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Washington, D.C.

Session 3 Panel Member
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DR. MICHELE L. MALVESTI: I'll keep my remarks very brief, recognizing I'm up against a coffee break and probably a bathroom break for some people.

I would like to continue with the conversation that Sarah just started regarding tensions in partnerships. And I'd actually like to talk specifically about tensions in the partnerships that the Special Operations community has with its interagency policy makers in envisioning and conducting operations overseas. That's where I'd like to particularly focus my comments.

One of the key themes that Admiral McRaven and his team speak to so often and elegantly is the importance of relationships – relationships for building trust. For me, two key components of trust are both a shared understanding of and a shared responsibility for how to employ the nation's instruments of national power to optimal effect. So, I'd like to address some of the challenges, and quite frankly, some key impediments to optimizing the use of Special Operations Forces across the globe – including for building regional security – that could potentially hinder what the admiral is trying to build on behalf of the nation.

Keying off this tension is the first challenge: Policy makers and departments and agencies who still underestimate SOF's ability to help prevent conflict through partnership engagement and capacity building operations and activities. Many departments and policy makers still have an exceptionally narrow view of Special Operations. They tend to associate Special Operations almost exclusively with surgical strikes, with kinetic activities, and they fail to understand the full spectrum of activities that Special Operations Forces can bring to bear on behalf of the nation. These activities include not just partnership engagement operations, but also more nuanced forms of power and deterrence that SOF can bring to any situation. Compared with kinetic strikes, compared to surgical operations, these types of longer-term engagement activities and more nuanced forms of power projection are far more difficult to showcase to optimal effect. Certainly, they are more difficult to showcase to equally impressive effect as some of the surgical operations that many policy makers tend to focus on today. Accordingly, illustrating the importance and ultimate effectiveness of regional security and partnership engagement is more challenging. In this light, I would like to commend the work that Beth had mentioned here on this panel regarding USAID's collaboration with SOCOM and SOF in terms of better leveraging these differentiated capabilities in a more optimal way.

There is a second challenge and tension between policy makers and the Special Operations community: Because SOF's capabilities for the most part still continue to outpace the nation's policies for their employment, policy makers and departments and agency partners will often overestimate SOF's capabilities. On the one hand, decision makers often underestimate what SOF can bring to bear in terms of conflict prevention, regional engagement, and partnership building. And yet on the other hand, policy makers and some of SOF's department and agency counterparts will often overestimate what SOF can accomplish in other instances. SOF have proven their ability, particularly over the past decade, to address a full range of twenty-first-century threats and challenges. But these forces do not have unlimited capacity. Modern SOF are the most combat capable in the world – indeed, throughout history. If given the right resources, they could adapt to virtually any situation. But simply because these forces can do just about anything does not mean that they should be asked to do everything. In his comments this morning, Dr. Carter emphasized that SOF are central to so many of DOD's priorities and that SOF give policy makers great ROI,



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or return on their investment. It is in this light, I would note, that SOF are at risk of being over-utilized, mis-utilized, and being asked to take on more conventionalized work that perhaps the general purposes forces or the all-purpose forces are better positioned to conduct. Indeed, SOF are being asked to take on work that perhaps diverts them for maintaining optimal readiness for those particular Special Operations that they are uniquely qualified to conduct. Policy makers need to understand and respect the limits, as well as the specializations, of these particular forces. Moreover, the over-use of SOF in many ways continues to contribute to the fraying of the force, which Admiral McRaven has made one of the central tenets of his command priorities.

A third tension that is connected with the over-estimation of SOF's abilities as part of a whole-of-government approach is that policy makers will often conflate SOF's ability to achieve their effects on target (at which they are incredible) with the achievement of a durable strategic outcome. These are not one and the same. It's incumbent upon policy makers and departments and agencies to provide the connective tissue between SOF's ability to achieve their effects on target (either through surgical strikes or the special warfare activities we are discussing on this panel) and the broader strategic framework for what the nation is trying to achieve globally, with its partners, and on behalf of U.S. foreign policy objectives.

In the end, true, effective, and enduring partnerships, including partnerships between SOF and those decision makers who place them in harm's way, will come down to shared understanding and shared responsibility through continued education. And this is part of what forums such as IFPA/Fletcher are doing on behalf of SOCOM. Indeed, in building trust through relationships, Admiral McRaven is trying to educate and produce a common understanding of SOF's full-spectrum capabilities, particularly those capabilities that help enhance regional security.

It is incumbent upon all parties to commit to this shared understanding and common cause. Special Operators must continue to educate those who will place them into harm's way, as those policy makers will ultimately bear the ultimate responsibility for their optimal utilization. In terms of a shared understanding of and commitment to SOF's abilities to conduct full-spectrum operations, it is essential that policy makers properly resource, enable, and incentivize all components of Special Operations and the full spectrum of their activities.

In the end, a willingness to appropriately resource, enable, and incentivize SOF will keep help to keep SOF special. This shared understanding and responsibility also will position SOF to be able to look across the strategic landscape, identify opportunities and challenges that affect the nation's security and then, quite frankly, go where others cannot go and do what others cannot do on behalf of the nation. Unfortunately, this component of the partnership between SOF itself and the policy makers has not yet been fully realized or optimized. And with that I'll cede my time back to the panel.