

SOCOM Commander: Fighting Terrorists is Another Way to Counter Great Nation States



Army Gen. Richard D. Clarke, Commanding General, U.S. Special Operations Command, shown here in February 2020 discussing training with students attending the Tactical Skills phase of the Special Forces Qualification Course at Camp Mackall, North Carolina, discussed the role Special Operations Forces play in the “Great Power Competition” at a virtual conference May 12.

U.S. ARMY / Staff Sgt. Keren-happuch Solano

ARLINGTON, Va. – As the National Defense Strategy shifts toward the “Great Power Competition” with Russia and China, there is still a key role for Special Operations Forces to play, countering both terrorists and peer competitors, the head of U.S. Special Operations Command (SOCOM) said.

In fact, Army Gen. Richard Clarke said, the main reason U.S. special operations forces like the Army’s Green Berets and Navy SEALs were created – to battle violent extremist organizations (VEOs) like al-Qaida and ISIS – is, in a way, “equal” to Great Power Competition.

“Going after the VEOs is not mutually exclusive to competing with great powers,” Clarke said in a live-streamed address to the National Defense Industry Association’s virtual Special Operations Forces Industry Conference (SOFIC) May 12. The capabilities required of Special Operations Forces fighting violent extremists in places like Asia and the Pacific serve a dual purpose. “By being there, we are also countering great nation states,” he added.

This dual role has implications for the defense industry, Clarke said. “No longer can we just build counter-VEO capabilities that serve a single purpose. As we look at the

precision, lethality and mobility requirements as examples, we absolutely have to develop them so they can compete and win with Russia and China, but they could also work in a counter VEO fight," he added.

SOCOM's top priority is next generation intelligence, surveillance and reconnaissance (ISR) capability, Clarke said. That means sustainable ISR technology that "can provide the capability in both Great Power Competition and working for our SOF teams in remote, austere, short take-off-and land battlefields," he said. Another priority is next-generation mobility and next-generation effects like the Hyper-Enabled Operator concept, which grew out of the TALOS (Tactical Assault Light Operator Suit) program, nicknamed the "Iron Man Suit."

The six-year TALOS project focused on high-tech body armor that could also monitor a wearer's stress and increase strength and speed through an exoskeleton. "Today's technology doesn't allow for the Iron Man suit, but the idea is there," Clarke said. The command is looking to equip the Hyper-Enabled Operator with a collection of useable data from lightweight, body mounted computers, cameras and other sensors to better navigate the future battlespace, which Clarke said would be increasingly "complex, dynamic and lethal."

Clarke spoke from Tampa, Florida, where SOCOM headquarters is based and where the annual SOFIC gathering, conducted virtually this year because of the coronavirus pandemic, is held.