Special operations (forces) explained

On the nature of Western special operations and the forces that conduct them

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During the last two decades the operational environment for Western armed forces has been dominated by the global war on terror and irregular warfare.[1] Both modes of conflict are strongly associated with unorthodox units and tactics resulting in special operations forces occupying, or at least sharing, the main stage.[2] Despite their recent prominence, there remains a limited grasp on the conceptual nature of special operations and the associated forces.[3] Because such a limited grasp invites misuse of special operations forces by policy makers and military commanders, a thorough conceptual exploration of special operations is warranted.

This article is divided in four parts. Firstly, a brief history of Western special operations is presented focussing on trends to highlight the various manifestations, or characteristics, of special operations in recent history. Secondly, contemporary definitions found within doctrinal and academic literature on special operations are analysed. Thirdly, the special operations value proposition is studied by examining theory on the nature of special operations in conjunction with its strategic-value ratio. Lastly, the discussed elements will be used to synthesise an enduring theory of special operations grounded in its timeless nature and thus distinct from contextual manifestations. This theory is meant to act as a guideline for Western special operations and the forces associated with them.[4]

A short history (of modern Western special operations)[5]

The contemporarily prevailing understanding of special operations and its forces is rooted within World War II.[6] This does not imply that there were no special operations or forces conducting them before this time. Warfare has been a staple of human society and as such, unorthodox or special modes of warfare have been around for ages.[7] Current Western special operations organisations, however, mostly trace their history to units created during World War II. Most prominent amongst these units were the (British) Commandos, the Special Air Service, the Rangers, the First Special Service Force, the Jedburghs, the Special Operations Executive, and the Office of Strategic Services Special Operations (OSS-SO) in the European theatre and the Marine Raiders, Navy Frogmen, and OSS – SO in the Pacific theatre.[8] British Prime Minister Winston Churchill was a strong proponent of special operations hoping they would 'set

U.S. Marines with 1st Marine Raider Battalion, Marine Raider Regiment, Marine Corps Forces Special Operations Command, await departure during an exercise near Yuma, Arizona

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1 There is much confusion and no uniformity regarding the use of terms such as conventional, unconventional, regular, and irregular in relation to warfare. Conventional is strongly associated with not using weapons of mass destruction whilst unconventional is connected to supporting an insurgency. Irregular is both used to describe conflicts that revolve around the support of the population contrasting it with state-on-state traditional warfare but also used to describe all actions undertaken by non-regular forces. However, within doctrinal and scholarly special operations writings much use is made of terms such as conventional and regular to highlight the contrast with special. It is because of the mentioned specific association with these terms that in this article no use will be made of conventional and regular as a contrasting adjective to special. Instead, this article makes use of the terms normal operations and normal operations forces.

2 Jessica Glicken Turnley, Kobi Michael, and Eyal Ben-Ari, eds., *Special Operations Forces in the 21st Century: Perspectives from the Social Sciences*, Cass Military Studies (New York, Routledge, 2018) 15–16; James Warren, 'Special Ops Rule in War on Terror', July 12, 2017. See: https://www.thedailybeast.com/special-ops
-rule-in-war-on-terror; Funs Titulaer and Martijn Kitzen, 'The Population-Centric Turn in Special Operations: A Possible Way Ahead for SOF Informed by a Cross-Disciplinary Analysis of State-Building Interventions', in: *Special Operations Journal* 6 (2020) (1) 35–36.

3 Christopher Marsh, James D. Kiras, and Patricia J. Blocksome, eds., *Special Operations: Out of the Shadows* (Boulder, Colorado, Lynne Rienner Publishers, Inc, 2019) 3; Turnley, Michael, and Ben-Ari, *Special Operations Forces in the 21st Century*, 15.

4 The author wishes to emphasize that when discussing special operations forces he is not referring to specific units. Within the context of this paper special operations forces are simply the forces conducting special operations.

5 For this paper, the concept of special operations is considered inherently military in nature presupposing that Western military operations are conducted within the responsibility and authority of a generic Western ministry of Defence. This paper furthermore assumes that the execution is predominantly being done by military forces and supported by civilians.

6 Turnley, Michael, and Ben-Ari, *Special Operations Forces in the 21st Century*, 16; Mark Moyar, *Oppose Any Foe: The Rise of America's Special Operations Forces*, First edition (New York: Basic Books, 2017) 1–96; John Arquilla, ed., *From Troy to Entebbe: Special Operations in Ancient and Modern Times* (Lanham, Maryland, University Press of America, 1996) ix.

7 Examples are the assassination of King Baldwin in 1192 by Nizari assassins, the operations conducted by Rogers' Rangers during the Seven Years' War in the 18th century, the raiding exploits of Thomas 'The Sea Wolf' Cochrane during the Napoleonic Wars, and the activities of T.E. Lawrence throughout the Arab Revolt against the Ottoman Empire in the early 20th century. Arquilla, *From Troy to Entebbe*; Yuval Noah Harari, *Special Operations in the Age of Chivalry, 1100-1550* (The Boydell Press, 2009).

8 Moyar, *Oppose Any Foe*, 1–96; Hans van de Wall and Rien Stegman, *Commando: Achnacarry 1942 - Roosendaal 2014 : historie en opleiding van Nederlandse commando's* (Roosendaal, 2014) 21–94; James D. Kiras, *Special Operations and Strategy from World War II to the War on Terrorism* (New York, Routledge, 2006) 35–111; Arquilla, *From Troy to Entebbe*, 195–254; Jelle Hooiveld, *Operatie Jedburgh: Geheime Geallieerde Missies in Nederland 1944-1945* (Amsterdam, Boom, 2014); Eliot A. Cohen, *The Big Stick: The Limits of Soft Power & the Necessity of Military Force* (New York, Basic Books, 2016) 75.

Europe ablaze' through conducting large raids and organising resistance forces behind enemy lines. By frustrating Axis Powers in this way, he sought to reclaim some initiative. Especially when the Allies were on their backfoot during the early 1940s, designing units for this goal was considered a low-cost and therefore attractive option.[9]

At the American side, President Franklin D. Roosevelt was similarly enthusiastic about what special operations were purportedly able to achieve with relatively few means. He was mostly inspired by his son who was a captain at that time and had convinced his father about the need to create special units, much to the chagrin of senior normal operations forces commanders.[10] Such commanders were wary of creating special units because they tended to siphon away capable personnel.[11] This results in the most common grievance of normal operations forces against special operations forces: the notion that the draining of good personnel to special operations forces creates more pains than gains on the whole.[12] The argument here is that the strategic gains that special operations forces can achieve do not weigh up against the loss in strategic gains consequential to normal operations forces losing good personnel. Historical analysis has shown that this claim is not without merit.[13] There were multiple reasons for this lack of special operations efficacy during World War II, ranging from poor choices by commanding officers who lacked understanding of the strengths and weaknesses of special operations forces to the fact that the war itself, especially during the second half, was ill suited for small and lightly armed elements.[14]

Following World War II, most of the special operations forces units conceived and stood up during this conflict were disbanded. Firstly, because there was no peacetime task for them and secondly, because they were not institutionalised within the armed forces. Consequently, when they lost political support because of a lack of interest in their capabilities, normal operations forces quickly ensured special operations forces were put in obscurity, assimilated, or filtered out of the system.[15]

The post-World War II wars of decolonization provided the conditions for a resurgence of special operations forces. This wave of decolonization, combined with the Communist strategy of globally supporting armed insurgencies, resulted in Western powers getting increasingly involved in irregular warfare. A type of warfare very distinct from the traditional form waged during World War II.[16] The Western legacy force of World War II, especially with regard to the US, was very much organised towards a traditional conflict and therefore had a limited capability and capacity for conducting irregular warfare.[17] As a consequence, special operations forces units were once again stood up or moved into prominence, usually not to organize resistance forces or act as raiding parties but to conduct counterinsurgency operations. Examples of this are the British Special Air Service in Malaya and Oman, the American Special Forces in Vietnam, and the Dutch Depot Speciale Troepen in Indonesia.[18] The results varied. In conflicts where there was a sound overall strategy integrating military and civilian efforts towards a clearly defined end

9 Moyar, *Oppose Any Foe*, 80; Arquilla, *From Troy to Entebbe*, 195; Wall and Stegman, *Commando*, 47–51.

10 Moyar, *Oppose Any Foe*, 42.

11 Bernd Horn, '"Love 'Em or Hate 'em": Learning to Live with Elites', in: *Canadian Military Journal* 8 (2007) (4).

12 Wall and Stegman, *Commando*, 47.

13 Moyar, *Oppose Any Foe*, 38–39, 61–62, 283; Wall and Stegman, *Commando*, 92–93.

14 Arquilla, *From Troy to Entebbe*, xxii–xxiii; Moyar, *Oppose Any Foe*, 38–39; Kiras, *Special Operations and Strategy from World War II to the War on Terrorism*, 116; Turnley, Michael, and Ben-Ari, *Special Operations Forces in the 21st Century*, 16.

15 Moyar, *Oppose Any Foe*, xvi–xx; Marsh, Kiras, and Blocksome, *Special Operations*, 1; Turnley, Michael, and Ben-Ari, *Special Operations Forces in the 21st Century*, 16–17; Richard Rubright, *A Unified Theory for Special Operations*, JSOU Report 17–1, 2017, 16.

16 Turnley, Michael, and Ben-Ari, *Special Operations Forces in the 21st Century*, 17–18; Marsh, Kiras, and Blocksome, *Special Operations*, 1–2.

17 John A. Nagl, *Learning to Eat Soup with a Knife: Counterinsurgency Lessons from Malaya and Vietnam*, Paperback ed (Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 2005) 48–50; Turnley, Michael, and Ben-Ari, *Special Operations Forces in the 21st Century*, 17.

18 Robert Grainger Ker Thompson, *Defeating Communist Insurgency: Experiences from Malaya and Vietnam*, Studies in International Security, no. 10 (London, Chatto & Windus, 1966); Nagl, *Learning to Eat Soup with a Knife*; Wall and Stegman, *Commando*, 131–72; Major General Tony Jeapes, *SAS: Secret War: Operation Storm in the Middle East.*, 2016; Bauke Geersing, *Kapitein Raymond Westerling en de Zuid-Celebes-Affaire (1946-1947): Mythe en Werkelijkheid. Een Markante Periode uit de Geschiedenis van Nederlands- Indië* (Soesterberg, Aspekt, 2019).

Dutch infantry in the Dutch East Indies in 1948. As Western powers were increasingly getting involved in irregular warfare, the post-World War II wars of decolonization provided the conditions for a resurgence of special operations forces

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state, the tactical application of special operations forces effectively contributed to the strategic goal. Noteworthy instances of this are the British campaigns in Malaya and Oman during the 1950s and 1970s.[19] Less successful efforts can be found in Algeria and Vietnam.[20]

The subsequent Vietnam-hangover in the US had a strong influence on Western military thinking onwards resulting in counterinsurgency going into obscurity. Consequentially, normal operations forces concentrated on concepts such as Active Defense and AirLand Battle.[21] Special operations forces had a limited role to play in the major combat operations associated with these concepts and therefore eagerly stepped in when the next gap in military force presented itself: hostage-taking terrorism.[22] During the 1970s and 1980s, Islamic, Socialist and other forms of terroristic violence emerged. Examples are the Munich massacre during the Olympic Games of 1972, the takeover of an Air France jet with the goal of acquiring Israeli hostages in 1976, the hijacking of a train in the Netherlands in 1977, and the occupation of the Iranian Embassy in London in 1980. As a result, new special units focussing on counterterrorism and hostage release operations were stood up within the armed forces and police organisations.[23]

During the 1980s and 1990s, Western special operations forces were not deployed regularly. There were exceptions such as the British in the Falklands (1982), the Americans in Granada (1983) and Somalia (1993), and the Dutch in Bosnia (1995), but it was relatively calm compared to the ensuing craze following the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001. The

19 Thompson, *Defeating Communist Insurgency*; Jeapes, *SAS*; Laurens Degenaar, 'The Omani Model: The Model on How to Defeat Twenty-First Century Insurgencies?', in: *Militaire Spectator* 187 (2018) (6).

20 Robert Komer, *Bureaucracy Does Its Thing: Institutional Constraints on U.S.-GVN Performance in Vietnam* (Santa Monica, CA, RAND Corporation, 1972); David Galula and John A. Nagl, *Counterinsurgency Warfare: Theory and Practice*, PSI Classics of the Counterinsurgency Era (Westport, CT, Praeger Security International, 2006).

21 David H. Ucko, *The New Counterinsurgency Era: Transforming the U.S. Military for Modern Wars* (Washington, D.C., Georgetown University Press, 2009) chapters 2–3.

22 Turnley, Michael, and Ben-Ari, *Special Operations Forces in the 21st Century*, 18–19.

23 Moyar, *Oppose Any Foe*, 157–60; Turnley, Michael, and Ben-Ari, *Special Operations Forces in the 21st Century*, 18–19.

Norwegian special forces stand ready alongside a Lithuanian army machine gunner on a deserted street corner in Daugavpils, Latvia. A noteworthy side effect of the commitment of Western special operations forces to Afghanistan and Iraq is that cooperation between NATO special operations forces increased

world of Western special operations forces was turned upside down in Afghanistan and Iraq. First, US special operations forces played a major role in the ousting of the Taliban from large sections of Afghanistan by working with local resistance organisations and providing them access to Air Power.[24]

The role of special operations forces during the invasion of Iraq in 2003 was more limited and like Desert Storm in the early 1990s mainly confined to small-scale raids, reconnaissance, and deception operations.[25] Following the major-combat phases, it became clear that the US-led coalitions were not able to effectively fill the power vacuums created by the ousting of the Baathists in Iraq and the Taliban in Afghanistan. Consequently, and notwithstanding strong resistance from some elements within the armed forces, counterinsurgency was back in the spotlight.[26] Fundamental to the operational counterinsurgency approach was the notion that irreconcilable insurgents, or terrorists, needed to be targeted through discriminate counterterrorism tactics.[27] This counterterrorism effort was a capability gap that Western special operations forces readily filled.[28] Moreover,

24 Henry A. Crumpton, *Art of Intelligence: Lessons from a Life in the CIA's Clandestine Service* (Penguin Group, 2013) chapters. 9–10; Doug Stanton, *Horse Soldiers: The Extraordinary Story of a Band of U.S. Soldiers Who Rode to Victory in Afghanistan* (Scribner, 2010); Moyar, *Oppose Any Foe*, 221–56.

25 Pete Blaber, *The Mission, the Men, and Me: Lessons from a Former Delta Force Commander* (Berkley Caliber, 2017) 1–13; Moyar, *Oppose Any Foe*, 256–63; Sean Naylor, *Relentless Strike: The Secret History of Joint Special Operations Command*, First edition (New York, St. Martin's Press, 2015) 199–223.

26 Thomas E. Ricks, *Fiasco: The American Military Adventure in Iraq* (New York, Penguin Books, 2007); Ucko, *The New Counterinsurgency Era*; Cohen, *The Big Stick*, 31–61; Thomas G. Mahnken and Thomas A. Keaney, eds., *War in Iraq: Planning and Execution*, Strategy and History 21 (London, Routledge, 2007), 129–44.

27 David Kilcullen, 'The State of a Controversial Art', in: *The Routledge Handbook of Insurgency and Counterinsurgency*, ed. Paul B. Rich and Isabelle Duyvesteyn, Routledge Handbooks (London, Routledge, 2014) 140–43.

28 Moyar, *Oppose Any Foe*, 270–71; U.S. Special Operations Command, 'The Operating Concept 2030', February 7, 2020, 22.

special operations forces deployments provided a politically welcome instrument as they signalled a forceful attitude and response, required a low level of personnel and material commitment relative to normal operations forces, and were accompanied by a level of discreteness and secrecy that mitigated potential negative media responses.[29]

A noteworthy side effect of the commitment of Western special operations forces to Afghanistan and Iraq is that due to their aligned interests an increase in cooperation between NATO special operations forces was facilitated.[30] Consequently, the NATO Special Operations Headquarters was created. A multi-national organisation attached to, but not part of, NATO which concerns itself with matters of training, education, doctrine, and concepts of special operations. For years these topics were primarily addressed within the context of the global war on terror and the conflicts in Afghanistan and Iraq. Because of the US dominance therein, their counterterrorism-heavy tactical perspective on special operations and its forces became normative within Western special operations thinking as a whole.[31] However, as a result of Russian President Vladimir Putin's Munich speech of 2007, a progressively waning Western interest in the counterinsurgency campaigns fought in Afghanistan and Iraq, Russian military action (e.g. in Georgia in 2008 and in Crimea in 2014), and Chinese activities in the South-China Sea, inter-state strategic competition once again became the centre of attention. Consequently, Western special operations forces have been assessing what this shift from counterterrorism and counterinsurgency towards inter-state strategic competition means for Western special operations, both from a NATO and national perspective.[32]

What are special operations?

In doctrinal and scholarly literature, numerous definitions of special operations can be found. The most influential doctrinal writing regarding Western special operations is the NATO Allied Joint Doctrine for Special Operations AJP-3.5(B). It states that special operations are '[m]ilitary activities conducted by specially designated, organised, selected, trained, and equipped forces using unconventional techniques and modes of employment. These activities may be conducted across the full range of military operations, to help achieve the desired end-state. Politico-military considerations may require clandestine or covert techniques and the acceptance of a degree of political or military risk not associated with operations by conventional forces. Special operations deliver strategic or operational-level results or are executed where significant political risk exists'.[33]

29 Moyar, *Oppose Any Foe*, 344–45; Harry Yarger, *21st Century SOF: Toward an American Theory of Special Operations*, JSOU Report 13–1, 2013, 34.

30 George Dimitriu, Gijs Tuinman, and Martijn van der Vorm, 'Formative Years: Military Adaptation of Dutch Special Operations Forces in Afghanistan', in: *Special Operations Journal* 2 (2016) (2) 162–63.

31 Of particular interest with regard to the recent all-encompassing focus on counterterrorism tactics is the fact that the currently largest Western SOF entity, the U.S. Army Special Forces ('Green Berets'), was initially part of the Psychological Warfare Center. These roots are still visible considering Psy Ops and Civil Affairs personnel are an integral part of the current U.S. Army Special Forces units. As such, this SOF entity represents a distinct conceptual branch within Western special operations thinking which can be contrasted with the branch primarily geared towards tactics associated with 'counterterror, quick strike, and rescue'. Currently, these branches are mostly known as Special Warfare and Surgical Strike and there is an ongoing discussion whether or not they should be conceptually and organizationally linked. See for example the work on this topic by Sam Sarkesian in the 1980s and Charles Cleveland and Chris Marsh in the 2010s.

32 The most dominant concepts for Western special operations in the near future currently centre around a continuous but declining focus on counterterrorism, operations in support of a joint force commander during major combat operations, and a strong commitment to operations in Competition Short of Armed Conflict/The Gray Zone. Marsh, Kiras, and Blocksome, *Special Operations*, 183–97; Moyar, *Oppose Any Foe*, 327–45; Turnley, Michael, and Ben-Ari, *Special Operations Forces in the 21st Century*, 285–98; Sean McFate, *Seven New Rules of War: Victory in the Age of Durable Disorder* (Place of publication not identified, Michael Joseph Ltd, 2019), 244–51; U.S. Special Operations Command, 'White Paper: The Gray Zone', September 9, 2015. See: https://info.publicintelligence.net/USSOCOM-GrayZones.pdf; U.S. Special Operations Command, 'Special Operations Forces Operating Concept', February 1, 2016. See: https://nsiteam.com/social/wp-content/uploads/2017/01/SOF-Operating-Concept-v1-0_020116-Final.pdf; Mark Urban, 'UK's Special Forces Set for New Russia Mission', *BBC*, June 13, 2019. See: https://www.bbc.com/news/uk-48624982; Todd South, 'Less Door Kicking, More Partner Building for Special Operations in "Great Power Competition"', *Military Times*, April 10, 2019. See: https://www.militarytimes.com/news/your-military/2019/04/10/less-door-kicking-more-partner-building-for-special-operations-in-great-power-competition/; Liam Walpole, 'We Need To Talk About the UK's New Special Operations Concept', September 30, 2019. See: https://www.oxfordresearchgroup.org.uk/blog/we-need-to-talk-about-the-uks-new-special-operations-concept.

33 NATO, *Allied Joint Doctrine for Special Operations AJP-3.5(B)* (NATO Standardization Agency, n.d.) 1–1.

Special operations are distinctively different from regular warfare, not a subcategory of it

The second-most influential doctrinal definition is found in the U.S. Joint Publication 3-05 Special Operations. It explains that '[s]pecial operations require unique modes of employment, tactics, techniques, procedures, and equipment. They are often conducted in hostile, denied, or politically and/or diplomatically sensitive environments, and are characterized by one or more of the following: time-sensitivity, clandestine or covert nature, low visibility, work with or through indigenous forces, greater requirements for regional orientation and cultural expertise, and a higher degree of risk. Special operations provide joint force commanders (JFCs) and chiefs of mission with discrete, precise, and scalable options that can be synchronized with activities of other interagency partners to achieve United States Government (USG) objectives'.[34]

Owing to the relatively small academic community and the classified nature of most conceptual documents related to special operations, these two openly available doctrinal documents play a very prominent role within both the public debate and the one taking place behind closed doors.

Contained within the doctrinal definitions discussed above there are several common denominators. Firstly, there is the notion that special operations are conducted by forces specially selected, trained, equipped, and organized, and which use special ways to achieve their goals. Added to this, it is emphasized through the use of terms such as clandestine, covert, and low visibility that special operations can have an element of secrecy attached to them.[35] Thirdly, there is the assertion that special operations are generally characterized by a heightened amount of political (or diplomatic) and military risk. Lastly, it is explained that special operations are geared to achieve direct operational or strategic effects. Together, the above-mentioned four elements arguably form the basic conceptual building blocks of Western special operations doctrine.[36]

The small academic special operations community centres around scholars attached to the U.S. Joint Special Operations University (JSOU), U.S. Naval Postgraduate School (NPS), and other US military-academic institutions. The notable exception in this regard is the influential strategic-studies scholar Colin S. Gray. In *Explorations in Strategy*, a book originally published in 1996, Gray extensively discusses the nature and definition of special operations. He explains that 'the heart of the matter [is] that special operations are operations that regular

34 U.S. Department of Defense, 'Joint Publication 3-05 Special Operations', July 16, 2014, ix.

35 Clandestine entails that the action is secret. Covert means that the sponsor of the action is secret. Low visibility operations are operations that do not meet the threshold of clandestine or covert but still warrant secrecy. See NATO Term and JP 3-05 Special Operations (2014).

36 Interestingly, Dutch legal policy has its own distinct definition of special operations. A definition that is often overlooked domestically and somewhat differs from the doctrinal point of view. In a procedure regarding the obligation to inform the parliament of peace- and security operations, the Dutch government in 2000 chose to postulate a definition of operations for which it was deemed not prudent to inform the parliament before deployment: special operations (Kamerstukken II 26 800-X Nr. 46). The definition itself is reminiscent of the doctrinal ones described in the above with three pertinent exceptions. It firstly stresses the need for strict secrecy. So, whereas in NATO and US doctrine secrecy is optional and the degree of it dependant on the context, the Dutch definition is decidedly more narrow. The second noteworthy point is the fact that the Dutch definition underscores the strenuous physical efforts associated with special operations, thereby limiting its scope. The third and arguably most important difference is the fact that the Dutch definition and the tasks described within it (e.g. detention operations, raids, intelligence collection, and evacuation operations) is considered exhaustive (Kamerstukken II, 27 400-X Nr. 29). As a consequence, this definition is strongly connected to the context of the time when it was drafted. Considering the ever-evolving security context a periodic reassessment might be considered warranted.

forces cannot perform, and special operations forces are selected, equipped, and trained to do what regular forces cannot do. To restate the point from a different perspective, special operations lie beyond the bounds of routine tasks in war'.[37] He furthermore states that 'special operations are distinctively different from regular warfare, not a subcategory of it. Organizational and tactical historical analysis of special operations has revealed a set of conditions for success that vary considerably from those for success in regular operations'.[38] A similar point of view is found in work by NPS professor John Arquilla who tells us that special operations should be conceived 'as that class of military (or paramilitary) actions that fall outside the realm of conventional warfare during their respective time periods'.[39] Robert Spulak, an academic attached to JSOU, argues in the same direction when he states that special operations are operations that cannot be performed by normal operations forces without generating unacceptable risks.[40] James Kiras, a professor from the U.S. Air University who did extensive research into the strategic value of special operations, takes a different approach

37 Colin S. Gray, *Explorations in Strategy* (Westport, CT, Praeger, 1998), 149.
38 Gray, 150; Yarger, *21st Century SOF: Toward an American Theory of Special Operations*, 43.
39 Arquilla, *From Troy to Entebbe*, xv–xvi.
40 Robert Spulak, 'A Theory of special operations: The Origin, Qualities, and Use of special operations forces', JSOU Report 07-7, October 2007, 21.

Special Operations Surgical Team candidates participate in a medical scenario during an assessment and selection process

PHOTO U.S. AIR FORCE, GERALD WILLIS

with regard to a definition by focussing less on the inability of normal operations forces.[41] He explains that special operations are 'unconventional actions against enemy vulnerabilities in a sustained campaign, undertaken by specially designed units special operations forces, to enable military or other governmental operations and/or resolve economically politico-military problems at the operational or strategic level that are difficult or impossible to accomplish with military or other governmental forces alone'.[42]

Comparing the doctrinal perspective and its building blocks to the scholarly approach it becomes obvious that the latter focusses less on the characteristics of special operations and more on the distinct value of special operations in relation to normal operations. The scholarly perspective is thus centred around a negative definition contrary to the predominantly positive explanation found within doctrine.[43] As such, it essentially presents special operations and its forces as an inherently complementary concept designed to partially fill the void of military force left unfulfilled by normal operations forces.[44]

The enduring value proposition of special operations (forces)

As discussed above, the scholarly perspective suggests that special operations are partially able to fill the void of military force unfulfilled by normal operations. The building blocks distilled from doctrine describe characteristics associated with such special operations and thereby the void itself. Because doctrine is principally a codification of past experiences, best practices, and current thinking within an organization, this description of the void has a strong link with time, space, and the contemporary perspective of the organization writing the doctrine. It thus describes the character of special operations and thereby the void of military force in relation to a specific context, but not its enduring nature.

This observation is supported by the diversity of special operations discussed in the first part of this article and which came to be as a result of the constantly changing security context during the previous seven decades.[45] This constantly changing security context leads to new military risks and opportunities which keep presenting themselves. Military force as produced by normal operations forces aims to mitigate those risks and exploit the opportunities by adapting, but in reality will always be lagging.[46] As a consequence, the void of military force and thus the potential source of special operations is in a constant flux.

Defining a value proposition or strategic theory to fit this flux is one of the key discussions ongoing within special operations forces academia. Is there already a complete theory of special operations and, if not, should there be one?[47] Kiras argues that the history of special operations has been and will remain so diverse it is unwanted to create a comprehensive theory, because it will most probably have a very limited shelf life.[48] Nevertheless, some have tried to create such an overarching strategic theory and define the enduring value proposition of special operations. A number of these theories of special operations claim general applicability but have only succeeded in partially covering the con-

41 Kiras, *Special operations and Strategy from World War II to the War on Terrorism*.

42 Marsh, Kiras, and Blocksome, *Special Operations*, 21. It is interesting to note that Kiras, in the definition previously posited in his study of special operations and strategy published in 2006, tells us that special operations enable and support conventional forces and their operations. In the more recent definition, he has broadened his scope to other governmental forces thereby opening the conceptual door towards interdepartmental cooperation by special operations forces. Thirteen years of insights gained through academic research and working as a senior policy advisor in the U.S. Department of Defense apparently resulted in this updated perspective.

43 Tom Searle, *Outside the Box: A New General Theory of Special Operations*, JSOU Report 17–4, 2017, 55.

44 Turnley, Michael, and Ben-Ari, *Special Operations Forces in the 21st Century*, 16; MARSOC, 'MARSOF 2030: A Strategic Vision for the Future', March 2018, 2; Rubright, *A Unified Theory for Special Operations*, 39.

45 It is important to note that this diversity is even greater than what is shown in this article. As a consequence of special operations often having a secret character, we are unable to discuss the bulk of these operations in publicly available research.

46 Theo Farrell, 'Military Adaptation and Organisational Convergence in War: Insurgents and International Forces in Afghanistan', in: *Journal of Strategic Studies*, May 25, 2020, 1; Nagl, *Learning to Eat Soup with a Knife*; Henk Geveke, 'Klaar zijn voor Hyperwar: Transformatiestrategie voor Defensie in de "Samenleving 5.0"', in: *Militaire Spectator* 188 (2019) (12) 580–95.

47 Marsh, Kiras, and Blocksome, *Special Operations*, 11–46.

48 Ibidem, 21–26.

ceptual realm of special operations by focussing on a type of special operation or a specific country (e.g. Direct Action and the US).[49] Others have been following the instrumental example set by many land-, sea-, and airpower thinkers and used theory in the form of white papers and operational concepts to promote institutions.[50] Finally, there is also theory, such as the one promulgated by Richard Rubright, which provides food for thought but lacks practical applicability thereby serving little purpose beyond explicating a broad conceptual umbrella.[51] Of particular interest however are the theories proposed by Robert Spulak and Tom Searle, theories that are both relatively simple and practical yet conceptually overarching and enduring.[52]

Spulak's theory centres around the supposed unique ability of special operations forces to distinctly deal with an enduring aspect of war: Clausewitzian Friction. The concept of friction as used by Spulak is taken from a paper by Barry Watts. In this paper, Watts analysed and revised Clausewitz's concept of friction.[53] Following the argument made by Clausewitz that friction is the difference between real and theoretical war, he proposes three primary sources of this friction:

- constraints imposed by human physical and cognitive limits;
- informational uncertainties and unforeseeable difference stemming from the spatial-temporal dispersion of information in the external environment, military organizations, and the brains of individual participants;
- the structural nonlinearity of combat processes.[54]

According to Watts, these sources of friction can be mitigated by lubricants, such as technological developments, but cannot be eliminated.[55] They are enduring characteristics of war and thus part of its nature. Spulak in turn simplifies these enduring sources of friction as 1) war is hell, 2) we cannot know what is out there, and 3) we cannot predict what will happen.[56] The point he makes subsequently, and which forms the central idea fundamental to his theory, is the notion that the intense selection and self-selection associated with special operations forces leads to an entity that can mitigate the enduring sources of friction in a way that is structurally impossible for normal operations forces. Due to the tasks normal operations forces have — such as major combat engagements and operating in potentially vast territory — and the means that are available to them with regard to personnel and material, normal operations forces are required to organize themselves in a specific way with regard to mass and culture, thereby inheriting certain institutional

Special operations forces can mitigate the sources of friction in a way that is structurally impossible for normal operations forces

49 William H. McRaven, *Spec Ops: Case Studies in Special Operations Warfare : Theory and Practice* (New York, Ballantine Books, Random House Publishing Group, 1996); Marsh, Kiras, and Blocksome, *Special Operations*, 35–46; William Harris, 'Special Operations, Irregular Warfare, and Operational Art: A Theory of Special Operations', 2013; Yarger, *21st Century SOF: Toward an American Theory of Special Operations*; Hy S. Rothstein, *Afghanistan and the Troubled Future of Unconventional Warfare* (Annapolis, Maryland, Naval Institute Press, 2006).

50 Marsh, Kiras, and Blocksome, *Special Operations*, 14–21; Gray, *Explorations in Strategy*, 58–59; Rubright, *A Unified Theory for Special Operations*, 21; Nathan K. Finney and U.S. Army Combined Arms Center, eds., *On Strategy: A Primer* (Fort Leavenworth, Kansas, Combat Studies Institute Press, U.S. Army Combined Arms Center, 2020) 40, 55.

51 Rubright, *A Unified Theory for Special Operations*.

52 Spulak, 'A Theory of Special Operations'.

53 Barry Watts, 'Clausewitzian Friction and Future War: Revised Edition', National Defense University, 2004.

54 Watts, 76.

55 Ibidem, 78.

56 Spulak, 'A Theory of Special Operations', 19.

The Dutch Korps Commando Troepen trains a special unit of the Afghan police, the ATF-888

constraints.[57] These constraints result in an organization that can generate a large-scale predictable and reliable output but has a limited capability for flexibility and creativity.[58] As such, these constraints severely hamper the ability of normal operations forces to deal with the uncertainty central to Clausewitzian Friction. Special operations forces do not have the same obligation as normal operations forces have and thereby acquire increased freedom with regard to their design.[59] A design that is characterized by being relatively small compared to the size of the normal operations forces and solely consisting of individuals with a high concentration of certain attributes. He explains that because of the distinct organization and the associated selection and self-selection, special operations forces are:

57 Ibidem, 10–14; Jan Willem Honig, 'The Tyranny of Doctrine and Modern Strategy: Small (and Large) States in a Double Bind', in *Journal of Strategic Studies* 39 (2016) (2) 261–79.

58 T. E. Lawrence, *Seven Pillars of Wisdom*, Dover thrift editions (Mineola, New York, Dover Publications, Inc, 2018) chapter 59; Spulak, 'A Theory of Special Operations', 16–18.

59 Jessica Glicken Turnley, *Cross-Cultural Competence and Small Groups: Why SOF Are the Way SOF Are*, vol. 11–1, JSOU Report, 2011, 55–64; Wall and Stegman, *Commando*, 21.

PHOTO MCD, HILLE HILLINGA

- elite warriors because they are selected and trained to deal with intense stresses, pressures, and responses of combat;
- flexible because they have a wide range of capabilities within a small group of people;
- creative because they feel less bound to doctrine than normal operations forces and as such are more able to go beyond the orthodox in achieving the wanted results.[60]

As a consequence of possessing this combination of attributes, special operations forces are able to mitigate the three primary sources of friction

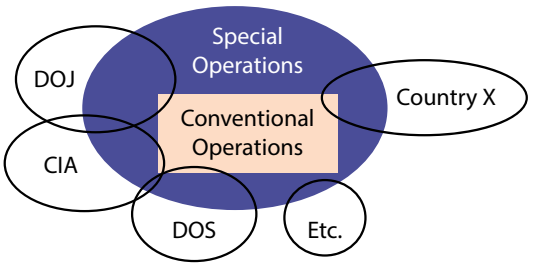

Figure 1 Searle's 'Relationship between conventional operations, special operations, international partners and interagency partners'

previously discussed in a way dissimilar from normal operations forces. Spulak notes that normal operations forces can also be elite warriors or creative or flexible but asserts that the combination of warrior elitism in tandem with creativity and flexibility is what sets special operations forces apart.[61]

The second theory that will be discussed in depth is the 'outside-the-box' one promulgated by Tom Searle. In a 2017 paper he came up with a helpful model to describe how normal operations and special operations relate to each other.[62] A model that can be used to visualize the afore-mentioned void of military force (see Figure 1).[63]

Searle explains that the ellipse bordering the dark-grey zone represents the responsibility and authority of the U.S. Department of Defense. He states that the ellipse can grow and shrink depending on the context. The same goes for the box of conventional operations.[64] Searle goes on to tell us that '[t]he large circle contains an enormous variety of activities the military may need to conduct in situations ranging from peaceful cooperation to thermonuclear war. […] They define conventional operations as operations that the DOD will focus its resources

60 Spulak, 'A Theory of Special Operations', 19–21; Emily Spencer, *Thinking for Impact* (Ottawa, Canadian Special Operations Forces Command, 2018) chapter 1.
61 Spulak, 'A Theory of Special Operations', 15.
62 Searle, *Outside the Box*.
63 Ibidem, 23.
64 Ibidem, 23–27.

Jedburghs get instructions from a briefing officer in London, circa 1944. Current Western special operations organisations mostly trace their history to units created during World War II, like the Jedburghs

PHOTO U.S. NATIONAL ARCHIVES AND RECORDS ADMINISTRATION

on and put the vast majority of its resources into conventional forces to conduct conventional operations'.[65] Following this assertion, he concludes that special operations are all those military operations that are not 'purely conventional'.[66] Within the model by Searle, the area outside the conventional box but inside the mandate of the U.S. DoD is the void of military force unfulfilled by normal operation forces and thus the source of special operations. It is the area that normal operations forces are temporarily or persistently unable to cover because of their previously discussed institutional constraints.

The notion that special operations forces are tactically able to do something normal operations forces cannot is in itself, however, not enough to claim a part in the military instrument of power. It is when these activities have a sufficient positive strategic effect that the true value proposition of special operations surfaces.[67] A critical element in determining whether a tactical activity such as a special operation has sufficient positive strategic effect is the investment it requires; a strategic-value ratio juxtaposing costs and gains. A factor that strongly influences the strategic-value ratio of special operations is their so-called economy of

65 Ibidem, 17.
66 Ibidem, 17–18.
67 Rubright, *A Unified Theory for Special Operations*, 21.

force. Based upon his analysis of special operations, Gray reached the conclusion that special operations have two 'master claims': 1) expansion of choice and 2) economy of force.[68] Expansion of choice relates to providing options to policy makers beyond those offered by normal operations forces. It is about being able to partially fill the void of military force.[69] According to Gray, economy of force is the primary reason for this expansion of choice and he posits seventeen reasons why special operations can achieve significant results with limited force.[70] They range from acting as a force multiplier for normal operations forces to being able to surgically deal with strategic problems which would have required large amounts of normal operations forces. Put more succinctly, he argues that special operations can generate a relatively large return on investment by having a disproportionate effect compared to the raw mass in military power and related financial investments they require. This results in a politically palatable strategic-value ratio which makes special operations interesting to the strategic decision-makers.

With regard to the abovementioned strategic-value ratio as the main determinant for the strategic utility of special operations, it is important to realize that the discussed gains can also manifest themselves outside the military realm. This entails that special operations forces could be directed to undertake activities that have no discernible military-strategic effect, or, from a tactical point of view, could have been conducted by normal operations forces. Valid or invalid reasons at the political-strategic level not connected to purely military-strategic thinking but grounded in either grand strategy, senior bureaucratic- or political self-interest may lead to such an outcome.[71] As such, the utility of special operations may look different at the political-strategic level than it does at the military-strategic level. That is not say that the military should limit itself to executing policy without questioning its merits. Tactical thinking is supposed to inform military-strategic thinking, which in turn should inform political-strategic thinking.[72] The filter of feasibility this process provides ensures a reconciliation of the desired policy with the possible execution, thereby aligning the two towards a coherent and realistic strategy.[73]

Consequently, if the tactical level fails to inform the higher levels, then it is partially responsible for any policy detached from the real world and subsequent strategic incoherency. This entails that military personnel at all levels, and in particular special operations forces due to the direct strategic effect they aim for with their tactical activities, should be aware of the political-strategic context wherein their tactical activities take place. They must be able to think 'politically' and look beyond their military realm.[74] Therefore, policymakers in the business of special operations should constantly be studying the political-strategic context, the abilities of normal operations forces, and the resulting void of military force. By so doing, special operations with profound positive political-strategic effects relative to the required tactical investment can be identified and trends regarding the characteristics of these special operations can be distinguished.[75] Such trends can then be used to inform the primary component of special operations forces capabilities, according to Spulak: special operations forces selection and self-selection.

68 Gray, *Explorations in Strategy*, 168–69; CANSOFCOM, 'Beyond the Horizon: A Strategy for Canada's Special Operations Forces in an Evolving Security Environment', January 2020, 29.

69 Yarger, *21st Century SOF: Toward an American Theory of Special Operations*, 43; Gray, *Explorations in Strategy*, 149–50.

70 Gray, *Explorations in Strategy*, 168–74.

71 George Dimitriu, 'Clausewitz and the Politics of War: A Contemporary Theory', in: *Journal of Strategic Studies* 41 (2018) (5) 35–36.

72 Everett C Dolman, *Pure Strategy: Power and Principle in the Space and Information Age* (London; New York, Frank Cass, 2005), 27.

73 Titulaer and Kitzen, 'The Population-Centric Turn in Special Operations', 45; Finney and U.S. Army Combined Arms Center, *On Strategy*, 92.

74 Rubright, *A Unified Theory for Special Operations*, 9.

75 A current example of such a trend manifesting is the idea of SOF Warrior-Diplomats being the 'gaps and seams force in the spaces between the national defence and security architectures, interfacing with the conventional military, between agencies, and with other government department partners' (Glicken Turnley, *Cross-Cultural Competence and Small Groups: Why SOF Are the Way SOF Are*, 11–1, 1–46); CANSOFCOM, 'Beyond the Horizon', 20; Marshall Webb, 'Foreword', *CTX* 6, (2016) (4) 13; Steven Kashkett, 'Special Operations and Diplomacy: A Unique Nexus', *The Foreign Service Journal* (blog). See: http://www.afsa.org/special-operations-and-diplomacy-unique-nexus; Linda Robinson, *Modern Political Warfare: Current Practices and Possible Responses* (Santa Monica, CA, RAND Corporation, 2018) 307–16.

The strategic utility of special operations forces lies in their complementary capability to partially fill the void of military force

Concerning such special operations trends, it is important to note that changes within the normal operations forces may result in certain types of special operations becoming normal operations, thereby transforming a trend.[76] An example of this is the standing up of Security Force Assistance Brigades in the US and the Specialised Infantry Group in the UK. Both are units aimed at training partner forces. This is a type of operation that was markedly associated with special operations forces but is now quickly becoming a fundamental part of normal operations. In the 'outside-the-box' model such a development is indicated by an expanding conventional box (see Figure 2).

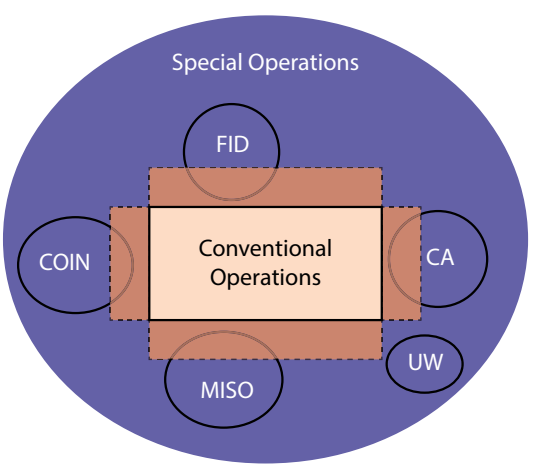

Figure 2 Searle's 'Some of the principle Special Operations Missions'[77]

Other special operations trends may be persistent and almost considered classical because normal operations forces are (deemed) inherently incapable of certain types of tactical activities. So-called no-fail missions, such as hostage release and recovery, countering weapons of mass destruction, and the covert action strongly associated with intelligence organizations come to mind.[78] These are operations that are generally performed by *specialist* special operations forces because they necessitate a narrow yet in-depth skillset. But also activities such as Unconventional Warfare requiring scalability to small autonomous teams may be considered to fall within this category, because they are distinct from the mass associated with normal operations forces.[79] Alternatively, special operations trends may disappear altogether because a changing political-strategic context results in a fading policy demand. Following the outside-the-box model this does not mean these types of operations are no longer part of the void of military force. They are still potential special operations. However, no military units including special operations forces have been specifically training for them. In Figure 2 this is the area inside the ellipse, outside the box, and not a part of trends such as Foreign Internal Defense, Military Information Support Operations, and Civil Affairs. These are operations obscured by uncertainty, the inherent component of this void and therefore the fundamental building block of special operations.

Conclusion

This article has shown that the enduring strategic utility of special operations lies in the complementary capability of special operations forces to partially fill the void of military force left unfulfilled by normal operations forces. This void can be visualized using the following model (see Figure 3), which is inspired by but not representative of the Dutch context.

76 MARSOC, 'MARSOF 2030', 2; Espen Berg-Knutsen and Nancy C. Roberts, 'Strategic Design for NORSOF 2025' (Naval Postgraduate School, July 2015) 4; Rubright, *A Unified Theory for Special Operations*, 22.

77 Searle, *Outside the Box*, 27.

78 NATO, *Allied Joint Doctrine for Special Operations AJP-3.5(B)*, 2–5.

79 Titulaer and Kitzen, 'The Population-Centric Turn in Special Operations'; Wall and Stegman, *Commando*, 15–16.

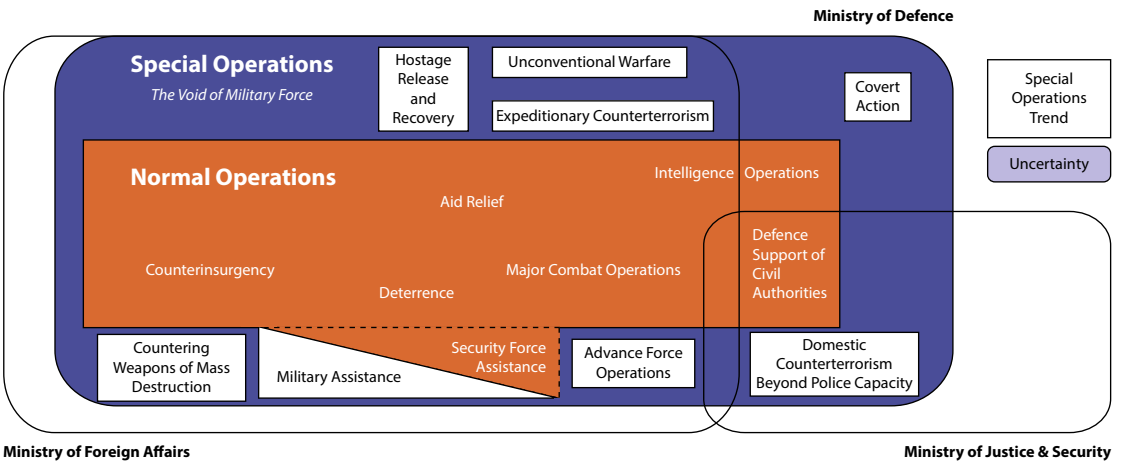

Figure 3 A possible relationship between normal operations, special operations trends, and the fundamental special operations element of uncertainty[80]

The void exists because normal operations forces are inherently limited in their capabilities due to institutional constraints. This is because the way in which normal operations forces are designed results in a limited capability to mitigate the sources of Clausewitzian Friction intrinsic to war. Special operations forces have a distinctly different capability to mitigate these sources of friction because they are (1) creative, (2) flexible, and (3) elite warriors. Selection and self-selection enable special operations forces to institutionalize these attributes.

Because of its connection with Clausewitzian Friction inherent to war this conceptualization of special operations (forces) is not limited to a specific context and thus enduring. However, the actual strategic utility of special operations is always contextual and thus very much connected to time, place, and the interests of the sponsoring state. It is determined on the balance between a tactical investment and a positive strategic effect; the strategic-value ratio. A strong impact on this ratio is made by the economy of force associated with special operations. This is an idea grounded in the notion that special operations are able to generate a large return on investment compared to the cost they require. The strategic-value ratio is also connected to the assertion that a positive strategic effect is not exclusively measured within the military domain. This is because tactical military investments can also generate gains within other political instruments of power.

A continuous demand for certain void-filling capabilities may result in special-operations trends. The history of special operations has shown that trends may last a couple of years, but they can also be more persistent. Despite the utility of these trends, special operations forces should not focus on one or two of the attributes that enable them to uniquely mitigate Clausewitzian Friction. Going in such a direction means mistaking specialist operations forces for special operations forces and thus runs counter to its nature. It is after all the balanced combination of being elite warriors, creative, and flexible that empowers special operations forces to address the uncertainty of an unpredictably changing security context and connected policy demands.[81] A balanced combination that ensures that special operations forces can enduringly complement normal operations forces and are thus truly special. ■

80 Adapted from Searle, *Outside the Box* (2017).

81 MARSOC, 'MARSOF 2030', 4; Micah Zenko, '100% Right 0% of the Time', *Foreign Policy* (blog), October 16, 2012. See: https://foreignpolicy.com/2012/10/16/100-right-0-of-the-time/.