

Whither Special Forces? The Strategic Relevance of Special Operations

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Abstract:

Today's focus on special forces is hardly surprising when considering the demand for counterterrorist and counterinsurgency experience in an unconventional and asymmetric threat environment that is today's battlefield. After 11 September 2001, special forces represented the "logical policy option" decision makers in Washington seeking to bring the fight to the enemy—they have become a "force of choice" for the 21st century. This raises the question of the role that special forces play in strategy. Is their recent popularity and success because they are simply right for the time, or is it a reflection of their contribution on a strategic level? This essay will investigate how special operations contribute to overall strategic utility, and how special forces may be employed as a strategic asset.

Keywords: Special Forces; Counterinsurgency; Contemporary Security Environment

INTRODUCTION

Recent years have witnessed a renaissance for special operations and the professionals involved in their conduct. This renewed focus on special forces is hardly surprising when considering the demand for counterterrorist and counterinsurgency experience in an unconventional and asymmetric threat environment that is today's battlefield. After 11 September 2001 (9/11), special forces represented the "logical policy option" decision makers in Washington seeking to bring the fight to the enemy—they evolved from being a "force of desperation" born during the Second World War (WWII), to a "force of choice" for the 21st century.¹ However, this raises the question of the role that special forces play in strategy. Is their recent popularity and success because they are simply right for the time, or is it a reflection of their contribution on a strategic level? This paper will attempt to answer this question through an investigation of how special operations contribute to overall strategic utility, and how special forces may be employed as a strategic asset. These factors taken together ensure the strategic relevancy of special forces well into the foreseeable future.

SPECIAL MEN FOR A SPECIAL PURPOSE

*"Whom shall I send? And who will go for us?
And I said, here am I. Send me!"*

– Isaiah 6:8

Shrouded in secrecy and veiled from public view, it can be quite difficult to get an accurate idea of what special forces are.² Operational security requirements mean that governments often neither confirm nor deny the existence of certain special forces capabilities themselves and the missions that these men undertake.

It is useful then, for the purposes of this investigation, to begin with a definition of what special forces are. One approach to defining special forces uses its purpose—that is, the conduct of a "special operation" as one of its key distinguishing features. Indeed, Malcolm Brailey argues in favor of this approach, when he writes that it is much more fruitful to first "define what constitutes a special operation and to extrapolate from that which kind of forces are selected and trained to perform those operations."³ The reason for this is that though it may be tempting to define special forces against

“mainstream or conventional military identity,” because of their special or elite status, this is not useful as different nations structure their armed forces according to different national security priorities.⁴ Such a definition would only highlight “national differences rather than international commonalities,” and would not serve as a firm base for further inquiry.⁵

Colin Gray suggests that in order to have a “sufficiently holistic understanding” of special operations, it is necessary to think of them in three ways, “a state of mind; forces; and a mission.”⁶ Following this thread, it becomes evident that what sets the special forces soldier apart from his peers is his “intellectual and philosophical capability,” his “distinct way of thinking” that “no mission is too great, no task is too daunting, and failure is not an option.”⁷ At its core, what truly sets special forces apart is the type of people it attracts and the rigorousness of its selection processes. These are individuals with strong characters, flexible minds, physical fitness and devotion to the team. These individuals, the “non-standard operators,” form the heart of special forces. They are the ones who can then be trained and equipped to perform a wide spectrum of missions. It is only men like these who are able to meet the simple or complex, subtle and imaginative demands that special operations ask of them, only then that can they be considered a special force.

STRATEGY: THE UTILITY OF FORCE?

Clausewitz has arguably had the single biggest influence on Western military thought, a remarkable fact considering that *On War* was written in the 19th century. Clausewitz wrote as one professional soldier to another and sought to explore the nature and dynamics of war in a theoretical sense, so that it may enlighten those responsible for the practice of war. In his own words, theory is “an analytical investigation leading to a close acquaintance with the subject” that “becomes a guide to anyone who wants to learn about war from

Whether or not special operations have strategic utility depends on how they are used.



SAF Special Operations Task Force Troopers

books; it will light his way, ease his progress, train his judgment, and help him to avoid pitfalls.”⁸ Clausewitz believed that understanding its theory would aid a commander in the conduct of war. He defined war fundamentally as fighting, a “trial of moral and physical forces through the medium of the latter.”⁹ The object of this trial is to impose one’s will on the enemy by rendering him powerless, achieved by the total and complete application of force to the enemy’s “center of gravity.”¹⁰ War itself is regarded as an instrument of the state, the force employed has to serve a political purpose—the “political object is the goal, war is the means of reaching it.”¹¹ Strategy is subsequently defined as “the use of engagements for the object of the war.”¹²

Modern definitions of strategy that build on Clausewitz's writings remain relevant because the nature of war—the activity that is the result of the reciprocal clash of opposing wills—is constant through time. Improved technology and new tactics might alter the character of war, but the nature of this competition remains unchanged. However, this definition of strategy can be expanded on in order to make it more suitable to the subtleties of special operations and changes to the international system over time.

Michael Howard defined strategy with respect to the international system in terms of the part “played by force, or the threat of force” as wielded by political units.¹³ Freedman expanded on this theme by considering how the concept of power fit into the theory of strategic activity. Defining power as the “capacity to produce effects that are more advantageous than would otherwise have been the case,” he uses deterrence theory to illustrate that power, as relevant to strategic theory, is more than the actual capacity to produce effects.¹⁴ What is more important is the perceived capacity, that is, power exists “to the extent that it is recognized by others,” thus taking into account the authority an actor has, not simply how much force he is able to wield.¹⁵ Strategy is defined by Freedman as “the art of creating power to obtain the maximum political objectives using available military means.”¹⁶ This is a more subtle definition of strategy, casting it in terms of power and setting it within the context of international politics. Force still plays an integral part in strategy, but with this definition, the context is no longer confined to instances where force is being applied, that is, in cases of war, but is widened to include the threat of force and the perceived capability to carry out a specific threat.

THE STRATEGIC UTILITY OF SPECIAL FORCES

“When the hour of crisis comes, remember that 40 selected men can shake the world.”

– Mongol Warlord Yasotay

Special operations are, by definition, “small-scale, clandestine, covert or overt.” In other words, they are usually tactical and at times, operational in scale. Yet like tactical and operational missions of a conventional nature, special operations can and do contribute to the greater strategic effort. Thus, one way of looking at the role of special forces in the strategic context is to analyze the strategic utility of special operations. Colin Gray identifies two “master claims” that form the core of the strategic utility of special forces—they provide economy of force and expansion of choice. The former United States (US) Army Chief of Staff Peter Schoomaker, himself a special operator, called this the “tailor to task capabilities” of special forces, that is, their ability to “adapt to a broad and constantly varying range of tasks and conditions.”¹⁷

Special forces are not simply better soldiers in the sense that nuclear bombs are bigger bombs—they are entirely different and should be employed in accordance to a strategy that accounts for this.

A point worth making here is that these two attributes of special forces are more interrelated than they seem on the surface. In a manner of speaking, the flexibility of special forces, that is their “tailor to task” capability, grants them a degree of adaptability with respect to the roles and missions that they are called on to perform. This creates the economy of force that rests at the core of the strategic utility of special operations. Therefore, it is not that special operations simply “achieve significant results with limited forces.”¹⁸ Rather, they achieve significant results, with limited forces, in a diverse number of ways. For example, a special forces team deployed in an advanced reconnaissance role to gather intelligence for an impending full force invasion may also deploy with the capability to perform a direct action mission if a target of opportunity presents itself. This was taken to its logical conclusion in

Operation Enduring Freedom in Afghanistan, where US Special Operations Forces (US SOF) teams deployed to link up with indigenous elements in order to prepare the battlefield for a conventional deployment instead went on to rout the Taliban themselves, working together with a combination of local forces and precision air support.¹⁹

Generally, whether or not special operations have strategic utility depends on how they are used. Tucker and Lamb proposed categorizing special operations into direct and indirect categories, roughly based on the approach used. These labels refer to the operators achieving the missions either directly, by taking actions themselves, or indirectly through their influence on indigenous forces.²⁰ Direct missions may take the form of counterterrorist operations, for example hostage rescue scenarios like Operation NIMROD (the British SAS in London, 1980) or Operation MAGIC FIRE (the German GSG9 in Mogadishu, 1977); or counter proliferation of weapons of mass destruction missions like those carried out under the ambit of the Proliferation Security Initiative. Examples of indirect missions may include aspects of unconventional warfare or foreign internal defense, such as training, equipping and working with friendly indigenous forces. However, this is not a perfect categorization and missions can have both direct and indirect elements. For instance, the USSOCOM Fact Book has indicated counterinsurgency operations as a core US SOF activity. Counterinsurgency operations do not fit neatly into either the direct or indirect categories because they themselves contain elements of both approaches and elements of the other core activities (direct action, information operations, unconventional, psychological or civil affairs operations).

Special operations missions, be it direct or indirect, may be employed independently or in support of conventional forces.²¹ This means that special forces may achieve strategic utility either when tasked to act alone, say when conducting a hostage rescue operation; or when acting in conjunction

with a conventional force, for example conducting advanced reconnaissance in order to facilitate their deployment. There are many permutations possible, since direct or indirect methods may be employed independently or in support of a conventional effort. For instance, special forces may be deployed to work “by, with, and through” local indigenous forces in an unconventional war effort—an example of a largely indirect method of operation. This special operation may itself be an independent act, that is, the only boots on the grounds are special forces soldiers; or it may be a small part of a bigger conventional operation, with the unconventional push supporting a bigger strategy. The recent deployments of special forces to Afghanistan and Iraq are cases in point. The US SOF in Afghanistan fought alongside the local Northern Alliance in an independent role, and indeed were supported by precision munitions from the air. Conversely, circumstances led to the US SOF in Iraq being tasked with the northern push to Baghdad—to support concurrent moves by infantry, marine and armored divisions from western, southern, and eastern approaches.

The preceding discussion suggests that special forces can complete their mission directly or indirectly, either acting independently or in support of a conventional effort. In a manner of speaking, there is greater strategic value when special forces act independently, since they are the primary effort and success hinges solely on the skills that they bring to the mission.²² However, when acting in support of conventional forces, special forces make a strategic contribution only to the extent that their involvement influences the success of the conventional effort.²³ Moreover, special forces typically support conventional forces through their direct action capabilities. Ironically, such use of special forces limits them to a tactical contribution as they are merely augmenting the conventional effort—there is less strategic value in such a role because it has more in common with what conventional forces can already do.²⁴ This is a point that will be picked up again in the following section.

A STRATEGY FOR SPECIAL FORCES

“Special warfare is an esoteric art unto itself.”

– Lt. Gen William G. Yarborough

The lack of special forces in the “canon of strategic theory” limits its understanding by conventional military commanders and thus they have not been used to their full potential on modern battlefields. Theory is important because it provides a framework for further inquiry to proceed, as mentioned earlier, it lights the way, eases the process and trains judgment. A proper understanding of the theory of special forces in a strategic context results in better application, thereby increasing their utility. It has been pointed out that the process of developing a strategy for special forces is analogous to that of crafting a strategy for the use of nuclear weapons.²⁶ Initial proposals called for the newly developed atomic bomb to be used just as a conventional bomb would, albeit on a larger destructive scale. However, strategists soon realized that nuclear weapons were an entirely different capability and nuclear war would be an entirely different form of fighting that required its own strategy to account for its strategic, tactical, military and political idiosyncrasies.²⁷ Likewise, special forces are not simply better soldiers in the sense that nuclear bombs are bigger bombs—they are entirely different and should be employed in accordance to a strategy that accounts for this.

A useful way of approaching the question of how special forces can be employed strategically comes from identifying the reason behind the roles and missions they perform. In order to do this, it is necessary to return to the concepts of strategy and strategic utility outlined above.

The object of strategy is to impose one’s will on an adversary, to create power in order to obtain political objectives. The optimum strategy achieves this end state whilst “maintaining freedom of action with the least effort.”²⁸ These principles of strategy identified by Marshal Ferdinand Foch—freedom of action (the ability to control circumstances of an

event) and economy of force (the optimum allocation of resources)—define the strategic environment and in turn the strategic effectiveness of one kind of operation versus another. Using these principles, McRaven shows that conventional forces can provide “unparalleled freedom of action through the application of overwhelming force”—this is the strategic utility of conventional forces and there are certain operations for which they are best suited.²⁹ Special forces, on the other hand, are able to both optimize freedom of action and economy of force—echoing Gray’s argument that their strategic utility is derived from the economy of force and expansion of choice that they provide. Thus special operations are strategically advantageous when conventional operations are strategically disadvantageous—when it is necessary to maintain freedom of action with minimum force. Special forces ought to be employed in circumstances where conventional forces cannot do the job.

In such circumstances, conventional forces are only able to guarantee freedom of action through the overwhelming application of force, thereby negating economy of force. One example is the role special forces have in counterterrorist operations. Counterterrorist operations are a traditional staple of special forces missions. Many nations have some form of special unit or other trained to deal with such contingencies. Conventional forces and means are inadequate when it comes to dealing with terrorists—the experiences of the security forces in Germany during the 1972 Munich Olympics demonstrated this fact. There are two reasons for this: “not only are contemporary [conventional] weapons and tactics far too destructive to be employed in heavily populated urban regions, but also the deployment of large numbers of soldiers against terrorists simply increases the number of targets at which they can strike.”³⁰ Therefore, in order to succeed against terrorist, security forces need to employ similar weapons and tactics, those of “psychology, stealth, speed, surprise, and cunning.”³¹ This requirement was met with the development of specialized counterterrorist capabilities, in some

cases within existing military structure as with the British SAS and American Delta Force, and in other cases within police or paramilitary structures as was the case with Germany's GSG 9.

The strategic employment of special forces rests on the type of mission that special forces are called on to perform. Special forces are strategically advantageous in situations where conventional forces are strategically disadvantageous. As obvious as this may seem, this is an important point to remember as it reduces the tendency for special forces to be used as "superior" conventional soldiers—employed for conventional purposes on the mistaken belief that their training and equipment makes them better for missions that standard infantry can accomplish. Identifying roles and missions that are suited for special forces is the heart of crafting a strategy for special forces. Missions such as counterterrorism, counter proliferation, special reconnaissance and unconventional warfare, all favor the employment of special forces because they are missions that conventional forces find hard, if not impossible, to accomplish. Special forces are the strategic response that policymakers seek when faced with these contingencies, therefore when used in these circumstances, they are performing the function as strategic assets.

The aim of this section was to provide a theoretical understanding of the role special forces play in strategy. It is perhaps helpful to summarize some of the key observations made above. Special forces may act independently or in support of conventional forces. This distinction does not affect the strategic utility of special forces as it merely describes how special forces are being used in an operation. This is because the strategic utility of special forces rests intrinsically in their ability to provide economy of force, and expansion of choice to the policymaker. What does impact the strategic utility of special forces is the type of mission they are called on to perform. While it may seem evident that the role of special forces is to conduct the special operation, the lack of a proper

strategy directing their use may cause the temptation of using them for conventional purposes because they appear to be "superior" soldiers. Rather than being "superior," they are "different," and a different strategy must be present to account for this and properly direct their use. At the heart of the matter is the fact that special forces, acting independently or as supporting elements, ought not to be employed for conventional purposes.

SPECIAL FORCES AND THE CONTEMPORARY SECURITY ENVIRONMENT

"The top, military board is uni-polar, with the US being the only country capable of projecting global military force. The middle, economic board is tri-polar. The US, the European Union and Japan account for two-thirds of the world's economy. China's dramatic growth may make this board quadri-polar by the turn of the century. The bottom board consists of diverse transnational relationships outside the control of governments, including financial flows, drug trafficking, terrorism and degradation of the ozone layer. On this board, there are no poles."

– Joseph Nye, 1994

Nye observed that the structure of power in the international system may be likened to a "three-dimensional chess game."³² He used this analogy to explain why it would prove increasingly difficult to produce accurate estimative intelligence, arguing that it would be necessary to understand the complex interaction of factors within and between boards before accurate predictions could be formulated. This analogy is also particularly useful when looking at the nature of the contemporary security environment and the strategic role special forces play in it.

The current security climate is characterized by its great complexity. The simplest way of looking at the threat environment is to consider it a hybrid of "new actors with new technology and new or transfigured ways of war" combining with "old threats" that have to be tackled "at the same time and in the same space."³³ Moreover, this hybrid environment is an "ambiguous,

dynamic, and multifaceted” mix of contrasting trends: local social networks and globalized linkages; traditional conservatism and postmodern liberalism; local insurgencies and worldwide terrorism.³⁴ Technological advancement has made it more comfortable in many modern nations, and yet ironically more vulnerable as lives and infrastructure become more intertwined. Globalization has brought economic prosperity at the same time that it has emphasized the gulf between the haves and have nots, leading to a backlash against itself. To further complicate matters, this backlash is often directed at the political or cultural components of globalization whilst simultaneously embracing its modernizing technological or economic components. To return to the chess game analogy, it is as if the time and space between the chess boards have been compressed.

Contemporary strategy exists within this complex and dynamic context. Policymakers are increasingly faced with challenges that require multi-faceted solutions. Strategy, as defined earlier, is “the art of creating power to obtain the maximum political objectives using available military means.” In the traditional sense, political objectives differ from country to country, and therefore so do the strategic requirements of different nations. For instance, retaining the capability to project military force globally is an obvious strategic concern of the US, but this same concern may not necessarily be shared by other western countries such as France or Canada which may place greater emphasis on economic influence. Furthermore, countries in a state of development, most notably China, have a distinctly different strategic outlook, one that may seek to assert power more than maintain it. It follows then that the requirement for special forces tends to differ according to the strategic requirements of a particular country.

The fact that special forces offer solutions to the many challenges faced in the current security climate makes this an even more crucial requirement if their misuse is to be avoided.

However, in the contemporary security environment, because of the compression of time and space in the structure of power resulting from the amalgamation of trends that impact security, there is a case to be made for special forces as strategic assets, regardless of the strategic requirements of a country. In other words, even though two countries may have vastly different political objectives, they may nonetheless find utility in developing their own strategic special forces capabilities. Moreover, because the interaction between boards in the chess game have intensified, special forces, being relevant in all three boards, are relevant to countries that have interests in any of the boards, regardless of their specific strategic orientation or requirements. This

claim rests on the fact that the two key features of special forces which provide strategic utility, the economy of force and “tailor to task” capability, are ideally suited to a security environment that is a hybrid of the old and

new. In this type of environment, what is required is a means that is flexible and capable of adapting to the specific threat it is faced with—this is the essence of economy of force and a “tailor to task” capability. Special forces are the queens in this three dimensional chess game. They are versatile pieces capable of acting in all directions on individual boards; but also have applications and effects across the boards. In the three dimensional chess game, players have to be able to move “vertically as well as horizontally.”³⁵

One of the underlying themes of this paper is that the use of special forces must be directed by a proper strategy. The fact that special forces offer solutions to the many challenges faced in the current security climate makes this an even more crucial requirement if their misuse is to be avoided.

CONCLUSION

The current security environment demands a response that is versatile and capable of responding to a variety of contingencies. Special forces provide a measured and tailored means of exercising power. Special forces are right for the time, and the time is right for them. At its most basic level, the popularity enjoyed by special forces is a product of this match. More importantly, the success of special forces and their continual employment in operations reflects a deeper understanding of their contribution on a strategic level. Decision makers recognize that special forces present ideal solutions to challenges faced in the contemporary security environment, and are less unsure about how best to employ them.

But what does the future hold for special forces? Special forces cannot be obstinate, in other words, they must not take recent successes as a guarantee for future strategic relevance. Special forces must continue to look ahead for new missions that can expand their capabilities, thereby reinforcing the element of expansion of choice and economy of force that gives them their strategic utility. One potential area lies in the realm of integration with intelligence. Specifically, this would entail an expansion in the more traditional strategic reconnaissance role and also development of a human intelligence acting in cohort with existing networks in the intelligence community.

Special forces can act as intelligence practitioners, gathering and acting on intelligence in hostile environments. This is an emerging trend in the US, where special operators from the military and intelligence agencies jointly execute covert operations, most noticeably the “targeted killings” of high value terrorists.³⁶ However this integration needs to be more about gathering intelligence rather than acting on it in the form of covert action. Two possible benefits arise from this. First, intelligence is a crucial requirement for modern armies structured to fight “network centric war” based on information

dominance. No doubt much of the emphasis here rests on technological assets like unmanned drones and satellites with ultra high resolution cameras, but time and again it is proven that nothing is a complete substitute for “eyes on the ground.” Second, integrating special forces with intelligence works towards combating some of the transnational, non state problems on the bottom chess board. Governments increasingly demand “action-on” (or actionable) intelligence, that is, intelligence to support day to day tactical operations rather than informed policy.³⁷ Preemptive action against weapons proliferation, terrorism, piracy and so forth require quick, real time responses. Integrating special forces with intelligence assets develops the capability of transitioning from gathering intelligence to acting on it, greatly expanding the options available to policymakers. In this way, an integrated special operations and intelligence capability is a strategic asset to any country seeking to protect its citizens from transnational, non state problems. Therefore, such a capability stresses international commonalities over differences.

The concluding point made here is only one suggestion for the future role for special forces. Strategic planners dealing with the future of special forces face the fundamental problem of predicting future trends. This problem is greatly complicated because of the varied capabilities of special forces, their ability to act on all three boards of power means that strategic planners, much like intelligence analysts, must account for power distributions on all the boards. Furthermore, special forces depend on the quality of the individual operator, they cannot be mass produced—“competent [special forces] cannot be created after emergencies occur.”³⁸ The time may be right for special forces, but this does not guarantee their continual success. Special forces must continue to evolve in order to ensure that they are also right for the time. Only then will their strategic relevance be secured. 🌐

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2. Throughout this paper, the term "special forces" will be used as an umbrella term to describe those responsible for carrying out special operations. There may be confusion with another similar term, "special operations forces," used by the US for this purpose because 'Special Forces' specifically refers to the US Army Special Forces, otherwise popularly known as "Green Berets." When necessary, reference to the special forces of America in general will be done so with the full title of US Special Operations Forces or US SOF for short; and specifically to the US Army Special Forces as US SF. Thus, unless otherwise stated, the term "special forces" is to be taken as a generic one that describes special operators from all branches of the military.
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7. Horn, "Special Men, Special Missions," 10.

8. Carl von Clausewitz, *On War* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1989).
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10. *Ibid.*, 75.
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34. *Ibid.*, 7-27.
35. Joseph S. Nye Jr., "US Power and Strategy after Iraq," *Foreign Affairs* 82, no. 4 (2003): 65.
36. See Kibbe (2007) and Kibbe (2004) for discussions on the use of special forces for covert action, dealing with the issues of legality and oversight; also see Cogan (2004) on intelligence "gathering" being replaced by intelligence "hunting." Jennifer D. Kibbe, "Covert Action and the Pentagon," in *Intelligence and National Security* 22, no. 1 (2007): 57-74; Jennifer D. Kibbe, "The Rise of the Shadow Warriors," in *Foreign Affairs* 83, no. 2 (2004): 102-115.
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