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The Future of U.S. Special Operations Forces

By Linda Robinson



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The Future of U.S. Special Operations Forces By Linda Robinson

U.S. special operations forces are doing more things in more places than ever before. They are now active in some seventy countries and, since 2001, have seen their combined budget nearly quintuple—a trend that seems likely to continue. As the United States seeks ways to tackle a range of security threats worldwide, shore up the resilience of its friends and allies against terrorist and criminal networks, and minimize need for large-scale military interventions, the importance of special operations forces will grow. Yet, writes Linda Robinson in this Council Special Report, the strategic vision for special operations forces has not kept pace with the growing demands for their skills. Most people—and, indeed, many policymakers—associate the special operations forces with secret nighttime raids like the one that targeted Osama bin Laden: tactical operations against a particular individual or group. The abilities of special operations forces, however, extend much further, into military training, information operations, civilian affairs, and more. As the United States shifts its focus from war fighting to building and supporting its partners, Robinson argues, it will become critical to better define these strategic capabilities and ensure that special operations forces have the staffing and funding to succeed. Robinson further calls on the Pentagon to remove bureaucratic and operational obstacles to cooperation among the special operations forces of each service, and between special and conventional forces. She also recommends that all special operations forces commands work to develop a pipeline of talented, motivated officers with expertise in these issues, and that the role of civilian leadership in budget and operational oversight be reinforced. *The Future of U.S. Special Operations Forces* is a timely report on the future of what may become the military's most important troops. It offers a broad set of recommendations covering institutional, operational, and intellectual reforms that could improve the versatility and effectiveness of the special operations forces. As the Pentagon seeks new ways to exert American power in an era of lower budgets and higher aversion to wars on the scale of Iraq and Afghanistan, this report argues that expanding the role of special operations forces can—and should—be high on the agenda.



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Editorial Review

About the Author

Linda Robinson is a senior international policy analyst at RAND. In 2011–2012 she was an adjunct senior fellow for U.S. national security and foreign policy at the Council on Foreign Relations, and in 2013 she was a public policy scholar at the Wilson Center. A best-selling author and analyst, Robinson has reported on conflicts, political transitions, and other foreign policy issues around the world, including special operations in Afghanistan, Iraq, Colombia, and elsewhere. Her books include *Tell Me How This Ends: General David Petraeus and the Search for a Way Out of Iraq*; *Masters of Chaos: The Secret History of the Special Forces*; and *Intervention or Neglect: Central America and Panama Beyond the 1980s*. She was previously senior writer for national security and terrorism and Latin America bureau chief at *U.S. News & World Report* and senior editor at *Foreign Affairs* magazine. Robinson coauthored a study on special operations command and control for the U.S. government in 2008–2009. She is currently writing a book on special operations in Afghanistan. Robinson has also been a Nieman fellow at Harvard University, senior consulting fellow at the International Institute for Strategic Studies (IISS), and author-in-residence at the Merrill Center for Strategic Studies at the John Hopkins University's School of Advanced International Studies. She has received the Gerald R. Ford Prize for Distinguished Reporting on National Defense and other awards.

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