Executive Summary: U.S. Army Special Forces 2035 TTX

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1. **Abstract.** The purpose of this memorandum is to provide analysis findings and key takeaways from the U.S. Army Special Forces 2035 TTX. The TTX was centered around a Russian invasion of the Baltics in 2035 and was held at the unclassified level.

2. **Background to the Problem.** US Army Special Forces are adept at accomplishing their core tasks which often lie on the left side of the conflict continuum, and against less than peer adversaries. Skills and capabilities needed to complete the same tasks against a peer competitor have waned, some tasks may need to be accomplished differently, and new ones may need to be developed.

3. **Purpose and Research Question.** The objective of the TTX was to examine how US Army Special Forces will contribute to defeating a great power adversary in armed conflict between 2030-2050. Specifically, the TTX aimed to examine how conflict with a great power in this environment will shape, or potentially demand new core activities in the future.

4. **Method, Models, and Tools (MMT).** This section describes the methodology for developing the TTX which ultimately yielded the findings and recommendations outlined in section six.

Conduct. The unclassified TTX was conducted during one full day (0830-1630 on 6 June, 2018). 17 players including faculty and students from NPS were split into two teams to double collectible observations.

How it was 'played': Both teams were given the exact same scenarios. The format of the TTX was seminar-based and Socratic, as opposed to the more traditional turn-based approach. There was no white cell or red team. Teams were required to fill out large laminated tables to capture implications on the warfighting functions and UW tasks throughout the respective scenarios. Specifically, the tables captured implications for how the warfighting functions or UW tasks would be achieved within the scenario, any associated risk, required capabilities, and phase zero implications.

Road to War and Scenarios. The road to war and scenarios were set against a Russian invasion into the Baltics in the year 2035. To appropriately scope the players' mindsets most conducive to participating in a future-based TTX, the facilitators created a road to war which incrementally walked the players into the future. The road to war began in 2019 and outlined plausible geopolitical activities which ultimately led to Russia invading Lithuania, Latvia and Estonia in 2035. Scenario one outlined a situation where a SF team was behind enemy lines and ordered to conduct a Special Reconnaissance in a denied area to facilitate an impending joint force entry operation by NATO forces. Scenario two outlined a situation in which a SF team was ordered to conduct UW in an urban setting in a denied area. Both scenarios placed the SF elements at positions of tremendous disadvantage in regards to location, manning, and available combat power.

5. **Key Constraints, Limitations, and Assumptions.**

Constraints:

- Six weeks to plan, recruit and build the TTX
- Zero budget for player TDY or materials

Limitations:

- TTX is unclassified

Assumptions:

- Local NPS student and faculty members had sufficient experience and knowledge of Russia, NATO, joint, and SOF doctrine to collect the required data.
- Scenarios will allow for injects to capture any missing data
- The Baltic region provides the necessary terrain, population, and environment required to answer objectives/issues
- Armed conflict in 2035 is a sufficient scoping mechanism as it provides players: a window that is beyond current budgetary constraints/programs of record; enables the players' mindsets to transcend current geopolitical variables; is not too distant in the future that it cannot be imagined
- Risk will be assumed on certain SF tasks that arguably would not be as prevalent during armed conflict against a great power adversary.
- Traditional phase zero tasks will be provided to the players within the scenario, thus enabling operations in the traditional phase three or armed conflict portions of the study
- The US Army Special Forces will operate within the joint environment for the scenarios.
- Implementation of the Multi-domain Task Force utilized within the scenarios represents current operational concepts extended into the future

6. **Findings and Recommendations.** These findings aim to avoid the incorrect utilization of Special Forces in a future armed conflict with a great power adversary and better prepare US Army Special Forces for such an eventuality.

1) **Finding: ODA survivability in a denied environment is almost solely reliant upon host nation SOF partners and/or resistance elements.** Most, if not all players were unwilling to assume any risk associated with movement or maneuver.
Recommendation: US Army Special Forces must reinforce the importance of aligning itself to specific areas of responsibility, and if possible, enforcing country alignment at the detachment-level. Players consistently relied upon pre-existing relationships, networks, plans, and pre-positioned stocks to survive and operate, with all of these capabilities residing at the detachment-level, as the teams were isolated. Of note, players encountered significant challenges in accomplishing both missions when portions of the human network were destroyed or disrupted. Players maintained that if parts or all of a particular network was destroyed, it could not be replaced or repaired at a sufficient level commensurate with accomplishing sensitive missions. Players often discussed how long it would take to re-create or repair networks within a denied environment as they are typically created before a conflict begins.

2) **Finding: An ODA will conduct very limited kinetic operations in a denied environment. Instead, it will serve as an information-gathering and reporting element.** In all scenarios, the players rarely utilized the ODA to conduct kinetic strikes, raids, or even advise Guerrilla forces. Even with the element of surprise and the advantage of choosing the time and place of attack, the players felt the risk was too high, a result of the adversary's ability to rapidly identify and respond with overwhelming firepower over great distances. Instead, players used the ODA as a vector for all information going in and out of the area of operations, as well as a force multiplier able to bring a myriad of assets to the host nation resistance elements and Joint Force efforts. **Recommendation: US Army Special Forces must place great emphasis on mission planning at the detachment-level and equip detachments with the means to securely communicate (internally and externally) in a denied environment.** Additionally, ODAs must be afforded more training on developing intelligence on the ground and in a vacuum, as these techniques were vital for players in the TTX. It is critical for ODAs to maintain a communications platform able to operate safely and securely in a denied environment. A critical piece for intra-team communication was reliance on commercial-like equipment (i.e. smart phones and tablets) as it allowed the ODA to "hide in the noise" and locally replace parts or batteries as needed. Efforts should be made to equip ODAs with these capabilities.
3) **Finding: Risk to force versus risk to mission was a critical aspect of each scenario, ultimately leading to new approaches to UW and SR tasks.** The TTX revealed that most players were unwilling and uncomfortable in assuming any risk to the ODA. The scenarios revealed a significant cognitive block in players as they struggled to balance the high-risk environment versus the high strategic payoff for success in the missions they were assigned. Similar calculus should be conducted at echelons above detachment-level to determine what level of risk commanders are willing to incur in order to accomplish a particular mission. For example, is finding an adversary's SAM system to enable targeting worth the destruction of an ODA in a denied environment? Perhaps yes. Perhaps no. Situations similar to this one should be experimented with heavily at the senior leader levels.

   Recommendation: ODAs must mentally prepare for and train on high-risk, strategic mission sets, while practicing risk management. Similar to the training and certification of the Special Atomic Demolition Munition Detachments from the Cold War, who had a high-risk but strategically important mission set, today's ODAs must be mentally prepared to receive similar mission sets during armed conflict with a great power adversary. As the risk to force becomes higher while fighting a great power adversary, US Army Special Forces must reevaluate the training and doctrine for mission sets such as UW and SR. Robin Sage is still heavily focused on the training and employment of Guerrilla forces and places limited emphasis on developing and utilizing Underground elements. However, as revealed in the TTX, players relied considerably more on the Underground to achieve mission success and rarely utilized Guerrilla forces in either scenario. While this shift may not apply across all regions and conflicts, it is worth exploring the need to alter US Army Special Forces' training and doctrine to increase mission success while limiting risk to force.