Securing the Homefront

Special Operations Command North’s Approach to Secure the Homeland against the People’s Republic of China

COL Matthew Tucker, USA
Lt Col Jason “Comrade” Buell, USAF

Abstract

This article examines how the US Special Operations Command North (SOCNORTH) is tasked with defending the US homeland against the growing strategic competition with China. The article highlights how China’s hybrid warfare tactics—including cognitive warfare, cyber-attacks, and economic coercion—have encroached into nearly every facet of American society, creating an asymmetric advantage for China. SOCNORTH, in coordination with the North American Aerospace Defense Command (NORAD), is responsible for executing the nation’s top defense priority—defending the homeland. The article outlines SOCNORTH’s “band” framework, which organizes its operations across three distinct operational environments: the Arctic region, the continental United States and maritime approaches, and the southern region including Mexico and the Bahamas. SOCNORTH has developed a theory of victory to guide its operations, focusing on preventing strategic distraction, assuring power projection, degrading adversary capabilities, eroding adversary influence, and providing specialized military options. The article emphasizes the critical role of special operations forces in safeguarding the homeland and the rules-based international order against strategic competitors like China.

***

Chinese President Xi Jinping’s November 2023 summit with President Joe Biden rekindled attention on the escalating strategic competition between the United States and the People’s Republic of China (PRC). Prior to this diplomatic engagement, the 2022 National Defense Strategy (NDS) noted that “the most comprehensive and serious challenge to US national security is the PRC’s coercive and increasingly aggressive endeavor to refashion the Indo-Pacific region and the international system to suit its interests and authoritarian preferences.”

Securing the Homefront

Employing a strategy of “winning without fighting,” the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) wages political warfare “below the threshold of large-scale military combat.”\(^2\) The ramifications of China’s all-domain campaign, spanning cognitive manipulation, lawfare, cyber intrusions, and economic coercion, extend far beyond the Indo-Pacific theater, infiltrating transregional networks and penetrating the US Northern Command (USNORTHCOM) area of responsibility (AOR). These hybrid activities permeate nearly every facet of American society, furnishing the PRC with an asymmetrical advantage within the homeland while eroding the joint force’s capacity to project power abroad. The PRC’s gray-zone activities undermine US national security, both regionally and globally, with the potential to isolate the United States from its international responsibilities while eroding democratic institutions. In essence, Xi’s authoritarian regime and its comprehensive societal assaults underscore the notion that the US homeland is no longer a sanctuary.\(^3\)

The pressing question persists: How can the United States counter the PRC in a security environment that is not characterized by large-scale conventional military operations? USNORTHCOM, in coordination with Canada via the combined North American Aerospace Defense Command (NORAD), assumes the mantle as the geographic combatant command (GCC) tasked with defending the homeland against the PRC’s unrestrained campaign. NORAD–USNORTHCOM’s (N–NC) overarching vision for executing the nation’s paramount defense priority—defending the homeland\(^4\)—is built upon the following premise: “A capable and persistent defense at home is a prerequisite to project power to a globally integrated forward fight.”\(^5\) However, without assigned forces to execute the homeland defense mission, N–NC does not have the option to deploy large-scale conventional forces to deter, de-escalate, deny, or defeat the PRC within the USNORTHCOM AOR. Consequently, it must lean on the cultivation of robust relationships among its military components, regions, and subordinate commands, as well as engage with international and interagency partners. This approach is essential for executing a globally integrated, layered defense and deterrence strategy (GILD&D), aimed at preempting or swiftly responding to threats against the homeland.

---


As the theater special operations command (TSOC) and special operations component command of USNORTHCOM, Special Operations Command North (SOCNORTH) plans and executes all-domain special operations aimed at identifying, deterring, and disrupting threats and hazards throughout the USNORTHCOM AOR, while simultaneously positioning the nation for strategic advantage. SOCNORTH has operationalized special operations campaigning to seamlessly integrate with USNORTHCOM’s holistic all-domain, whole-of-government/nations (WOG/N) approach outlined in the 2021 N–NC Strategy. SOCNORTH’s operations, activities, exercises, and investments (OAEI) are meticulously designed and executed yield distinctive outcomes in collaboration with a diverse array of partners, including joint, interagency, multinational, and private-sector entities, across USNORTHCOM’s three integrated geographic defensive layers: the forward layer, the approaches, and the homeland. The N–NC strategic principle of global integration (GI) defines the forward layer as comprising forward-deployed Canadian and US forces, seamlessly integrated with allies and partners; the approaches layer encompasses joint force capabilities, leveraging contributions from Canada, Mexico, and the Bahamas; and the homeland layer includes the US military, interagency, and commercial resources. Despite the comprehensive integration outlined in this framework, it is essential to acknowledge that adversaries are not constrained by such structures. Consequently, SOCNORTH has designed an analytical framework to enhance domain awareness of malign influence and hostile activities in support of GILD&D.

SOCNORTH’s “band” framework (northern, central, southern) underscores the unique value that special operations forces (SOF) contribute to the joint force and the broader WOG/N strategy, enabling deterrence in competition, de-escalation in crises, and denial and defeat in conflict. Central to this framework are principles of all-domain awareness, information dominance, and decision superiority. The SOCNORTH bands necessitate the presence of SOF within the USNORTHCOM AOR to assess challenges, opportunities, and threats across three distinct operational environments (OE), extending beyond the resource networks outlined in the N–NC layers. These bands are based on adversaries’ tactics and strategies targeting the homeland, facilitating the identification of specific challenges, and the development of tailored solutions to bolster homeland defense.

---

6 NORAD-USNORTHCOM Strategy.
Securing the Homefront

Figure 1. Gearing Up for Arctic Ops: Special Forces Load Sleds and Ski-Dos for Arctic Edge 24. US Army Soldiers assigned to the 10th and 19th Special Forces Groups load equipment and snowmobiles into a MC-130J Commando II during Arctic Edge 24 in Utqiaġvik, Alaska, 8 March 2024. During Arctic Edge 24, more than 400 joint and allied special operators trained in extreme cold conditions to sharpen SOF readiness across unique specialties like long range fires and movements, special reconnaissance, rapid resupply, personnel recovery, and medical care in the austere Arctic environment. AE24 is a NORAD and US Northern Command–led homeland defense exercise demonstrating the US military’s capabilities in extreme cold weather, joint force readiness, and US military commitment to mutual strategic security interests in the Arctic region. (US Air Force photo by SrA Drew Cyburt)

The Northern band consists of the pan-Arctic approach, stretching from the western end of the Aleutian Islands to the Greenland–Iceland–United Kingdom (GIUK) gap in the Atlantic Ocean. It is here that SOCNORTH focuses on characterizing malign activity, contesting global chokepoints, enhancing all-domain awareness, and enabling GILD&D campaigning in cooperation with US Indo-Pacific Command (USINDOPACOM) and US European Command (USEUCOM). In support of the commander of USNORTHCOM’s responsibility to advocate for Arctic capabilities, SOCNORTH has solidified relationships in both the North American Arctic and the European High North to leverage ally and partner capabilities. Embracing a collaborative pan-Arctic strategy is imperative for countering Russian aggression and expansion, as well as challenging PRC assertions in the region. The support of our North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) allies
and partners is crucial in safeguarding territorial integrity, preserving freedom of movement, and securing access to strategic resources within the USNORTHCOM AOR.

The Central band encompasses the intricate mission of integrating homeland defense with homeland security, spanning the continental United States and the multi-domain approaches, including the Atlantic and Pacific maritime approaches. Within this band, SOCNORTH prioritizes the identification and characterization of threats to disrupt adversarial attempts to contain and isolate the United States. As strategic adversaries employ cognitive warfare tactics to undermine democratic institutions, exploit cyberspace vulnerabilities along the Digital Silk Road, and target critical infrastructure and key resources (CI/KR), SOCNORTH must employ multi-domain red teaming and cultivate deep relationships with law enforcement and intelligence community stakeholders to enhance resilience. Equipped with an enhanced all-domain threat assessment, SOCNORTH is at the forefront of efforts to expand authorities, permissions, and capabilities necessary for the United States to uphold its unwavering crisis response capability within the USNORTHCOM AOR and along the Pacific and Atlantic approaches.

In the Southern band—encompassing Mexico, the Gulf of Mexico, and the Bahamas—SOCNORTH confronts a wholly distinct array of challenges. While SOCNORTH engages with NATO allies and partners in the North and collaborates with domestic interagency and commercial sector entities, its interactions in the Southern band entail working with national partners lacking formal security obligations derived from alliances or the Constitution. Moreover, SOCNORTH contends with destabilizing, multi-domain threats from malign actors and conflicting national interests, posing challenges unlike those in the other two bands. Consequently, SOCNORTH is adapting its approach to foster a regional identity based on collective security. OAEIs in the Southern band are crafted to operate alongside Mexican and Bahamian partners, fortifying their capabilities, addressing common threats, pursuing shared interests, and nurturing enduring relationships crucial for operational synergy in advancing the GILD&D of North America as a whole.

The Digital Silk Road, an extension of the PRC’s Belt and Road Initiative, represents a concerning dimension of China’s global strategy. While portrayed as a means of technological advancement and cooperation, it serves as a tool for extending Beijing’s influence and control. Under the guise of aid and support, China provides recipient states with telecommunications infrastructure, artificial intelligence systems, surveillance technology, and other high-tech solutions. However, these initiatives often come with strings attached, including political leverage and economic dependency on China. Despite its branding as a collaborative effort, the Digital Silk Road primarily serves China’s interests, furthering its agenda of expanding influence and dominance in strategic sectors.
In light of a refined comprehension of the threats and opportunities spanning the USNORTHCOM AOR, SOCNORTH has devised a theory of victory (ToV) to navigate present operations while cultivating strategic advantages for the future. This ToV empowers the TSOC to concurrently establish conditions for the successful execution of homeland defense contingency operations, compete decisively against adversaries, and mitigate risks amid crises and conflicts. Comprising five overarching conditions for victory, the ToV ensures SOCNORTH remains harmonized with regional and global entities tasked with homeland protection, safeguarding US interests, disrupting adversary activities, and fortifying national positions of advantage. To realize these strategic imperatives, SOCNORTH must consistently execute OAEIs in support of all five conditions.

1. SOCNORTH will prevent strategic distraction by integrating SOF into the WOG/N approach, ensuring the United States remains focused on critical contingencies, particularly hostile takeovers of Taiwan and Ukraine.

2. SOCNORTH will assure power projection and domain awareness by leveraging access, placement, and influence with mission partners throughout the USNORTHCOM AOR. This effort aims to enhance SOCNORTH's capability to detect, characterize, and disrupt irregular threats to the homeland.

3. SOCNORTH will simultaneously degrade adversary capability by illuminating and holding at risk adversary CI/KR across and approaching the USNORTHCOM AOR.

4. SOCNORTH will erode adversary influence and legitimacy by executing operations in the information environment, supporting USNORTHCOM's strategic messaging campaigns across the AOR. These actions aim to counter malign influence and promote resiliency.

5. Finally, SOCNORTH will provide SOF options to contest critical strategic lines of communications. It will achieve this by leveraging emerging and exquisite capabilities, enhancing its posture in key locations, and maintaining a warfighting advantage across all domains.

The SOCNORTH operational approach is the mechanism that operationalizes the ToV. It is designed to fortify our special operations prowess and innovate exquisite capabilities within the joint force and WOG/N approach. Its mission: outmaneuver adversaries in the present and, if necessary, secure victory in the days to come. SOCNORTH's operational approach operates through four lines of effort (LOE), empowering special operations campaigning to counter malign
activity in the gray zone and achieve desired outcomes utilizing all facets of national power—diplomatic, informational, military, and economic.

- **LOE 1: Contest Adversary Activity in the AOR** directs SOCNORTH to plan and execute operations and sensitive activities to impose costs, create dilemmas, and generate positions of advantage for the nation over adversaries. LOE 1 ensures SOCNORTH can campaign in all domains and OEs but remain below the threshold of armed conflict through tailored signaling of credible integrated deterrence.

- **LOE 2: Operationalize GILD&D** drives SOCNORTH to strengthen relationships with mission partners and bolster unified action to safeguard the homelands, protect CI/KR, and enable power projection to meet challenges across the competition continuum. LOE 2 focuses SOCNORTH development of operational compatibility with partners and ensuring the necessary agreements and networks are in place to authorize, permit, fund, and execute cooperative WOG/N OAEIs.

- **LOE 3: Set the Theater for Crisis Response and Conflict** enables SOCNORTH to leverage access, placement, and influence with mission partners to execute SOF-peculiar missions in support of GILD&D and activated contingency plans. Campaigning efforts in LOE 3 allow SOCNORTH to field resilient teams to enhance threat awareness and ensure the SOF-enabling infrastructure is in place to facilitate a rapid response to emergent crises.

- **LOE 4: Advance All-Domain Warfighting** challenges SOCNORTH to look beyond the current fight and build all-domain, multidisciplinary advantage to win today and in future OEs. Building an adaptive culture that is willing to innovate and exercise unique capabilities and resilient capacity allows SOCNORTH to rapidly evolve and demonstrate next-generation effects to deter strategic competitors and other hostile actors from attacking the homeland and United States interests abroad. With the ToV and operational approach, SOCNORTH has the vision and campaigning mechanisms to set the conditions to both defend the USNORTHCOM AOR in its entirety and successfully execute operations abroad when directed, hone threat-identification efforts, and map out the necessary investments to overcome the challenges of modern and future warfighting.

The vast oceans that border our coastlines no longer afford us the advantages of time and distance from our adversaries they once did. These strategic competitors now operate both within our near abroad and inside our own borders. We must be willing to adapt to this new environment in new and meaningful ways that include
enhanced authorities and resourcing along with integration of emerging technologies. Failure to do so will only exacerbate the pressing need to confront both conventional and irregular threats to our homeland. We must set the theater today to ensure we can maintain advantages over our adversaries and rapidly counter crises and conflicts. We cannot afford to await until a national calamity to rally our resolve against existential threats. This endeavor demands concerted effort at every echelon, from the individual to our highest-ranking leaders, to contest our adversaries, uphold democracy, and defend the rules-based global order. Rooted in strategic competition and honed by decades of experience, SOF stand uniquely poised to safeguard our homeland and national interests.

**COL Matthew Tucker, USA**
Colonel Tucker, a graduate of the US Military Academy, began his military journey in May 1998 as an Infantry Officer. Throughout his career, he served in various leadership roles, including commanding Company C, 2nd Battalion, 10th Special Forces Group (Airborne), and leading Task Force 220 in Afghanistan. He graduated from the National War College in 2021 and assumed command of the 2nd Special Warfare Training Group (Airborne) before becoming Commander of Special Operations Command North in May 2023.

**Lt Col Jason “Comrade” Buell, USAF**
When the article was written, Lieutenant Colonel Buell was serving as the Chief of Policy and Arctic planner in the J5 at Special Operations Command North. He is a graduate of the University of Washington and holds an MA from St. Mary’s University, an MA from Air Command and Staff College, and an MPhil from the School of Advanced Air and Space Studies. Throughout his career, he has provided intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance, joint all-domain operational planning, and remote combat support to Kosovo Task Force Falcon, Operations Iraqi Freedom/New Dawn, Enduring Freedom, Inherent Resolve, and Resolute Support, and campaigning efforts to gain advantage in strategic competition. Lieutenant Colonel Buell is currently serving as a squadron commander for an Air Force Special Operations Command unit in North Carolina.

**Disclaimer**
The views and opinions expressed or implied in *JIPA* are those of the authors and should not be construed as carrying the official sanction of the Department of Defense, Department of the Air Force, Air Education and Training Command, Air University, or other agencies or departments of the US government or their international equivalents.