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ECHOES IN THE VOID:

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**FINDING UNIVERSAL PATTERNS  
IN THE UTILITY OF SOF  
ACROSS EPOCHS**

**LT. COL. PAUL DE JAGER**  
ROYAL DUTCH ARMY





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# **ECHOES IN THE VOID: Finding Universal Patterns in the Utility of SOF Across Epochs**

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**On the cover:** A Green Beret assigned to 1st Special Forces Group (Airborne) fires a rifle downrange during combat marksmanship training. This photo was altered for security purposes in accordance with USSOCOM Manual 360-1. (U.S. Army photo by Sgt. John Bae)

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## About the Author

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# Abstract

Special operations and the units that carry them out are captivating to many. In recent years, several scientists have developed theories to better understand this military-strategic phenomenon. Notably, American scientist Tom Searle developed a theory where he describes a void in military force as an area of military challenges within a security issue that can only be resolved by special operations forces (SOF) units. He offers a “negative definition” of special operations—that is, he defines them by what conventional forces cannot do—specifying that they comprise of the missions and tasks that lie outside the capabilities, legal authority, or doctrinal scope of conventional military units. The history of special operations shows that this void in military force is dynamic, which is evident when considering the deployment of SOF units in recent decades. There are three distinct periods where it’s observable that SOF deployment differed significantly from each other. Conceptually, the dynamics in the gap are caused by ever-changing relationships between the capabilities of conventional units and the military solutions requested in a security issue.

However, what are the factors or determinants shaping this void? This monograph examines the void in military force by comparing the deployment of SOF units at three significantly different stages of its development. By comparing SOF deployment during World War II (WWII), the Cold War, and the Global War on Terror (GWOT), the following universal determinants of the void of military force can be identified.

- (1) Changes in the balance of political power
- (2) The nature and level of national security risks at stake
- (3) The political and military risks involved in military response options
- (4) The level and intensity of the proliferation of threats
- (5) The presence of disruptive emerging technologies

Understanding these universal determinants allows a better understanding of the current period's void in military force. With this understanding, SOF deployment can be better prepared in the modern era. Using the universal determinants to analyze today's void can be the subject of follow-up research.





# Introduction

## THE EVOLUTION AND CONCEPTUALIZATION OF SPECIAL OPERATIONS

Special operations have played a crucial role in military history, evolving alongside changes in warfare and strategy. These operations, characterized by unconventional tactics, have historically been employed to achieve strategic objectives beyond the capabilities of conventional forces.

### Historical Context of Special Operations

The origins of special operations can be traced to ancient civilizations, where elite units conducted reconnaissance, sabotage, and targeted strikes. In ancient Greece, for instance, the Spartans deployed the *Krypteia*<sup>1</sup> for intelligence gathering and irregular warfare (IW). During the medieval period, organizations such as the Knights Templar engaged in covert operations to safeguard strategic interests, including the protection of pilgrims during the Crusades.<sup>2</sup>

The role of special operations expanded significantly during WWII, with the establishment of elite units such as the British Special Operations Executive (SOE),<sup>3</sup> the Special Air Service (SAS),<sup>4</sup> the U.S. Office of Strategic Services (OSS),<sup>5</sup> and Nazi Germany's Brandenburgers.<sup>6</sup> These forces executed behind-the-lines operations, sabotage missions, and intelligence-gathering efforts that influenced the course of the war.

The Cold War era witnessed further institutionalization of special operations, as intelligence agencies such as the CIA and the Komitet Gosudarstvennoy Bezopasnosti (KGB) engaged in covert actions and unconventional warfare (UW). Specialized military units, including the U.S. Army Special Forces (SF), or Green Berets,<sup>7</sup> and the British Special Boat Service (SBS),<sup>8</sup> were developed to counter emerging global threats.

**The evolution of SOF has been marked by distinct phases [. . .] Analyzing these transitions provides insight into the enduring determinants of the void and informs the design and deployment of future SOF.**

In the post-Cold War period, special operations adapted to new security challenges, including terrorism, insurgencies, and asymmetric warfare. These forces became increasingly integrated into broader military campaigns while retaining their capacity for independent, rapid-

response missions. Today, SOF are indispensable in contemporary security environments, executing missions such as counterterrorism (CT), hostage rescue, and humanitarian assistance.

### **Conceptualizing Special Operations**

Scholars have sought to define the unique nature of special operations. Searle, for example, describes them as “military or paramilitary actions conducted by SOF that fall outside of conventional warfare.”<sup>9</sup> His concept of the void of military force refers to military objectives that conventional forces cannot fulfill due to institutional constraints. SOF are uniquely equipped to operate within this void, leveraging their creativity, adaptability, and specialized training.<sup>10</sup>

The evolution of SOF has been marked by distinct phases in their selection, training, equipping, and deployment. If Searle’s theory holds, the characteristics of the void of military force must have shifted across these phases. Analyzing these transitions provides insight into the enduring determinants of the void and informs the design and deployment of future SOF.

### **RESEARCH OBJECTIVES AND QUESTIONS**

This study aims to enhance scholarly understanding of the void of military force as a framework for assessing the utility of SOF. The central research question is:

*To what extent do the determinants of the void of military force over the past three eras exhibit a universal pattern, and if so, what is this pattern?*

Supporting questions include:

- What constitutes the void of military force, and how does it relate to special operations?
- How has the void of military force evolved over time?
- Can universal determinants of the void be identified?

## METHODOLOGICAL APPROACH

This research adopts a conceptual and theoretical approach, drawing upon existing literature on special operations. The study is structured as outlined below:

**Chapter 1** explores the concept of special operations, defining key terms and examining their strategic utility. The chapter also examines the units that typically conduct special operations. Two theoretical frameworks guide this analysis: special operation appearances and the strategic utility of SOF as outlined by Colin Gray. The study on the appearance of special operations utilizes a two-dimensional model with the variables of directness and autonomy. The utility of special operations as a strategic military instrument of power is discussed in detail using the seminal work of Gray.

**Chapter 2** traces the historical development of special operations, analyzing key events and their impact on SOF capabilities. The two-dimensional model introduced in Chapter 1 is applied to categorize historical operations and assess their strategic significance.

**Chapter 3** identifies universal determinants of the void of military force by comparing its characteristics across different eras. This analysis forms the basis for broader conclusions regarding the evolution of special operations.

**Chapter 4** synthesizes findings and discusses implications for future research on SOF doctrine and strategy.

## CONCLUSION

The study of special operations reveals its enduring significance in military strategy. By examining the evolution of the void of military force, this research contributes to a deeper understanding of how SOF adapt to shifting security landscapes. Identifying universal determinants of this void offers valuable insights for policymakers and military strategists in optimizing the role of SOF in contemporary and future conflicts.





# Chapter 1: Special Operations, SOF, and Their Utility

Mount a sudden strike on their doubts. Attack their haste.  
Force them to constrict their deployment. Launch a sudden  
strike against their order. Take advantage of [their failure]  
to avoid harm. Obstruct their strategy. Seize their thoughts.  
Capitalize on their fears.

–Methods of the Ssu-ma<sup>11</sup>

## INTRODUCTION

This chapter begins by examining the concept of special operations. It explores various definitions, characteristics, and the concept of the void. Then, the chapter delves into the units that typically carry out special operations and how appearances of special operations can be identified and organized. Finally, the chapter focuses on how SOF can be utilized to address security issues.

## DEFINING SPECIAL OPERATIONS AND THE VOID OF MILITARY FORCE

### What are Special Operations?

Finding a proper definition for special operations is essential but complex. However, it is crucial to have good definitions and delineations to do meaningful research on the phenomenon of special operations. It is tricky because the exclusivity that should characterize any good definition contradicts the spirit of special operations. After all, special operations are “special” because they deviate from the norm. To be valid, a definition should be short and capture the defined subject’s essence but should not sacrifice user-friendliness for arbitrary clarity.

Attempts to define special operations are conducted by thinkers in both the military and the sciences. NATO’s Allied Joint Doctrine for Special Operations (AJP-3.5) describes special operations as

**The small size of special operations teams enables them to operate with stealth, speed, and precision, maximizing their effectiveness in achieving strategic objectives while minimizing risk.**

“military activities conducted by specially designated, organized, trained, and equipped forces, manned with selected personnel, using unconventional tactics, techniques, and modes of employment. These activities may be conducted across the full range of military operations,

independently or with conventional forces, 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.”<sup>12</sup>

Maurice Tugwell and David Charters have offered another useful definition of special operations. They advise that special operations are “small-scale, clandestine, covert or overt operations of an unorthodox and frequently high-risk nature, undertaken to achieve significant political or military objectives in support of foreign policy.”<sup>13</sup> A notable divergence between these two endeavors is that Tugwell and Charters do not explicitly mention the forces that execute special operations. However, they do establish a direct and relevant link between special operations and the support of foreign policy. Gray also adopts this definition, which he points out is both succinct and comprehensive. He claims that six key features contribute to its superiority. This essay adopts the definition of Tugwell and Charters; its key features are addressed below.<sup>14</sup>

**Small-scale:** First, the notion of small-scale must be addressed. Special operations are typically conducted by small groups for the following reasons:

(1) Small groups can move covertly and maintain secrecy more effectively than large forces, which is crucial for operations requiring surprise or infiltration behind enemy lines.

(2) Small groups are more agile and flexible and can adapt quickly to changing situations on the ground. They can maneuver through complex environments and adjust their tactics as needed.

(3) Small groups are less likely to be detected by enemy forces or local populations, reducing the risk of engagement and increasing the likelihood of mission success.

(4) Special operations often focus on specific, high-value objectives rather than large-scale engagements. Small groups are well-suited to execute targeted missions with a clear goal.

(5) Small groups leave a smaller footprint, making it easier to operate discreetly and avoid escalating conflicts or provoking opposition forces or local populations.

The small size of special operations teams enables them to operate with stealth, speed, and precision, maximizing their effectiveness in achieving strategic objectives while minimizing risk.

**Clandestine, covert, or overt:** By definition, a clandestine<sup>15</sup> operation attempts to conceal its very existence, a covert<sup>16</sup> operation attempts to conceal its true sponsorship, and an overt<sup>17</sup> operation does not attempt to conceal either the action or its perpetrators. This reference to secrecy helps direct attention to the historical fact that, by their small-scale character, SOF were most valuable serving in reconnaissance or other intelligence-gathering missions rather than in combat roles.

**Unorthodox:** In special operations, “unorthodox” refers to approaches, tactics, or methods that deviate from conventional military strategies. Unorthodox techniques are often innovative, unconventional, and tailored to specific mission requirements. These approaches may involve exploiting enemy vulnerabilities, utilizing unconventional weapons or equipment, leveraging local resources or knowledge, and employing non-traditional tactics to achieve strategic objectives. SOF units are known for thinking creatively and adapting

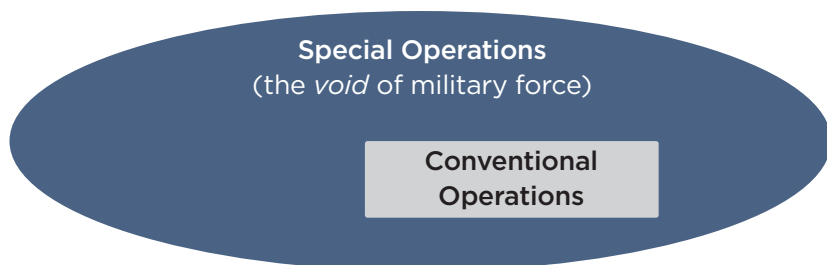
quickly to dynamic and challenging situations, using unorthodox methods when standard approaches may not be effective or feasible.

**High-risk** – Special operations, and their purposes, generally involve high-risk circumstances. The operation of Clausewitz's "friction" factor in war can be uniquely deadly to the participants in special operations.<sup>18</sup> A definition of special operations provided by a study of commando raids highlights why such operations are so high-risk in nature: Special operations are "self-contained acts of war mounted by self-sufficient forces operating within hostile territory."<sup>19</sup> Operations in enemy territory are inherently high risk. With so much uncertainty and so little room for error, it is not surprising that SOF plan their efforts in excruciating detail, mastery of which can provide a sound basis for emergency improvisation.

**Significant political or military objectives:** Many thoughtful commentators insist upon a strategic role rather than an operational or tactical role for special operations. Even David Stirling, founder of the famous special forces unit SAS, considered his initial memorandum outlining a daring plan to destroy the Luftwaffe in North Africa on the ground as essentially strategic. However, the strategic value of special operations depends on the context of the war as a whole—whether those operations are independent of distinctive campaign designs or contribute to a campaign. The Tugwell and Charters definition of special operations that provides the basis of this analysis avoids this misconception by requiring that such operations be "undertaken to achieve significant political or military objectives."<sup>20</sup>

**Foreign policy:** Lastly, defining special operations as being conducted in support of foreign policy is helpful. It is important and beneficial to remember that military activity must have a distinct political purpose to be successful. Additionally, the reminder that special operations should serve foreign policy helps elevate analysis to include grand strategy-level thinking. SOF are a national grand strategy asset; they are a tool of statecraft that can be employed surgically in support of diplomacy and foreign assistance,

whether as a vital adjunct to conventional military forces or as an independent weapon.



**Figure 1.** Special operations that are outside the conventional box of military operations. Source: Tom Searle, “The “Outside the Box” Theory of Special Operations,” in *Outside the Box: A New General Theory of Special Operations* (Joint Special Operations University Press, 2017), 18

### The “Outside the Box” Theory and the Void of Military Force

Searle introduced an exciting study on the theory of special operations in 2017 wherein he abandons the search for an idealized view of special operations.<sup>21</sup> Instead, he flips the discussion by giving a specific definition that “negatively defines” special operations as a broad set of military activities that conventional forces cannot execute. The relationship between special and conventional operations is meaningful in his theory, as it is dynamic and changes over time.

In his influential essay, Searle presented a valuable model for illustrating the relationship between conventional and special operations. Searle’s model begins with a large circle or ellipse representing the complete spectrum of military operations that are within the purview and legal authority of the defense department of any nation. It is unrealistic for the defense department to excel in every conceivable type of operation. Instead of evenly distributing its resources across all potential tasks, policymakers and military leaders allocate resources based on national strategic objectives and future expectations. They define conventional operations as the focal point for the defense department, concentrating most of its resources on conventional forces to carry out these operations. This is depicted in

Figure 1 by the light gray box representing conventional operations within the larger circle encompassing all potential military operations.

Using Searle's negative definition of special operations, everything inside the circle of military responsibilities and authorities but outside the conventional operations box is considered a special operation. This space is also identified as the void of military force. For the remainder of this monograph, it will be referred to as the void.

This visualization of special operations helps to understand several important aspects of the relationship between special and conventional operations.

The first thing to emphasize is that a narrower definition of conventional operations allows conventional forces to become better at those operations by dividing their training time among fewer types of activities. This definition also makes the box smaller, causing more activities to fall outside of it and become special operations. As a result, efforts to focus conventional forces on a smaller range of tasks should be coupled with an expanding range of special operations capabilities.

Another perspective on this model is to view special operations capabilities as a safeguard against the inaccurate predictions of policymakers and military leaders. As former U.S. Secretary of Defense Robert Gates candidly acknowledged, "When it comes to predicting the nature and location of our next military engagements, since Vietnam, our record has been perfect. We have never once gotten it right."<sup>22</sup> Competent SOF serve as the insurance that shields us from "lousy" predictions.

Given that special operations often extend to the outer edges of the defense department's authorized activities, they are more prone than conventional forces to intersect with the authorities and activities of other government agencies such as the Department of Foreign Affairs, the Department of Justice, and intelligence services. Therefore, it is imperative for SOF to establish connections with these government agencies.

Finally, and most importantly, the definition of special operations as “different from conventional operations” means that what constitutes as a special operation changes in response to the definition of conventional operations. In other words, changes within conventional operations may result in certain special operations becoming normal operations, thereby transforming a trend. Consider the establishment of security force assistance brigades in the U.S. and, for example, the 1st Infantry Brigade – Security Force Assistance Group (SFAG) in the UK as prime examples. These units, traditionally associated with SOF, are now swiftly transitioning into a crucial part of conventional operations. This shift creates a need for policymakers in special operations to consistently assess the political-strategic context, the capabilities of conventional forces, and the resulting implications of these operations.<sup>23</sup>

**Efforts to focus conventional forces on a smaller range of tasks should be coupled with an expanding range of special operations capabilities.**

### **The Relationship Between Special Operations and SOF**

After elaborating on the phenomenon of special operations, it is relevant to explore the relationship between special operations and SOF. Gray argued that special operations and SOF are not quite synonymous. Special operations may be “what SOF do,” but they are not *only* done by SOF. Special operations can also be executed by a small group of soldiers from non-SOF units.<sup>24</sup>

A different perspective on the relationship between special operations and SOF, as described by Dr. Robert Spulak, argues that special operations are missions to accomplish strategic objectives when the use of conventional forces would create unacceptable risks due to Clausewitzian friction. Overcoming these risks demands SOF to eliminate the underlying sources of friction by leveraging their distinctive qualities—skills, training, mindset, and physical and cognitive capabilities—that result from the unique composition and attributes of their personnel. Spulak lists three ultimate sources of friction: (1)

constraints imposed by physical and cognitive limits, (2) informational uncertainties and unforeseeable differences between perceived and actual reality, and (3) the structural nonlinearity of combat processes.<sup>25</sup> Additionally, Spulak lists three characteristics of SOF that enable them to overcome these three sources of friction. First, SOF are “elite warriors” who can exceed the physical and cognitive limits typical of conventional forces. SOF are also flexible, enabling them to deal with uncertainties and differences between perception and reality better than conventional forces.<sup>26</sup> Finally, SOF are creative which allows them to exploit the unpredictability and “nonlinearity” of combat and create more friction for the enemy. For Spulak, SOF are both different—due to superior flexibility and creativity—and elite.

Different scholars also make relevant distinctions between different types of SOF units.<sup>27</sup> During WWII, generally accepted as the time that SOF units became institutionalized, a variety of so-called special units were created and situated broadly in the spectrum of UW but conducted different tasks. UW can be best imagined as a scale of activities that spans the conditions of peace, the so-called gray zone, and war. These activities include several different actions involving different personnel from spies and paramilitary forces to SOF. In WWII, the two British exemplars—the British SOE and the SAS—captured the separation between paramilitary and SOF. While the British SOE was designed to coordinate all action by way of subversion and sabotage against the enemy overseas, the SAS was a purely military unit that worked in uniform in enemy territory, usually after conventional forces had a toehold in the theater. The difference between SOF and special forces described by Alastair Finlan<sup>28</sup> is also relevant. While SOF equates to high-quality, usually battalion-size, infantry units of the shock variety (such as the U.S. Army Rangers or the British parachute regiment), he argues that special forces are truly unconventional, non-confluent warfare units that are fundamentally different in size, organization, culture, character, outlook, and mission orientation.

## FILLING THE VOID OF MILITARY FORCE

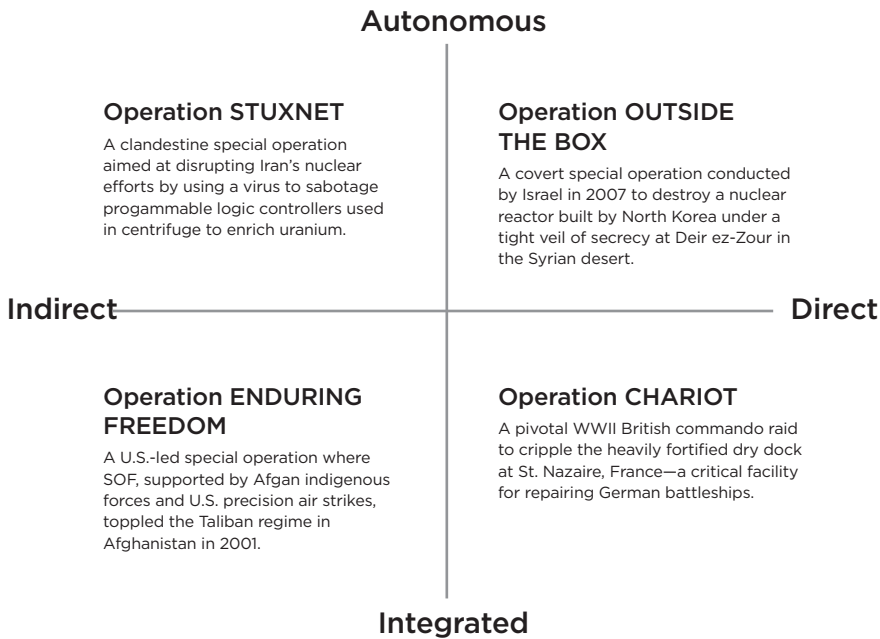
Two theoretical concepts are used to analyze the void of military force: appearance of special operations and the strategic utility of SOF.

### Appearance of Special Operations

Special operations come in many different forms and shapes. Dutch officer scholar Dr. Ben Gans considers four types of special operations using two variables: duration (short vs. protracted) and autonomy (autonomous vs. integrated).<sup>29</sup> This exciting typology misses the explicit and crucial distinction between direct and indirect special operations. This distinction is not just a theoretical concept, but a practical tool that enhances SOF's strategic and operational effectiveness. Ensuring the right approaches are used in the proper contexts can significantly impact the outcome of operations.

A prominent counterinsurgency (COIN) expert, David Kilcullen, emphasizes the importance of understanding and employing direct and indirect approaches in complex environments, particularly in COIN operations.<sup>30</sup> Other scholars, like John Arquilla and David Ronfeldt, discuss the need for a balanced approach that integrates direct and indirect methods to address asymmetric threats effectively.<sup>31</sup> This monograph uses Gans' model, replacing the duration variable with directness, and elaborates on the two variables that distinguish special operations: **directness** and **autonomy**.

**Directness** (direct vs. indirect): As we have seen, the global special operations community often subdivides special operations into two different types: direct and indirect.<sup>32</sup> Direct special operations, or direct action (DA), are executed with surgical precision—often autonomously—and are typically short in duration. These operations are often characterized as offensive, as they usually include a precision strike capability. By conducting these operations, states aim to generate strategic effects, which in turn contribute directly to achieving their political objectives. Indirect special operations refer to a category of unconventional military activities that involve influencing or supporting proxy forces, partner nations, or local populations to achieve strategic objectives indirectly. Instead of directly engaging



**Figure 2.** Appearances of special operations. Source: Author

the enemy with conventional military force, indirect special operations focus on leveraging local actors, networks, or resources to achieve desired outcomes. Indirect special operations have a broad, geographically dispersed, and often protracted character to exert influence in a broader political-military campaign. These operations are typically employed in support of UW,<sup>33</sup> COIN,<sup>34</sup> and operational preparation of the environment.<sup>35</sup>

Former British soldier, historian, and military theorist Sir Basil Henry Liddell Hart is historically credited with defining indirect approach in his work, *Strategy: The Indirect Approach*, where he asserted: “Throughout the ages, decisive results in war have only been reached when the approach has been indirect...In strategy, the longest way round is apt to be the shortest way home.”<sup>36</sup> This indirect approach from Hart focused on targeting the balance or equilibrium of an adversary, noting, “While the strength of an enemy country lies outwardly in its numbers and resources, these are fundamentally

dependent upon stability or equilibrium of control, morale, and supply.”<sup>37</sup> The central premise of the indirect approach is to orient upon, target, and upset an adversary’s equilibrium or balance to set up and enable follow-on decisive blows to be landed. SOF’s power is the ability to apply the precise effects of these collective capabilities at carefully calibrated points of the adversary’s balance or equilibrium described by Hart, whether that opponent is a state, non-state, or irregular actor in the form of an insurgent challenging an incumbent allied government.<sup>38</sup>

**Autonomy** (autonomous vs. integrated): The terms “autonomous” and “integrated” refer to different approaches in the coordination and execution of special operations within a broader military context. Autonomous special operations involve units or forces that operate independently or semi-independently from conventional military command structures. These units often have their own dedicated command and control (C2) systems, logistics support, and decision-making processes. They can operate with a high degree of autonomy, allowing them to conduct missions with minimal reliance on external support or coordination. Alternatively, integrated special operations involve the seamless integration of SOF with conventional military forces, intelligence agencies, and other government entities to achieve strategic objectives. In integrated operations, SOF work collaboratively with conventional forces and other partners, leveraging their unique capabilities to enhance overall military effectiveness.<sup>39</sup> Figure 2 combines the two variables that categorize special operations in a four-quadrant model. For each quadrant, an example of a historic special operation is added for clarification.

Special operations can be mapped across the two variables using a nine-point scale. On the scale of directness, a low score of one means that an operation is conducted indirectly with supporting proxy forces. These operations usually have a protracted character. A high score of nine on the dimension of directness indicates a special operation that is offensive, kinetic, with a short duration, and often conducted with surgical precision. On the scale of autonomy, a low score of one means that a special operation is fully integrated into conventional

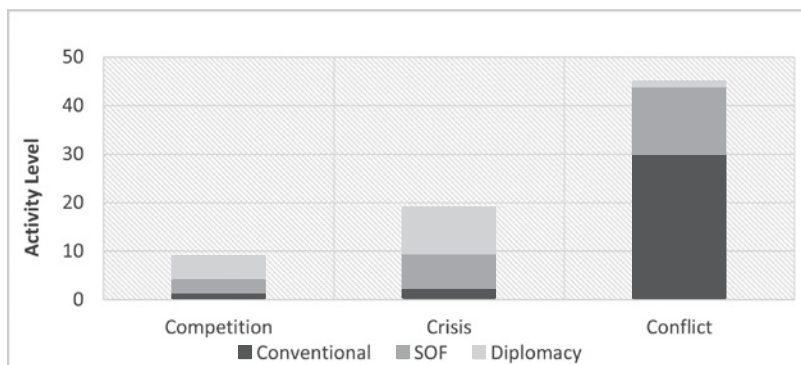
operations and supports the main effort. In contrast, a high score of nine means a special operation is autonomously planned and executed, uncoordinated with joint or component forces headquarters. See Appendix B for more details on this scoring methodology. This model will be used to map special operations across the three ages in Chapter 2.

## **The Strategic Utility of SOF Within the Military Instrument of Power**

It is necessary to understand what role special operations can play in the military instrument of power. As seen in section 1.2, national strategic objectives and future expectations have an impact on the allocation of resources to conventional forces. Consequently, they shape the void of military force. Gray, mentioned earlier, has studied SOF's strategic utility extensively and argued that special operations *can* have strategic utility. In other words, special operations can contribute to the course and the outcome of the entire conflict either directly or indirectly through the operational level of the war.<sup>40</sup>

Gray outlines the strategic utility of special operations in nine categories or claims. Two of them are more important than the others and are termed “master claims,” while the other seven are termed “other claims.” The following section elaborates on the master claims—economy of force and expansion of choice—while briefly mentioning the other claims.

**Economy of force** defines achieving significant results with limited forces. Gray explains this further by stating that special operations can (1) “act as a force multiplier and augment the strength of regular forces,” (2) “accelerate the pace of success,” (3) attain operational or strategic objectives by themselves, (4) prepare the battlefield in regular operations, (5) wage war economically, having a disproportionate effect on the battle and solving political or military problems cheaply and quickly, (6) kill or capture individuals or equipment that are difficult to reach with conventional forces, and (7) seize the initiative, substituting for absent or incompetent conventional



**Figure 3.** Absolute vs. relative value of SOF. Source: Ben Gans, “Verdiepingsdag: The Role of SOF in Conflict,” Powerpoint Presentation, April 2024; Colin S. Gray, *Explorations in Strategy* (Praeger, 1998)

forces, deceive the foe, applying military pressure quietly and with deniability, and function as the ultimate “smart weapon.”

**Expansion of choice** expands the options available for decision makers at higher levels. SOF capabilities create the ability to use force minimally, flexibly, and precisely, changes the equation when the enemy realizes that a nation has a special operations capability, and in times of war—both independently and in joint operations—enhances the flexibility of the use of force and the feasibility of success.<sup>41</sup>

As identified by Gray, the other claims of the strategic utility of SOF are: (1) innovation—SOF have “the ability to demonstrate new tactical doctrines, equipment, and military methods;” (2) morale—“special operations can raise morale and encourage political will;” (3) showcasing competence—SOF can “enhance the political standing of the country by demonstrating military prowess;” (4) reassurance—“special operations can reassure an angry or fearful public or an ally that something is being done;” (5) humiliation of the enemy—“special operations can embarrass an enemy and make him lose face without triggering a much wider war;” (6) control escalation—“special operations can limit the scope and intensity of a conflict;” and (7) shaping the future—“special operations as a contributor to [UW] can help shape the future course of political events.”<sup>42</sup>

Gray argues that SOF are highly valuable in peacetime or low-intensity conflicts as they provide unique military or paramilitary options for policymakers facing acute security problems. However, Gray also rejects this argument by pointing out that the strategic value of SOF is relative. While they excel in peacetime and low-intensity conflicts compared to other military capabilities, their absolute strategic value may be outweighed in mid-intensity or high-intensity conflicts. Additionally, the strategic value of SOF is influenced by their performance and the importance of their assigned missions for the overall war effort.<sup>43</sup> Figure 3 illustrates the discussion on absolute vs. relative strategic utility of SOF in the perspective of the conflict continuum.

## CONCLUSIONS

This chapter examines how SOF contribute to the military instrument of power, offering a thorough treatment of the concept of special operations, their various “appearances,” the units that execute them, and their strategic utility. By establishing this foundation, we created the analytical footing needed for the subsequent sections. The central focus of the chapter was the articulation of the void—the operational space in which special operations maneuver. Tracing the evolution of the political–military environment reveals the factors that shape the geometry of the ellipse and the square, and consequently the size and character of the void. This examination yields deeper insight into the nature of the void and informs conclusions about the design and deployment of SOF units. In the next chapters, the analysis extends, applying the three historically distinct phases of SOF employment and the models introduced here, to identify overarching trends that will guide future SOF development.





# Chapter 2: The Three Ages of SOF Analyzed

## INTRODUCTION

The history of modern SOF can be viewed in terms of clearly defined evolutionary stages. Each stage, or age, of SOF begins with an event or condition that catalyzes change. While there are several examples of special operations elements and leaders throughout early military history, the three ages described in this chapter refer to the evolution of modern-day SOF from their WWII predecessors. This chapter summarizes each of the three ages<sup>45</sup> and analyzes them using the theoretical concepts introduced in Chapter 1. By examining the various appearances of special operations, the strategic utility of SOF, and the specific (geo)political circumstances of that period, the void can be described.

## THE FIRST AGE OF SOF – FROM 1940 TO THE LATE '50S

And now go and set Europe ablaze.<sup>46</sup>

Enterprises must be prepared, with specially trained troops of the hunter class, who can develop a reign of terror down these coasts.<sup>47</sup>

—British Prime Minister Winston Churchill, July 1940

## Conception and Emergence

When Nazi Germany invaded Poland on September 1, 1939, major countries such as Britain, France, the U.S., and the Soviet Union were hardly prepared for a major war on the European continent. Within a short time frame, Hitler conquered large parts of Europe, leading to significant strategic dilemmas for the Allies.

After the withdrawal of the British expeditionary force from Dunkirk, followed by the collapse of France, both strategic planners and politicians began to consider how Britain might be able to continue to

prosecute the war against the Axis powers. It was painfully clear that Britain would be in no position to wage war on the European mainland in the foreseeable future because its armies had abandoned their heavy equipment in France and needed to be rebuilt virtually from scratch. This effectively left Britain with economic warfare as the only means through which the Axis powers could be attacked.

Britain turned its attention to the possibility of waging economic warfare through sabotage and subversion. Early evidence from Poland and the protectorate suggested that resistance to occupation was developing but needed help from abroad—particularly in the provision of armaments—to expand. The minister of economic warfare, Labor Member of Parliament Hugh Dalton, suggested the setup of a new organization to coordinate resistance in Europe. Based on the endorsements of some key political leaders, including British Prime Minister Winston Churchill, and in the last acts of his political life, Neville Chamberlain signed the British SOE-founding charter on July 22, 1940: “A new organization shall be established forthwith to coordinate all action, by the way of sabotage and subversion, against the enemy overseas... This organization will be known as the [Special Operations Executive] SOE.”<sup>48</sup>

On the other side of the Atlantic Ocean, in 1939, the U.S. was also not prepared for large-scale conflicts. When Gen. George C. Marshall took office as chief of staff of the U.S. Army, he assumed leadership of a 174,000-man army that ranked 19th in world size. When William Donovan, a civilian at the time, embarked on fact-finding trips to England for U.S. President Theodore Roosevelt in 1940, Churchill directed the leaders of the British SOE to brief the Americans on their concepts for intelligence and special warfare operations in support of European resistance groups. Upon his return to Washington D.C., Donovan proposed that the U.S. build a similar organization. As a result, the Office of Coordinator of Information, later renamed to the OSS, was established by Roosevelt with Donovan as its first director and directly subordinate to the Joint Chiefs of Staff.<sup>49</sup>

In addition to the setup of the British SOE, Churchill called for a force to be assembled and equipped to inflict casualties on the Germans, and bolster British morale. This led to the formation of the British (and Interallied) commando units tasked to carry out raids against German-occupied Europe. Initially drawn from within the British Army from soldiers who volunteered for the Special Service Brigade, the commandos' ranks would eventually be filled by members of all branches of the British Armed Forces and several foreign volunteers from German-occupied countries. By the end of the war, 25,000 men had passed through the commando course at Achnacarry in the Scottish Highlands. This total includes not only the British volunteers, but volunteers from Greece, France, Belgium, the Netherlands, Canada, Norway, and Poland. Reaching a wartime strength of over 30 units and four assault brigades, the commandos served in all theaters of war from the Arctic Circle to Europe and from the Mediterranean and Middle East to Southeast Asia. The U.S. Army Rangers and U.S. Marine Corps Raiders<sup>50</sup> were modelled after the commandos. Their operations ranged from small groups of men landing from the sea or by parachute to a brigade of assault troops spearheading the Allied invasions of Europe and Asia.

Similar to the military campaign of Nazi Germany on the continent of Europe, its ally Japan conducted significant military campaigns and geopolitical maneuvers across the Asia-Pacific region from 1941 to 1942. The invasion of the Republic of China, the annexation of French Indochina, and subsequent incursions into Burma and British India were conducted relatively unhindered.

In their monograph *The Fourth Age of SOF: The Use and Utility of Special Operations Forces in a New Age*, Will Irwin and Isaiah Wilson write that the U.S. commander in the China-Burma-India theater, Gen. Joseph Stilwell, needed ground forces to drive the Japanese out of the area, but he knew that it would likely be at least a year before he could expect any U.S. infantry to be shipped to this theater. When Donovan offered the light, unconventional, and untried OSS Detachment 101 for use in this theater, Stilwell—having nowhere else to turn—begrudgingly agreed. Operational requirements soon resulted in the formation of

other deep penetration units to precede or augment conventional forces engaging the Japanese army such as “Merril’s Marauders,”<sup>51</sup> and the Chindits.

In 1941, the British High Command authorized the deployment of several commando units for operations in the Middle East and North Africa, including No. 7, No. 8, and No. 11. These units were later grouped together as Layforce. As discussed by John Ferris,<sup>52</sup> this formation proved short-lived and was disbanded later that year due to strategic and operational constraints, with many of its personnel redistributed to other units. At the same time, new concepts of IW began to emerge, emphasizing the use of small, highly mobile units capable of operating deep behind enemy lines. Within this context, the SAS was established in July 1941 under the leadership of David Stirling. Stirling envisioned a force dedicated to conducting long-range raids against Axis logistical and air installations in the Western Desert, particularly those associated with German forces under Erwin Rommel. As noted by historians such as Ben Macintyre,<sup>53</sup> early SAS operations were often carried out in cooperation with the Long Range Desert Group, which provided essential navigation and transport capabilities in the desert environment.

As part of Operation OVERLORD, British and French SAS units were deployed during the night from June 5 to June 6 in France.<sup>54</sup> These units conducted haphazard attacks to prevent German reinforcements from reaching the initial Allied landing zones, and in tactical support of advancing forces. In addition to the efforts of the SAS, the Allied High Command deployed the Jedburgh teams to leverage the indigenous pool of resistance fighters in France. The Jedburghs consisted of three-person teams composed of a British or American officer; a second officer who was French, Belgian, or Dutch; and a noncommissioned officer radio operator. They were tasked to help organize, train, and arm the rapidly growing resistance and to serve as a communications link between the Allied High Command and the resistance.<sup>55</sup>

As the tide of the war shifted in 1942 so did the emphasis of Allied SOF specialist forces. DA raids were marginalized; strategic

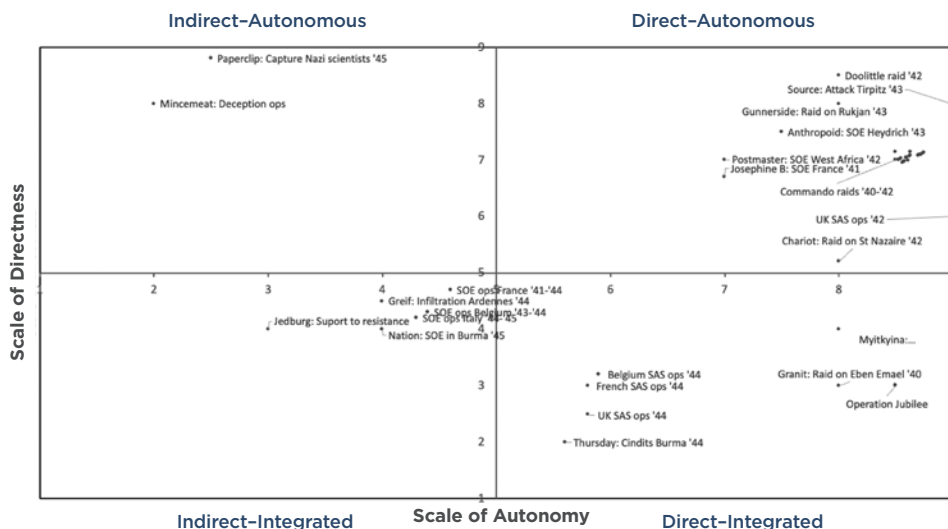
reconnaissance and UW—conducted by the OSS, the British SOE, and the SAS—gained relative importance. Following the war, and after large conventional forces were built, all elite forces that had been set up were dismantled. However, after being reassembled with the outbreak of the Korean War in June 1950, it became apparent that there was an urgent need for units that could operate behind enemy lines, especially after China entered the war in November 1950.

### Mapping Appearances of Special Operations in the First Age of SOF

In Figure 4, the special operations of the first age of SOF are plotted using the four-quadrant model introduced in Chapter 1.

#### *The Operations*

During the first age of SOF, special operations were conducted across all four quadrants. Special operations from this time can be clustered into two sections. The first cluster of special operations is positioned in the Direct-Autonomous section. These operations were mainly conducted at the beginning of the war and aimed at showcasing force to the Axis powers. Special operations in the second



**Figure 4.** Special operations in the first age of SOF. Source: Author

cluster occurred in the war's later stages. These operations were more integrated into the conventional operations and consisted of strategic reconnaissance and UW operations leveraging resistance forces across Europe and Asia.

### ***The Forces that Executed Them***

The SOF involved in the first age can be distinguished into two broad categories already introduced in Chapter 1: *elite forces* of the shock type, identified as SOF units like the Commandos, SAS, and U.S. Army Rangers on the one hand, and *special forces* like the British SOE and the U.S. OSS on the other. Although all newly created units were relevant, the different elite or SOF units executed most of the operations.

### **The Strategic Utility of SOF During the First Age of SOF**

As mentioned earlier, SOF during WWII were created out of necessity. The military campaigns of the Nazis in Europe and the Japanese in the Far East were so successful at the beginning of the war that the Allies could only watch at first. According to Gray, the tasking of SOF derives directly from judgment about national interests.<sup>56</sup> The national interests of the Allies at stake were existential, more than enough to proceed with the deployment of all necessary means to fight the enemy. The deployment of SOF was a logical first step.

The rapid emergence of SOF at the outset of WWII can be understood through Gray's first master claim—expansion of choice. By fielding small, highly-trained units capable of striking aggressively across the European mainland, the Allied political-military leadership suddenly acquired a set of options that conventional forces, still mobilizing for a full-scale counteroffensive, could not provide. These SOF units gave the Allies the flexibility to act decisively, signal resolve, and keep the initiative while the larger armies were still assembling. In addition, the very presence of such forces amplified Allied morale; as David Thomas observed in 1983: "For an army on the defensive, the real value of commando operations was connected with their psychological effect upon morale and the collection of intelligence."<sup>57</sup>

Thus, the early deployment of SOF embodied Gray's expansion of choice by widening the strategic toolbox available to the Allies and by delivering a morale-boosting, intelligence-gathering capability that conventional formations alone could not achieve. Later during the war, the newly formed SOF units served as "force-multipliers" supporting conventional combat units by shaping their operations

and accelerating their successes. Thomas continues: "In the offensive phase of the war, the value of commando operations consisted in their usefulness in assisting conventional armored attacks and naval assault landings, whose ultimate success was in any case already assured."

In summary, the first age of SOF did have a cyclical existence driven by demand. It consisted of primarily overt special operations carried out by relatively broad-based elite military forces drawn from handpicked volunteer infantry fighters. They were born out of necessity, established to raise the morale of Western armies at the beginning of the war and to serve as a model of an "elite warrior." During the war, many special operation units were created to conduct a wide variety of operations, using both direct and indirect approaches for combat. At the beginning of the war, SOF were of the "shock type"—conducting small-scale, direct, special operations to harass German and Japanese troops behind enemy lines. However, in later stages of the war, the void changed and special operations became increasingly integrated into Allied campaigns. SOF were disbanded and dissolved once the war was over.

**The first age of SOF did have a cyclical existence driven by demand [. . .] They were born out of necessity, established to raise the morale of Western armies at the beginning of the war and serve as a model of an "elite warrior."**

### **The Void During the First Age of SOF**

After the invasion of Poland by the Nazis in 1939, the military instrument of power became dominant. Searle's model represents this by a large ellipse. Initially, conventional military forces could

not confront Axis military campaigns in Europe, Africa, and the Far East. Searle's model represents this with a small box that symbolizes conventional military power. As a result, a significant void was created and led to the establishment of SOF. Elite SOF units were formed to conduct raids behind enemy lines and harass the Axis powers. In contrast, special forces units such as the British SOE and the OSS were created to support resistance forces in European and Asian theaters. While the void was filled with direct and indirect special operations, the most significant was the requirement for direct special operations behind enemy lines, initially operating autonomously and later becoming more integrated into conventional military campaigns.

## **SECOND AGE OF SOF - FROM 1960 TO THE LATE '80S**

This is another type of warfare, new in its intensity, ancient in its origins, war by guerrillas, subversives, insurgents, assassins, war by ambush instead of by combat; by infiltration instead of aggression, seeking victory by eroding and exhausting the enemy instead of engaging him.

—U.S. President John F. Kennedy, June 1962<sup>58</sup>

### **Promotion and Expansion**

The second age of SOF took place during the Cold War. In this period, the world was dominated by two superpowers: the U.S. and the Soviet Union. Each possessed vast military arsenals, ideological fervor, and global influence. This bipolar structure led to a tense standoff characterized by proxy wars, nuclear brinkmanship, and ideological competition across the globe. The balance of power was maintained through a delicate equilibrium of deterrence, where neither side could risk direct confrontation due to the threat of mutually assured destruction. In the 1960s, Liddell Hart wrote his famous book *Strategy: The Indirect Approach* where he stated that “the nuclear deterrent, however, does not apply and cannot be applied to the deterrence of subtler forms of aggression.”<sup>59</sup> He could not have been more right.

During the Cold War and under the shadow of the nuclear threat, the major powers significantly increased their use of guerilla warfare. It is in this time that Nikita Khrushchev<sup>60</sup> declared his support for “wars of liberation” across the globe and newly elected U.S. President John F. Kennedy declared a growing need for a vigorous special warfare capacity. In 1961, Kennedy announced to Congress that he had instructed Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara to act rapidly in expanding the speed and the scope of the training of existing forces for nonnuclear war, paramilitary operations, and limited or unconventional wars. McNamara talked of a 150 percent increase in U.S. anti-guerilla forces.<sup>61</sup> Non-conventional forces at that time were more of the ‘special’ type (SF) than the ‘elite’ type (SOF).<sup>62</sup>

During the conflicts in Malaysia and Vietnam, conventional British and U.S. armies encountered communist guerillas and had difficulty dealing with them. One of the solutions found was the widespread use of Green Berets and SAS teams.<sup>63</sup> In Vietnam, SF units were deployed to conduct long-range reconnaissance patrols (LRRPs) led by the CIA. Project Delta, for example, was established to gather intelligence along the Ho-Chi-Minh supply trail. Special forces teams consisted of six to ten fighters, half American and half South Vietnamese. Using advanced means and methods for that offensive, the commando fighters worked together with U.S. Air Force aircraft and guided them in targeting enemy supply squads moving along the route. During the Vietnam conflict, U.S. Army SF grew from 1,500 men to 9,000. The U.S. Navy established two new special warfare units to be known as SEAL units, with first deployments on the Mekong River delta.

In Europe, long-range reconnaissance units (LRRUs) of NATO countries played a crucial role in implementing the “stay-behind” concept during the Cold War. These specialized military units were tasked with gathering intelligence deep behind enemy lines, often operating covertly and independently for extended periods. In the context of stay-behind operations, LRRUs served as the eyes and ears of clandestine networks and provided critical information about enemy movements, infrastructure, and vulnerabilities. LRRUs were ideally suited for this role due to their advanced training in reconnaissance,

stealth, and survival techniques. They penetrated hostile territory undetected, established communication with stay-behind operatives, and relayed vital intelligence back to NATO command centers. Additionally, LRRUs facilitated the insertion of supplies, equipment, and personnel into occupied territories, strengthening the resilience of resistance movements and enhancing NATO's ability to conduct UW in the event of a Soviet invasion.<sup>64</sup>

During the 1980s, U.S. SF played a crucial role in UW campaigns in South and Central America. These campaigns often involved covert operations aimed at supporting anti-communist forces, destabilizing governments perceived as sympathetic to communism, and protecting American strategic interests in the region. One notable example is the deployment of U.S. SF to train and advise anti-communist militias and paramilitary groups. In Nicaragua, U.S. SF personnel trained and supported the Contras, a guerrilla insurgency fighting against the leftist Sandinista government. Similarly, U.S. SF provided training, equipment, and assistance to government forces combating Marxist rebels in El Salvador during the Salvadoran Civil War. Over the course of a decade, U.S. SF personnel professionalized the Salvadoran armed forces and helped them to conclude a long insurgency.<sup>65</sup>

By the late 1970s, terrorism increasingly became an area of interest to SOF as a growing number of hijackings resulted in hostage situations. SOF sought to learn from some successful foreign hostage release operations, such as one conducted by Israeli commandos at Entebbe airport in Uganda in 1974, a second carried out by the German *Grenzschutzgruppe 9* (GSG 9) commandos at Mogadishu Airport in Somalia in 1977, a third carried out by the British SAS at the Iranian embassy in London in 1980, and a fourth carried out by the Dutch *Bijzondere Bijstandseenheid* (BBE) during a hostage situation at De Punt in The Netherlands in 1977. These events led to a significant change in the attitude of the public and the military to SOF.

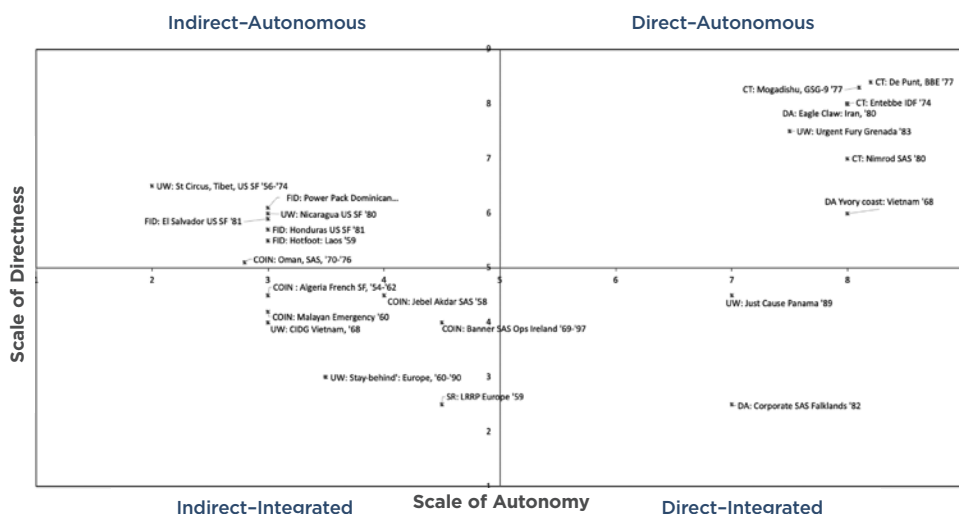
In 1985, following the Hezbollah suicide bombing in Beirut in 1983, RAND Corporation investigated the contemporary tools available for the U.S. to deal with international terrorism. It determined that SOF

commando raids were the best course of action against terrorism.<sup>66</sup> On November 4, 1979, Iranian radicals stormed the U.S. Embassy in Tehran, taking 52 hostages. An attempted rescue of the hostages by a special operations task force on April 24, 1980—Operation EAGLE CLAW—ended in disaster at a refueling site in the Iranian desert known as Desert One. This event would have a great impact on the development of SOF in its third age.

## Mapping Appearances of Special Operations in the Second Age of SOF

### *The Operations*

A few things stand out in the distribution of special operations across the four quadrants in Figure 5. First, we see a cluster of special operations in the Direct-Autonomous quadrant. These are essentially a response by Western countries to the activities of various terrorist groups worldwide. Second, a significant number of special operations during this age are classified as indirect. Some of the special operations were conducted autonomously, while a substantial number of indirect special operations were linked to conventional military



**Figure 5.** Special operations in the second age of SOF. Source: Author

operations. Finally, it is notable that the number of special operations in the Direct-Integrated quadrant.

### ***The Forces that Executed Them***

The second age of SOF saw a dramatic increase in the size of the U.S. SF, or Green Berets. These units specialized in UW and long-range reconnaissance while working on a long-term basis with indigenous forces. Additionally, LRRP capacities, such as the 104 Long Range Reconnaissance Company, part of the Dutch Army SOF regiment *Korps Commandtroepen* (KCT), were being formed in the U.S. and Europe. Even for the British SAS, UW and long-range reconnaissance became primary tasks. As terrorism became a significant “new” menace in the ’70s and ’80s, new units were created and existing ones were assigned new tasks. For example, the GSG 9 was established in Germany in 1972, the British SAS was assigned the counterterrorist role in 1972, the *Groupe d’intervention de la Gendarmerie Nationale* was formed in France, 1st Special Forces Operational Detachment-Delta (1st SFOD-D)—also known as Delta Force—was formed in the U.S. in 1977, and the *Gruppo di Intervento Speciale* was formed in Italy in 1978.

### **The Strategic Utility of SOF During the Second Age of SOF**

With the eternal threat of destructive nuclear war, interests and antagonisms were mainly fought indirectly. The Soviet Union encouraged the spread of communism by supporting uprisings against former colonizers or supporting Marxist-oriented regimes to increase their influence in the world. With the U.S. in the lead, the West tried to counter this movement by supporting pro-Western governments or insurgents. This indirect approach prevented a direct clash between the two superpowers. SOF, such as the Green Berets and the British SAS, were deployed worldwide to fuel this indirect struggle for world hegemony. During this period of SOF development, Gray’s master claim—expansion of choice—played an essential role in the decision to deploy SOF units. In supporting either friendly governments using foreign internal defense or friendly insurgents using UW, discretion and a long-term approach were often necessary. Unlike conventional

units, SOF units were well positioned for this. Consequently, the 1960s saw strong growth in the deployment of SOF units, particularly in the United States. The military relevance of SOF for indirect warfare is also evident in what Gray calls “escalation control.” By deploying limited military resources when there was an imminent escalation between the U.S. and the Soviet Union, it was possible to scale back relatively quickly and easily. During the 1970s, a new task for SOF surfaced. A wave of terrorism engulfed the Western-oriented world, and it soon became apparent that only SOF had an answer for this. SOFs high level of training, availability on short notice, and use of innovative tactics and techniques proved suitable for dealing with these terrorist threats; it offered policymakers “economy of force.”

**Fighting terrorism required specific skills that were not resident within the military instrument at large. As such, SOF were once again targeted to provide the solution.**

In this second age, SOF units were sustained, and experienced vast growth under the Kennedy administration. SOF represented a governmental tool that may be overt or covert. They were designed to foment rebellion and create proxy and guerilla forces or to fight guerilla forces

to further national interests, while maintaining a degree of obscurity in both instances. This became increasingly important with the emergence of international terrorism. During this time, SOF were reestablished and retrained for anti-terror, as they were considered accurate, well trained, flexible, and agile. Following several cases in which SOF operated with a high-media profile, they began receiving the status of popular heroes.<sup>67</sup>

### **The Void During the Second Age of SOF**

During the Cold War, the military instrument of power played an essential role in the strategic competition between the U.S., or the West, and the Soviet Union. The tasks of both power blocs' conventional army units were limited to forming a deterrent. Large conventional armies and substantial nuclear arsenals were utilized

for this purpose. In the strategic competition that ensued, the two power blocs sought to increase their influence through sustaining or countering regional conflicts. The required military interventions were unsuitable for conventional military units tied to European territorial defensive tasks. The void that surfaced could only be filled with the deployment of special units that conducted mostly *indirect special operations*. The rise of terrorism in the '70s spawned the next major evolutionary step for SOF. Fighting terrorism required specific skills that were not resident within the military instrument at large. As such, SOF were once again targeted to provide the solution; and who better than specially selected individuals who were capable of agility in thought, adaptability in operations, and possessed superior martial skills?

### **THIRD AGE OF SOF – FROM 1990 TO 2020**

The motto of our Army Special Forces is 'To free the oppressed,' and that is exactly what they have been doing and will continue to do.<sup>68</sup>

—U.S. President Donald Trump, 2016

#### **Regeneration and Validation**

The failed Iranian hostage rescue mission in April 1980 proved to be the catalyst for change that initiated the third age of SOF. In May 1980, the U.S. Joint Chiefs of Staff commissioned a Special Operations Review Group to examine all aspects of the failed mission. The commission's report concluded that a command whose mission was to integrate the special units from all branches of the military into SOF and equip them with weapons and combat support systems suited to the nature of their high-priority operations needed to be established. This command became known as Joint Special Operations Command (JSOC) and marked the commencement of a period of rebirth and reorganization—a renewal of interest in and the professionalization of America's SOF.<sup>69</sup>

During the First Gulf War with Operation DESERT SHIELD and Operation DESERT STORM in late 1990 and early 1991, U.S. and British

SOF were employed in a wide range of traditional wartime special operations missions. SOF provided a critical component in successful coalition forces C2. All the activities of SOF during the months of preparation and during the operation itself demonstrated, above all, its operational flexibility. The range of operations, from rescue and recovery to direct offensive operations—like the famous Scud hunts<sup>70</sup>—demonstrated how far SOF had come and how they could be integrated into regular warfare. The number of missions assigned to the forces also indicated increased confidence in SOF's operational capabilities among officers, and highlighted several ways to use SOF during high-intensity conflict to assist conventional forces. SOF have, in effect, become force multipliers.<sup>71</sup>

After the collapse of the Soviet Bloc in 1989, the world entered a period of uncertainty which led to the emergence of what scholars termed “fourth-generation warfare” (4GW)<sup>72</sup> or various other labels like “limited war,” “war amongst the people,”<sup>73</sup> and “low intensity confrontation.”<sup>74</sup> This new form of conflict was characterized by asymmetry, urban warfare, and challenges in decision-making where traditional state power could become a weakness. Yedidya Ya'ari and Haim Asa argued that modern democratic values were exploited by enemies to manipulate against state adversaries.<sup>75</sup> Thomas Liebes and Zohar Kampf highlighted the role of media in shaping perceptions of violence.<sup>76</sup> Western militaries, still geared towards conventional warfare, faced difficulties in adapting to decentralized enemies. SOF, with their flexibility and clandestine nature, became crucial assets in addressing these challenges. In the decade that followed the First Gulf War, SOF emerged as the primary tool of the West in non-war military operations. Their role expanded over time, encompassing a diverse range of missions: from covert raids for intelligence gathering, to providing guidance for remote-controlled missiles, as seen in Operation ENDURING FREEDOM (OEF). This operation, conducted in close collaboration with the Afghan Northern Alliance and U.S. airpower, led to the toppling of the Taliban regime in Afghanistan in 2001. Other missions included sabotage, hostage rescue, CT, anti-kidnapping,

and assassination operations, as well as psychological warfare and peacekeeping missions.<sup>77</sup>

Following the 9/11 attacks, the Bush Doctrine emphasized preemptive actions against terrorism, elevating the role of SOF in global conflicts. Thus, the active and aggressive Global War on Terror (GWOT)—as opposed to the defensive and relatively passive approach that had preceded the attack on the Twin Towers—became central to the strategy of some Western countries. The increasing reliance on SOF, marked by expanding budgets and missions, continued through subsequent administrations and reflected a shift towards “light footprint” strategies. Despite their effectiveness, the heavy toll on SOF personnel and the debate over their extensive deployments have sparked public and military scrutiny.

## **Mapping Appearances of Special Operations in the Third Age of SOF**

### ***The Operations***

Notably, in the third age of SOF, operations are also conducted in all quadrants of the model introduced in Chapter 1 (as seen in Fig. 6). However, it is clear that Direct-Integrated special operations constituted a significant share. While direct special operations were mainly conducted in support of conventional military operations during WWII, a reverse pattern is seen during the third age of SOF: conventional units often supporting SOF units. A major trigger for SOF deployment is related to the West’s large-scale military deployments in Iraq (Operation DESERT STORM and Operation IRAQI FREEDOM) and Afghanistan (OEF). Challenging, autonomously-conducted direct special operations, such as the eliminations of ISIS leader Al-Baghdadi and Osama Bin Laden, the air raid on a nuclear facility in Syria by Israel, and the clandestine cyber-attack on Iran’s nuclear uranium enrichment facility, are also notable.

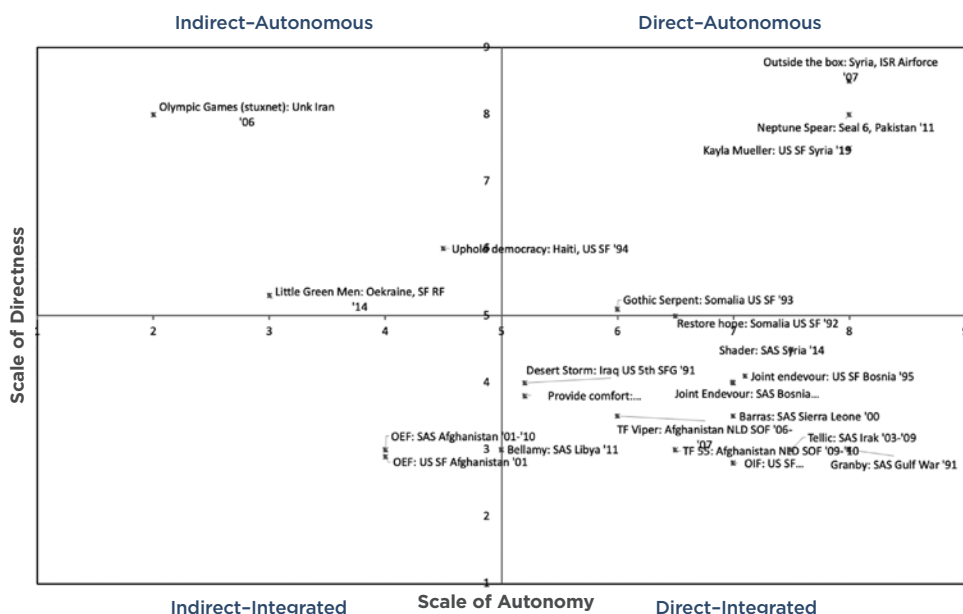
### ***The Forces that Executed Them***

During the third age of SOF, the emphasis on indirect special operations focusing on UW and long-range reconnaissance typically

conducted by U.S. SF shifted to the more kinetic, DA special operations conducted by units like the U.S. Navy SEALs and Delta Force. For example, in the Dutch SOF community, the tasks of the Army SOF unit KCT shifted from long-range reconnaissance tasks to CT and COIN, marking a profound change in culture, training, equipment, and position within the Dutch armed forces.

### The Strategic Utility of SOF in the Third Age

The third age of SOF followed the end of the Cold War period, in which the Western world and the U.S. dominated world politics. It was the age of Francis Fukuyama's influential book *The End of History* where he posits that the fall of the Soviet Union and the triumph of liberal democracy marked the endpoint of humanity's ideological evolution, with liberal democracy representing the final form of government. He argued that this universalization of Western liberal democracy would lead to a peaceful and harmonious global order devoid of ideological conflict.<sup>78</sup> In this atmosphere, the Western



**Figure 6.** Special operations in the third age of SOF. Source: Author

world developed the notion that liberalism and democracy needed to be exported to other parts of the world, including to “failed states” threatening the liberalist world order. State and non-state actors with opposing world views—including Russia and China—but with significantly less military means turned to IW and terrorism to oppose the liberal West.

Simultaneously, in an era of perceived peace, the public’s reluctance to deploy troops to foreign peacekeeping/enforcement missions decreased. This was accompanied by a strategic shift towards ‘sustainable political warfare,’ which replaced the traditional approach of deploying tens of thousands of troops in multiple global conflicts with ‘light footprints’ in numerous locations. These light footprints involved the use of uncrewed aerial vehicles, the facilitation of arms sales and shipments, the training of various groups fighting for Western interests, and the widespread utilization of SOF.<sup>79</sup> This shift not only expanded the range of options for decision-makers, providing them with a more nuanced and adaptable approach, but also offered a politically acceptable alternative to conventional force intervention in foreign countries.

### **The Void During the Third Age of SOF**

The void during the third age of SOF changed because of a gap between warfare’s evolving nature and traditional military forces’ capabilities, particularly in addressing asymmetric threats and unconventional challenges. This void emerged as conflicts shifted towards IW, terrorism, and non-state actors, creating a mismatch between the conventional capabilities of militaries and the demands of modern conflict environments. SOF emerged as crucial actors in filling this void. Conducting mostly *direct and integrated special operations*, SOF offered flexibility, agility, and specialized skill sets tailored to address the complexities of contemporary security threats. Their ability to operate in small teams, adapt quickly to changing situations, and engage with local populations positioned them as critical assets in bridging the gap between conventional military strategies and the realities of 21st-century conflict (force multipliers). SOF’s small

footprint also played into the national interests of Western countries, which were not keen on large-scale military deployment.

**SUMMARY**

It is risky to oversimplify complex issues when summarizing the three ages of SOF development. Nevertheless, Table 1 summarizes the complex evolution of SOF deployment from 1945 to 2020, using the theoretical concepts of Chapter 1. It is essential to realize that the dividing lines cannot be drawn hard, and that reality shows a more gradual transition. Nevertheless, such an overview helps to ultimately

**Table 1.** Summaries of the Three Ages of SOF Development

|                                                                             | First Age of SOF                                                                | Second Age of SOF                                                                                           | Third Age of SOF                                                   |
|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Appearances of Special Operations                                           | Direct-Autonomous (transforming into direct-integrated)                         | Indirect-Integrated (transforming into direct-integrated)                                                   | Direct-Integrated (transforming into indirect-autonomous)          |
| Dominant Type of SOF Forces That Executed Special Operations                | Elite Forces (SOF)                                                              | Special forces                                                                                              | Elite forces (SOF)                                                 |
| Strategic Utility of SOF<br><i>'Expansion of choice' 'Economy of force'</i> | Use of direct SOF to boost morale and showcase resolve towards Axis aggression  | Indirect usage of SOF to attain political goals while mitigating risks for direct confrontation             | Sustainable political warfare with light footprint                 |
| The Void of Military Force                                                  | Conventional forces "beaten" during first stages of the war, reaction necessary | Due to mutually assured destruction,* direct conventional confrontation between superpowers is not possible | Conventional forces could not handle irregular warfare efficiently |

Source: Author

\*"Mutually Assured Destruction" is a Cold War doctrine wherein the possession of nuclear weapons by opposing superpowers ensures that any aggressive action would result in the complete annihilation of both parties.

conclude the universal determinants of the void. More specifically, the next chapter will use the analysis and insights of Chapter 1 and 2 to identify the universal determinants of the changing void.





# Chapter 3: Identifying Universal Determinants in the Void

## INTRODUCTION

In the first chapter, we discussed the concept of special operations, their connection to the void of military force, their manifestations, the characteristics of the units carrying them out, and their strategic utility. In the second chapter, we utilized these theoretical ideas to define the void for the three distinct periods of SOF. In this chapter, which expands on the theoretical groundwork laid in Chapter 1, the goal is to explore whether there are common factors when comparing the void in the three eras of SOF. The two main theoretical concepts of Chapter 1, the appearances of SOF, and the strategic utility of SOF will be used to conduct this analysis.

## ANALYZING THE CHANGING VOID OF MILITARY FORCE ACROSS EPOCHS

### What Factors Determined the Appearances of Special Operations?

Comparing the three ages of SOF, significant strategic shifts in response to global events can be observed. The types of special operations have changed in appearance several times. In the first age of SOF, special operations were characterized as direct-autonomous at the beginning of WWII, then transitioned into direct-integrated special operations as the war progressed. The second age of SOF saw a dominance of indirect-integrated special operations throughout the 1950s and 1960s. The 1970s and 1980s were then marked by the rise of international terrorism and witnessed a shift from indirect-integrated to direct-autonomous operations. The third age of SOF, shaped by the GWOT, saw a return to direct-integrated operations—this time supported by conventional forces. Even in the face of revisionist Russia and more assertive geopolitical players like China and Iran, special

operations have shown their adaptability and tendency to return to indirect-autonomous operations.

One of the things that stands out when looking at the three stages of SOF development is that all three took place during a specific geopolitical period. The first age of SOF occurred predominantly during WWII, characterized by high-intensity conflict between two major powers. Rapid conquests in Europe and Asia by the Axis powers presented the Allies with significant strategic dilemmas. The inability of conventional combat forces to respond swiftly to the created power imbalance led to various SOF units. With targeted, direct-autonomous raids on Axis vulnerabilities, the Allies showed they were not yet defeated. Later during the war, special operations became more integrated in the conventional military campaign.

**The inability of conventional combat forces to respond swiftly to the created power imbalance led to various SOF units.**

The second age of SOF occurred during the Cold War, characterized by a “bipolar” balance of power and strategic competition between the U.S. and the Soviet Union.

Their mutual nuclear arsenals

essentially caused the equal balance of power between the two nations. In an ever-threatening mutually assured destruction scenario, the two superpowers avoided direct confrontation. To still defend national interests (for the U.S., that meant protecting the liberal, democratic rule of law based on a capitalist economic system), the superpowers fought each other indirectly in various conflicts in different parts of the world. The void for special operations arose because conventional forces were not tailored for effective support of indirect proxy warfare.

The geopolitical situation during the third age of SOF, which took place after the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989, became unipolar, with the U.S. as the dominant world power. This Western dominance was globally contested by local and regional powers and fought with terrorist attacks and hybrid warfare. Again, deploying conventional

units against these threats had limited effect, creating a void in military force. SOF was uniquely positioned for these security threats due to their flexibility, agility, and specialized skill.

In conclusion, balance of power issues can significantly influence the use of SOF by shaping the strategic considerations and decision-making processes of nations. It is observed that in a bipolar geopolitical situation, states try to avoid large-scale military confrontations with conventional assets. SOF can be employed indirectly and covertly to support allies, undermine adversaries, or project power in contested areas without escalating into open conflict, thus allowing states to pursue their interests while avoiding direct confrontation. Conversely, in a unipolar or bipolar world where a dominant power seeks to preserve its position, SOF may be utilized to counter challenges to its supremacy, conduct preemptive actions against emerging threats, or shape the behavior of other actors to maintain the existing balance of power. Overall, the use of SOF in balance of power calculations reflects a strategic tool for states to advance their interests, manage risks, and navigate complex geopolitical dynamics while avoiding the pitfalls of conventional warfare. The first universal determinant of the void is identified as *changes in the balance of political power*.

When devising military strategies, it is crucial for policymakers to prioritize understanding the political and military risks associated with a state's defense and security.

These risks significantly influence the decision-making process

for the deployment and utilization of SOF. In the face of heightened political risks, such as concerns about escalation, international repercussions, or civilian casualties, the expertise of policymakers is essential in making strategic choices. These decisions may involve discreet and directly targeted SOF operations or indirect, deniable operations, which entail SOF collaborating with indigenous proxy

**Balance of power issues can significantly influence the use of SOF by shaping the strategic considerations and decision-making processes of nations.**

forces. Similarly, when faced with significant military risks like enemy capabilities or operational limitations, policymakers must strategically assess the feasibility and impact of employing direct SOF in specific scenarios. Relevant in this context is Gray's notion of the "expansion of choice,"

as already discussed in earlier

sections of this publication. This refers to the idea that advances in military technology and strategy provide policymakers with a broader range of options for achieving political objectives. In the context of political and military risks to military response options, the expansion of choice becomes relevant as decision-makers assess various courses of action to mitigate risks and achieve desired outcomes. In essence, Gray's notion of the expansion of choice underscores the importance of leveraging diverse military capabilities, including SOF, to navigate political and military risks effectively and achieve strategic objectives while maximizing flexibility, adaptability, and operational success. The second universal determinant of the void is identified as *the level of political and military risk involved in military response options*.

**National interest is the key to unlocking the otherwise uncertain relationship between a policy and its security environment, and the tasking of special operations derives directly from a judgement about national interests.**

### **What Impacted the Strategic Utility of SOF?**

As detailed in Chapter 1, Gray outlines the strategic utility of special operations in nine comprehensive categories or claims. Two of them—economy of force and expansion of choice—stand out as "master claims." The other seven also play crucial roles and are termed "other claims." These claims, when combined, provide a comprehensive understanding of the strategic utility of special operations—which is the main focus of this analysis. In the paragraphs below, both claims come into play in decisions to deploy SOF.

Gray has done some work on the relationship between the utility of SOF and matters of national interest.<sup>80</sup> Apart from the balance

of power issues, he argues that the void is also a function of the state's foreign policy choices. These choices rest upon the strategic culture of the state involved rather than the trends in world affairs exclusively. According to him, national interest is the key to unlocking the otherwise uncertain relationship between a policy and its security environment, and the tasking of special operations derives directly from a judgement about national interests. Four levels of national interest can be defined: (1) survival interests, which are vital for a state to protect in order to endure physically and politically; (2) vital interests, which are deemed so crucial that they are worthwhile to fight for; (3) major interests, which are difficult, but not impossible to justify fighting for; and (4) other interests that are virtually impossible to justify a fight for. National interest impacts the strategic utility of SOF *and* its appearance. The higher the national interest, the higher the chance of deploying SOF for autonomous special operations. The combination of the level of national interest and the ability or inability of conventional forces to address them determines the *void*. High national interests are clearly visible during all three ages of SOF development. The third universal determinant of the void is identified as *the nature and level of the national security interests at stake*.

The identification and assessment of threat—defined as actions that can cause disruption, damage, and potential ruin of another state's national security and economic, defense, and political stability and/or sovereignty—is normally at the forefront of states' focus.<sup>81</sup> As such, their military, security, and intelligence apparatus are tasked, trained, and equipped to deal with these threats. However, a failure to properly identify threat, surprise, or unexpected "Black Swan" events, or simply being overwhelmed by an opponent, creates gaps and shortcomings that endanger a state's ability to conduct itself as it desires. While studying the different ages of historic SOF development, it was clear that predicting threats has proven to be very difficult. As a result, in many cases, conventional forces were not prepared for the security challenges—resulting in a void. This situation occurred in the past and is likely to be even more uncertain in the period ahead of us. With an "increased global disorder," characterized by decline in the long-

standing rules-based international order, the security environment is getting more complex and volatile than what has been experienced in recent memory. Rival states seek a world with diminishing Western influence and dominance, a world marked by an eastward shift in the geopolitical center of gravity. Revisionist powers and rogue states grow increasingly frustrated with their standing in the international system and seek to gain advantage through campaigns marked by disinformation, deception, cyberattack, economic coercion, intimidation of weaker neighbors, support to terrorists, subversion, sabotage, and proxy warfare.

**SOF possess a more evolved and complex multidimensional association with several advanced technologies. In isolation, they have no defining quality; however, in fusion, they provoke new capabilities and military possibilities.**

Meanwhile, persistent instability in the Islamic world; global governance and security imbalances recently reemerging in Europe (specifically Ukraine); transnational crime; climate change challenges; resource shortages; economic disparities and financial crises; pandemics and other health issues; religious and ethnic complexities; aging populations and demographic

shifts; the rise of megacities; and the rapid proliferation of evolving technologies all contribute to a complex security challenge and an ever-evolving strategic environment. The spread of destructive misinformation facilitated by increasingly capable digital technology reinforces distrust in government institutions and further enables self-serving authoritarian rule. In key locations around the world, populations are losing trust in governments and institutions that are seen as unwilling or unable to address their needs. Governments are facing historic new challenges in a time of diminishing resources, resulting in political volatility and a strain on democratic governance. Meanwhile, major powers are finding it increasingly painless to flaunt international rules, norms, and institutions. These high uncertainties drive the void as conventional forces are not sure on what type

of conflict/threat they need to prepare for. The fourth universal determinant of the void is identified as *the level and intensity of the proliferation of threats*.

Disruptive technologies can confront military units with strategic and tactical dilemmas. If an adversary uses a new disruptive technology, it puts military units at a disadvantage. The resulting void can be filled by SOF units, which are inherently adaptive. Finlan, introduced in Chapter 1, even argues that special operations are defined by a technology fusion that could only occur once a certain level of technological development has been reached. This is the reason why, according to Finlan, prior to the 20th century, standing SOF did not exist and could not exist.<sup>82</sup> SOF possess a more evolved and complex multidimensional association with several advanced technologies. In isolation, they have no defining quality; however, in fusion, they provoke new capabilities and military possibilities. These technologies cover three broad areas: (1) communications, (2) firepower, and (3) transport, which all rose to prominence in WWII. For example, (1) the development of wireless Morse code sets and S-phones allowed soldiers to communicate with their headquarters, nearby ships, or overflying aircraft while located deep behind enemy lines. (2) The development of lightweight, small-arms technologies, such as submachine guns, light machine guns, and plastic explosives, permitted SOF to have a disproportionally larger impact compared to the size of the units deployed, especially when targeting vital enemy material assets such as aircraft, fuel dumps, and critical personnel. Finally, (3) transport technologies such as aircraft/parachutes, jeeps/lorries, and ships/submarines allowed SOF various means to locate themselves within enemy territory. One of the most noticeable, but often overlooked, aspects of WWII was how “depth” and its exploitation were an important part of the strategy landscape. For SOF, the fusion of specific technologies facilitated the exploitation of geography and the inevitable porousness of a battle theatre from a non-confluent perspective. It permitted the infiltration of small yet well-equipped units into historically restricted realms of the battlefield where vital war-sustaining material assets and critical political and

military leaders are located. It is important to underline that there was nothing new about the ability to penetrate enemy lines in the annals of warfare. However, historically, these excursions were limited and once service members crossed over into enemy territory all regular communication would be lost until they returned. However, the emergence of SOF meant that, thanks to technology and new thinking, military forces could operate behind enemy lines with genuine affect and communicate, or be coordinated, in real-time with their headquarters.

The deployment of SOF and high-tech precision stand-off weapons during Operation ENDURING FREEDOM in 2001 proved to be highly effective, allowing for swift deployment, adaptability, and enhanced military capability through alliance-building with local partners such as the Northern Alliance. SOF facilitated real-time intelligence gathering and targeted operations to disrupt Taliban leadership and control while precision strikes minimized unintended damage and weakened the morale of Taliban fighters. This coordinated approach enabled a minimalist military presence, reducing both risks and expenses when compared to a traditional invasion. The overwhelming display of power and efficiency resulted in the rapid disintegration of Taliban resistance, underscoring the efficacy of modern warfare tactics that combine cutting-edge technology with highly skilled ground forces. Through this, the fifth universal determinant of the void is identified as *the presence of disruptive emerging technologies*.

## **SUMMARIZING THE UNIVERSAL DETERMINANTS OF THE VOID**

Table 2 concludes this chapter by summarizing the relationship between the theoretical concepts, the ages of SOF development, and the universal determinants of the void.

**Table 2.** Universal Determinants of the Void

|                                          | First Age of SOF                                                                   | Second Age of SOF                                                                                    | Third Age of SOF                                                                           |   | Universal Determinants                                                     |
|------------------------------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|---|----------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <b>Appearances of Special Operations</b> | Axis military power created need for direct special operations                     | Balance of power created need for unconventional warfare                                             | Uni-polar world created need for CT and COIN operations                                    | → | Changes in the balance of political power                                  |
|                                          | Involved high military risk to challenge a superior opponent in occupied territory | Involved high political risks to compete with opponents under threat of nuclear escalation           | High political risks to counter insurgents/terrorist while reducing risks for the military | → | Level of political and military risk involved in military response options |
| <b>Strategic Utility of SOF</b>          | Survival of the Allied political system required swift response                    | Vital interest for the West to protect its ideological model from communism through indirect warfare | Vital interest for the West to protect its ideological model from irregular challengers    | → | The nature and level of the national security interests at stake           |
|                                          | Significant threat by superior (conventional) opponent                             | Significant threat of a peer opponent in combination with proliferation of terrorism                 | Acceleration of irregular threats hyper connected world                                    | → | The level and intensity of the proliferation of threats                    |
|                                          | Fire power, communications and transportation                                      | Improved fire power, communications, and transportation                                              | Stand-off precision weapons, hyper connectivity                                            | → | The presence of disruptive emerging technologies                           |

Source: Author



## Chapter 4: Conclusions

This monograph seeks to contribute to the ongoing scholarly discourse surrounding SOF deployment. It draws upon the pioneering work of Tom Searle, who has linked SOF deployment to what he calls the void of military force—referring to tasks that conventional units cannot execute. Searle argues that this void is dynamic and subject to change, but he does not delve into how this void evolves or the factors that drive these changes. Similarly, scholars such as Irwin and Wilson have examined the shifting role of SOF since WWII, identifying three distinct periods of varied SOF deployment worldwide. While their work offers valuable insight into the historical development of SOF, it falls short of explaining the catalysts behind these changes.

This study aims to connect two different research areas in a new and innovative way. By using Searle's concept of the void and Gray's important work on the strategic significance of SOF, along with Irwin and Wilson's identified periods of SOF deployment, the goal is to develop a deeper and more comprehensive understanding of the universal factors influencing the void. This provides a solid basis for further investigation. By carefully analyzing the visible forms and strategic usefulness of SOF, five key factors that echoed across the eras, each playing a significant role in shaping the void, have been identified.

- (1) Changes in the balance of political power*
- (2) The nature and level of national security risks at stake*
- (3) The level of political and military risks involved in military response options*
- (4) The level and intensity of the proliferation of threats*
- (5) The presence of disruptive emerging technologies*

Having identified the universal determinants of the void, the research question of this publication—*To what extent do the*

*determinants of the void of military force in the last three eras reveal a universal pattern, and if so, what is this pattern?*—has been answered, marking the next step in the scholarly understanding of the void in the field of military studies. It turns out that if the different periods of SOF development are analyzed consistently, universal factors that always apply can be identified. With that understanding, follow-up research can be initiated.

The findings of this study have significant practical implications for SOF units. Utilizing the universal determinants can drive further research to understand the current void better. Analyzing changes in geopolitical balance, for example, can derive conclusions about the current primary mode of SOF deployment, whether direct or indirect. Examining cutting-edge, disruptive technologies like AI and unmanned systems can yield valuable insights into developing necessary skills and supporting technologies for SOF personnel. A more thorough understanding of the present void will empower SOF units worldwide in their development and readiness. This understanding is crucial as SOF units contemplate their role in the post-GWOT era. This period will significantly shape their future operations and require immediate strategic adjustments. ♠





# Appendix A: List of Special Operations\*

## A. WELL-KNOWN COMMANDO RAIDS

- **Operation GUNNERSIDE** A team of Norwegian commandos trained by the British SOE infiltrated and sabotaged the heavy water plant at Vemork in Norway on February 27, 1943. Heavy water was a key component of Germany's nuclear research program and the operation prevented Germany from developing an atomic bomb. It was later called "the most successful act of sabotage in all of [WWII]" by Churchill.
- **Operation CHARIOT** This daring British commando raid, also known as the St. Nazaire Raid, took place on March 28, 1942 and targeted the heavily defended dry dock at St. Nazaire in German-occupied France. The mission involved ramming the obsolete destroyer HMS Campbeltown, packed with explosives, into the dock gates, followed by a commando assault to destroy key installations. The successful destruction of the dry dock rendered it unusable for the German battleship Tirpitz, significantly hindering German naval capabilities in the Atlantic.
- **Operation GRANIT** A German military special operation during WWII that aimed to capture the Belgian Fort Eben-Emael on May 10, 1940. Utilizing glider-borne paratroopers and specialized explosive charges, German forces swiftly neutralized the fort's defenses in a surprise attack. The successful capture of Fort Eben-Emael facilitated the rapid German advance into Belgium, marking a significant early victory in the Battle of France.

## B. OTHER COMMANDO RAIDS, 1940-1942

Note: These operations are summarized in the graphs featured in Chapter 2: The Three Ages of SOF Analyzed.

- **Operation COLLAR** (France, 1940) – This reconnaissance mission consisted of 200 men and was only a propaganda victory.

Two Germans were killed for no loss and all the commandos returned safely.

- **Operation AMBASSADOR** (Guernsey, 1940) – This mission involved 140 men tasked to take prisoners and attack Guernsey Airfield at Saint Peter Port; however, only 40 men landed. The raid was a failure due to a series of mishaps, poor fortune, and hasty planning and implementation. It resulted in no immediate military gains.
- **Operation CLAYMORE** (Lofoten Islands, 1940) – Eight hundred men were tasked with destroying industry. About 800,000 gallons of fish oil, kerosene, and paraffin were set on fire. Several factories were destroyed and 228 prisoners of war were captured.
- **Operation CHESS** (France, 1941) — Eighteen commandos landed to conduct reconnaissance and capture prisoners; they remained ashore for one hour, but no prisoners were taken and there were no casualties.
- **Operation GAUNTLET** — (Norway, 1941) A force of 1,500 men was deployed to destroy industry, and the targeted coal-mining facilities were successfully demolished.
- **Operation ACID DROP** (France, 1941) — Twenty-five commandos went ashore for reconnaissance and to capture prisoners. After thirty minutes on the beach, they encountered no German forces and returned emptyhanded.
- **Operation CHOPPER** (France, 1941) — Twenty-five commandos participated in a raid where two of them were killed and had to be left behind.
- **Operation DEEP CUT** (France, 1941) — Twenty-five commandos were sent to reconnoiter and capture prisoners. They opened fire on a German bicycle patrol, who returned fire and wounded two of the commandos.
- **Operation ASTRAKEN** (France, 1941) — Four commandos were tasked to carry out a beach reconnaissance mission. They did not

encounter any German troops, but gathered useful information on the beach's suitability for landing craft.

- **Operation SUNSTAR** (France, 1941) — One hundred commandos attempted to destroy a gun battery, but the raid was only partially successful. Although the battery was not destroyed and no prisoners were taken, the commandos recovered documents and other intelligence.
- **Operation ANKLET** (Norway, 1941) — Three hundred commandos were tasked with capturing prisoners and destroying radio stations. They destroyed two radio stations, sank or captured several ships, and took prisoners. This operation is often mistakenly described as a diversion for Operation ARCHERY, but the opposite is true.
- **Operation ARCHERY** (Norway, 1941) — Eight hundred commandos assaulted German harbor installations and personnel. They destroyed four fish oil factories and stores, captured German prisoners, and suffered 17 killed and 53 wounded.
- **Operation CURLEW** (France, 1941) — One hundred commandos were sent to reconnoiter beach defenses. The mission failed and the landing party had to be rescued by the Navy.
- **Operation BITING** (France, 1942) — One hundred and twenty commandos seized radar equipment. The success of this raid later prompted the expansion of the British airborne forces and the creation of the Parachute Regiment.
- **Operation MYRMIDON** (France, 1942) — One hundred commandos were assigned to attack harbor installations; however, the transport ships struck a sandbar and—compounded by bad weather—the raid was called off.
- **Operation JV** (France, 1942) — Two commandos covertly placed a limpet mine on a tanker and escaped without being detected.
- **Operation ABERCROMBIE** (France, 1942) — One hundred and fifty commandos attempted to capture prisoners and destroy a

searchlight. One commando was wounded and the objectives were not achieved.

- **Operation BRISTLE** (France, 1942) — Commandos destroyed a German radar site. Although the raid itself succeeded, the transport vessels were intercepted on the return voyage and casualties were incurred.
- **Operation BARRICADE** (France, 1942) — Eleven commandos attacked a radar and anti-aircraft site. They killed three Germans and wounded six without suffering any losses, but failed to achieve the primary objective.
- **Operation CAULDRON** (France, 1942) — A commando assault carried out on August 19, 1942 as part of the larger Operation JUBILEE at Dieppe. Lt. Col. Lord Lovat led No. 4 Commando—augmented by about 50 U.S. Army Rangers—to land on the western flank of the Dieppe beaches and neutralize the German Hess Battery at Varengeville. Only a small party (around 18 commandos) reached the battery's perimeter; they engaged the guns with small-arms fire, and succeeded in distracting the crews and forcing erratic firing, but were unable to destroy the emplacements. Consequently, the raid achieved a limited tactical effect—temporarily suppressing the battery—but fell short of its primary objective of permanently silencing the artillery that threatened the main Dieppe landing.
- **Operation MUSKETON** (Norway, 1942) — Twelve commandos were sent to destroy an industrial site. The raid succeeded, but most of the commandos were captured while trying to cross into Sweden and became the first victims of the German “Commando Order.”
- **Operation FAHRENHEIT** (France, 1942) — Ten commandos carried out a reconnaissance and prisoner-capture mission against a signals station. After killing at least two Germans, they withdrew from the site.

## C. WELL-KNOWN BRITISH SPECIAL OPERATIONS EXECUTIVE OPERATIONS

- **Operation ANTHROPOID** The assassination of SS-Obergruppenführer Reinhard Heydrich, one of the main architects of the Holocaust and the Nazi ruler of Czechoslovakia, who was also known as the Butcher of Prague. Two Czech operatives trained by the British SOE parachuted into Prague and ambushed Heydrich's car on May 27, 1942. Heydrich died a week later from sepsis. The operation boosted the morale of the Czech resistance and provoked Hitler's wrath, who ordered brutal reprisals against the Czech population.
- **Operation POSTMASTER** The capture of three Axis ships from a neutral Spanish port in Fernando Po (now Bioko) in West Africa. A team of British and Polish operatives disguised as dock workers boarded the ships on January 14, 1942 and overpowered their crews. Then, they sailed the ships to Lagos in Nigeria under British control. The operation demonstrated Britain's naval supremacy and disrupted Axis supply lines.
- **Operation JOSEPHINE B** The destruction of a transformer station at Pessac in France. The station supplied electricity to a submarine base at Bordeaux where German U-boats were stationed. A team of French operatives trained by the British SOE paddled across a river on June 7, 1941 and planted explosives on the station's pylons. The explosion cut off power to the base and damaged several U-boats. The operation was one of the first successful acts of sabotage by the British SOE in France.
- **Operation JEDBURGH** A secret mission during WWII in which three-man teams (which often included women) from different Allied countries parachuted into Nazi-occupied territories. Their goal was to help the local resistance fighters with weapons, training, and coordination. They also carried out sabotage and guerrilla attacks against the German forces. The operation was named after a town in Scotland where some of the teams trained.

- **Operation MINCEMEAT** In April 1943, the waterlogged corpse of a British Royal Marine was found floating off the coast of Spain. The dead Brit had a suspicious-looking attaché case chained to his wrist, and this soon caught the attention of the Germans, who colluded with pro-Nazi elements in the Spanish military to surreptitiously gain access to its contents. Inside, they found a shocking letter to a British officer in Tunisia outlining a secret Allied scheme to stage an invasion of Sardinia and Greece in the coming weeks. The dead man's documents would have been a major intelligence coup for the Nazis, if not for one small issue: they were all fake. As part of a plan dubbed Operation MINCEMEAT, British spymasters had dressed the body of a deceased tramp in the guise of a fictitious Allied courier named William Martin. After the corpse's briefcase was stuffed with phony military plans, a Royal Navy submarine secretly deposited the body off Spain in the hope that it might hoodwink the Nazis. The result was the perfect con: Not only did the Germans intercept what they believed to be crucial information about where the Allies would attack the Mediterranean, they were convinced they had done so without tipping off the British. Duped by Operation MINCEMEAT's bogus intelligence, Hitler diverted tank divisions and other personnel to Greece, only to be caught off guard in July 1943, when the Allies instead invaded Sicily and Italy with some 160,000 troops.
- **Operation EICHE** In 1943, Operation EICHE, also known as the "Gran Sasso Raid," saw a team of German commandos pull off the daring rescue of none other than Benito Mussolini. The mission came in the wake of the Allied invasion of Italy, which had resulted in the fascist dictator being expelled from office and arrested by the king of Italy. Concerned that Mussolini was crucial to keeping Italy in the war, Hitler ordered Otto Skorzeny, a Waffen-SS officer, to free "Il Duce" before he could be handed over to the Allies as part of a peace deal. After several false starts and dead ends, Skorzeny and his team tracked Mussolini to the Hotel Campo Imperatore, a ski resort situated on a remote mountaintop in the

Apennine range. With no easy way to reach the resort from the ground, Skorzeny opted for a risky aerial attack. On September 12, 1943, he and a team of commandos made a silent descent on the mountain in 12 gliders and stormed the hotel, easily overwhelming the bewildered Italian guards. After destroying the post's radio equipment, the commandos located a much-relieved Mussolini, who supposedly exclaimed, "I knew my friend Adolf Hitler would not leave me in the lurch!" Desperate to make his getaway before reinforcements could arrive, Skorzeny convinced one of his support aircrafts to make a precarious landing on the rugged mountaintop and then personally escorted Mussolini to safety in Austria. The dictator went on to spend several months as a puppet leader in northern Italy before partisan forces finally captured and killed him in April 1945.

## **D. BRITISH SPECIAL OPERATIONS EXECUTIVE OPERATIONS IN FRANCE**

- **Operation ALOES** (France 1944) — A clandestine Allied sabotage mission carried out in the summer of 1944 in occupied France as part of the broader effort to disrupt German communications, transportation, and supply lines in the weeks leading up to the D-Day landings and the subsequent liberation of French territory.
- **Operation CREUSOT** (France 1943) — A precise sabotage mission carried out by the French Resistance's FTP-Morvan cell, with British SOE support, targeting the hydroelectric plant that powered the Creusot steel works. The timed explosives destroyed key turbines and transformers, cutting power for two days and halting steel production for a week, thereby delaying German armaments shipments and boosting local resistance morale.
- **Operation SLING** (France 1944) — A British SOE-directed sabotage campaign in occupied France that targeted the electricity supply to Paris by systematically blowing up pylons on three of the city's main power lines. The coordinated attacks succeeded in interrupting the grid, forcing German engineers to devote considerable resources to repairs and temporarily crippling

civilian and military electricity use in the capital. The operation demonstrated the effectiveness of focused infrastructure sabotage in undermining German occupation authority in the weeks leading up to the Allied advance.

## E. SPECIAL AIR SERVICE OPERATIONS

- **Operation CORPORATE** (April 2–June 14, 1982) The overall British operation to recover the Falkland Islands. The SAS with the SBS carried out numerous reconnaissance missions and diversionary raids in East and West Falkland to support the campaign. SAS forward observers also directed British artillery and aircraft. The following events took place during Operation CORPORATE:
  - **Operation PARAQUET** (April 25, 1982) The successful recapture of the Island of South Georgia.
  - **Pebble Island Raid** (May 14–15, 1982) A successful attack on an Argentinian-held airbase in West Falkland.
  - **Operation SUTTON** (May 21–23, 1982) This operation consisted of several landings in East Falkland.
  - **Operation MIKADO** (May 1982) The abortive operation to destroy three remaining Exocet missiles in Argentine possession.
  - **Mount Kent** (May 29–31, 1982) The D Squadron of 22 SAS seized and then held the vital Mount Kent high ground for three nights against repeated Argentine assaults until being reinforced by 42 Commando.

## F. U.S. SPECIAL FORCES, VIETNAM

- **Civilian Irregular Defense Group (CIDG) Program** This assistance program was meant to broaden South Vietnam's COIN efforts against the Viet Cong (VC) and was conducted through several programs such as the one to improve Central Highland village agricultural conditions. This, in fact, was a covert CIA effort intended to collect information on VC activities and North Vietnamese Army infiltrations into the heavy jungle of the

mountainous border areas while the agency evaluated developing the paramilitary potential of selected minority groups.

- **Operation IVORY COAST** In 1970, an SF ground element led by Lt. Col. Arthur D. 'Bull' Simons conducted a raid on the Son Tây prison camp in North Vietnam.
- **Project HOTFOOT** In 1959, 107 SF Soldiers of the 77th Special Forces Group (Airborne) were ordered to Laos. Led by Simons, they trained Laotian soldiers to fight the Communist Pathet Lao. The mission changed to the overt Operation WHITE STAR in April 1961 and ended in July 1962.

## G. U.S. SPECIAL FORCES, SOUTH AND CENTRAL AMERICA

- **Foreign Internal Defense, El Salvador** In 1981, U.S. SF arrived in El Salvador to train its soldiers in their war against leftist rebels. This training mission lasted until February 1992.
- **Operation URGENT FURY** In 1983, the 1st Ranger Battalion and 2nd Ranger Battalion conducted a parachute assault on Point Salinas airfield in Grenada. On October 25, elements of TF-160 and Army SOF elements participated in the assault on the Richmond Hill Prison. Tactical psychological operations (PSYOP) teams broadcasted surrender appeals to People's Revolutionary Army soldiers and their Cuban advisors. Civil affairs (CA) helped the Grenadian government transition to post-Communism.
- **Operation JUST CAUSE** United States Army Special Operations Command's first combat operation began in Panama in support of the XVIII Airborne Corps/JTF-South. The Ranger Regiment conducted parachute assaults at several locations, and elements of the 7th Special Forces Group (Airborne) and the 617th Special Operations Aviation Detachment conducted missions around the country. Other SOF elements, supported by the 160th Special Operations Aviation (Airborne), participated in key missions, including the rescue of Kurt Muse from La Modelo prison. PSYOP products encouraged Panamanian Defense Forces to surrender,

and CA elements enhanced the safety of the civilian population. The 528th Support Battalion provided a forward arming and refueling points for aviation assets, and a wide array of logistics support to Army SOF elements in theater. The 112th Signal Battalion deployed teams to create secure communications links for deployed SOF elements.

\*Source: Eugene Nielsen, "The Special Operations Executive: A Secret History of WW2," Spotter Up, August 15, 2023, <https://spotterup.com/the-special-operations-executive-a-secret-history-of-ww2/>; History.com, "World War II," last modified December 8, 2025, <https://www.history.com/articles/world-war-ii-history>; Eugene G. Piasecki, "Civilian Irregular Defense Group: The First Years: 1961-1967," Veritas 5, no. 4 (2009), [https://arsof-history.org/articles/v5n4\\_cidg\\_page\\_1.html](https://arsof-history.org/articles/v5n4_cidg_page_1.html); 'Operation Cauldron,' Commando Veterans Archive, accessed n.d., <https://www.commandoveterans.org/OperationCauldronDieppe>; "Operation Jubilee: The Raid at Dieppe," The National WWII Museum, October 8, 2021, <https://www.nationalww2museum.org/war/articles/operation-jubilee-dieppe-raid-1942>; Arthur L. Funk, "Les missions alliées parachutées en Bretagne," in *La Résistance et les Français*, eds. Jacqueline Sainclivier and Christian Bougeard (Presses universitaires de Rennes, 1995), <https://doi.org/10.4000/books.pur.16353>; Andre Vareyon, "LE CREUSOT 16 décembre 1943 Le témoignage d'André VAREYON alias DET, dernier survivant de cette operation," Maquis de l'Ain et du Haut-Jura, 2022, <https://www.maquisdelain.org/article-le-creusot-16-decembre-1943-95.html>; "Records of Special Operations Executive," The National Archives, accessed n.d., <https://discovery.nationalarchives.gov.uk/details/record?catid=153&catIn=1>





## Appendix B: Mapping Special Operations

### EXPLANATION OF SCORING SCALE

| Scale of Autonomy                                                                                                            | Score |
|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-------|
| Special operation is fully autonomously planned and executed and effects are uncoordinated with a central command structure. | 9     |
|                                                                                                                              | 8     |
|                                                                                                                              | 7     |
|                                                                                                                              | 6     |
| Special operation is autonomously planned and executed, but effects are coordinated with a central command structure.        | 5     |
|                                                                                                                              | 4     |
|                                                                                                                              | 3     |
|                                                                                                                              | 2     |
| Special operation is fully integrated in conventional operations, supporting the main effort.                                | 1     |

| Scale of Directness                                                                                                      | Score |
|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-------|
| Special operation is offensive, kinetic, has a short duration, and is conducted with surgical precision.                 | 9     |
|                                                                                                                          | 8     |
|                                                                                                                          | 7     |
|                                                                                                                          | 6     |
| Special operation has offensive character, but largely depends on proxy forces. The results are more indirect..          | 5     |
|                                                                                                                          | 4     |
|                                                                                                                          | 3     |
|                                                                                                                          | 2     |
| Special operation is conducted indirectly through supporting proxy forces and/ or agents and has a protracted character. | 1     |

## SCORING SPECIAL OPERATIONS DURING THE FIRST AGE OF SOF

| Operation Name                        | Scale of Directness | Scale of Autonomy |
|---------------------------------------|---------------------|-------------------|
| Operation CHARIOT (1942)              | 8                   | 5                 |
| Operation GUNNERSIDE (1943)           | 8                   | 8                 |
| Operation GRANIT (1940)               | 8                   | 3                 |
| Commando raids '40-'42                | 8.5                 | 7                 |
| JEDBURG operations (1944)             | 3                   | 4                 |
| French SAS operations (1944)          | 6                   | 3                 |
| Belgium SAS operations (1944)         | 6                   | 3                 |
| United Kingdom SAS operations (1942)  | 6                   | 2.5               |
| Operation GREIF (1944)                | 4                   | 4.5               |
| Attack on TIRPITZ (1943)              | 9                   | 8                 |
| Operation THURSDAY (1944)             | 5.5                 | 2                 |
| Operation PAPERCLIP (1945)            | 2.5                 | 9                 |
| Operation ANTHROPOID (1943)           | 7.5                 | 7.5               |
| Operation MINCEMEAT (1943)            | 2                   | 8                 |
| Operation MYITKYINA (1944)            | 8                   | 4                 |
| Operation NATION (1945)               | 4                   | 4                 |
| Operation POSTMASTER (1942)           | 7                   | 7                 |
| SOE operations in France (1941-1944)  | 4.5                 | 5                 |
| SOE operations in Belgium (1943-1944) | 4.5                 | 4                 |
| SOE operations in Italy (1944-1945)   | 4.5                 | 4                 |
| DOOLITTLE raid (1942)                 | 8                   | 8.5               |
| Operation COLLAR (1940)               | 8.5                 | 7                 |
| Operation AMBASSADOR (1940)           | 8.5                 | 7                 |
| Operation CLAYMORE (1940)             | 8.5                 | 7                 |
| Operation CHESS (1941)                | 8.5                 | 7                 |
| Operation GAUNTLET (1941)             | 8.5                 | 7                 |
| Operation ACID DROP (1941)            | 8.5                 | 7                 |
| Operation CHOPPER (1941)              | 8.5                 | 7                 |
| Operation DEEP CUT (1941)             | 8.5                 | 7                 |
| Operation ASTRAKAN (1941)             | 8.5                 | 7                 |
| Operation SUNSTAR (1941)              | 8.5                 | 7                 |
| Operation ANKLET (1941)               | 8.5                 | 7                 |
| Operation ARCHERY (1941)              | 8.5                 | 7                 |
| Operation CURLEW (1941)               | 8.5                 | 7                 |
| Operation BITING                      | 8.5                 | 7                 |
| Operation MYRMIDON                    | 8.5                 | 7                 |
| Operation JV                          | 8.5                 | 7                 |
| Operation ABERCROMBY                  | 8.5                 | 7                 |
| Operation BRISTLE                     | 8.5                 | 7                 |
| Operation BARRICADE                   | 8.5                 | 7                 |
| Operation JUBILEE                     | 8.5                 | 3                 |
| Operation MUSKETOON                   | 8.5                 | 3                 |
| Operation FAHRENHEIT                  | 8.5                 | 7                 |

## SCORING SPECIAL OPERATIONS DURING THE SECOND AGE OF SOF

| Operation Name                      | Scale of Directness | Scale of Autonomy |
|-------------------------------------|---------------------|-------------------|
| Stay-behind Europe (1960-1990)      | 8                   | 5                 |
| Operation EAGLE CLAW (1980)         | 8                   | 8                 |
| CIDG Vietnam (1968)                 | 8                   | 3                 |
| Operation YVORY COAST (1968)        | 8.5                 | 7                 |
| US SF operations Nicaragua (1980)   | 3                   | 4                 |
| US SF operations Honduras (1981)    | 6                   | 3                 |
| US SF operations El Salvador (1981) | 6                   | 3                 |
| Operation JUST CAUSE (1989)         | 6                   | 2.5               |
| Operation POWER PACK (1965)         | 4                   | 4.5               |
| Operation HOTFOOT (1965)            | 9                   | 8                 |
| LRRP Europe (1959-1994)             | 5.5                 | 2                 |
| Operation URGENT FURY (1983)        | 2.5                 | 9                 |
| Operation BANNER (1969-1997)        | 7.5                 | 7.5               |
| Operation NIMROD (1980)             | 2                   | 8                 |
| Operation JEBEL AKDAR (1958)        | 8                   | 4                 |
| Operation CORPORATE (1982)          | 4                   | 4                 |
| Operation MALAYAN EMERGENCY (1960)  | 7                   | 7                 |
| Hostage crisis Entebbe (1974)       | 4.5                 | 5                 |
| Hostage crisis Mogadishu (1977)     | 4.5                 | 4                 |
| Hostage crisis De Punt (1977)       | 4.5                 | 4                 |
| French SOF Algeria, (1954-1962)     | 8                   | 8.5               |
| UK SF operations Oman (1970-1976)   | 8.5                 | 7                 |
| Operation ST CIRCUS (1956-1974)     | 8.5                 | 7                 |

## SCORING SPECIAL OPERATIONS DURING THE THIRD AGE OF SOF

| Operation Name                         | Scale of Directness | Scale of Autonomy |
|----------------------------------------|---------------------|-------------------|
| Operation GRANBY (1991)                | 8                   | 3                 |
| Operation JOINT ENDEAVOUR (1992-1995)  | 7                   | 4                 |
| Operation BARRAS (2000)                | 7                   | 3.5               |
| Operation ENDURING FREEDOM (2001-2010) | 4                   | 3                 |
| Operation TELLIC (2003-2009)           | 7.5                 | 3                 |
| Operation BELLAMY (2011)               | 5                   | 3                 |
| Operation SHADER (2014)                | 7.5                 | 4.5               |
| Operation DESERT STORM (1991)          | 5                   | 4                 |
| Operation PROVIDE COMFORT (1991)       | 5                   | 4                 |
| Operation RESTORE HOPE (1992)          | 6.5                 | 5                 |
| Operation GOTHIC SERPENT (1993)        | 6                   | 5.1               |
| Operation UPHOLD DEMOCRACY (1994)      | 4.5                 | 6                 |
| Operation IRAQI FREEDOM (1992)         | 7                   | 2.8               |
| Operation NEPTUNE SPEAR (2011)         | 8                   | 8                 |
| Operation TF 55 (2009-2010)            | 6.5                 | 3                 |
| Operation TF VIPER (2006-2007)         | 6                   | 3.5               |
| Operation KAYLA MUELLER (2019)         | 8                   | 7.5               |
| Operation OLYMPIC GAMES (2006)         | 2                   | 8                 |
| Operation OUTSIDE THE BOX (2007)       | 8                   | 8.5               |
| Little Green Men (2014)                | 3                   | 5                 |





## Appendix C: Acronyms

|                   |                                                   |
|-------------------|---------------------------------------------------|
| <b>1st SFOD-D</b> | 1st Special Forces Operational Detachment – Delta |
| <b>4GW</b>        | fourth-generation warfare                         |
| <b>AJP</b>        | Allied Joint Doctrine                             |
| <b>BBE</b>        | Bijzondere Bijstandseenheid                       |
| <b>C2</b>         | command and control                               |
| <b>COIN</b>       | counterinsurgency                                 |
| <b>CT</b>         | counterterrorism                                  |
| <b>DA</b>         | direct action                                     |
| <b>DoW</b>        | Department of War                                 |
| <b>GSG 9</b>      | Grenzschutzgruppe 9                               |
| <b>GWOT</b>       | Global War on Terror                              |
| <b>JSOC</b>       | Joint Special Operations Command                  |
| <b>KGB</b>        | Komitet Gosudarstvennoy Bezopasnosti              |
| <b>LRDG</b>       | Long-Range Desert Group                           |
| <b>LRRP</b>       | long-range reconnaissance patrol                  |
| <b>LRRU</b>       | long-range reconnaissance units                   |
| <b>OEF</b>        | Operation ENDURING FREEDOM                        |
| <b>OPE</b>        | operational preparation of the environment        |
| <b>OSS</b>        | Office of Strategic Services                      |
| <b>SAS</b>        | Special Air Service                               |
| <b>SBS</b>        | Special Boat Service                              |
| <b>SF</b>         | Special Forces                                    |
| <b>SOE</b>        | Special Operations Executive                      |
| <b>UW</b>         | unconventional warfare                            |
| <b>WWII</b>       | World War II                                      |



# Notes

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- 5 Halik Kochanski, *Resistance: The Underground War in Europe, 1939-1945* (Penguin Books, 2022), 134-157.
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- 7 The U.S. Special Forces (SF), commonly known as "Green Berets," are highly trained and versatile soldiers specializing in unconventional warfare, foreign internal defense, and counterinsurgency operations. Recognized by their distinctive headgear, they excel in building relationships with partner forces, conducting special reconnaissance, and training indigenous populations to confront emerging threats and achieve strategic objectives.
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- 14 Colin S. Gray, "The Nature of Special Operations," in *Explorations in Strategy* (Greenwood Press, 1996), 145-149.
- 15 NATO, Allied Joint Doctrine for Special Operations. The source defines clandestine as "an operation planned or conducted in such a way as to assure secrecy or concealment."
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- 26 Spulak, *A Theory of Special Operations*, 25.
- 27 Alistair Finlan, "A Dangerous Pathway? Toward a Theory of Special Forces," *Comparative Strategy* 38, no. 4 (2019), 261, <https://doi.org/10.1080/01495933.2019.1633181>.
- 28 Finlan, "A Dangerous Pathway," 262.
- 29 Ben Gans, *Special Operations and National Security: Policies, Strategies, and Tactics* (Routledge, 2024).
- 30 David Kilcullen, *Counterinsurgency* (Oxford University Press, 2010).
- 31 John Arquilla and David Ronfeldt, *The Advent Of Netwar* (RAND Corporation, 1996), [https://www.rand.org/pubs/monograph\\_reports/MR789.html](https://www.rand.org/pubs/monograph_reports/MR789.html).
- 32 Joint Chiefs of Staff, *Joint Doctrine for Special Operations*.
- 33 Joint Chiefs of Staff, *Joint Doctrine for Special Operations*. The source defines unconventional warfare (UW) as "activities conducted to enable a resistance movement or insurgency to coerce, disrupt, or overthrow a government or occupying power by operating through or with an underground, auxiliary, and guerrilla force in a denied area."

- 34 Joint Chiefs of Staff, Joint Doctrine for Special Operations. The source states: "COIN refers to the comprehensive civilian and military efforts taken to defeat insurgency and to address any core grievances. The combat skills, experience, cultural awareness, and language skills of SOF allow them to conduct a wide array of missions working through or with host nation security forces or integrated with U.S. [conventional forces], which make them particularly suitable for COIN operations or campaigns."
- 35 Joint Chiefs of Staff, Joint Doctrine for Special Operations. From the source, "[Operational preparation of the environment (OPE)] is broadly understood as the conduct of activities in likely or potential operational areas to prepare and shape the operational environment. [Combatant commanders] conduct OPE to develop knowledge of the operational environment, establish human and physical infrastructure, and for general target development. OPE activities include, but are not limited to, passive observation; area and network familiarization; site surveys; mapping the information environment; the operational use of individuals; developing nonconventional assisted recovery capabilities; use of couriers; developing safe houses and assembly areas; positioning transportation and telecommunication assets; and cache emplacement and recovery."
- 36 B.H. Liddell Hart, *Strategy: The Indirect Approach, 2nd Edition* (Penguin Books, 1991), 14.
- 37 Liddell Hart, *Strategy*, 212.
- 38 Scott Morrison, "Redefining the Indirect Approach, Defining Special Operations Forces (SOF) Power, and the Global Networking of SOF," *Journal of Strategic Security* 7, no. 2 (2014): 48-54.
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- 40 Gray, *Explorations in Strategy*, 168-174.
- 41 Ronny Modigs, "The Utility of Special Operations in Small States," in *Special Operations from a Small State Perspective: Future Security Challenges*, eds. Gunilla Eriksson and Ulrica Petterson (Palgrave Macmillan, 2017), 46.
- 42 Gray, *Explorations in Strategy*, 174-179.
- 43 Gray, *Explorations in Strategy*, 185.
- 44 Rob de Wijk et al., *The Future of NLD SOF: Towards an All-Domain Force* (The Hague Centre for Strategic Studies, 2021), <https://hcss.nl/wp-content/uploads/2021/07/Future-of-SOF-20210629-final-revisions-FB.pdf>. The source provides the following definitions: "**Competition** is a phase where state and non-state actors predominantly carry out non-military hostile activities such as information operations to influence the political process. **Crisis** is the disruption of the status quo through small-scale, possibly covert, military actions and other activities aimed at weakening the adversary before the actual conflict starts. These activities below the threshold of war include hybrid threats / gray zone confrontations. **Conflict/Combat** refers to the phase in which armed forces or (non-state) armed groups of opposing sides meet in combat, with casualties as a result. Depending on the context, this phase can also be referred to as (interstate) war, (intrastate) civil war or major disruption / out-of-control crisis (within a society). Although physical force-on-force engagements usually define this phase, confrontations

- in the cyber and information domain are usually, and in the current era almost invariably, part and parcel of the sphere of combat/conflict.”
- 45 Will Irwin and Isaiah Wilson, *The Fourth Age of SOF: The Use and Utility of Special Operation Forces in a New Age* (Joint Special Operations University Press, 2022). This source provides an excellent analysis of the three ages of SOF.
- 46 Hugh Dalton, *The Second World War Diary of Hugh Dalton 1940–45* (Cape, 1986), 62.
- 47 Michael E. Haskew, *Encyclopedia of Elite Forces in the Second World War: The Complete Guide to Paratroop, Commando, Ranger, SS, Marine and Other Elite Units* (Casemate Publishers, 2007), 62.
- 48 Kochanski, *Resistance*, 135.
- 49 Irwin and Wilson, *The Fourth Age of SOF*.
- 50 Joseph H. Alexander, *Edson’s Raiders: The 1st Marine Raider Battalion in World War II* (Naval Institute Press, 2000).
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- 63 Robert Grainger Ker Thompson, *Defeating Communist Insurgency: The Lessons of Malaya and Vietnam* (Praeger, 1966).

- 64 Tamir Sinai, "Eyes on Target: 'Stay-Behind' Forces During the Cold War," *War in History* 28, no. 3 (2020): 681-700, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0968344520914345>. During the Cold War, NATO faced a numerically superior adversary. NATO had to gain time to deploy forces to their front-line positions and mobilize reservists. In the early phases of a conflict, NATO had plans to field 'stay-behind' capabilities (military and civilian) that would allow themselves to be bypassed by an attacker to collect intelligence behind enemy lines, conduct target acquisition, and thus try to slow its advance. Reference the source for more information.
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*Echoes in the Void: Finding Universal Patterns in the Utility of SOF Across Epochs* offers an examination of why special operations forces (SOF) consistently emerge as a preferred instrument of national power when conventional military capabilities prove inadequate for the strategic environment. Building upon the concept of the “void of military force,” Lt. Col. Paul de Jager of the Royal Dutch Army analyzes SOF development and employment across three different eras to identify the enduring conditions that create demand for special operations. The study demonstrates that SOF effectiveness is not merely a function of unique capabilities, but of their ability to operate within gaps created by political constraints, strategic uncertainty, and the limitations of conventional force.

This monograph argues that five recurring determinants shape this void across time. By integrating strategic theory with historical evidence, *Echoes in the Void* provides a conceptual framework for understanding the continuing relevance of SOF in great-power competition, irregular warfare, and future conflict. The study contributes to the broader discourse on force employment, adaptation, and strategy, offering practitioners and scholars a lens through which to assess the evolving role of special operations in an increasingly complex security environment.

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