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Sure, shrink the defense budget -- but give even more bucks to Special Operations!

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If you put that proposition to the public, I think they'd agree. Lately, in the wake of [getting bin Laden](#), there have been two books about Navy SEALs on the [New York Times bestseller list](#), [Seal Team Six](#) and [The Heart and the Fist](#). Here one guy steeped in the subject makes the argument.

By J. Michael Barrett

Best Defense guest columnist

A new question is circling around the Pentagon: With bin Laden out of the way, is it time for the Pentagon to get back to planning for and fighting large wars? A decade without any further attacks on the scale of 9/11 indicates that perhaps the Bush administration overestimated (albeit justifiably) the capabilities of al Qaida and its ilk. Is it time to recalibrate our strategic approach to our global commitments and interests? How best do we allocate our military and other national security resources for the near, mid and long term?

The desire to move away from low level conflicts is understandable. Our decade-long detour into asymmetric warfare has been bruising and all encompassing, causing all manner of strategic and operational changes and a refocusing of attention away from traditional warfare and into the messy arena of low-intensity conflict and, perhaps inevitably, of mission creep into nation building. Now there is a new sense we can put all that behind us, that the past decade was an aberration and the military ought to go back to dealing with large nation state capabilities. But abandoning the emphasis on **Special Operations Forces (SOF)** and their role in winning small, dirty wars would be a grave mistake.

First, it is clear operations by non-state actors and insurgents attempting to take over faltering nations will continue to plague the global community with high frequency in coming decades. That means more assignments for Special Operations' Green Berets, Navy Seals and Marine Corps elements, even if those forces must come at the expense of traditional forces such as tank brigades and large-scale infantry because SOF elements are necessary for effectively fending off insurgents and building partner capacity in weak and faltering states. Second, the same SOF capabilities witnessed in the raid that killed Osama bin Laden -- stealth insertion, small footprint, direct action, and rapid egress -- will be called upon if we have to secure loose nuclear materials if (or when?) Pakistan or North Korea collapse -- both of which are increasingly realistic scenarios. Finally, SOF can also be used to great effect as a diversionary or harassment force in larger conflicts by opening up additional fronts in China's eastern border or in remote

regions of Iran. And those are only the foreseeable risks; if the past decade has taught us anything it is that strategic surprise is the only constant in military planning.

So despite the allure of turning away from SOF and refocusing solely on large wars, we must instead continue to build out our Special Operations/low-intensity conflict capabilities with a discrete subset of the total force.

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