YJIA: In an article you co-wrote in May 2011 about the operation against Osama Bin Laden, you identified four major concerns that policymakers must confront when considering counterterrorism (CT) actions. They are sovereignty, casualties and operational failure, assessing effectiveness, and the risk not taken. Which of these poses the greatest challenge to US policymakers going forward and why?

Malvesti: Many decisions to combat terrorism are characterized by conditions of risk and uncertainty. When faced with a decision to approve a highly sensitive CT operation, policymakers weigh both political and operational considerations. The precise considerations, of course, will depend on the given scenario and the larger context of the decision. But in addition to those you mentioned, other issues that often come into play include the level of confidence that policymakers have in the underlying intelligence, external pressures they might feel to take action, the aspirations they have in terms of policy objectives, and whether or not they assess that a tactical success can produce a strategic outcome or otherwise have an appreciable effect on the enemy. To address your question, I would cite two key continuing challenges for CT policymakers. First, the most significant terrorist threats will continue to emanate not from “hot” battlefields, but rather from countries with which the United States is not at war. Such threats will be exacerbated in countries where the United States lacks willing, able, and reliable host nation partners in combating mutual terrorist enemies. A second continuing challenge for policymakers will be dealing with risk more broadly. When deciding whether or not to undertake risky operations, as was arguably the case with the Bin Laden raid, it is reasonable and prudent for policymakers to be concerned with the potential negative consequences that can occur if the operation fails. Yet the notion

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of what is risky has evolved in the ten years since 9/11. When the country is capable of acting with probable success to disrupt terrorism or defeat terrorist enemies, a decision not to take a risk can be equally consequential.

YJIA: There have been allegations of institutionalized Pakistani support to terrorist groups operating against US forces in Afghanistan. How do you foresee US policy toward Pakistan changing, especially with regard to CT cooperation?

Malvesti: The ideal host nation partner in combating terrorism is a functioning state that is governed by the rule of law, has the ability to extend its writ, and shares a common approach and a history of successful collaboration with the United States against mutual terrorist enemies. The United States, however, will not always get such ideal partners. This is true in the case of Pakistan, where the US-Pakistan relationship on CT cooperation has been sub-optimal at best and fraught with frustration. That country’s civilian and military leadership must do more. As strained and frustrating as the relationship might be, the United States must continue to strengthen its CT partnership with Pakistan.

YJIA: You have written extensively about the role of Special Operations Forces (SOF) in ensuring national security. How do you expect SOF employment to evolve as an instrument of national policy?

Malvesti: In the decade since 9/11, SOF have experienced their most extensive use and greatest transformation of the modern SOF era. Their employment will continue to be essential to the nation’s security, including on issues beyond counterterrorism. For instance, the ability of SOF to locate and destroy or render safe weapons of mass destruction provides policymakers with an important option in addressing WMD threats and challenges. But I would also argue that another critical aspect of SOF’s continued employment rests with their long-held role as agents of change. SOF use imagination and unconventional thinking to push the envelope in tactics, technology, and capabilities. This innovation often forces points of clarity in larger national policies for SOF employment. The continuing evolution of SOF as innovators and change agents will help to create alternatives for policymakers as they find ways to cope with and address multiple threats to the nation’s security.

YJIA: President Obama recently announced the deployment of SOF personnel to assist in the effort against the Lord’s Resistance Army in Uganda, and US SOF were also reportedly on the ground in Libya. Do you think that these “SOF-centric” operations will replace the kinds of “shock and awe” tactics that we saw in Iraq and Afghanistan?

Malvesti: SOF are strategic national assets that should be utilized wherever they can add value. While they have been invaluable on the battlefields of Iraq and Afghanistan,
SOF arguably are used to greater effect when they undertake leading roles in more ambiguous situations and non-traditional operating areas. Moreover, SOF have well-regarded expertise in engaging with host nation forces and indigenous populations. They are skilled in languages, cultures, and regional politics. Combined with unique skillsets they have in leveraging local relationships, building partner capacity, and operating in politically sensitive environments, SOF increasingly will be used in the atypical battle spaces of the twenty-first century.

– Charles Faint conducted this interview in October 2011, and served as Lead Editor.