ARSOF'S MAROPS
MARITIME OPERATIONS

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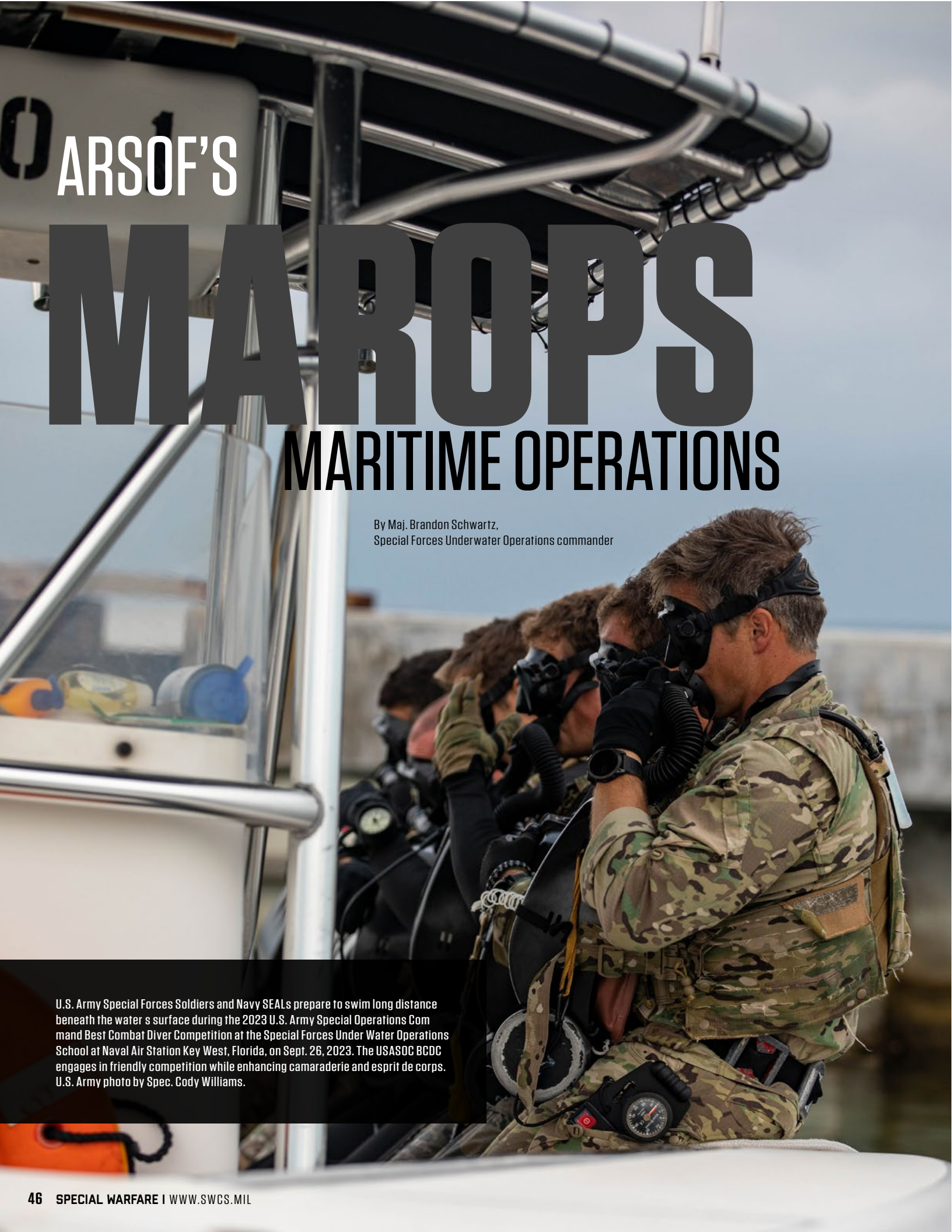

U.S. Army Special Forces Soldiers and Navy SEALs prepare to swim long distance beneath the water s surface during the 2023 U.S. Army Special Operations Com mand Best Combat Diver Competition at the Special Forces Under Water Operations School at Naval Air Station Key West, Florida, on Sept. 26, 2023. The USASOC BCDC engages in friendly competition while enhancing camaraderie and esprit de corps. U.S. Army photo by Spec. Cody Williams.

CHANGING TIDES

The *Army Warfighter Concept: 2030-2040* coined the term *air-ground-littoral zone* [01] to describe the coastal areas, brown and green waters, and near-Earth space upon which the Army and joint force operational and contingency plans rely. Through a geographic and economic lens, this term encompasses all nations' territorial waters, seventy percent of the megacities, and the column of airspace above them. [02] The converging megatrends of "rapid population growth, accelerating urbanization, littoralization (*the tendency for people and infrastructure to cluster on coastlines*), and globalization," [03] are making these zones more unstable, networked, ripe for malign influence, [04] and thus more complex albeit essential to operate in. To this end, the United States and its rivals are engaged in a maritime arms race to gain the upper hand in influencing and projecting power into air-ground littoral zones.

Still engaged in the epilogues of the Global War on Terrorism (GWOT), the U.S. military is in the unenviable position of trying to reinvigorate its maritime capabilities—*the domain most atrophied over the past two decades*—for both high-end conflict and asymmetric threats while simultaneously downsizing and adjusting to new fiscal constraints. Meanwhile, the People's Republic of China, the United States' designated pacing challenge, [05] is aggressively investing in its maritime capabilities—*anti-access, aerial denial (A2AD) systems, peer-capable naval platforms, and maritime proxy forces*—with the "stated intention of exceeding the capability of the U.S. military in the Western Pacific in the next decade." [06]

In short, mounting insecurity within and increased competition over the global littoral necessitates a shift in focus for U.S. special operations forces (SOF), who must keep pace with rival behavior and the "seismic changes in the character of war, largely driven by technology." [07] As the proponent for irregular warfare, Army special operations forces (ARSOF) must improve its maritime operations (MAROPS) baseline capabilities and develop irregular approaches to address emerging challenges. Explicitly, ARSOF must develop a MAROPS capability that can (1) enable our allies and partners to counter sources of maritime insecurity through capacity building, (2) extend U.S. influence, and (3) enable the Army and joint force to succeed in crisis and conflict in air-ground-littoral zones. ARSOF should not view this deviation from recent experience as an aberration, but rather as a *means* to see, sense, and affect this increasingly important battlefield.

JOINT FORCE ADAPTION TO MARITIME THREATS

The U.S. military is at a strategic inflection point, repurposing the joint force to support the 2022 National Security Strategy threat prioritization and the associated need to dominate the air-ground-littoral zone. The much-discussed "Pacific Pivot" of the Obama Administration is finally underway, as evidenced by the influx of units and war stocks into United States Indo-Pacific Command (INDOPACOM) and emphasis on Pacific military partnerships. [08] Since the U.S. withdrawal from Afghanistan, the joint force executed dozens of integrated battle problems focused on solving the challenges of reception, staging, onward movement, and integration; joint forcible entry; very shallow water obstacle identification and reduction; and logistics in a peer-contested, maritime environment. [09] These exercises signal America's commitment to countering Chinese maritime investments and inform stakeholders of the ways and means the military must develop to overcome assessed gaps to ensure America can fight its preferred way of war in a theater predominately covered by ocean.

LITTORAL (DOD)

The littoral comprises two segments of operational environment:

1. Seaward: the area from the open ocean to the shore, which must be controlled to support operations ashore.

2. Landward: the area inland from the shore that can be supported and defended directly from the sea.

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Although MAROPS is most associated with INDOPACOM, each combatant command is witnessing changes to its maritime environments. In United States European Command, the Russo-Ukrainian conflict in the Black Sea demonstrates a fundamental shift in how militaries "see, shoot, move, communicate, protect, and sustain" [10] in this decisive terrain. Ukrainian MAROPS, characterized by small, remote-controlled unmanned surface vessels that target enemy infrastructure and Russian naval vessels, as well as Russia's manned and unmanned countermeasures, is greatly influencing joint force wargames and capabilities development. [11] Moreover, observed Russian and Ukrainian struggles to execute wet gap operations is renewing the U.S. Army's focus on this old-but-new challenge as evidenced by the activation of multi-role bridging companies. [12] In United States Central Command, Iranian-backed Houthi drone attacks and interdiction of commercial vessels transiting the Red Sea demonstrate the impact asymmetric maritime threats can have on the global economy. [13] To date, the U.S. Navy's response to secure this strategic sea line of communication has been effective, albeit costly, while also creating opportunity costs elsewhere. Concurrently, in the global south, partner nations are increasingly requesting assistance to secure their economic exclusion zones from malign and substate maritime threats like piracy, drug trafficking, and illegal and unregulated fishing. [14] In aggregate, these actions signal a rising demand for conventional and special operations maritime solutions across each combatant command.

Adapting to this future reality, United States Special Operations Command (USSOCOM) drafted Directive 350-24, Maritime Infiltration (MI), as an essential step in reshaping the trajectory of joint SOF maritime capabilities. The current draft states that maritime infiltration "is a fundamental skill across all USSOCOM Components," [15] and mandates that the entire SOF enterprise increase its baseline MAROPS capabilities while becoming increasingly interoperable. This directive may shock many within ARSOF who view this as encroaching on traditional Navy SEAL and Marine Raider territory; however, increased demand for SOF MAROPS requirements will likely exceed the capacity of the United States Marine Forces Special Operations Command (MARSOC) and require partnered, irregular approaches that are not the forte of Naval Special Warfare (NSW).

NSW predominance in the maritime domain is well documented and respected. They are the Nation's "premier maritime SOF and are uniquely positioned to extend the fleet's reach and deliver all-domain solutions to the joint force." [16] During the twilight of the GWOT, (then) NSW Commander, Read Admiral Wyman Howard, smartly embraced a "return to sea" mentality and reoriented NSW from land-based, partnered operations through the modernization of its subsurface and surface MAROPS capabilities. The results are superb; however, this organizational orientation—focusing "on the things that only [NSW] can do for the joint force" [17]—comes with a tradeoff. Concentrating on developing a tailored Deep Blue capability left many of the "lesser" littoral maritime challenges unaccounted for. For example, NSW SEAL Delivery Vehicle Teams can conduct exquisite combat swimming operations, but they are also inextricably linked to some of the U.S. Navy's most strategic and precious platforms—like Columbia-class submarines—whose role in high-end conflict will be tightly controlled. This is not to say that NSW is no longer capable of partnered operations, but their charter is fleet support and high-end, technical maritime special operations.

Covering the SOF littoral gap created by the NSW post-GWOT pivot, MARSOC developed a new operating concept called Strategic Shaping and Reconnaissance (SSR). SSR, grounded in the Marine Corps' amphibious roots, is "focused on special reconnaissance, preparation of the environment, and the employment of kinetic and nonkinetic effects in contested, near-shore environments." [18] MARSOC is progressively developing capabilities for information and influence operations aimed at the locations where "half of the global population will live by 2050." [19] This potent irregular warfare instrument—designed to bring people into the United States' influence column—is essential during competition and may help prevent conflict from occurring. However, recognizing that the entire Marine Raider Regiment is smaller than even one of the five active duty U.S. Army Special Forces (SF) groups is an immutable reality. Marine Raiders cannot address the increasing volume of maritime partner building or littoral irregular warfare without extensive assistance. Moreover, SOF's value to the Nation is maximized when its units of action are already at the crisis point with developed flexible response options and flexible deterrence options for policymaker decisions. To this end, combining ARSOF's global presence with the SSR model provides an excellent blueprint for addressing the current limitation of USSOCOM's littoral SOF capabilities.

BUILDING MAROPS NEXT

Building upon these recommended joint SOF component "swim lanes," ARSOF should embrace USSOCOM's directive to increase its baseline MAROPS capability to prepare for assessed requirements across the competition continuum. Specifically, ARSOF should develop a threat-informed, partner-centric capability that augments MARSOC's littoral irregular warfare and operational preparation of the environment capacity and interoperates with NSW's exquisite Deep Blue capabilities.

ARSOF should also modernize to extend its combat diving capability's operational reach to account for 21st-century standoff requirements in conflict. Moreover, ARSOF should emphasize upgrading its surface MAROPS capabilities to provide more significant opportunities for access, placement, and partnerships in strategically important air-ground-littoral zones before the crisis. Paying close attention to lessons learned in the Black Sea, ARSOF must also integrate robotics to ensure MAROPS operators are able to sense and shape the environment to increase survivability and lethality. Finally, ARSOF should partner closely with the Army to answer their hydrographic and river reconnaissance needs to enable their wet gap operations and joint logistics over-the-shore (JLOTS). Thankfully, the 1st Special Forces Command (Airborne) (SFC[A]) is committed to this cause.

SF Regimental Command and Staff are developing a new 1st SFC(A) Operating Concept to articulate its value proposition across the competition continuum, in all domains, and in every sector of the battlefield. This soon-to-be-published Operating Concept will also emphasize how Special Forces groups can leverage surface and subsurface MAROPS capabilities to extend U.S. influence into littorals during competition and provide direct and general support to the Army and joint force during a crisis or conflict.

BENEFITS OF A NEW BASELINE

During competition, an improved ARSOF MAROPS capability creates opportunities for increased access, placement, and influence that add to the Nation's deterrence capabilities. ARSOF must enable indigenous solutions to the problems of overfishing, piracy, smuggling, crime, pollution, and threats to commerce that cost even the most developed countries like South Korea billions of dollars each year. [20] Cooperating to increase partner maritime security and conducting littoral influence and information operations can help retain these countries in the United States' corner. Should a crisis occur in the air-ground-littoral zones, and ARSOF are there, they can enable the joint force's unfettered access to bases, ports, and airspace for mission accomplishment. In addition to strategic shaping, ARSOF littoral operational preparation of the environment can help pre-position war stocks, develop human networks, and generate flexible and scalable response and deterrence options that provide U.S. policymakers innumerable means to overcome unforeseen challenges.

In crisis and conflict, ARSOF MAROPS has a role in each battlefield sector. In the close area, ARSOF and their partners can utilize surface and subsurface MAROPS to enable multidomain breach of the air-ground-littoral zone in support of joint forcible entry operations and reception, staging, onward movement, and

integration of the joint force. Tasks could include the kinetic and nonkinetic targeting of A2AD systems, hydrographic surveys to mark and reduce obstacles in very shallow waters, and military deception to enable the Army to perform joint logistics over-the-shore.

> "We must develop the tactics and technologies to dominate the Air-Ground-Littoral, which is the near-earth space, up to thousands of feet. Formations that are organized, trained, and equipped to exploit the Air-Ground-Littoral can sense and strike further and faster [...] The emergence of these formations may drive the biggest change in how [the Army] fights on land since armies learned to exploit the potential of mechanization."
>
> Army Futures Command
> Army Warfighting Concept: 2030-2040

Once ashore, the joint force could sustain operations utilization of activated subsurface caches. ARSOF can also utilize maritime infiltration techniques to gain access to the deep area and enable joint force land component commanders to see and sense farther and shape the environment to allow ground forces to maintain operational tempo. Specifically, ARSOF targets enemy long-range precision fires, logistics, and "kill chains,"[21] and conducts river reconnaissance of wet gap crossing sites. Outside the theater of armed conflict, ARSOF MAROPS can create multiple dilemmas on their peripheral or strategic flanks. Leveraging their global presence, ARSOF can hold the enemy's sea lines of communication, ports, assets, and proxies at risk to create comparative advantages for the joint force through attrition. Across all battlefield sectors, ARSOF must embrace the policy trend of remote advisement and assistance of a MAROPS-capable partner force while leveraging unmanned surface or underwater vessels to target enemy naval and littoral-based assets. In a crisis, ARSOF must provide combatant commanders and policymakers with low-cost, asymmetric solutions to counter maritime proxy forces like the Houthis. SOF maritime solutions will free up the U.S. Navy for other global requirements that bolster the Nation's strategic deterrence value, reduce the risk of horizontal escalation, and avoid the depletion of high-end war stocks.

This old-but-new vision—a nod to the Office of Strategic Services maritime playbook[22]—will guide ARSOF in the future fight and shed light on the endless albeit important role of MAROPS. However, ARSOF's institutional and operational forces must do more to realize this vision.

NEXT STEPS

The key to advancing ARSOF surface MAROPS is greater collaboration between the operational and institutional forces to modernize existing program of instructions and develop a new training division of labor between Special Forces Underwater Operation (SFUWO) School and the SF groups. The U.S. Army John F. Kennedy Special Warfare and School (USAJFKSWCS) is currently revamping SFUWO's Water Infiltration Course (WIC) to account for assessed future ARSOF MAROPS activities and threats. In support of this course redesign, SFUWO is actively pursuing SF group input to ensure "WIC 2.0" meets the customers' expectations and complements emerging operational training guidance. The richer the collaboration, the better the outputs will be. If the course redesign is approved, ideally SFUWO would exclusively teach the advanced surface MAROPS skills required to operate effectively in assessed future operational environments (for example, air-to-water insertion, mothership operations, hardshell boats, mission planning, and visit, board, search, and seizure credentialling) as early as Spring 2025.

As the only joint SOF component that does not teach MAROPS in their initial training pipeline, SF groups must assume greater responsibility for their units' foundational MAROPS skillset. Only then can SFUWO focus on developing the advanced capability required by the joint force as outlined in the USSOCOM Directive 35024 critical tasks list.

The key to modernizing ARSOF combat diving is additional resourcing and leader advocacy. Team-level innovation and pockets of excellence cannot overcome underinvestment. As demonstrated during the 2023 USASOC Combat Diver Competition,[23] SF combat divers have the human capital to outcompete Navy SEALs; however, ARSOF units' collective proficiency can only progress with additional focus. There is no getting around the unavoidable costs of MAROPS equipment, but diver propulsion and precision navigation are vital instruments for all joint SOF components' subsurface capabilities. SFUWO already revamped its Combat Diving Supervisor Course to teach seasoned divers how to echelon diver propulsion devices and precision navigation to accomplish advanced profiles taught in the U.S. Navy's Lead Combat Swimmer Course. However, SF dive lockers need the manning, expertise, and resourcing to allow dive teams to maintain the skillset in their pre-mission training and annual training requirements.

Concerning doctrine, the Army's creation of an entire chapter—Chapter 7: Maritime Operations—in its recently published FM 3-0, Operations, signals a requirement for ARSOF MAROPS inclusion and cascading doctrinal updates. USAJFKSWCS must continue to leverage SFUWO—its MAROPS institutional center of gravity—to nest ARSOF MAROPS with the Army's vision for maritime and riverine operations. Furthermore, USAJFKSWCS and SFUWO should codevelop MAROPS updates for its programmatic reviews of ARSOF doctrine. MAROPS detachments do not have codified expectations for training requirements for combat dive or

other specialty detachments. To this end, the institutional and operational forces must create a USASOC Regulation 350-20 equivalent for MAROPS detachments to guide the training and maintenance standard for the skillset.

SFUWO should evolve to become the MAROPS capabilities development directorate (CDD) and support USASOC's Force Modernization Center (UFMC) to ensure prudent force transformation. As a CCD-like entity, SFUWO could directly support UFMC's overhaul of ARSOF's outdated MAROPS technologies and communicate future requirements to industry partners. Moreover, if resourced as an innovation battle lab, SFUWO and its visiting units—an average of 600 personnel each year—could collaborate on complicated problems to spur new techniques, tactics, and procedures that will help accelerate ARSOF MAROPS growth and simultaneously inform senior leader modernization decisions.

Finally, MAROPS is not just a dive detachment responsibility; it is an ARSOF leader responsibility. To this end, the SF Regiment should conduct leader professional development to replenish its atrophied MAROPS intelligence quotient and overcome the heuristic that MAROPS is singularly about combat divers infiltrating to a beach landing site. A review of the SF Regiment's rich history demonstrates that our third lightning bolt was well-earned; it is worthy of continued stewardship. To that end, broadening ARSOF leader aperture to the nuances of emerging MAROPS concepts, lessons learned, new technologies, and threat capabilities will benefit the SF Regiment moving forward.

CONCLUSION

The world's littoral populations continue to grow at an aggressive pace. Of the 513 cities having a population above 1 million in 2015, 271 (52.8 percent) were located less than 100 kilometers from a coastline. This accounts for 59.4 percent of the global urban population.[24] A failure to invest in ARSOF MAROPS capabilities ignores these clear population shifts and generates indisputable operational and mobility challenges for future ARSOF leaders.

ARSOF MAROPS needs USASOC leader advocacy to become operationally viable once again. USASOC should embrace a programmatic capability review process that encourages divestment at the same rate of investment. Although MAROPS may not achieve top billing over other ARSOF capabilities, this critical capability is well above the cut line because the risk of the status quo is too significant. USASOC should continue to build upon the 1st SFC(A) operating concept and carry their water when advising USSOCOM on how ARSOF complements the joint SOF maritime capabilities. ARSOF should strive to become interoperable with NSW capabilities to extend their reach from the Deep Blue into the air-ground-littoral zones, which are decisive to joint force contingency and operational plans. USASOC should partner closely with MARSOC to augment SSR on a global scale and validate near-identical requirements to ensure each combatant commander has enough capacity to conduct influence and information operations and be poised to respond to crises in increasingly contested littorals.

Concerning the costs of MAROPS resourcing, both USASOC and MARSOC are on the outside looking in at the exclusive relationship between NSW and USSOCOM Program Executive Office—Maritime (PEO-M).[25] If MARSOC and USASOC were to buy into PEO-M together, it would open avenues that could lessen the fiscal burden of ARSOF institutional and operational force modernization efforts. Lastly, USASOC should adopt the Army's maritime and riverine-centric challenges as their own and collaborate through experimentation to overcome them. Doing so would signal that ARSOF recognizes the Army as the supported entity and is committed to successfully navigating its strategic inflection point across all domains. In sum, a genuinely all-domain ARSOF will enable the joint force to succeed in future contested maritime environments. And for that reason, we should "give way together."

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