed territories</td>
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<td>Failed states</td>
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<tr>
<td>Undergoverned Spaces</td>
<td>State unable to provide public goods because of an inability to gain access to the public or incapable of providing public goods.</td>
<td>States</td>
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<td>Intra-state regions</td>
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<td>Fragile States</td>
<td>States facing difficulties providing public goods.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Failing States</td>
<td>States on the verge of governing collapse either from conflict or economic instability.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Failed States</td>
<td>Nonfunctioning state apparatus to provide public goods to citizens within the state.</td>
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Table 1 – Framework for Unlit Spaces
Using current doctrinal manuals for unconventional warfare, the following case studies attempt to demonstrate some characteristics of unlit spaces as they relate to UW planning considerations. The following questions will guide analysis of these cases: Why is the country/area unlit? What governing characteristics contribute to the area being unlit and what physical characteristics factor into a lack of light? What do those considerations mean for employing SOF in an unconventional role? While there are myriad factors to consider when analyzing a country or area, those that fall within the purview of governance and geography are the most significant to overcome when performing UW because they determine the relative advantage a SOF team might gain when accessing an unlit space. After all, “UW has a political end state.”
Afghanistan

Background

A space image of Afghanistan at night reveals how unlit the country is. Only Kabul and Kandahar, the two dominant cities in the northern and southern regions, respectively, appear as minimal clusters of modern civilization. The image alone does not explain why Afghanistan lacks light; it reveals only that the country is mostly dark.

Afghanistan is a landlocked, South Asian country surrounded by Iran, Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, Pakistan and China. Very few paved roads exist. Only one major paved highway connects the northern part of the country with the southern part. A second highway extends from Kabul east through Peshawar, Pakistan, headed toward India. Most of the remaining desert and mountainous country is accessible only by dirt roads or footpaths. With virtually no modernized transportation system, exporting to neighboring countries is extremely difficult. In the Nangarhar district in the eastern part of the country, for instance, because of “the lack of available export mechanisms, up to 30 percent of produce grown in Nangarhar rots in the field.” Nangarhar is fortunate because it is near the border of Pakistan; much of the import/export business in that district occurs directly across the border.
Pakistan is a major trade partner with Afghanistan and relatively easy to trade with because of the proximity. However, the further inland one goes into Afghanistan, the more difficult the transportation becomes. The further into the mountainous north and east one goes, the more isolated pockets of population become since access to those pockets is largely by foot or by animal. Modernized, paved roads are limited. Moving agriculture and other products is both challenging and slow. Additionally, transporting goods often means travelling through so-called “no man’s land” where law and order exist in more localized rather than centralized forms. A truck driver risks his life moving goods through those dangerous areas. There is a security premium placed on the use of those lines of communication. Competition exists in those very rural and isolated regions for control over those access lines.

Farmers in rural Afghanistan find themselves even more landlocked in an already landlocked country. Pockets of villages that trade only with neighboring villages litter the central, southwestern and northern parts of the country. This is an interesting demographic phenomenon because the majority of Afghans live in rural Afghanistan as a subsistence economy. Only 23 percent of the population have access to potable drinking water. Electricity is scarce. Only 2 percent of the population have access to the Internet, while 70 percent live below the poverty line of two dollars per day. That population is scattered throughout various and unique physical environments. The central and northeastern region is an extremely mountainous segment of the Himalayas. The southwestern region is flatter and more closely resembles arid desert terrain. The northern region is generally a rich agricultural lowland. These regions sustain the population in distinct ways that further isolate localized forms of governance.

The physical environment in Afghanistan matters for two reasons. First, SOF planners analyze the geography and climate for technical infiltration and sustainment considerations. Often SOF teams operate independently of any significant bases of support and must rely on local procurement and other means to operate. Given Afghanistan’s position as a landlocked country, only two forms of infiltration are available: land and air. The challenge of infiltrating by land is that routes entering the country originate in some countries that are themselves difficult to access, such as Iran and China. Second, pockets of population that are ethnically distinct exist across different geographic zones. The uniqueness and distinctness of tribal associations within various rural and urban regions present an incredible challenge for SOF operators who must negotiate the Afghan human domain. Moreover, the different geographic zones correspond to different flavors of insurgent activity.

One of the most distinguishing characteristics of Afghan governance throughout the country’s modern history has been the distinction between various tribal ethnic associations and those ethnic intertribal as well as intra-tribal interactions. This factor is a key ingredient SOF UW planners need to consider when analyzing the nature of Afghan governance. The interplay between centralized ethnic representation and decentralized tribal influence is a contextual matter that depends on the level of influence particular tribes might have within their ethnic group. Ethnicity may encompass overarching associations relevant to certain matters of that ethnicity. However, those overarching associations may be further overruled by a majority tribe that wields influence within a specific ethnicity. Those tensions within ethnicities and between ethnicities remain one of the governance challenges keeping Afghanistan in the dark today.

Although great democratic changes have occurred since 2001, internally the Afghan government is seen as incompetent and incapable of doing anything. As recently as 2009, the central government is “widely seen as weak, dysfunctional and utterly corrupt.” To have a
legitimate economy, the country must first have a legitimate government. To have a legitimate government in Afghanistan, ethnic biases must be represented. Thus, maneuvering through the legitimacy of the central government or through disparate local forms of governance requires SOF teams to maneuver through a human domain of intense tribal competition.

**Afghanistan 1989–2001**

For more than 30 years, Afghanistan has been under some kind of external control. The Soviets controlled the country throughout the 1980s. During the ’90s, after a period of little to no rule, the Taliban took control. While never recognized by the United States as a legitimate government, the Taliban did establish a system of rule and law, albeit oppressive and degrading. Most recently Afghanistan’s security has been under NATO (largely U.S.) control. Although the country does have an elected head of state and will have either a new or reelected head of state following the conclusion of President Hamid Karzai’s second term, decisions regarding the future of Afghanistan still rest largely with inputs from external actors, namely the United States, the United Nations (UN) and NATO. That external governing influence may change after 2014 when the United States officially completes its major military operations.

Between 1989 and 2001, Afghanistan struggled with severe governance problems that perpetuated a decade of conflict. It was a failed state. The proxy war between the Soviets and the United States ended in 1989. In effect, U.S. interest in Afghanistan ended at the same time. When the Soviets withdrew from Afghanistan, so too did the international community. Aid efforts did continue throughout the first half of the 1990s, but they were not as robust as they had been through the previous decade. The important point is that the exodus of international actors left a noticeable void in Afghanistan. During the war in the 1980s, there was no effective government. When the war ended, there still was no effective government. When support was withdrawn from Afghanistan, it left behind no effective government.

From early 1990 into 1992, the UN attempted a power-sharing scheme to bring together the different warring factions left over from the Soviet war. Shah Tarzi points out that “the UN formula envisioned a power-sharing arrangement—the creation of a 15-member council selected from the various mujahideen parties and the Wattan (homeland) Party, the former Communists.”84 This arrangement did not work. Tarzi continues, “Events quickly overtook the UN plan and [Mohammad] Najibullah’s government crumbled under the weight of military defections.”85

For the next few years a series of power grabs took place as mujahideen leader Ahmad Shah Masood, militia leader General Abdul Rashid Doestam and hardliner Islamist Gulbuddin Hekmatyar jockeyed for premier government positions.86 As these three notables and others sought power, efforts by the UN to stave off a complete government collapse proved futile. The country moved further into civil war. Combat among the struggling factions grew. A massive refugee problem emerged, and people began fleeing the country to Pakistan and Iran. By the end of 1994, Afghanistan was embroiled in war internally, and the UN could do little to help. Zalmay Khalilzad reported, “Because of the attacks in Kabul, UN staff members left and UN humanitarian aid declined.”87 The government had collapsed, and the UN had virtually given up. The decline of international interest gave way to the rise of a militant force able to seize control of the country. The Taliban seized Kabul in 1996. Their form of government proved to be inwardly oppressive and outwardly objectionable.

At the heart of Afghanistan’s problems was the complete lack of any government to make policies that would reinforce stability. Throughout the 1990s, Afghanistan never effectively
created a government. Her struggle to create one coupled with internal struggles between political factions led to a governance void that resulted in the take-over by a hostile Taliban regime. That regime hosted terrorist networks and inflicted severe social policies, driving the country into further conflict.

This narrative of political fractionalization typifies the pursuits of power throughout the 34 provinces and the roughly 361 districts within those provinces.\textsuperscript{88} Woven into the physical environment described by provincial boundaries was a similar narrative of fractionalized control, led by opposing warlords, village elders and ruthless political heads. Much of the tension between actors was a function of ethnic and tribal rivalries that were concentrated in regional pockets. Terrain separated those regional pockets. Making accessibility matters worse, between 1989 and 2001 the overall state infrastructure deteriorated because a functioning government never materialized with any degree of capability to improve the country.\textsuperscript{89} The country—literally and figuratively—was in the dark, a veritable “wild west.” It was a failed state.

**Afghanistan after 2002**

Immediately after 2002, Afghanistan changed from a failed state to an ungoverned place. An interim Afghan government quickly filled the void of governance with significant assistance from predominantly U.S. forces during the initial period following the Taliban overthrow. After President Hamid Karzai survived an initial election, the country remained temporarily ungoverned because the state apparatus lacked the necessary agency to provide public goods.\textsuperscript{90} The international community retained the majority of the necessary agency to execute public goods in the broad sense of overall state security. Recently, international control has been shifting to the Government of Afghanistan (GIRoA).\textsuperscript{91}

One of the major distinctions regarding the future accessibility of Afghanistan remains unknown. That is, to what extent do U.S. and international forces remain in Afghanistan in some partnered capacity? And to what extent do the United States and international actors retain control of what does and does not happen in Afghanistan? This is especially true with regard to security since presently ISAF and U.S. forces own the greatest share of Afghan security.\textsuperscript{92} The United States maintains that it will “remain politically, diplomatically and economically engaged in Afghanistan as a strategic partner for the long term.”\textsuperscript{93}

Since the second democratic election of President Karzai in 2009, Afghanistan’s governance and the role of a centrally organized, popularly elected polity have continued to evolve. Outwardly, the central government and representative governorships portray an effort to reach the greater Afghan population. By way of comparison, the United States has a central government representative of regional population clusters. The rule of law is consistent from federal to state to county to city and municipality level. A person in Florida can expect to lead a fairly similar life in Wisconsin with the exception of benign nuances mostly at the local level. Those nuances might appear in the form of processes for doing business. That is not the case yet in Afghanistan. Different rules apply to different areas and with different tribal networks. The extent of insurgent control in hard-to-reach areas further prevents consistency regarding a uniform rule of law.\textsuperscript{94} This is problematic for SOF UW planning because different regional and ethnic areas require different forms of sustainment to adhere to different rules of doing business.

Doing business in Afghanistan is inherently difficult; the degree of difficulty depends on which province, which district or which ethnic majority holds the lion’s share of social norms in a particular area.\textsuperscript{95} Currently, Afghanistan is one of the most challenged countries in the
world for doing business, in large part because factors related to functioning governance such as the registration of property, access to credit, access to inter-regional trade and access to electricity inhibit business opportunity.96

The farther one gets from the major cities the more the political environment changes from centralized governance to semi-autonomous systems of governance, especially in the areas with little to no vehicle access or electricity. The Uruzgan province and the various districts within it are examples of this inconsistent governance dynamic. The research group The Liaison Office (TLO) notes that as of 2009, the central Afghan government had yet to gain access to the Uruzgan province to leverage capital revenues or to extend the reach of services such as electricity.97 Uruzgan is one of several provinces that remain largely disconnected from the rest of Afghanistan. Moreover, certain districts within Uruzgan remain entirely unreachable by even the Uruzgan governing apparatus.98

The conditions in Afghanistan since 2002 differ from those of the period between 1989 and 2001, mostly in terms of the governing architecture. Afghanistan is in transition out of a failed state condition. One of the challenges SOF faces in an area that is transitioning to a better state is the relative legitimacy of the recognized government. As a central government gains or regains control, it gains greater influence, permitting SOF UW activities. The political balance US SOCOM must weigh is between honoring the legitimacy of a central authority and pursuing specific U.S. interests, particularly when the two dynamics diverge along critical lines of effort. In late February 2012, President Karzai condemned the consequences of Special Forces actions in Wardak province. Reports following a SOF mission indicated possible civilian casualties, a result of an engagement between SOF and militant forces. President Karzai subsequently ordered Special Forces out of the province, placing a deadline on their departure. This kind of political reaction to SOF activities differs in fragile and failing states or in ungoverned and undergoverned areas as opposed to completely failed areas. In a completely failed state, such as Afghanistan between 1989 and 2001, SOF considerations of governance account for the degree of security threat operators may encounter when operating in a denied and unfamiliar space. In states and spaces with some governmental legitimacy, such as Afghanistan since 2002, SOF planning considerations should account for the degree of political freedom of maneuver to perform necessary activities in pursuit of strategic and operational interests.

Somalia

Background

Somalia’s space image is even more revealing than that of Afghanistan. Barely noticeable is a speck of light emanating from the capital, Mogadishu. The entire peninsula appears blacked out, in part a testament to Somalia’s decades of prominence as the world’s leading failed state. (See figure 6.) Somalia, a peninsula with the longest coastline in Africa, is a mostly arid desert with less than 2 percent arable land.100 Nomads comprise a large portion of the population. Somalia is one of the poorest countries in the world; an informal economy of mostly livestock, agriculture and remittances make up a paltry gross domestic product. Piracy is one of the most vibrant business sectors in the northern coastal regions. No legitimate nationwide rule of law existed until 2012. Nor did any real military or law enforcement apparatus exist that could have enforced laws. Instead, an informal system of localized governance by tribal, nomadic or criminal groups enforces the way of life. Drought and famine plagued the country at various points throughout the 1990s. To put it bluntly, Somalia, “wracked by almost two decades of lawless thuggery . . . is a virtual disaster.”101
Somalia 1991–2011

Between 1991 and 2011 Somalia was a failed state. In the purest sense of this definition, Somalia lacked any form of representative institution to maintain order and provide any public goods. For several years running, Somalia topped the indices of state failure, in particular Foreign Policy’s Failed States Index. One of the clearest descriptions of Somalia comes from Daren Acemoglu and James Robinson in their book Why Nations Fail:

"Political power in Somalia has long been widely distributed—almost pluralistic. Indeed there is no real authority that can control or sanction what anyone does. Society is divided into deeply antagonistic clans that cannot dominate one another. The power of one clan is constrained only by the guns of another. This distribution of power leads not to inclusive institutions but to chaos, and at the root of it is the Somali state’s lack of any kind of political centralization, or state centralization, and its inability to enforce even the minimal amount of law and order to support economic activity, trade or even the basic security of its citizens."

Politically Somalia has been in a state of anarchy since the fall of the Siad Barre regime. Some scholars disagree about characterizing Somalia as anarchic given that the function of governance does exist, just not in a centralized form. Yet, the lack of institutions—namely a constitution that describes the institution of law—rendered Somalia literally and virtually lawless until 2012. The competition for control in Somalia was largely for control of localized areas and territorial clan stakes. To some extent, the anarchic nature of Somalia actually makes it less of a safe haven for external criminal and terrorist organizations. One study suggests that “[inter alia] Somalia’s pragmatic political culture has inoculated Somali society to some degree from radicalism.”

Elements that did seek central control, such as al Shabaab, did so to gain criminal control of rights to propagate fundamental ideologies and take hold of resources to fund their operations. Moreover, their base of power has not been strong enough to take hold over the entire government apparatus. Had the al Shabaab group or any other criminal group had any relevant power, Somalia may have seen at least some element seize governing control. Other than repeated failed external attempts to launch a federal government, no real governing apparatus emerged to provide public goods in either an inclusive or extractive way. Somalia writ large demonstrated neither inclusive nor extractive systems, either of which would have been some form of overarching governance. Thus the anarchic description fits appropriately throughout this 20-year period.

One of the reasons unlit spaces need further analysis is because “unlit space” does not sufficiently describe the nature of an area. It merely identifies an area on an image as either
dark or light and in some cases with varying degrees of light. Somaliland and Puntland are two Somali governing exceptions within the territorial boundary of Somalia. “Both claim relative independence. Both claim separate semi-functioning governments. Both even claim separate forms of currency, none of which is formally recognized by the UN or other member states.”

A SOF planner looking at Somalia in the context of framing the operational environment must look at three distinct but related sub-states with distinct but related political considerations that are distinctly yet collectively recognized with international legitimacy.

Somalia after 2011

Toward the end of 2011 and into 2012, the political and security situation in Somalia began to change. The federal government began its mandated change from a transitional government to a permanent governing body, beginning with the adoption of a new constitution by a new parliament and the election of a new head of state, Hasan Sheikh Mohamud. The transition was significant for two reasons. One, leading up to the transition, African Union Mission in Somalia (AMISOM) forces and Somali military forces made substantial gains against al Shabaab strongholds in Mogadishu. In 2011 the tide turned against al Shabaab. AMISOM forces regained a measure of initiative specifically in Mogadishu through a series of successful operations against al Shabaab military forces. In August 2011, al Shabaab withdrew from Mogadishu in a move seen as either a sign of potential weakness and decline or a necessary reorganization. Two, the central political apparatus appears to be making the most constructive legitimacy progress in over 20 years and 14 attempts at establishing central governing authority. As with Afghanistan, this means the legitimacy of a central authority matters more now because one actually exists.

Nevertheless, the political and security situation in Somalia remains challenging. Jon Lunn warned the United Kingdom Parliament that “while greatly improved, [security] in Mogadishu, and in some other parts of the country, remains fragile and could yet go into reverse.” A Harmony Project report about al Qaeda’s interest in eastern Africa notes that current events in Somalia “are hard to interpret.” Al Shabaab continues to pose serious threat challenges particularly related to governance because in 2011 al Shabaab underwent a restructuring of its organizational hierarchy. In testimony before the House Committee on Foreign Affairs in 2011, Dr. J. Peter Pham presented a disturbing narrative of al Shabaab as a decentralized and potentially self-regenerating organization. When it decentralized, al Shabaab’s central leadership delegated authority and autonomy to dedicated regional commands. Those commands act like an operational-level mechanism to achieve a grander strategic aim. The extent to which that strategic aim is synchronized is speculative considering the ongoing debate as to whether al Shabaab is in fact an arm of al Qaeda or merely associated with the idea of al Qaeda.

This systematic decentralization of operational control presents an altogether unique governing situation for the UW operational planner. Although the country functions through largely decentralized clan and territorial control, the lack of centralization does not mean a lack of societal integration. Some reports indicate that the Somali culture is one of integration and consensus regarding the execution of decisions. This presents an interesting dichotomy for both terrorist organizations and USSOCOM elements wishing to gain access to Somalia. When al Qaeda analyzed Somalia as a base of operation, some al Qaeda operatives considered the environment ill-suited to maintain secrecy because the interconnectedness of clan assemblies generated an exposure risk too difficult to overcome.
accessibility was not conducive for basing operations, then SOF efforts to similarly base for UW operations would be especially risk-prone.

As with Afghanistan, a newly elected and newly legitimized central governing authority changes the political operational environment. Prior to 2012, SOF UW infiltration considerations would have accounted for the disparate security threats associated with areas under different types of control. Access would have been gained surreptitiously in support of actors favorable to U.S. objectives. After 2012, a new layer of political authority requires the invitation by Somali leadership into Somalia in spite of the areas under uncertain control.

Findings

The overall governing architecture within a geographic region contributes to an area’s capacity to build an infrastructure that produces visible light. When the governing architecture fails or is not capable of providing goods to the general public, as both Afghanistan and Somalia demonstrate, then the nature of their operating environment makes them prone to being unlit. However, their unlit condition only identifies them from space as being unlit. Accessing each has less to do with its categorization as unlit and more to do with who manifests the governing conditions. In both case studies, determining the governing tendencies of unlit spaces is as important as determining who controls the form of governance within the unlit space.

The labels unlit space, fragile states, failing states, etc., are not sufficient descriptors to effectively plan SOF operations, particularly those operations such as UW that involve influencing the human domain. They begin to characterize potential factors for SOF to consider only when accessing those kinds of places. When no effective government existed in either Afghanistan or Somalia, the operational environments posed security risks to SOF operators in terms of their ability to avoid detection and capture. SOF operators needed adeptness at negotiating with criminal groups and warring ethnic factions. Afghanistan and Somalia pose new accessibility challenges related to the authority of new governments to regulate external accessibility.

Although the physical environment is an important factor to consider when looking for ways to access an area, the human environment presents a greater set of nuanced considerations that are unique and distinct and cannot fit within an overarching descriptive term. Since the human domain varies in unlit spaces, SOF planners must understand more completely the operational environment as it relates to the human dimension. Even within an unlit space, the human domain may change depending on the type of prevailing governance (either formal or informal), the kinds of social norms (such as ethnic and tribal associations) and the extent to which formal and informal mechanisms enforce rules of law. In unlit spaces such as Afghanistan and Somalia, these factors make accessing potential resistance elements more difficult because the nature of the human domain is not entirely consistent across unlit spaces in general or even within a single unlit space in particular.

This difficulty is exacerbated even further when one factors the dimensions of social connectedness. Recent social technologies add a new layer of risk to SOF teams attempting to hide within the social fabric of an unlit space. Previous attempts to enter those societies would have been met with certain interconnected social norms whereby information travels through various human networks. This was the case more so in Somalia than in Afghanistan. Maneuvering through the human domain in the 1990s and early 2000s would have required SOF operators to vet personal relationships one-on-one and in the context of personal interactions.
That dynamic has since changed as the proliferation of information technologies manifestly increases the ease with which societies weave virtual fabrics of connectedness. The technological social-connectedness phenomenon has specifically shaped the nature of recruitment efforts to radical ideologies. “Social networks appear to be central to the radicalization process and to terrorist plots as well. Networks can be actual groups—encompassing intimate kinship ties, bonds of friendship, links forged in student associations or in cliques tied to radical mosques. They may also be virtual and fostered by the Internet.”

Given both countries’ distinctions as ethnic and tribally-based societies and given both countries’ propensities to foster radical and extreme groups (al Qaeda, Taliban, al Shabaab), Somalia and Afghanistan share the potential to exploit virtual interconnectedness through social technologies. This poses new challenges related to the ease with which SOF operators hide within the human domain as socially connected societies share information through virtual and instant technology networks. In spite of appearing unlit developmentally, Afghanistan and Somalia potentially light up the cyber domain with information hindering SOF access.

Conclusion

USSOCOM commander Admiral William McRaven recently testified that SOF are a “cost effective hedge against uncertainty.” SOF are well postured to engage the unlit spaces around the globe with unique direct and indirect capabilities. However, before committing to any strategy within those spaces, USSOCOM should clearly understand the relevant aspects of the types of unlit spaces and the ramifications of accessibility to specific regions. There are distinct differences to the various kinds of unlit spaces. Each area displays unique characteristics. Accessing each area requires either varying degrees of specialization or varying degrees of political consideration or both. Therefore, a careful study beyond semantics necessitates a useful framework with which to categorize and analyze strategic engagement. This monograph intends to stimulate further discussion of so-called unlit spaces through the framework analysis tool to clarify more precisely SOF roles and SOF impacts in those regions.

This monograph cautions against the operational planning notion that unlit spaces are a generalized phenomenon and require SOF intervention. The term “unlit spaces” is an interesting descriptive view of the world, but it lacks specificity with regard to the nature of conditions within an unlit space. The category is too broad and comprises too many variables unrelated to either national security threats or national interests. Rather, context is key when planning for SOF missions in unlit spaces because the actual dynamics of a particular area vary. Typology characterizations provide limited insight into the political nature of an area. Accessibility into those areas depends on a further analysis of the human domain in relation to the operational environment.
Note: The references listed here informed the research process but may not have been directly used in citations. They are provided as a guide to further research.


Endnotes


2 NASA’s visible-earth project images are available free of charge at http://visibleearth.nasa.gov.


4 For more on the Center for Systemic Peace and the Polity 4 Project, see http://www.systemicpeace.org.

5 Figure 1, UW Vulnerability as Part of “Overthrow” Effort, is an example of a period of risk and the point of relative advantage during an “overthrow” unconventional warfare (UW) option. It is derived from a Fundamentals of Unconventional Warfare class taught as part of an Unconventional Warfare Operational Design Course (UWODC) through the JFK Special Warfare Center and School at Fort Bragg, NC. The image is intended to depict only that a critical period exists in the initial stages of UW that presents unique risks to SOF. It is not intended to portray a prescribed UW methodology because each UW scenario is unique and requires different operational approaches, as will be explained in the subsequent case studies.


7 Ibid.


Ibid.


NASA’s visible-earth project images are available free of charge at http://visibleearth.nasa.gov.


The Framework for Unlit Spaces analysis is the author’s attempt to merge several contemporary academic and strategy discussions into a single tool. Although one should be cautious of trying to fit too many variables into a single model, this framework offers a basis with which to analyze so called unlit spaces and then to associate whole-of-government responses to each based on unique access and implication characteristics.

The definitions of various unlit spaces are the author’s attempt to clarify what the spaces are. They are not derived from a single source but are adapted from numerous definitions used in academic and policy discussions. Except where specifically cited, these definitions are the author’s attempt to simplify them and offer a more practical definition within the construct of the author’s Framework for Unlit Spaces. The concept of public goods, however, and their relationship to states is largely derived from Paul Collier, Wars, Guns and Votes (New York: Harper Collins, 2009), pp. 229–237.

Collier, Wars, Guns and Votes, pp. 229–237.


The Fund for Peace has published a failed-states index every year for the past nine years. Somalia has ranked first for the past four consecutive years. See: http://www.fundforpeace.org/global/?q=node/122.


Dr. James Steiner, “Challenging the Red Line between Intelligence and Policy” (Washington DC: Institute for the Study of Diplomacy, Edmund A. Walsh School of Foreign Service, 2003), p. 7. The singular focus on terrorism transformed the CIA in a bad way because other efforts have been underemphasized.


Richard L. Armitage, Samuel R. Berger and Daniel S. Markey, *U.S. Strategy for Pakistan and Afghanistan*, (New York: Council on Foreign Relations, 2010), p. 22. The FATA has been a vacuum of power because local tribal systems left over from colonial British rule have assumed a form of authority beyond what the Pakistani governance structure reasonably could support.


Tariq Gilani, “U.S.–Pakistan Relations: The Way Forward,” *Parameters*, vol. 36, no. 4, Winter 2006–07, pp. 84–102. See also recent news reports regarding the outing and subsequent arrest of an alleged spy used by the United States to locate Osama bin Laden, such as: http://www.nbcnews.com/id/47944034/ns/world_news-south_and_central_asia/#.U2hQzoFdVyR.


Department of the Army, Army Field Manual (FM) 3-05.130, *Army Special Operations Forces Unconventional Warfare* (Washington, DC: Headquarters, Department of the Army, 30 September 2008), p. 3–13. Hereafter FM 3-05.130. The five criteria to support a joint campaign are mission appropriateness, support to campaign plan, operational feasibility, resources available and justification of risk.

TC 18-01, p. 1-1. The current USSOCOM definition of UW considers three objectives: coerce, disrupt or overthrow a government or occupying power.


FM 3-05.130, p. 4-1.

TC 18-01, p. 1-3. A feasibility assessment includes analyzing factors such as the physical and human environment to include geopolitical factors such as the state of the host governance.

TC 18-01, Appendix A, Area Study Outline.

TC 18-01, pp. 3-1–3-21. The scope of this monograph does not seek to reveal the specific nature of unique legal authorities other than to highlight that unique legal authorities permit sensitive SOF actions as they relate to access.


No clear definitions currently exist in joint doctrines for anti-access or area-denial. For a good explanation of each, see Colonel Vincent Alcazar, USAF, “Crisis Management and the Anti-Access/Area Denial Problem,” *Strategic Studies Quarterly*, Winter 2012, pp. 42–70.


*Ibid*. See also pp. 5–6.

63 JOAC 2012, p. i.


65 TC 18-01, p. 1-1.


67 TC 18-01, Appendix A, Area Study.

68 This image of Afghanistan is modified from the NASA Visible Earth 2012 image available at http://earthobservatory.nasa.gov/NaturalHazards/view.php?id=79765&src=ve. Visible in this section, from west to east, are eastern Africa, the Saudi Arabian peninsula, Iran, Afghanistan, Pakistan and India.

69 Stanford International Human Rights and Conflict Resolution Clinic and Global Justice Clinic at NYU School of Law, Living Under Drones: Death, Injury and Trauma to Civilians from U.S. Drone Practices in Pakistan (Stanford, CA: Stanford Law School, 2012), p. 4, http://www.livingunderdrones.org/report. Researchers found it was “very difficult for foreigners physically to access FATA, partly due to the Pakistani government’s efforts to block access through heavily guarded checkpoints, and partly due to serious security risks.”

70 FM 3-05.130, p. 4–2.

71 This image of Afghanistan is modified from the NASA Visible Earth 2012 image available at http://earthobservatory.nasa.gov/NaturalHazards/view.php?id=79765&src=ve. Highlighted in the image are the major cities of Kabul in the north and Kandahar in the south.

72 The Grand Trunk Road is one of the oldest and longest trade highways in South Asia, extending from Kabul, Afghanistan to Chittagong, Bangladesh.


74 The author’s own experiences in Afghanistan’s mountainous north, east and central regions revealed that people living in population pockets relied heavily on donkeys and camels to transport goods.


77 Samira Shackle, “Afghanistan: facing up to the facts and figures,” New Statesman, 17 August 2009, pp. 16–17, 28–29. Shackle’s research is based on 2009 data; however, very little has changed between 2009 and 2013 regarding the infrastructure and demographic distribution.


79 JP 3-05, pp. II-3, IV-4. One SOF truth is that SOF often require external support.

80 One of the most notable features of Afghanistan’s demography is its ethnic tribal associations.

82 Barfield, Afghanistan, p. 18.
85 Ibid., p. 166.
86 Ibid. Tarzi describes in greater detail the chronology of feuding rebel and political leaders.
88 Afghanistan Country Study, p. 17.
91 Afghanistan’s official name is Islamic Republic of Afghanistan.
95 In 2012, Afghanistan dropped six positions (to 164 out of 183 countries) in the World Bank’s annual Doing Business report.
98 This author’s experiences throughout the Uruzgan province include numerous combat and aid patrols to the most unreachable areas of the Shahidi Hassas (Char China) district.
99 This image of Somalia is modified from the NASA Visible Earth 2012 image available at http://earthobservatory.nasa.gov/NaturalHazards/view.php?id=79765&src=ve. The capital city of Mogadishu is highlighted.
101 Royo, “Afghanistan Part II,” p. 3.
102 Foreign Policy magazine annually publishes a Failed States Index in collaboration with The Fund for Peace. Data supporting the project can be found at http://www.fundforpeace.org/global.
A lack of sufficient power of any group has contributed to Somalia’s prolonged state failure.

Ibid., and pp. 4–5. See also, Acemoglu and Robinson, Why Nations Fail, pp. 75–76, for more on inclusive and extractive ecopolitical systems.


116 Watts, Shapiro and Brown, Al Qaida’s (Mis)Adventures, p. 45.


119 Somalia Hearing, pp. 45–47. Dr. Pham notes the disagreement among analysts and academics regarding the connection between al Shabaab and al Qaeda.

120 Watts, Shapiro and Brown, Al Qaida’s (Mis)Adventures, p. 43.


123 McRaven testimony.