

# Sharpening the Dagger

## Optimising Special Forces for Future Conflict



Jack Watling



**Royal United Services Institute**  
for Defence and Security Studies

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RUSI Whitehall Report 1-21, May 2021



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Published in 2021 by the Royal United Services Institute for Defence and Security Studies.



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RUSI Whitehall Report 1-21, May 2021. ISSN 1750-9432.

Printed in the UK by Stephen Austin.

*Cover image: Courtesy of kaninstudio/Adobe Stock*

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# Executive Summary

MILITARIES HAVE FOUND a persistent need to establish units that are detached from the conventional force structure to address discrete challenges. Detached units provide policymakers and senior commanders with the ability to directly oversee critical tactical activity. Historically, these units have been employed to carry out strategic reconnaissance, raiding and interdiction, fomenting rebellion and insurgency, working with partnered forces, high-risk and high-profile operations that require the greatest possible assurance, and tasks where secrecy is vital. To accomplish these tasks, special forces have tended to select members from the conventional military who are able to work independently, are creative, have additional non-military skills such as languages, and are highly proficient in a range of military specialisms. This limits the size of special forces units, because only a minority within a military are suitable. How these forces are prioritised is therefore an important operational question; they cannot be surged at short notice.

For much of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, special forces have worked at the seams of the battlefield. During the War on Terror, the blending of military and intelligence practices, the need to work in a range of complex environments, and the demand for high levels of assurance have all placed special forces at the tip of the spear as the forefront of NATO's military effort. The result has been the refinement of the counterterrorism raiding function. But the tempo of operations raises questions about the readiness of special forces to reprise some of their other functions as the world returns to an era of great power competition. While the US can use mass to address this tension, smaller states are liable to find their special forces increasingly stretched and cannot readily expand their number. This report therefore provides an assessment of the likely future demands on special forces to assess how they can be optimised for the future operating environment.

The report concludes that the future operating environment will be characterised by the diversification of military actors and increasingly transnational conflict. Even when states confront one another this is likely to result in widely dispersed attacks and may lead to conflict in third countries. This is partly to avert the risk of major escalation. Given the anticipated proliferation of non-state actors, however, fighting transnationally is likely to require a detailed understanding of complex human communities in order to avoid drawing in additional groups to the fight, or to direct these groups against an adversary. Special forces, with a licence to adopt a covert posture, are likely to be critical in entering, assessing and operating in these cluttered competitive environments.

At the same time, however, retaining a covert posture will become increasingly difficult. The ubiquity of sensors means that forces dedicated to covert work will need to build an active cover and plan operations over a much longer timeframe than the high-tempo activity characterised by the War on Terror. Selecting personnel for such work from veteran special forces operators

is likely to prevent having a sufficiently diverse force to sustain a credible covert posture. For this reason, covert strategic reconnaissance and enablement is likely to need to increasingly be carried out by dedicated units with differentiated selection processes.

The need to make the covert posture of some units more robust does not supersede the need for the physical attributes necessary for conducting long-range patrolling to conduct extended approaches to objectives. The revolution in sensors that is making covert activity harder is also pushing back the enablers that have allowed special forces to rapidly approach and engage targets. In great power conflict, therefore, special forces will need to conduct operations against strategically significant targets while fighting unplugged, from both communications and supporting echelons. This will place a much greater emphasis on their endurance and ability to work unsupported. However, it also demands a step change in how commanders use special forces, since the accustomed oversight of such operations that has developed over the past two decades will be dangerous to maintain. The physical attributes necessary for such work mean that these activities will likely need to be carried out by different personnel from those pursuing covert action.

Both covert activity in dense human terrain and long-range patrolling in austere environments share a common feature that is different to special forces activity during the War on Terror. Rather than being the most enabled part of the force, special forces are likely to become a key enabler of the joint force. Building relationships and situational awareness in complex human environments will be vital if conventional forces are to enter theatre and operate without antagonising and coming into conflict with local actors. Similarly, locating, identifying and degrading the long-range stand-off that prevents conventional forces from having freedom of manoeuvre will be vital to allow sufficient mass to enter areas of intense competition to change the facts on the ground.

Few of these conclusions would come as a surprise to members of the special forces community. But for the past 20 years, special forces have often been employed where conventional forces could have performed the task with comparable ability. This has often been for political convenience rather than operational necessity. If special forces are to be able to perform the tasks that may be demanded of them, however, they will need to prepare novel tactics to evade detection and achieve the desired effects. Policymakers will need to be prepared to commit special forces without an expectation of maintaining sustained tactical control of operations. Special forces are likely to be more important in the future operating environment, but precisely for that reason policymakers will need to be more discerning about when they are committed.

# Introduction

**O**N THE FINAL day of the 1991 ground campaign of Operation *Desert Storm*, General Norman Schwarzkopf delivered a lengthy briefing to the press setting out the strategic approach, operational trade-offs, tactical dispositions and ultimate outcomes of the fighting. During the Q+A session, a reporter remarked that ‘you went over very quickly the special operations folks; could you tell us what their role was?’. In contrast to the openness of the rest of the briefing, Schwarzkopf replied that ‘we don’t like to talk a lot about what the special operations do’.<sup>1</sup> He went on to say they provided liaison with Arab units, conducted strategic reconnaissance, oversaw combat search and rescue and ‘did some direct action, period’.<sup>2</sup>

For anyone familiar with the challenges of exercising command and control over a multilingual coalition, the importance of identifying and knocking out critical infrastructure and the political necessity of destroying Iraq’s transporter erector launchers used to fire ballistic missiles at Israel, it is undeniable that special forces played an important role in the Gulf War. Nevertheless, like many wars of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, one could write a quite serviceable, if incomplete, history of Operation *Desert Storm* without reference to special forces. Since their inception during the Second World War, special forces have largely performed tasks at the periphery of a war effort. Their special status has stemmed from their unconventional skills and approaches, ability to operate with limited support, detached from the traditional echelon structure, and with discretion. They have been exceptionally useful but rarely decisive.<sup>3</sup>

A history of the War on Terror, by contrast, that failed to deal in considerable detail with special operations would be incomprehensible, let alone incomplete. From the initial partnered effort with the Northern Alliance in Afghanistan<sup>4</sup> and the high-tempo raiding of Task Force 145 against Al-Qa’ida in Iraq,<sup>5</sup> to the killing of Osama bin Laden<sup>6</sup> and the campaign alongside Iraqi and Syrian regulars and irregulars to retake ground from the Islamic State, special forces have

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1. C-Span, ‘U.S. CENTCOM Military News Briefing’, 27 February 1991, 33:08, <<https://www.c-span.org/video/?16795-1/us-centcom-military-news-briefing>>, accessed 20 January 2021.
  2. *Ibid.*, 34:10.
  3. Max Hastings, *The Secret War: Spies, Codes and Guerrillas, 1939-1945* (New York, NY: Harper Collins, 2017).
  4. Doug Stanton, *The Horse Soldiers: The Extraordinary Story of a Band of US Soldiers Who Rode to Victory in Afghanistan* (New York, NY: Scribner, 2010).
  5. Mark Bowden, ‘The Ploy’, *The Atlantic*, May 2007; Mark Urban, *Task Force Black: The Explosive True Story of the SAS and the Secret War in Iraq* (London: Abacus, 2011).
  6. Mark Owen, *No Easy Day: The Firsthand Account of the Mission that Killed Osama Bin Laden* (New York, NY: Penguin, 2012).

periodically led the main effort for NATO operations for the past 20 years.<sup>7</sup> They have become the first and primary response to a wide range of threats, leading to concerns that they have become chronically overstretched.<sup>8</sup> Indeed, as Hy Rothstein has argued, while the high tempo of operations has led to much greater proficiency, it may also have inhibited the mindset among special forces for unconventional activities that once defined the special operations community.<sup>9</sup> That mindset shift arguably raises concerns about special forces' readiness to reprise some of their historical roles against hostile state actors. Once defined by an ability to work outside the military echelon structure, special forces today, as General Raymond Thomas, commander of the US Special Operations Command (USSOCOM), told the Senate Armed Services Committee in 2017, 'are more than simply interoperable with the Services ... we are truly interdependent'.<sup>10</sup> In response to this concern, the US has shifted a large proportion of USSOCOM personnel to confront hostile state actors.<sup>11</sup> The US has the mass to do this, although whether the operational tempo of these units can be paired back, given the breadth and scale of standing commitments, remains to be seen. For smaller nations the challenge is arguably greater.

This strain is exacerbated by the perception of special forces among the policy community. Seeking assurance, policymakers have become accustomed to using special forces in conjunction with air power as their foremost military tool, even where conventional forces might be entirely appropriate. Furthermore, since the public perception of special forces is centred upon the counterterrorism sub-set of their functions, awareness of what special forces may need in a new era of great power competition is limited. For example, there is an understandable push to increase the codification and oversight of special forces activity.<sup>12</sup> Although this may be justified while these operations remain the primary line of military effort, the recommendations may harm the viability of special forces in some of their other functions. This point has rarely entered the debate. Furthermore, because so much of what has traditionally been the remit of special

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7. Anthony King, 'The Special Air Service and the Concentration of Military Power', *Armed Forces & Society* (Vol. 35, No. 4, 2009), pp. 646–66.
  8. Jeff Seldin, 'US Officials Warn Special Ops Forces Being Stretched to Possible Breaking Point', *Voice of America*, 17 November 2017; John Ismay, 'Elite U.S. Forces Critique Themselves: Overused, Underled, Raid-Obsessed', *New York Times*, 29 January 2020.
  9. Hy S Rothstein, 'Less Is More: The Problematic Future of Irregular Warfare in an Era of Collapsing States', *Third World Quarterly* (Vol. 28, No. 2, 2007), pp. 275–94; Hy S Rothstein, *Afghanistan & the Troubled Future of Unconventional Warfare* (Annapolis, MA: Naval Institute Press, 2006).
  10. US Special Operations Command, 'Statement of General Raymond A Thomas III, US Army Commander, United States Special Operations Command Before the Senate Armed Services Committee', 4 May 2017, <<https://www.socom.mil/pages/posture-statement-sasc.aspx>>, accessed 7 April 2021.
  11. John Grady, 'SOCOM Shifting to Great Power Competition Strategy, But Needs More ISR Capabilities, Commander Says', *USNI News*, 25 March 2021; Patricia Kime, 'As Russia, China Threaten, Navy SEALs Get a New Focus', *Military.com*, 30 January 2019.
  12. Liam Walpole and Megan Karlshoej-Pedersen, 'Britain's Shadow Army: Policy Options for External Oversight of UK Special Forces', Remote Warfare Programme, Oxford Research Group, April 2018, <<https://www.saferworld.org.uk/downloads/britains-shadow-army-org.pdf>>, accessed 26 April 2021.

forces is not recognised in this discourse, it becomes difficult to discuss the trade-offs in not committing special forces to the current counterterrorism mission. While the employment of special forces for conventional activities may be politically convenient, that does not necessarily make it strategically wise.

The purpose of this report is twofold. First, it aims to place the role of special forces in the context of why they were created and the breadth of tasks for which they are best suited. It attempts to provide policymakers with an accessible reference point for the ways in which special forces have been used historically and how adversaries are increasingly likely to use them. This task is largely descriptive rather than analytical but is an important starting point for understanding which tasks special forces are best able to address and which conventional forces struggle to carry out. Conversely, this also helps to clarify those tasks for which conventional forces are appropriate and therefore where the use of special forces may be understood as an indulgence. These points are covered in Chapter I.

Second, the report aims to assess how the future operating environment is likely to change the way in which special forces pursue many of their missions. It endeavours to identify the challenges that changes in the operating environment are likely to create for the training and structuring of special forces units. This is necessarily analytical. Chapter II is concerned with identifying the relevant trends in the future operating environment, while Chapter III explores what this may mean for special forces units.

The report uses a range of methodologies. First, it is necessary to explain the terminology employed. Different countries use a variety of terms for 'special forces'.<sup>13</sup> Some of the distinctions reflect nation-specific institutions, such as the US Army Special Forces. Some terms, such as 'Tier One', have a series of constitutionally specific connotations reflecting where a special forces unit fits into a national chain of command. The delineation between units for the responsibility of covert operations, for instance, is different in the US, the UK, France, Israel, Iran and Russia, reflecting constitutional differences as much as operational considerations. Other terms, such as 'special operations forces' (SOF) or 'special purpose troops' (*spetsnaz*), are exceedingly broad, and not only refer to special forces but also to conventional units that enable them on a routine or ad hoc basis. To adopt wholesale a specific national nomenclature would be to prejudice the analysis by baking in assumptions about delineations of responsibility that would inhibit what is a conceptual discussion. Furthermore, much of the public information about the delineation between units within national structures is either out of date or misleading, and these details are not supplied in this report.

The report therefore adopts its own nomenclature. 'Special forces' refers to unconventional military units subject to higher levels of training and screening that are detached from the conventional force structure. It does not refer to highly skilled military trade specialists such as explosive ordinance disposal engineer units or elite assault troops such as paratroopers,

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13. Bernd Horn, Paul B de Taillon and David Last (eds), *Force of Choice: Perspectives on Special Operations* (Montreal: McGill-Queens Press, 2004), pp. x–xx.

marines and rangers, who sometimes help special forces units. When these wider forces are discussed, they are collectively referred to as SOF. Where the study is referring to specific units, such as the US Army Special Forces or *Spetsgruppa Alpha*, these will be indicated by name.

The analysis for this work is conceptual but informed by historical research. A conceptual approach is necessary to provide the freedom to consider changes in the operating environment without having to detail the implications for a specific nation's doctrine. This approach therefore avoids the inadvertent disclosure of sensitive information or publication of misleading information as to how individual nations conduct operations. Chapter I is based on a survey of historical special forces operations and divides these into the drivers for why special forces were employed rather than conventional units. This means that several of the drivers of special forces activity discussed in Chapter I may apply simultaneously to certain missions. A counterterrorism mission may be covert, for instance, but the reasons for special forces having a counterterrorism role and a covert role are distinct.

Chapter II provides an assessment of the future operating environment that is necessarily concerned with projection rather than empirical historical data. The survey is based on a literature review of economic, demographic, political and military analysis and an assessment of technological trends to arrive at some projected characteristics of the future operating environment. The emphasis is on the elements of these projections that appear to intersect with the conduct of the special forces missions identified in Chapter I. Chapter III comprises an analytical reconciliation between the changed context within which special forces must pursue their missions and the manner in which special forces will need to operate. There is a limit to the extent to which a conceptual study can be specific in making recommendations, therefore, in its Conclusion, the report tries to set out conceptual challenges that institutions will need to address.

# I. Surveying the Use of Special Forces

**T**O BETTER UNDERSTAND special forces, it is necessary to appreciate the unique policy challenges that lead to their formation. Militaries are hierarchical organisations with a strong drive to standardise procedure and ensure a high level of assurance in delivering specific tasks. Doctrinal military solutions to problems are therefore often manpower intensive and inefficient, especially when confronted with problems that do not fit within the conventional repertoire of the force. Furthermore, the need to manage scale and complexity leads to the creation of echelons, which in turn creates bureaucracy. Assigning a portion of the force to address a new problem is often slow because it creates changes and resource tensions throughout the echelons between the commander and the tactical unit assigned the task.<sup>14</sup> For this reason, throughout history, policymakers wanting a unit dedicated to resolving specific problems have often created detached units under their direct supervision unconstrained by the structures of conventional forces.<sup>15</sup> These units are often not ‘special’ because of their unique abilities, but rather by virtue of their place within the military structure: they give strategic or operational commanders the ability to direct highly tactical activity.<sup>16</sup> At the same time, however, liberated from the conventional military structure, these forces often rapidly deviate from standard equipment, procedure and culture to optimise for the particular problem that they were created to address. Once the original task is completed it can be very difficult to re-amalgamate these forces into a conventional force.<sup>17</sup> They tend therefore to either be disbanded<sup>18</sup> or where they have a sponsor, adapt to find new roles; indeed, adaptability can be a trait they market to policymakers.<sup>19</sup> This is a vital context in which to understand special forces,

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14. Roger A Beaumont, *Military Elites: Special Fighting Units in the Modern World* (London: Bobbs-Merrill, 1975).
  15. Kobi Michael, ‘Special Operations Forces (SOF) as the “Silver Bullet”: Strategic Helplessness and Weakened Institutional and Extra-Institutional Civilian Control’, in Jessica Glicken Turnley, Kobi Michael and Eyal Ben-Ari (eds), *Special Operations Forces in the 21st Century* (New York, NY and Abingdon: Routledge, 2017), pp. 59–73.
  16. Eliot A Cohen, *Commandos and Politicians: Elite Military Units in Modern Democracies* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1978).
  17. Bernd Horn, ‘When Cultures Collide: The Conventional Military / SOF Chasm’, *Canadian Military Journal* (Autumn, 2004), pp. 3–16.
  18. Joseph H Alexander, *Edson’s Raiders: The 1st Marine Raider Battalion in World War II* (Annapolis, MD: Naval Institute Press, 2010).
  19. Eitan Shamir and Eyal Ben Ari, ‘The Rise of Special Operations Forces: Generalized Specialization, Boundary Spanning and Military Autonomy’, *Journal of Strategic Studies* (Vol. 41, No. 3, 2016), pp. 1–37; Peder Hyllengren, ‘Military Leaders’ Adaptability in Unexpected Situations’, *Military Psychology* (Vol. 29, No. 4, 2017), pp. 245–59.

because the structures that surround them are rarely the product of deliberate design, but rather an attempt to make coherent a series of adaptable and adapting units. It is the fact that these units can be assigned by strategic and operational echelons to confront new tasks that makes them of enduring value to the military. One might think that troops who are defined by adaptability are difficult to pin down as to their role. In practice there are a number of functions that – while pursued in a range of ways – have persistently led to the creation of dedicated forces. This chapter seeks to set out the relationship between the tasks for which special forces have been created and the policy drivers that lead these tasks to be assigned to special units.

## Strategic Reconnaissance

Ascertaining the key features of terrain, environment and enemy dispositions is critical to all military planning and is therefore a continuous task to which units across a military formation contribute. This includes the gathering of intelligence, conduct of reconnaissance with dedicated assets, and the deployment of reconnaissance troops who precede units to try and understand the ground and the enemy. There is also the collection of reports from all subordinate units and their fusion by intelligence staff to try and build a picture of the battlefield beyond one's own forces. Collectively this may be understood to comprise the operating picture from which commanders seek to plan.<sup>20</sup> However, any given plan will have certain criteria that must be met if it is to succeed. These critical criteria constitute specific pieces of information that may or may not have been addressed through general reconnaissance. Where critical information is missing, filling in these gaps in knowledge becomes vital and is elevated to strategic reconnaissance justifying the dedication of units to find the necessary answers. Filling these knowledge gaps is not only necessary for military planning but is often vital for obtaining permission from policymakers to carry out an operation.<sup>21</sup>

There are an array of organic technical reconnaissance capabilities available at higher echelons, but there are also many questions that must ultimately depend on getting a human in position to observe a point of interest. Against an adversary that is familiar with technical reconnaissance capabilities and is actively practising deception, or in pursuit of questions that relate to human sentiment or behaviour, there is not yet a better solution than inserting human operators who have an ability to interpret what they are sensing with a broad contextual understanding of people and warfare.

Inserting personnel to answer questions of strategic importance is extremely sensitive and dangerous. In the first instance, if an adversary catches reconnaissance personnel scouting a particular site, this will flag it as an area of enemy interest, potentially revealing a commander's

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20. Alexander Stillwell, *Military Reconnaissance: The Eyes and Ears of the Army* (London: Casemate, 2021).

21. For instance, establishing with sufficient confidence that Osama bin Laden was resident in the Abbottabad compound required both technical surveillance and pattern of life observation from ground teams. See Mark Bowden, *The Finish: The Killing of Osama Bin Laden* (New York, NY: Atlantic Monthly Press, 2012), chapter 6.

intentions.<sup>22</sup> This risk is heightened if the scouts are captured, interrogated and divulge information. Avoiding detection often requires the employment of sophisticated insertion capabilities such as mini-submersibles<sup>23</sup> or high-altitude, low-opening parachute drops.<sup>24</sup> It may also require significant technical proficiency in communications and emplacing surveillance equipment. Alternatively, if penetrating human terrain, it may require linguistic proficiency and the adoption of a civilian profile.<sup>25</sup> Strategic reconnaissance operations must be small, both to reduce their signature and because the point is to send a minimal resource to establish whether a greater allocation of resources to a task is viable and sensible. Thus, personnel conducting strategic reconnaissance will need to be highly self-motivated and able to function effectively without the support, enablement and mutual protection afforded by conventional military formations. They must be able to perform technically complex tasks while knowing that failure not only means death, but likely means to die alone, or face capture and possible torture. Their deployment will often demand long marches across arduous terrain or swims through rough seas. In this context it becomes highly apparent why these tasks are not given to conventional forces. Undetected infiltration demands creative methods of entry, and the need to avoid detection and capture also means that commanders wish such tasks to be carried out by troops who have been specially selected and received specialist training in order to have the highest assurance of success. The strategic reconnaissance mission has set many of the standards for physical and psychological endurance that special forces units require from candidates joining their ranks.

## Interdiction and Raiding

In warfare, logistics constrain the extent of the possible. Destruction and interruption of supply can cripple an adversary's capacity to manoeuvre, degrade the predictability of operations, and cede the initiative. The threat of small, mobile and aggressive bands of troops able to penetrate enemy-held territory and wreak havoc on supply bases, convoys, critical infrastructure and weak

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22. Consider the need to reconnoître the beaches for D-Day, and what the discovery of these efforts may have revealed about Allied planning. See David Abrutat, *Vanguard: The True Stories of the Reconnaissance and Intelligence Missions Behind D-Day* (Annapolis, MD: Naval Institute Press, 2019).
  23. There is a transition underway from submersible swimmer deliver vehicles, see Kyle Mizokami, 'This Mini-Sub Is Like a Commuter Bus for Navy SEAL Commandos', *Popular Mechanics*, 22 January 2020, <<https://www.popularmechanics.com/military/navy-ships/a30629861/gator-navy-seal-submarine/>>, accessed 16 February 2021, to long-range surface and sub-surface connectors, such as the VICTA, see <<https://subseacraft.com/victa/>>, accessed 1 May 2021.
  24. Andy Newell, *Body-Flight Basics* (Kibworth Beauchamp: Matador, 2020).
  25. Consider, for instance, the Special Reconnaissance Unit established by the British to conduct reconnaissance and surveillance in Northern Ireland. See Huw Bennet, 'From Direct Rule to Motorman: Adjusting British Military Strategy for Northern Ireland in 1972', *Studies in Conflict and Terrorism* (Vol. 33, No. 7, 2010), pp. 511–32.

units<sup>26</sup> is rarely in itself decisive. However, in diverting resources from the main line of effort, slowing manoeuvres and constraining choice, such activity can enable operational defeat.<sup>27</sup>

The critical element of raiding is that it must be asymmetric. The aim is to force the enemy to expend more energy and resources in preventing a raid than the power conducting the raid expends in carrying it out.<sup>28</sup> The raiders therefore cannot be heavily equipped and enabled but must instead act in small groups with considerable independence and a mobile and organic capacity to achieve destruction disproportionate to their size. Russian operational analysis has concluded that it takes 20 platoons of conventional forces to protect a force's rear area from one platoon of raiders.<sup>29</sup> This is consistent with the ratios required in a range of counterinsurgency campaigns against guerrillas, such as in Malaya.<sup>30</sup> This raiding function, as typified by the Long-Range Desert Group during the British campaign in North Africa, can be highly effective and often places an adversary on the horns of a dilemma.<sup>31</sup>

There are three elements to the interdiction and raiding function that lend themselves to special forces. First, units conducting these activities must be confident to prosecute attacks quickly and to operate in small units without the capacity to escalate if confronted by superior forces.<sup>32</sup> They must be highly self-dependent. If they require substantial enablement in this role then they are failing to efficiently perform this function. This is perhaps best demonstrated by contrasting the Long-Range Desert Group's effective and persistent raids against German airfields and other bases in North Africa with the Chindit campaigns in Burma. The former saw a self-contained force operate independently to achieve disproportionate damage while making few demands upon conventional forces. The latter was initially conceived to achieve a similar effect, since Orde Wingate envisioned penetration warfare as forcing the enemy to fight in multiple directions and so dissipate their strength.<sup>33</sup> The first Chindit operation in 1943 arguably achieved this, drawing in large numbers of Japanese troops to contain the brigade, while having

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- 26. William H McRaven, *Spec Ops: Case Studies in Special Operations Warfare Theory and Practice* (Toronto: Random House Canada, 1995), pp. 4–11.
  - 27. Alan J Levine, *The War Against Rommel's Supply Lines, 1942–43* (New York, NY: Praeger, 1999).
  - 28. The Soviet Union planned extensively to use partisans and raiders inserted behind enemy lines to accelerate the exhaustion of invading forces. See Mark Galeotti, *Spetsnaz: Russia's Special Forces* (Oxford: Osprey, 2015), pp. 6–10.
  - 29. Igor Sutyagin, 'RUSI Land Warfare Conference 2017 – Session 7', 19 July 2017, 21:54–48:00, <[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=\\_EcrrD1dBhg](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_EcrrD1dBhg)>, accessed 8 April 2020.
  - 30. John Nagl, *Learning to Eat Soup with a Knife: Counterinsurgency Lessons from Malaya and Vietnam* (New York, NY: Praeger, 2002), p. 96.
  - 31. John Sadler, *Ghost Patrol: A History of the Long Range Desert Group, 1940–1945* (Oxford: Casemate, 2015).
  - 32. R E Laycock, 'Raids in the Late War and Their Lessons', *RUSI Journal* (Vol. 92, No. 568, 1947), pp. 528–40.
  - 33. Simon Anglim, 'Orde Wingate and the Theory Behind the Chindit Operations: Some Recent Findings', *RUSI Journal* (Vol. 147, No. 2, 2002), pp. 92–98.

modest logistical needs, and thereby led to the more ambitious second operation.<sup>34</sup> The second, which was much larger in scale, necessarily fixed the Chindits to logistics hubs that could then be concentrated against and attacked.<sup>35</sup> The second operation drew in more enabling resources from the Indian Army and was consequently deemed far less successful.<sup>36</sup>

The agility demanded of small raiding forces to avoid being caught by enemy sweeps means that these units tend to have erratic and unconventional planning cycles, and the absence of staff work directing their movements makes it extremely difficult to integrate them into the military structure supporting conventional units. These tasks therefore tend to be assigned to detached units such as ‘special purpose’ troops in Russia that are tasked with ‘special reconnaissance actions’.<sup>37</sup> The lack of structured staffing and tempo also protects these troops from being predictable to the enemy. These missions can require distinct skill and equipment sets such as desert driving, skiing or amphibious operations.<sup>38</sup> Raiding requires creativity and confidence and troops assigned to these missions often become increasingly unconventional the longer they are tasked with such duties.<sup>39</sup> When combined with strategic reconnaissance so that raids strike operationally significant targets, raiding can play a critical role in enabling the wider force to have freedom of manoeuvre. An example of this might include the SAS raid that destroyed Argentine aircraft on Pebble Island during the Falklands conflict, since aircraft operating from the Falklands had much greater time on station with which to threaten the British Task Force.<sup>40</sup>

## Fomenting Resistance and Insurgency

Operating across an expanse such as the Sahel or the dense forests of Eastern Europe may provide a highly permeable front, enabling irregular forces to interdict and raid the enemy at scale. However, this is not always possible, either because of a disparity in the scale of forces available to each side, or the constraints of the terrain inflicting a high rate of attrition on friendly forces, or the political constraints of mounting direct attacks on an enemy. For some or all of these reasons, states have routinely sought to encourage and enable civilians, armed groups and the remnants of defeated security forces to actively attack and attrit enemy units occupying ground. The effect of these acts of resistance and insurgency is similar to interdiction and raiding, except that they tend to be carried out where the enemy interfaces with a population rather than when they traverse unpopulated terrain. However, from the point of view of the

34. P Mead, ‘The Chindit Operations of 1944’, *RUSI Journal* (Vol. 100, No. 598, 1955), pp. 250–62.

35. B Fergusson, ‘Behind the Enemy’s Lines in Burma’, *RUSI Journal* (Vol. 91, No. 563, 1946), pp. 347–60.

36. William Slim, *Defeat into Victory* (London: Cassell, 1956), pp. 546–49.

37. Igor Sutyagin with Justin Bronk, *Russia’s New Ground Forces: Capabilities, Limitations and Implications for International Security*, RUSI Whitehall Paper 89 (London: Taylor & Francis, 2017), pp. 54–58.

38. Niall Cherry, *Striking Back: Britain’s Airborne and Commando Raids, 1940–42* (London: Helion, 2009).

39. Robert Laycock, ‘Raids in the Late War and Their Lessons’, *RUSI Journal* (November 1947), pp. 534–35.

40. This is a good example of an attack that had an operational significant impact. See Cedric Delves, *Across an Angry Sea: The SAS in the Falklands War* (London: Hurst, 2018), pp. 131–74.

patron state fomenting resistance and insurgency, this activity requires fundamentally different skills and support structures from interdiction and raiding.

Fomenting resistance and insurgency requires networks within the target geography that are organised and willing to receive support from external forces.<sup>41</sup> The patron state provides aid by delivering training either in or out of the operational area, weapons and technical expertise, communications equipment and finance to commanders, and will in many contexts provide political cover in international forums as well as conduct wider information operations to legitimise the struggle of those resisting another power. Examples include support that the Soviet Union provided for North Vietnam and the international Coalition support to resistance in territory controlled by the Islamic State.<sup>42</sup> It must be noted that campaigns of resistance and insurgency usually depend upon mobilising significant numbers of relatively poorly trained forces which are likely to be killed in large numbers. The French Resistance, for example, killed at most 35 members of the 15,000-strong Das Reich Division in June 1944, suffering hundreds of dead in return.<sup>43</sup> Reprisals by enemy forces can also make the civil population hostile to insurgent or resistance personnel and if an enemy is prepared to be indiscriminate the cover provided by the civilian population can evaporate very quickly.<sup>44</sup> Alternatively, where insurgents have popular legitimacy and some military proficiency they can often tie down large numbers of enemy forces, inflict widespread damage, and even in some contexts set the conditions for strategic defeat by forcing the adversary into an attritional struggle against an enemy without a clear centre of gravity and against whom victory conditions are ambiguous while the legitimacy of the struggle at home can be called into question. Insurgency alone will rarely deliver victory but can set the conditions for it by conventional forces.<sup>45</sup>

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41. For example, British special forces entering France under Nazi occupation were largely dependent upon the French resistance for protection, even if the latter was largely dependent upon the special forces for access to weapons and training. See Julian Jackson, *France: The Dark Years, 1940–1944* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001); Olivier Wiewiora, *Histoire de la Resistance, 1940–1945* (Paris: Perrin, 2013); Robert Gildea, *Fighters in the Shadows: A New History of the French Resistance* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2015).
  42. Ilya Gaiduk, 'Soviet Policy Towards US Participation in the Vietnam War', *History* (Vol. 81, No. 261, 1996), pp. 40–54; Mike Stevens, 'Resistance and Information Warfare in Mosul and Raqqa: In Darkness, Light', *RUSI Journal* (Vol. 165, No. 5, 2020), pp. 10–21.
  43. Max Hastings, *Das Reich: The March of the 2nd SS Panzer Division Through France, June 1944* (London: Pan, 2009), pp. 248–50.
  44. For example, consider Alfred Knox's assessment of Germany's capacity to suppress partisan activity during the First World War versus the record of the Second World War. See The National Archives (TNA), WO 106/1098, 'Knox to CIGS, Possibilities of Guerrilla Warfare in Russia', 5 March 1918; Christopher Browning, *Ordinary Men: Reserve Police Battalion 101 and the Final Solution in Poland* (New York, NY: Harper Collins, 1998), pp. 88–103, 147–58.
  45. As achieved by the Viet Cong. See Max Hastings, *Vietnam: An Epic Tragedy, 1945–1975* (New York, NY: Harper Collins, 2018), pp. 556–84.

There are a number of military tasks in fomenting resistance and insurgency that lead to the employment of special forces. First, while almost always conducted in close collaboration with intelligence services, there are clearly military skills that are required to foment an insurgency. The first is a familiarity with the weapons and military equipment with which insurgents are to be provided and for which they require training. It is likely that personnel also need a certain proficiency with these weapons and confidence in commanding small teams, because insurgent forces will want to be reassured that the equipment and techniques they are being taught to employ work and that their teachers know what they are talking about. A second set of military skills relate to command and control. If it is accepted that insurgency can set the conditions for victory but rarely in itself delivers it, there is often a need to coordinate operations supporting insurgent forces with those of conventional units either delivering stand-off effects or preparing larger military operations. There is therefore a need to be familiar with military communications and to be able to coordinate with military structures.

There are three reasons these activities are the preserve of special forces as opposed to conventional troops. First, there is often a need for language and cultural skills that demand additional training and do not constitute the standard expertise of military units. Second, operating in support of insurgents is highly perilous. Some insurgent groups will have been penetrated by the enemy. Multiple insurgent groups may be at cross purposes and competing factions may view outsiders with periodic hostility. Insurgents will routinely interface with criminals, because they share many techniques for moving material into an area of operations without detection and are one and the same in the eyes of the enemy state. Yet criminals often pose a direct physical threat to the forces working with insurgents and expose them to moral corrosion. There is therefore a need for the military personnel to have strong contextual judgement and to be able to self-administer amid uncertain friends. This places troops under a distinct set of psychological pressures that are well outside the conventional military experience where reliance on comrades is paramount. Third, the political and reputational risks of exposure of these kinds of operations, as well as the legal risks associated with enabling forces that historically have always had a mixed appreciation for international humanitarian law,<sup>46</sup> creates a need for special oversight measures and a level of discretion that would be problematic if expanded to encompass conventional forces.

Although military support to fomenting insurgency often relies on special forces personnel, it is not always conducted by military special forces units. This is because there is often a need for deniability in operations that could risk direct escalation against another state, and because supporting insurgents using irregular warfare techniques over which a patron state has limited control can expose military personnel to legal risk. Given the need for detailed political awareness and relationships, many countries subordinate such activities to their intelligence agencies. The CIA, for instance, pursues such activities through its paramilitary Special Activities

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46. Jack Watling, 'Morals Matter: How Violent Nonstate Actors Write Their Own Laws of War', in David Brown et al. (eds), *Violent Non-State Actors in Modern Conflict* (Havant: Howgate, 2021), pp. 85–105.

Division.<sup>47</sup> Although this organisation may draw heavily on military special forces for its personnel, its operatives are not soldiers. Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps (IRGC) Quds Force represents another model, essentially creating an external action service that can draw on military personnel but also on non-military specialists to create what might be conceived as interdepartmental task forces for fomenting revolution abroad.<sup>48</sup> Exact structures depend on constitutional arrangements, but for such operations to be successful they must invariably see military and intelligence personnel working in close collaboration.

## Partnered Operations

Partnered operations are different from fomenting resistance and insurgency in that rather than enabling a partner to asymmetrically harass an adversary, these try to enable and assist a partner in performing conventional military operations. For this reason, this task is not the sole preserve of special forces and given the scale at which it must often be carried out there has been a drive to deliver partnered operations with conventional forces.<sup>49</sup> This is reflected in the creation of the Specialised Infantry Group in the UK<sup>50</sup> and Security Force Assistance Brigades in the US,<sup>51</sup> which are conventional units structured to deliver training.

There are also several reasons why special forces have often been favoured for delivering partnered operations and why they are likely to continue to have a role in them. In the first place, trainers with language skills and cultural awareness are exceedingly valuable in partnered operations. Special forces – because their personnel can be removed from the usual constraints of military career structures<sup>52</sup> – are less likely to frequently rotate around assignments and can build up extensive experience in a given theatre of operation. A further reason to employ special forces is that a partner may be reluctant to be seen to be receiving assistance or to appear dependent and it is therefore necessary to deploy troops who are able to operate with an appropriate level of discretion.<sup>53</sup> Trainers also need to function in very small teams and

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- 47. Chris Whipple, *The Spymasters: How the CIA Directors Shape History and the Future* (London: Simon & Schuster, 2020), pp. 19–78.
  - 48. John Chipman, *Iran's Networks of Influence in the Middle East* (London: International Institute for Strategic Studies, 2019).
  - 49. Linda Robinson, 'SOF's Evolving Role: Warfare "By, With, and Through" Local Forces', RAND blog, 9 May 2017, <<https://www.rand.org/blog/2017/05/sofs-evolving-role-warfare-by-with-and-through-local.html>>, accessed 29 April 2021.
  - 50. UK Army, 'Specialised Infantry Group', <<https://www.army.mod.uk/who-we-are/formations-divisions-brigades/6th-united-kingdom-division/specialised-infantry-group/>>, accessed 16 February 2021.
  - 51. US Army Fort Benning and The Maneuver Center of Excellence, '1<sup>st</sup> Security Force Assistance Brigade', <<https://www.benning.army.mil/Tenant/1-SFAB/>>, accessed 16 February 2021.
  - 52. Jack Watling and Nick Reynolds, *War by Other's Means: Delivering Effective Partner Force Capacity Building*, Whitehall Paper 97 (London: Taylor & Francis, 2020), pp. 62–79.
  - 53. As in the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps Quds Force operations in support of the Houthis in Yemen, conducted by Iranian personnel using mainly Yemeni, and in some cases Iraqi passports

sometimes in high-threat environments, which requires different training from conventional forces used to manoeuvring in larger formations.

Another aspect of special forces training is that they can often build relationships with and work alongside partner special forces, which in less capable militaries can constitute an island of military effectiveness. This has allowed special forces to get on the ground and work with partners quickly in crises. For instance, when the Islamic State seized 40% of Iraqi territory in 2014, previous international training delivered to the Iraqi Counterterrorism Service by NATO special forces paid dividends as almost the only component of the Iraqi Army that could conduct effective offensive operations.<sup>54</sup> In such crises special forces are also often better able to build relationships quickly compared with conventional forces because of the assistance they can give a partner through directing air support and other assets that require additional training, specialist equipment and connections with a Joint Staff that would normally be divided across several positions in a conventional unit.<sup>55</sup> This work is disproportionately carried out by experienced troops and non-commissioned officers (NCOs). Within the career system of conventional units, it is difficult to withdraw NCOs from their duties without causing harm to the soldiers who would normally be under their charge. Conversely, if a unit is formed purely of NCOs, it will struggle to sustain its strength, as it is dependent upon other units transferring personnel into it. This is a recipe for the provision of less able personnel, since units will endeavour to retain their better NCOs. Special forces, because of their unusual selection and career structure, can often avoid these dilemmas.

A further consideration is that because insurgency and resistance can set the conditions for success but cannot deliver it, insurgencies that wish to achieve victory must transition into more conventional forces.<sup>56</sup> Alternatively, in a failed or weak state following the outbreak of fighting there may be competing centres of gravity and it may be unclear who could be partnered. Both potential and suitability need to be assessed.<sup>57</sup> In either of these scenarios it is likely that special forces will have a relationship with the partner force, either because they have been instrumental in supporting the insurgency or because they have been conducting strategic reconnaissance to assess which forces may be most suitable to support. Given the importance of interpersonal relationships and trust in any partnered operation – but especially in those supporting quasi-state or semi-conventional forces – states will often find it best to continue a special forces mission because these troops have already established the relationships and can most quickly adjust their posture. Whether this delivers the best results in the long term

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and maintaining a low profile in Sana'a.

54. Michael Knights and Alex Mello, 'The Best Thing America Built in Iraq: Iraq's Counter-Terrorism Service and the Long War Against Militancy', *War on the Rocks*, 19 July 2017.
55. The importance of special forces in coordinating air strikes in support of Iraqi forces is a good example. See Becca Wasser et al., *The Air War Against the Islamic State: The Role of Airpower in Operation Inherent Resolve* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND, 2021).
56. Mao Tse-Tung, *On Guerrilla Warfare*, translated by Samuel Griffith (New York, NY: Dover, 2012).
57. For example, the importance of preliminary meetings in finding partners in Afghanistan. See Steve Coll, *Ghost Wars: The Secret History of the CIA, Afghanistan and Bin Laden* (London: Penguin, 2005).

if a patron fails to transition to a conventional force deployment is debatable, but it must be recognised that the early entry – and often late exit<sup>58</sup> – of special forces exerts a gravitational hold on their involvement in even prolonged partnered operations.

## Covert Operations

Covert activity should be understood as comprising operations that, if they can plausibly be tied to a state, would harm a state's operational interests. This may be because its disclosure could expose sources and methods of infiltration that, once exposed, could prevent future operations being conducted in a similar manner, as with Israel's and the US's Operation *Olympic Games* targeting Iran's nuclear programme.<sup>59</sup> Some of the activities already described in this report would likely be covert in character. Operations to train and equip insurgents to fight an adversary with whom a state was not at war would likely be conducted covertly.<sup>60</sup> Most strategic reconnaissance is necessarily covert because of the risk of alerting an adversary to intentions. Sabotage of infrastructure and targeted killing of adversaries belonging to hostile terrorist or state actors is usually pursued by covert forces, with a good example being Israel's clandestine war with Iran.<sup>61</sup> There is also a range of operations where – although the identity of the perpetrator may be apparent to the adversary – ambiguity as to what can be proven publicly can mitigate escalation risks and dampen the need for an adversary to retaliate.<sup>62</sup> Covert operations therefore provide states with the ability to engage in kinetic diplomacy to message deterrence thresholds and intent without spilling over into direct armed conflict. Covert operations are usually subject to special legislation, allowing for distinct oversight mechanisms to safeguard security.

Covert operations cannot be widely conducted by conventional forces, for several reasons. First, the need for secrecy demands that the personnel dedicated to these missions undergo extensive screening, maintain a high level of discretion at all times, and are subject to thorough and consistent security monitoring.<sup>63</sup> This is because the disclosure of the identity of covert operatives, even when they are not conducting covert operations, can provide a set of indicators that allows them to be tracked and therefore enables enemies to disrupt

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- 58. Jessica Donati, *Eagle Down: The Last Special Forces Fighting the Forever War* (New York, NY: Public Affairs, 2021).
  - 59. See David Sanger, *Confront and Conceal: Obama's Secret Wars and Surprising Use of American Power* (New York, NY: Random House, 2013), pp. 188–225.
  - 60. Such as British operations targeting Indonesia in Borneo and Egypt in Yemen. See Richard J Aldrich and Rory Cormac, *The Black Door: Spies, Secret Intelligence and British Prime Ministers* (London: William Collins, 2016), pp. 247–54.
  - 61. Ronen Bergman, *The Secret War with Iran: The 30-Year Clandestine Struggle Against the World's Most Dangerous Terrorist Power*, translated by Ronnie Hope (London: Simon & Schuster, 2008).
  - 62. Rory Cormac and Richard Aldrich, 'Grey is the New Black: Covert Action and Implausible Deniability', *International Affairs* (Vol. 94, No. 3, 2018), pp. 477–94.
  - 63. Marek N Posard et al., *Updating Personnel Vetting and Security Clearance Guidelines for Future Generations* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation, 2021).

operations. The organisations tasked with covert operations must also be shielded from penetration by hostile intelligence services that could provide early warning as to their activities or betray the techniques that enable covert operatives to infiltrate and exfiltrate safely. This counterintelligence burden cannot realistically be applied to an entire conventional force because to do so would be prohibitively expensive, laborious and injurious to the personnel involved. It is therefore more realistic to have a small cadre responsible for these activities in order to limit the burden of security. Furthermore, trying to apply a high standard of secrecy on general military activity would make recruitment difficult, oversight impossible, and would undermine civil–military relations.<sup>64</sup>

Second, in order to gain approval for covert operations, governments want a high level of assurance that they will remain covert. This demands that those carrying them out do so with a high degree of proficiency. There is therefore an increased training burden for those implementing covert operations, since the risk of exposure is harmful and keeping activity covert often precludes many of the most assured military methods. Indeed, many of the techniques of covert warfare are distinctly sub-optimal in conventional operations as they sacrifice efficacy in order to avoid detection or leaving a trace. It would therefore be counterproductive to train conventional forces in many of these techniques.

## Clandestine Operations

The difference between covert and clandestine operations is not binary, since it partly reflects the perceived interests at stake. Furthermore, it can be desirable for specific audiences to know but not be able to prove, or merely suspect, covert action, as a part of deterrence messaging.<sup>65</sup> Nevertheless there is a distinction worth drawing. Covert operations tend to require a high level of secrecy before execution and to ensure that who perpetrated the action is ambiguous as far as the public is concerned afterwards. State victims of covert action will often know who was responsible, but may not be able to prove this publicly, or may be strongly disinclined to do so. There are tasks, however, that demand military skills but which a state cannot afford to be traceable to its personnel.<sup>66</sup> This category of operation can be classified as clandestine operations. To merit being a clandestine operation, it is assumed that the disclosure of these activities would inflict strategic harm to a state's interests. To illustrate the distinction between covert and clandestine operations, consider the sabotage of a transformer station in Pessac, France, in 1941 in the Special Operations Executive's (SOE) Operation *Josephine B*<sup>67</sup> in contrast to Operation *Postmaster*, carried out on 14 January 1942, in which British operatives entered the Spanish port of Santa Isabella on the West African island of Fernando Po and cut out an Italian and German ship, along with a barge.<sup>68</sup> Both of these operations involved the infiltration

64. Samuel Finer, *The Man on Horseback: The Role of the Military in Politics* (New York, NY: Routledge, 2017).

65. Austin Carson and Keren Yarhi-Milo, 'Covert Communication: The Intelligibility and Credibility of Signalling in Secret', *Security Studies* (Vol. 26, No. 1, 2017), pp. 124–56.

66. Michael Poznansky, 'Revisiting Plausible Deniability', *Journal of Strategic Studies* (2020).

67. TNA, HS 6/347, 'JOSEPHINE B: Sabotage of Transformer Sub-Station at Pessac'.

68. TNA, HS 3/89, 'POSTMASTER: Report on Operation'.

of specially trained operatives to conduct military activity against enemy forces. However, *Josephine B* was carried out in occupied France. It was a covert mission because secrecy was important for its success and in protecting the personnel and methods that had made it possible. But exposure would have been an operational setback, not a strategic disaster. By contrast, Operation *Postmaster* was a violation of Spanish neutrality and if British involvement could have been proved may have provided Spain with a *casus belli* to enter the war on the side of the axis. This would have been a major and disproportionate setback for the Allies. It was therefore essential that the operation could not be traced to Britain and that there was no evidence of its forces being behind the raid or plausible alternatives.

Where covert activity is often operating close to the boundaries of acceptable conduct, the majority of clandestine activity is explicitly a violation of international norms and law. The fact that states practise clandestine operations, however, does not suggest that they place no value on international law. Instead, their recognition that breaching certain thresholds, norms or laws would constitute a strategic harm is precisely why such operations are clandestine and not pursued openly. Furthermore, the high risk involved and the difficulty of avoiding both detection and subsequent attribution means that for activity to be clandestine it can only be pursued on a small scale. Given that warfare is a competitive activity for high stakes and that breaching certain norms and laws on a limited basis can provide tactical opportunities for success, it is to be expected that states will continue to maintain forces able to operate in this manner. For states that choose not to have such capabilities it is vital that they understand that other states will employ such methods and that they equip themselves to detect and thereby cause such efforts to fail. If such activities are uncovered but go unpunished, it is likely that they will drift from the clandestine to the covert arena and in doing so become more prevalent.

Clandestine operations are rarely carried out by a state's military because of the strategic risks involved. They are usually approved by the most senior political leadership and carried out by organisations that are disconnected from the conventional military chain of command.<sup>69</sup> Indeed, militaries place a great deal of emphasis throughout the training of their officers on adherence to rules and norms of behaviour. Military violence is supposed to be directed, and because clandestine operations are almost always a breach of norms and laws, officers are often hostile to them. Thus, they are usually not conducted by special forces, or if they are, then those units made available for clandestine work are usually separated from the main body of special forces and operate under a unique arrangement with other government agencies. Many clandestine operations require personnel who are highly proficient in military skills. For example, a British strategic reconnaissance operation against a Russian cruiser in 1956 saw the intelligence services make use of Lieutenant Commander Buster Crabb, an expert naval diver.<sup>70</sup> The trained personnel that populate the structures dedicated to clandestine activities often

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69. Rory Cormac, *Disrupt and Deny: Spies, Special Forces, and the Secret Pursuit of British Foreign Policy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018).

70. For example, as in the Buster Crabb incident. See Michael Goodman, 'Covering Up Spying in the "Buster" Crabb Affair: A Note', *International History Review* (Vol. 30, No. 4, 2008), pp. 768–84.

come from special forces.<sup>71</sup> Once drawn into a clandestine organisation, these personnel will undergo additional training and be subject to additional vetting and scrutiny.

## High-Risk and High-Profile Operations

Many of the operations outlined above involve a high level of risk to the operators, and in the case of covert and clandestine operations there is often a significant degree of risk for the state's interests if the operations go awry. It therefore makes sense that special forces should be tasked with those jobs that require hyper-proficiency in certain military skills. Perhaps somewhat ironically, however, the history of the hyper-proficient special forces unit owes less to the clandestine and covert world and rather to its opposite. In the 1970s there was a significant increase in international terrorism, exemplified by the massacre of the Israeli Olympic team in Munich in 1972.<sup>72</sup> The failure of the German police in freeing the hostages – in front of the world's media – convinced many countries of the need to have specialist counterterrorism units able to clear buildings, discriminating between targets and civilians in the face of significant scrutiny.

These high-stakes operations required military units to be able to function with the precision of a scalpel and to dominate the most complex of environments – urban terrain – without recourse to the massive firepower that conventional doctrine used when fighting in built-up areas.<sup>73</sup> It called for novel tactics, incessant drilling, the closest of teamwork and meticulous planning. Special forces became the kernel around which these capabilities would be developed around the world. UK special forces achieved global recognition for their success in the 1980 Iranian Embassy Siege, among others,<sup>74</sup> but the debacle at the Dubrovka Theatre in Moscow in 2002 highlighted the risks of these operations.<sup>75</sup> The death of so many hostages caused severe political blowback.<sup>76</sup> The public nature of these operations places special forces in a difficult position given their parallel mandate for covert activity.

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71. For example, a high proportion of personnel of Israel's targeted killing units were originally either in the Israeli Defence Forces' special forces units *Sayeret Matkal* or Flotilla-13. See Ronen Bergman, *Rise and Kill First: The Secret History of Israel's Targeted Assassinations* (New York, NY: Random House, 2018).
  72. Paul Thomas Chamberlin, *The Global Offensive: The United States, the Palestinian Liberation Organization, and the Making of the Post-Cold War World Order* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012).
  73. John Spencer, 'The City Is Not Neutral: Why Urban Warfare Is So Hard', Modern War Institute at West Point, 4 March 2020, <<https://mwi.usma.edu/city-not-neutral-urban-warfare-hard/>>, accessed 29 April 2021.
  74. Benjamin Grob-Fitzgibbon, 'Those Who Dared: A Reappraisal of Britain's Special Air Service, 1950–80', *International History Review* (Vol. 37, No. 3, 2015), pp. 540–64.
  75. David Satter, *The Less You Know the Better You Sleep: Russia's Road to Terror and Dictatorship Under Yeltsin and Putin* (London: Yale University Press, 2016), pp. 98–106.
  76. Catherine Belton, *Putin's People: How the KGB Took Back Russia and Then Took on the West* (London: William Collins, 2020), pp. 242–46.

Furthermore, high-risk special forces counterterrorism operations are necessarily carried out in a civilian context, often under the supervision of the police. This opens up a range of complex issues. For example, most counterterrorism operations call for the use of hollow point ammunition because this reduces the risk of overpenetration of the target, which might risk the lives of civilians behind the target. The use of hollow point ammunition, however, is specifically prohibited in war by the Hague Conventions.<sup>77</sup> This is not an insurmountable problem – clearly counterterrorism operations in support of a civil power are not operations in war – but it is indicative of the complexities that arise when employing military units for such roles. The situation is further complicated in the context of military counterterrorism operations carried out in war zones.<sup>78</sup> In many countries therefore, counterterrorism has often taken tactics developed by special forces units and created parallel bodies within the law enforcement agencies able to perform these missions. This is typified by Germany's GSG 9,<sup>79</sup> France's GIGN (Groupe d'intervention de la Gendarmerie Nationale),<sup>80</sup> the US's Special Weapons and Tactics Teams,<sup>81</sup> and in Russia the transition away from employing military *spetsnaz* such as Spetsgruppa-Alpha in this role towards a plethora of regional counterterrorism units within law enforcement.<sup>82</sup> Nevertheless, special forces units around the world continue to be incubators for new tactics in this mission set and are often drawn upon in crises. In some countries, including the UK, domestic counterterrorism remains a military capability.

The creation of these highly precise and discretionary tactics, however, has broadened the special forces repertoire to involve the kill-or-capture raid that is distinct from the raiding and interdiction function practised against enemy installations and strictly military targets. The War on Terror has seen the skills developed for counterterrorism response combined with the raid to create a means of isolating and eliminating identified individuals.<sup>83</sup> These activities have elements of covert operations in the secrecy that governs their planning and execution but are also reminiscent of high-profile domestic counterterrorism missions in the publicity that is often

77. Hague Convention, 'Declaration III – On the Use of Bullets Which Expand or Flatten Easily in the Human Body', 29 July 1899.

78. The US disputes the International Committee of the Red Cross's view that the use of expanding ammunition is a violation of customary international war in all conflicts. See International Committee of the Red Cross, 'Rule 77. Expanding Bullets', <[https://ihl-databases.icrc.org/customary-ihl/eng/docs/v1\\_rul\\_rule77](https://ihl-databases.icrc.org/customary-ihl/eng/docs/v1_rul_rule77)>, accessed 18 February 2021.

79. Ben Knight, 'Germany Expands Anti-Terror Squad GSG 9', DW, 15 January 2018.

80. French Ministry of the Interior, 'GIGN: Groupe d'intervention de la Gendarmerie Nationale', <<https://www.gendarmerie.interieur.gouv.fr/gign/>>, accessed 16 February 2021.

81. Prem Mahadevan, *The Role of SWAT Units* (Oslo: Norwegian Institute for Defence Studies, 2012).

82. Joshua Sinai, 'The Terrorist Threats Against Russia and its Counterterrorism Response Measures', *Connections* (Vol. 14, No. 4, 2015), pp. 95–103.

83. There are historical precedents, such as the British Night Squads in Palestine in the 1930s, see Matthew Hughes, 'Terror in Galilee: British-Jewish Collaboration and the Special Night Squads in Palestine during the Arab Revolt, 1938–39', *Journal of Imperial and Commonwealth History* (Vol. 43, No. 4, 2015), pp. 590–610, but this did not shape the formation of the kill-or-capture raiding of the War on Terror.

given to them by governments after their successful conclusion. The most famous examples might be the raids to kill Osama bin Laden<sup>84</sup> and Abu Bakr al Baghdadi.<sup>85</sup> There have been a great many – at times nightly – raids that have not received comparable attention or publicity, unless they have gone wrong.<sup>86</sup> These raids also differ from comparable activities pursued in conventional war in that they assume a level of permissibility in the surrounding environment that would be difficult to achieve against a state adversary. It is this hybrid mission set that has most brought publicity to special forces units.

## Limitations of Special Forces

Beyond the roles outlined above there is an assortment of specialist functions that have often fallen to special forces, including combat search and rescue,<sup>87</sup> seizing oil rigs,<sup>88</sup> supplying bodyguards to high-value individuals, underwater explosive ordinance disposal, and counterproliferation missions. The specific roles vary by state. Nevertheless, the core roles outlined in this chapter highlight some consistent drivers for why tasks are assigned to special forces rather than conventional units. Special forces units can be assigned responsibilities in a conventional context and in some circumstances will perform these tasks effectively.<sup>89</sup> However, because policymakers have in many cases become accustomed to the assurance offered by special forces and appreciate the ability to direct tactical activity, there is a risk that special forces are inappropriately tasked. This constitutes a strategic risk because special forces are a finite resource and will always constitute a small proportion of a country's military. When considering new missions that arise from the future operating environment, therefore, it is important to ask whether tasks assigned to special forces fall into these categories. Just because special forces can conduct a mission does not mean that they should.

It is important to understand why special forces will always be limited in number. The foremost consistent trait necessary across the missions outlined above is the ability to continue to work creatively and dynamically while unsupported and under considerable pressure. A second common characteristic is creativity. Attacking a conventional unit with an insurgent force, avoiding detection when conducting strategic reconnaissance, planning and executing a successful assault on a defended position or causing disproportionate disruption all require innovative tactics that achieve surprise. The method and the mindset are not refinements of

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84. Bowden, *The Finish*.

85. Glenn Swann et al., ‘Visual Guide to the Raid that Killed Isis Leader Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi’, *The Guardian*, 31 October 2019.

86. Namir Shabibi, ‘Nine Young Children Killed: The Full Details of Botched US Raid in Yemen’, *Bureau of Investigative Journalism*, 9 February 2017.

87. George Galdorisi and Tom Philips, *Leave No Man Behind: The Saga of Combat Search and Rescue* (New York, NY: Motorbooks, 2007).

88. James Dao, ‘A Nation at War: The Commandos: Navy Seals Easily Seize Two Oil Sites’, *New York Times*, 22 March 2003.

89. Anthony King, ‘What is Special About Special Operations Forces?’, in Jessica Glicken Turnley, Kobi Michael and Eyal Ben-Ari (eds), *Special Operations Forces in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century*, pp. 273–84.

conventional tactics; in fact, special operations must often invert conventional operational concepts.<sup>90</sup> The psychological traits required to do this are not prioritised in conventional forces. While conventional forces are expected to be creative and dynamic in problem-solving, they are also required to do this rigidly within defined boundaries – often literally lines on their maps – in order to deconflict with other units and to enable the coherence of the wider scheme of manoeuvre. Conventional forces rely on people to maximise their creativity within the box. Moreover, military education and training emphasises that success is delivered by doing an assigned task to the best of one's ability in support of a team and in the belief that the team will similarly apply their skills to offer maximum support in return. In a special forces context, by contrast, personnel are required to think creatively about the boundaries of the box and are expected to flexibly adapt their role to make up for an absence of supporting formations.

That special forces are selected for different attributes from conventional units suggests that the former should accept direct entry from outside the military, since this would increase the potential pool of people with the requisite mindset. The problem with this is the assurance that special forces must offer because of the high stakes involved in the tasks assigned to them. Training does not replicate the stress of combat. In combat there will be a proportion of people who will psychologically struggle to be effective, and it is very difficult to predict who this will be. It does not correlate with competence demonstrated in training. In a large conventional unit, if a proportion of the force struggle when first exposed to combat it does not cripple the unit, but because special forces operations usually require a small signature and rely on extremely small teams, the impact of an individual struggling under stress can be mission critical. For this reason, special forces tend to require personnel to have already served for some time in the military before going through selection. Drawing on experienced personnel ensures a common basic set of skills and increases the proportion of the force with combat experience whose performance under fire is therefore likely to be more assured. This is not to argue that special forces cannot accept direct entry from outside the military but doing so significantly increases both the training required and the risk in deploying these personnel for the first time.

The combination of military proficiency and independent resilience is rare. Militaries place great emphasis on uniformity, reliability, teamwork and group identity. Special forces demand that personnel continue to exercise their functions competently and creatively in the absence of the supporting group. Given the resources expended in training special forces candidates will likely continue to be selected from the military and since only a proportion of service personnel have the requisite traits, this limits the pool of available candidates. Studies in the US have shown that if a special forces unit seeks to expand beyond about 3% a year it will suffer from a diminution of its quality.<sup>91</sup> The exact number will vary depending on the military culture from which special forces are generated, but where an army might increase the proportion of combat

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90. William H McRaven, 'The Theory of Special Operations', Thesis, Naval Postgraduate School, June 1993, <<https://calhoun.nps.edu/handle/10945/14838>>, accessed 16 April 2021.
  91. Kristen R Hajduk, 'Let SOF Be SOF', Defence360 Transition45 paper, Center for Strategic and International Studies, 21 December 2016, p. 3.

engineers by training more engineers, the number of special forces personnel cannot be readily increased while retaining the level of assurance that policy often demands.

Limiting the size of special forces units is also important for their internal culture. Units that are required to maintain a high degree of discretion and secrecy form distinct and sometimes quite intense internal cultures.<sup>92</sup> This can create highly dedicated, professional and motivated groups. It can also turn sour. This is especially true in a context where personnel are routinely exposed to and participate in violence, with an operational mandate that often makes oversight and the enforcement of rules difficult, so that there is an increased risk of moral corrosion. A demonstration of increased operational tempo, limited capacity for oversight, and moral corrosion is furnished in the findings of the Brereton Report concerning murders carried out by Australian special forces personnel in Afghanistan.<sup>93</sup> In the first instance, a smaller group makes it easier to actively shape the culture, and culture and values are critical to ensuring that special forces behave appropriately. Second, small groups – if they do turn sour – can be broken up and disbanded while minimising the collateral damage of such a decision. This was recently carried out by the German Bundeswehr after it became apparent that a special forces company had a disproportionate number of members of the far right in its ranks.<sup>94</sup> Where a special forces unit has become large and its culture has been corrupted, standards and professionalism can unravel, while the necessarily limited oversight can jeopardise the capacity to reassert control.<sup>95</sup>

The discretion with which special forces must operate limits their optimal and viable size. Large defence establishments are difficult to conceal. Once their location, nomenclature and past operations become known, members of the organisation are increasingly likely to be identified. A further challenge is that while small groups working on a need-to-know basis are restrained in breaching confidences, large organisations can leak, with the cost of tracking down the source being high to the point of counterproductive. Again, therefore, this makes expanding special forces a risk to the effectiveness of the force. The need for discretion also requires special mechanisms for oversight. As the scale of special forces activity increases there is a risk that oversight becomes insufficient because the number of parallel activities can become lost in the noise or overwhelm oversight bodies. Alternatively, if oversight bodies are enlarged then this creates complex and expensive bureaucracies that are themselves vulnerable to

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92. Anna Simons, *The Company They Keep: Life Inside the US Army Special Forces* (New York, NY: Free Press, 1997).
  93. Inspector-General of the Australian Defence Force, *Afghanistan Inquiry Report: Part 1: The Inquiry; Part 3: Operational, Organisation and Cultural Issues* (Canberra: Commonwealth of Australia, 2020), <<https://afghanistaninquiry.defence.gov.au/sites/default/files/2020-11/IGADF-Afghanistan-Inquiry-Public-Release-Version.pdf>>, accessed 16 February 2021.
  94. Peter Carstens, ‘Das KSK wird teilweise aufgelöst’, *Frankfurter Allgemeine*, 30 June 2020, <<https://www.faz.net/aktuell/politik/inland/rechtsextreme-in-der-truppe-das-ksk-wird-teilweise-aufgeloeest-16839731.html>>, accessed 16 February 2021.
  95. Consider, for example, the abuses that became prevalent in Israel’s Shin Bet, the internal security service, and the ways in which the institution sought to avoid accountability for them rather than address its moral corrosion. See Bergman, *Rise and Kill First*, pp. 277–96.

hostile penetration or accidental leakage. There is therefore a practical limit to the size of clandestine communities.

The fact that special forces are a finite resource matters because the tasks outlined in this chapter are ones that conventional forces cannot take over. If it is accepted that special forces are necessarily limited in number and that these missions will continue to be relevant, the prioritisation of these missions within special forces units will be critical to ensuring that they are appropriately organised, equipped and trained to meet the demands of policymakers. Furthermore, since it is difficult to increase the numbers of special forces, it is important to ask whether they are able to deliver these tasks with sufficient assurance given the evolving environment in which they are conducted. If special forces units are not optimised for the operating environment, states risk losing them, which would be deleterious to their ability to pursue certain policies. The next chapter considers how the operating environment within which special forces pursue their missions is changing.

## II. Challenges for Special Forces in the Future Operating Environment

THE OPERATING ENVIRONMENT is defined by the interaction between the policy priorities that generate tasks for special forces, the geographical, political, economic and demographic context in which operations will be implemented, and the adversary's posture and capabilities. This chapter seeks to consider how these factors will shape both the balance of effort between special forces missions that will likely be required in the future operating environment and how the challenge of carrying out these missions is changing. In some respects, this may require a return to older techniques. In others there are new requirements. The particular points that are considered include: the diversification of actors in the area of operations; the return of overt competition between states;<sup>96</sup> the impact of modern sensor capabilities; and the implications of modern targeting on individuals. These factors will likely shift the priorities for special forces and the risks in pursuing their core tasks.

### The Diversification of Military Actors

The future operating environment is likely to see the fragmentation of political, fiscal and military institutions, driven by multiple converging trends. Socially, the availability of live communications in the hands of every human allows for social groupings to transcend geography.<sup>97</sup> This creates international social networks built around values or shared interests in which there is necessarily a process of internationalised cultural entanglement.<sup>98</sup> These networks often lack a fixed centre of gravity or clear hierarchy that allows them to be reliably co-opted by a single state. Whether they comprise environmental activists, religious movements, or simply a shared appreciation for videos of cats, people now receive their news and information and are exposed to ideas from an increasing number of self-curated information eco-systems. International networks are not new,<sup>99</sup>

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96. As declared in national foreign policy strategies, see US Department of Defense, 'Summary of the 2018 National Defense Strategy of the United States of America: Sharpening the American Military's Competitive Edge', <<https://dod.defense.gov/Portals/1/Documents/pubs/2018-National-Defense-Strategy-Summary.pdf>>, accessed 16 February 2021; HM Government, *Global Britain in a Competitive Age: The Integrated Review of Security, Defence, Development and Foreign Policy*, CP 403 (London: The Stationery Office, 2021).

97. Matthew Ford and Andrew Hoskins, *Radical War: Data, Attention and Control in the 21st Century* (London: Hurst, forthcoming).

98. See Michel Espagne, *Les transferts culturels franco-allemands* (Paris: Presses Université de France, 1999).

99. Jan Rüger, 'OXO: Or, the Challenges of Transnational History', *European History Quarterly* (Vol. 40, No. 4, 2010), p. 659.

but they have never previously existed at such a scale and have lacked the instant connectivity that today allows synchronicity between such groups around the world.<sup>100</sup> For the state this changes its relationship with its citizens because they are becoming a diversifying constellation of communities less uniformly exposed to the deliberate crafting of identity traditionally practised by states.<sup>101</sup> Instead groups form in a manner closer to the original conception of national identity formation.<sup>102</sup> The state therefore has less capacity to curate and control the information citizens receive and simultaneously will find it harder to understand the views of its citizens, because they are receiving information from a diversifying and inconsistent range of sources. Even authoritarian governments that invest heavily in control of their citizens are primarily functioning as influencers and shapers of the information environment with a unity of purpose and an expanded tool set, rather than as active controllers of what is published and distributed.<sup>103</sup> Now that every citizen is a producer and consumer of information the volume defies pre-emptive censorship.<sup>104</sup> This turns civilians into actors who are able to shape military operations in ways that are more deliberate and yet diffuse than has historically been the case. In the first place, within minutes of an operation occurring people will record and publish information about it. For example, following the assassination in Yemen of the Houthi politician Saleh al-Samad in April 2018, video appeared within hours of the strike of the UAV feed, the operations room from which the strike was observed and of several international actors working with those seeking to benefit from the operation.<sup>105</sup> Such information can rapidly be collated and used for offensive purposes by activists. Bellingcat, for example, is rapidly developing a reputation for exposing Russian GRU operations and operatives in a way that increasingly exposes Russian actors to reprisals from their state competitors.<sup>106</sup> Bellingcat is itself a geographically dispersed network, independent of states, yet Moscow's activity against it would necessarily bring Russia into further tension with the states whose citizens and values are being threatened. The body of material emanating from the operating environment and diversity of networks interested in it must necessarily affect special forces who aim to operate in a discrete or covert posture.

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100. Peter Singer, *LikeWar: The Weaponization of Social Media* (New York, NY: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2018). The synchronicity is observable in incidents like the market manipulation of GameStop's share price in 2021, see Chris Fox and Fahima Abdulrahman, 'Stocks Explained: What's Going on with GameStop?', *BBC News*, 29 January 2021.
  101. Frederick Anscombe, *State, Faith, and Nation in Ottoman and Post-Ottoman Lands* (New York, NY: Cambridge University Press, 2014).
  102. Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (New York, NY: Verso, 2006).
  103. Gary King, Jennifer Pan and Margaret E Roberts, 'How the Chinese Government Fabricates Social Media Posts for Strategic Distraction, Not Engaged Argument', *American Political Science Review* (Vol. 111, No. 3, 2017), pp. 484–501.
  104. Nick Reynolds, 'Performing Information Manoeuvre Through Persistent Engagement', *RUSI Occasional Papers* (June 2020), pp. 7–9.
  105. Rawan Shaif and Jack Watling, 'How the UAE's Chinese-Made Drone is Changing the War in Yemen', *Foreign Policy*, 27 April 2018.
  106. Elliot Higgins, *We Are Bellingcat: An Intelligence Agency for the People* (London: Bloomsbury, 2021).

The diversification of transnational communities able to affect the operating environment is accompanied by economic globalisation. Expanding populations are intensifying dependence upon international supply chains.<sup>107</sup> Precisely because critical economic infrastructure and resources are located in multiple countries it follows that a state cannot exercise control over all of its dependencies.<sup>108</sup> Even states such as Russia that have worked hard to ensure domestic control of defence-related materials has had military production disrupted by its aggression towards Ukraine,<sup>109</sup> while the Kremlin tries and fails to encourage wealthy Russians to repatriate their money. Supranational entities can stabilise variables for states where the states involved agree to pool their sovereignty, as with members of OPEC.<sup>110</sup> More often, however, the transnational coordination of these activities will be vested in corporations. In some cases, these may be state-owned enterprises,<sup>111</sup> but even then, they will have interests that are difficult to reconcile with the state's and will be subject to laws and influence from the multiple states and entities with which they must cooperate.<sup>112</sup> Given the level of interdependence in these relationships, governments must increasingly evaluate and account for corporate interests if they wish their policies to be effective. States supporting corporate interests is not new,<sup>113</sup> but today states have a diminishing ability to control corporations.<sup>114</sup> A good example of these dynamics are provided by the seizure of a British-flagged tanker by Iran in the Strait of Hormuz in July 2019. Although the UK clearly had a range of security interests at stake amid escalating tensions with Iran, its most acute concern was that there would be a move by vessels to abandon the British flag and as a result the response was managed by the Department for Transport rather than

107. Jonathan Perraton et al., 'The Globalisation of Economic Activity', *New Political Economy* (Vol. 2, No. 2, 1997), pp. 257–77.
108. Kate Macdonald, *The Politics of Global Supply Chains* (Cambridge: Polity, 2014).
109. *Ukrainskii Vybor [Ukrainian Choice]*, 'Poteri Ukrayny ot razryva kontraktov s RF v kosmicheskoy i voyennyykh otrasylyakh sostavyat 2 mlrd grn' ['Ukrainian Losses from Broken Contracts with the Russian Federation in the Space and Aerospace Sector Amount to 2 Billion GRN'], 9 February 2016, <[http://vybor.ua/news/poteri\\_ukrainy\\_ot Razryva\\_kontraktov\\_s\\_rf\\_v\\_kosmicheskoy\\_i\\_voennyyh\\_otraslyah\\_sostavyat\\_2\\_mlrd\\_grn.html](http://vybor.ua/news/poteri_ukrainy_ot Razryva_kontraktov_s_rf_v_kosmicheskoy_i_voennyyh_otraslyah_sostavyat_2_mlrd_grn.html)>, accessed 8 April 2020.
110. James Griffin, 'OPEC Behaviour: A Test of Alternative Hypotheses', *American Economic Review* (Vol. 75, No. 5, 1985), pp. 954–63.
111. Pavel Augustynowicz, 'State-Owned Enterprises in Russia – The Origin, Importance and Principles of Operation', in Eva Voszka and G D Kiss (eds), *Crisis Management and the Changing Role of the State* (Szeged, Hungary: University of Szeged, 2014), pp. 133–45, <[http://acta.bibl.u-szeged.hu/57521/1/crisis\\_management\\_131-145.pdf](http://acta.bibl.u-szeged.hu/57521/1/crisis_management_131-145.pdf)>, accessed 22 February 2021.
112. For instance, the disputes between the UK and the EU over AstraZeneca's provision of Covid-19 vaccines. See Katya Adler, 'Covid Vaccines: EU Tussle with UK over AstraZeneca Escalates', *BBC News*, 22 March 2021.
113. The Honourable East India Company is a prime example, see William Dalrymple, *The Anarchy: The Relentless Rise of the East India Company* (London: Bloomsbury, 2019).
114. Robert Gilpin, *US Power and the Multinational Corporation: The Political Economy of Foreign Direct Investment* (New York, NY: Basic Books, 1975); Oliver Bullough, *Moneyland: Why Thieves and Crooks Now Rule the World and How to Take it Back* (London: Profile Books, 2018).

the Ministry of Defence.<sup>115</sup> In this instance, the need to protect shipping in one location caused serious disruption to the Royal Navy's posture and readiness. It is clear how vulnerable the UK could have been to a coordinated campaign covertly targeting British-flagged ships across a wider area. It would have rapidly outstripped the prevention capacity of conventional forces. This example is illustrative, therefore, of how special forces might be employed for raiding in the future and their role in deterring such activities. Indeed, when conflict erupted in Ukraine in 2014 it is worth noting that Russian special forces conducted attacks against Ukrainian interests internationally,<sup>116</sup> and sought to deter external actors from working with Ukraine.<sup>117</sup>

Politically there is a trend simultaneously towards internationalisation, localisation and disaggregation,<sup>118</sup> ironically driven by the same factors that have led economic and social structures to become transnational.<sup>119</sup> In the first instance, increasing population size and density has added complexity to localised administration and therefore created more layers between national and municipal governments.<sup>120</sup> This has led to the expansion of mayoral authority governing growing cities, devolved power to provincial administration, and an increased articulation of local political ambitions.<sup>121</sup> Indeed there is a plethora of territories seeking autonomous or semi-autonomous governance from Kurdistan to Scotland. These are not entirely new phenomena; they hark back to the early modern era in Europe. But it does suggest an end to the state-centric dynamics that dominated the late 19<sup>th</sup> and most of the 20<sup>th</sup> centuries.<sup>122</sup> Sean McFate described this emerging political environment as 'neo-medievalism'.<sup>123</sup> States remain hugely powerful, but they are also increasingly the most powerful individual power within a constellation of political and social authorities, rather than holding a monopoly.

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- 115. Jack Watling, 'By Parity and Presence: Deterring Russia with Conventional Land Forces', *RUSI Occasional Papers* (July 2020), pp. 51–52.
  - 116. Czech Republic Police, 'Žádost o pomoc při pátrání po 2 osobách' ['Request for Assistance in Searching for 2 People'], 17 April 2021, <<https://www.policie.cz/clanek/zadost-o-pomoc-pri-patrani-po-2-osobach.aspx>>, accessed 18 April 2021.
  - 117. *Bellingcat*, 'The Dreadful Eight: GRU's Unit 29155 and the 2015 Poisoning of Emilian Gebrev', 23 November 2019.
  - 118. Liesbet Hooge and Gary Marks, 'Unraveling the Central State, But How? Types of Multi-Level Governance', *American Political Science Review* (Vol. 97, No. 2, 2003), pp. 233–43.
  - 119. The Accidental Guerrilla phenomenon, both a reaction against and embrace of globalisation, as posited by David Kilcullen, was not only pertinent in the context of insurgencies. See David Kilcullen, *The Accidental Guerrilla: Fighting Small Wars in the Midst of a Big One* (New York, NY: Hurst, 2011).
  - 120. Stuart Corbridge et al., *Seeing the State: Governance and Governmentality in India* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005).
  - 121. Simon Curtis (ed.), *The Power of Cities in International Relations* (New York, NY and Abingdon: Routledge, 2016).
  - 122. This is both from expanding supranational structures, see Anthony Clark Arend, *Legal Rules and International Society* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), and from sub-national structures.
  - 123. Sean McFate, 'Durable Disorder: The Return of Private Armies and the Emergence of Neomedievalism', PhD thesis, London School of Economics and Political Science, 2011.

These trends manifest very differently in strong as opposed to weak states, and these differences are in many ways most distinct within the context of security. For states with stable governments there is likely to be a growing trend of military privatisation both in providing security to multinational corporations and in contracted support to national military operations.<sup>124</sup> In some countries, such as the UAE<sup>125</sup> and Russia,<sup>126</sup> this has seen private military contractors engage in direct military functions abroad.<sup>127</sup> China's extensive use of private security to protect its Belt and Road Initiative and other economic projects is also instructive.<sup>128</sup> In the UK, the provision of maritime security is a good example of private military forces protecting vital economic arteries.<sup>129</sup> There is also likely to be a growing presence of private companies in the provision of intelligence and analytical support to policing,<sup>130</sup> and since the same companies are often involved in military activity, there is a grey area between fighting and law enforcement.<sup>131</sup> This latter point is further enhanced by the aforementioned expansion of military-style counterterrorism units in regional police forces.

In weaker states – where a government is less able to guarantee the security of citizens – the proliferation of localised power structures is being shown in the multiplication of violent non-state actors.<sup>132</sup> From localised militias to organised crime, terrorist organisations and armed political movements, there is a decreasing hold on the state's monopoly over violence. Even where armed force is concentrated in organisations affiliated with the state, the wielding of state

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124. Peter Singer, *Corporate Warriors: The Rise of the Privatised Military Industry* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2007); Sean McFate, *The Modern Mercenary: Private Armies and What They Mean for World Order* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017).
  125. Aram Roston, 'A Middle East Monarchy Hired American Ex-Soldiers to Kill its Political Enemies. This Could Be the Future of War', *Buzzfeed News*, 16 October 2018.
  126. Neil Hauer, 'Russia's Favorite Mercenaries', *The Atlantic*, 27 August 2018.
  127. Thomas Gibbons-Neff, 'How a 4-Hour Battle Between Russian Mercenaries and U.S. Commandos Unfolded in Syria', *New York Times*, 24 March 2018.
  128. Paul Nantulya, 'Chinese Security Contractors in Africa', Carnegie-Tsinghua Center for Global Policy, 8 October 2020, <<https://carnegietsinghua.org/2020/10/08/chinese-security-contractors-in-africa-pub-82916>>, accessed 22 February 2021.
  129. Since global shipping insurance is centred in London, and piracy has led to a requirement for armed guards on shipping in order to keep premiums at an acceptable level, British policy has created a boom in private maritime security, see House of Commons, Foreign Affairs Select Committee, 'Piracy off the Coast of Somalia', <<https://publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm201012/cmselect/cmfaff/1318/131807.htm>>, accessed 2 May 2021.
  130. Damien Van Puyvelde, *Outsourcing US Intelligence: Contractors and Government Accountability* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2021).
  131. Alexander Babuta and Marion Oswald, 'Data Analytics and Algorithms in Policing in England and Wales: Towards A New Policy Framework', *RUSI Occasional Papers* (February 2020).
  132. Peter Maurer, 'No Neat Battlefields', The Western Way of War, podcast, series 2, episode 46, 15 April 2021, <<https://rusi.org/multimedia/no-neat-battlefields>>, accessed 14 May 2021.

badges by private armies is a real threat.<sup>133</sup> These trends are further exacerbated by the steady proliferation of sophisticated weaponry<sup>134</sup> and the fact that across South America, Africa and the Middle East, states are facing challenges that their governments are unable to resolve. These include climate change,<sup>135</sup> the effects of which encourage competition between communities.

The implications of these dynamics on conflict are complex. During the War on Terror it became widespread for states to violate one another's territory on the basis that a nation was 'unwilling or unable' to rein in non-state actors operating from their soil.<sup>136</sup> In some cases such arrangements have become enshrined in agreements between states, as among the G5 in the Sahel.<sup>137</sup> Whatever the merits of this legal doctrine, it has become increasingly prevalent in practice. Yet as states become less able to control the groups that operate within their territory and security interests become increasingly international, the drivers for cross-border violence expand. Similarly, as information flows globally, so do threats such as terrorism, suddenly creating a transnational virus that is beyond the reach of national law enforcement. The result is that states have a growing range of reasons to intervene on one another's soil without necessarily being in conflict with the host government or with many of the local armed actors that share the operating environment.

These dynamics have a number of effects on special forces. First, operations against specific actors on another state's territory may be carried out with or without that state's knowledge. The latter requires such operations to be pursued in a covert posture, putting them firmly within the responsibilities of special forces. Furthermore, the skills required to maintain a covert posture are becoming more specialised in an operating environment where a majority of the population has the means to capture and broadcast events around them in real time and may find the presence of strangers in their community – especially if violence has recently broken out in the area – noteworthy and worth sharing.<sup>138</sup> Even without the requirement for covert activity, however, the need for discretion and the discerning use of force is paramount. In an environment inhabited by multiple security actors it is often critical to a mission's success that the target is appropriately selected and identified and that there are no collateral casualties

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133. Michael Knights, Hamdi Malik and Aymenn Jawad al-Tamimi, *Honored, Not Contained: The Future of Iraq's Popular Mobilisation Forces* (Washington, DC: WINEP, 2020).

134. Sarah Chankin-Gould and Matt Schroeder, 'Man-Portable Air Defense System (MANPADS) Proliferation', Federation of American Scientists, January 2004, <<https://fas.org/programs/ssp/asmp/MANPADS.html>>, accessed 9 September 2020.

135. Jahara Matisek et al., 'Where Climate Change and Violent Non-State Actors Collide: Conflict and Security Force Assistance in the Sahel', *Modern War Institute*, 23 April 2019.

136. Olivier Corten, 'The "Unwilling or Unable" Test: Has it Been, and Could it Be, Accepted?', *Leiden Journal of International Law* (Vol. 29, No. 3, 2016), pp. 777–99.

137. Mixed Migration Centre, "Navigating Borderlands in the Sahel: Border Security Governance and Mixed Migration in Liptako-Gourma", NMC Research Report, November 2019, <[https://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/083\\_navigating\\_borderlands.pdf](https://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/083_navigating_borderlands.pdf)>, accessed 2 May 2021.

138. Anna Reading, 'Mobile Witnessing: Ethics and the Camera Phone in the "War on Terror"', *Globalization* (Vol. 6, No. 1, 2009), pp. 61–76.

from other security actors in the environment who might mount a backlash against the force.<sup>139</sup> This creates a need for unobserved strategic reconnaissance to understand the human terrain within which an operation might be mounted and requires a considerable level of fire discipline noting that the complexity and scale of opposition is likely to multiply as more local actors are drawn into a conflict. For example, raiding against corporate entities can be envisaged across a wide geographic area tied to a state, which necessitates operations in areas where local security forces are not the target. Conventional forces would likely end up fighting multiple actors in traversing such terrain. Special forces, by contrast, might operate either covertly or co-opt one local actor to help fight another.

The future operating environment therefore is likely to see a greater emphasis on a blended set of missions between partnered operations and fomenting rebellion and insurgency. The blending of these missions reflects the fact that a state-centric dynamic where national forces occupy ground and external actors try and provoke the population to attack the occupiers fails to consider the range of security actors that may be present. Moreover, many of the security actors in a territory disproportionately influenced by a state are likely to straddle national borders. The traditional dichotomy between state and non-state actors also fails to properly account for the diversity of quasi-state actors that operate in weaker states. In an operating environment where a large footprint risks causing friction with diverse armed groups (most of which are not enemies of a foreign power, but who will potentially fight intruders), the ability to enable local forces through training and the provision of capabilities beyond their usual capacity is likely a more palatable means of operating than large conventional deployments. There will need to be conventional contributions to such operations, not least to avoid special forces units being overcommitted. Mechanisms for special forces will need to be introduced therefore to conduct strategic reconnaissance and establish relationships that can then be handed over to conventional training forces or contractors to free up special forces capacity. But providing the situational awareness and force protection to enable these conventional deployments will fall heavily on special forces in the first instance, especially in a context of renewed great power competition.

## Great Power Competition

There is a tendency by some to view the emerging global political environment as a ‘new Cold War’.<sup>140</sup> It is clear that there has been a transition in the grammar of global politics over the past decade that raises some considerations familiar to ‘Cold Warriors’. Nevertheless, this harking back to the 20<sup>th</sup> century conceals more than it reveals, for the contemporary operating environment is also quite different. The first important difference is that during the Cold War the Soviet Union was ideologically committed to promoting revolution internationally. While the extent of active Soviet support for specific revolutionary movements waxed and waned, the ideology that was promoted fostered revolution. The trajectory of a major war could also be charted to the metre in Europe, with NATO war plans explicitly aimed at defending key points

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139. Kilcullen, *The Accidental Guerrilla*.

140. Robert Kaplan, ‘A New Cold War Has Begun’, *Foreign Policy*, 7 January 2019.

and the Soviet Union's drawn up to overrun Western Europe.<sup>141</sup> The bipolarity of the Cold War is often over-emphasised,<sup>142</sup> but the fact that it emanated from an ideological struggle shaped the displacement activity that drew in more powers.

The new era of competition is different. The three power centres of the US, Russia and China create a situation in which escalation to large-scale warfighting between any two powers must ultimately advantage the third.<sup>143</sup> Perhaps more importantly, while the points of friction in the Arctic and South China Sea are clear, they are also limited.<sup>144</sup> There is no global ideological vision among any of the parties. That does not mean that local conflict will not lead to general conflict.<sup>145</sup> The First World War should provide a clear reminder of how the local can rapidly become global.<sup>146</sup> Nevertheless, it is clear that the powers will endeavour to geographically isolate flashpoints, as reflected in the Chinese concept of fighting 'local wars under informatised conditions',<sup>147</sup> in Russia's pursuit of broadening its escalation options to expand its activities prior to crossing nuclear thresholds,<sup>148</sup> and in the US by an emphasis on calibrated force posture and penetration of stand-off, which is explicitly aimed at enabling theatre access to contest identified and localised areas of conflict.<sup>149</sup> In the absence of a clear ideological and systemic confrontation, much of the competition between these powers is likely to play out around the world in a struggle for influence, and in the supply chains and extraterritorial interests that provide leverage. Furthermore, if the Cold War saw countries flip between 'capitalist' and

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141. The CIA assessed in 1985 that Soviet war plans anticipated achieving 1,200 km of penetration across a 700-km frontage within 20–30 days of a general war, and that this was premised on an overestimation of NATO forces in the European theatre of operations. See CIA, 'Soviet Strategy and Capabilities for Multitheater War', National Intelligence Estimate, June 1985, p. 10.
142. China had a critical shaping role in the conflict. See Rana Mitter, 'China and the Cold War', in Richard Immerman and Petra Goedde (eds), *The Oxford Handbook of the Cold War* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), pp. 124–40.
143. Although the Sino-Russian conflict was a dynamic competition in the Cold War, China was not sufficiently powerful and had too little international reach to play a comparable role to the one it performs today. See Paul Stronski and Nicole Ng, 'Cooperation and Competition: Russia and China in Central Asia, the Russian Far East, and the Arctic', Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 28 February 2018.
144. Krista E Weigand, 'China's Strategy in the Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands Dispute: Issue Linkage and Coercive Diplomacy', *Asian Security* (Vol. 5, No. 2, May 2009), pp. 170–93.
145. Ryan Crocker, 'No More Walking Away, No More Policy Vacuums', The Western Way of War, podcast, season 2, episode 36, 4 February 2021, <<https://rusi.org/multimedia/no-more-walking-away-no-more-policy-vacuums>>, accessed 23 February 2021.
146. Dominic Lieven, *Towards the Flame: Empire, War and the End of Tsarist Russia* (London: Allen Lane, 2015).
147. M Taylor Fravel, *Active Defence: China's Military Strategy Since 1949* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2019).
148. Michael Kofman, Anya Fink and Jeffrey Edmonds, 'Russian Strategy for Escalation Management: Evolution of Key Concepts', CNA, April 2020.
149. US Army, 'The US Army in Multi-Domain Operations 2028', TRADOC Pamphlet 525-3-1, 6 December 2018.

'communist' orbits, the present competition is liable to see activities by competitors continue in countries side by side. There is a growing use of military and security means to gain and cement economic and political ties, as well as a strong incentive for these parties to fix and disrupt the activities of competitors.

These competitive dynamics create a number of tasks and challenges for special forces. If it is accepted that the diffusion of military actors and national infrastructure will see competition demand that militaries enter theatres with a small footprint, and that special forces will be critical for building access for conventional units, then disrupting special forces activity becomes a means of curtailing a competitor's influence. The US has adopted a new policy of explicitly sanctioning and indicting adversary personnel who operate against Washington's interests.<sup>150</sup> Initially limited to cyber criminals, this activity has expanded to organisations such as the IRGC Quds Force and those that work with it.<sup>151</sup> European powers – including Britain – have subsequently started to explicitly call out and expose Russian covert operations.<sup>152</sup> United States Africa Command has similarly called out Russian actors entering Libya.<sup>153</sup> These actions represent a change in policy and approach. They reflect a campaign by competitors to expose and constrain attempts to exert influence in third countries.

The implications of exposure go far beyond reputation. Because modern communications provide time- and location-stamped data, fuelling interest in the presence of an external power in an operating environment enables targeting by hostile special forces or by other actors in the security environment. Iraq provides an instructive example. The persistent attention drawn to locations where US and UK forces are based – and the locals that work with them<sup>154</sup> – has enabled a prolonged campaign of attacks carried out by local groups.<sup>155</sup> Although these attacks have not killed many US and UK personnel, they have imposed force protection constraints that

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150. John Carlin, *Dawn of the Code War: America's Battle Against Russia, China, and the Rising Global Cyber Threat* (New York, NY: Public Affairs, 2019).

151. Colin Clarke and Ariane Tabatabai, 'The U.S. Designated the Revolutionary Guards as a Terrorist Group. What Happens Next?', *RAND Blog*, 11 April 2019.

152. Western states have begun to publicly highlight Russian covert activity as a means of disrupting it. See, for example, Jon Henley, 'Visual Guide: How Dutch Intelligence Thwarted a Russian Hacking Operation', *The Guardian*, 4 October 2018.

153. US Africa Command, 'New Evidence of Russian Aircraft Active in Libyan Airspace,' 18 June 2020, <<https://www.africom.mil/pressrelease/32941/new-evidence-of-russian-aircraft-active-in-li>>, accessed 22 February 2021.

154. Larisa Brown, 'Iraqi Interpreters Ask Britain for Sanctuary After Death Threats', *The Times*, 26 February 2021.

155. Dana Taib Menmy, "'Wake Up Call': Deadly Iraq Rocket Attack Puts Pressure on US', *Al Jazeera*, 17 February 2021; *Reuters*, 'Explosives-Laden Drone Targets U.S. Forces at Iraq's Erbil Airport', 15 April 2021; *Reuters*, 'Rockets Fall Near Iraqi Base Hosting U.S. Contractors', 4 April 2021; *The Guardian*, 'Rocket Attack on Iraqi Airbase Where US Defense Company Operates', 20 February 2021; Stephen Losey, 'Rockets Fired at Balad Air Base in Iraq', *Military.com*, 15 March 2021.

have inhibited coalition forces from functioning in the operating environment while expanding the freedom of manoeuvre for Iranian actors.

During the War on Terror, special forces have become accustomed to what might be described as operating with a discrete posture: that is, as overt military forces but trying to keep a low profile. By operating from isolated bases this has allowed for high-tempo raids across geographic areas of concern.<sup>156</sup> This posture is likely to be increasingly difficult to maintain. Either it will become necessary to put sufficient force protection and joint assets in place to defend these operating bases – requiring a large conventional deployment – or it will be necessary for special forces to adopt a covert profile, embedded with local groups. For local groups to provide the appropriate cover also requires sustained and deep relationships of trust that call for longer-term bets on partners rather than short and transactional deployments. At a time when hostile state and non-state actors have ready access to long-range precision strike capabilities the dispersion of troops to poorly protected bases is a recipe for casualties.<sup>157</sup> Incidents such as that in the Euphrates Valley in 2018, where US forces decisively engaged a large number of Russian mercenaries, demonstrate the risk that isolated forces can come under attack from hostile great power competitors.<sup>158</sup> There is also a risk that Western states learn the wrong lessons from the Euphrates Valley incident because in that instance special forces were supported by overwhelming air support assigned to Operation *Inherent Resolve*, but this is unlikely to be available in other arenas of competition. This is especially true in skies where there is a greater threat to aircraft, which would include areas of direct rather than indirect competition where great powers have significant interests, such as in the High North or South China Sea.

## Fighting Through the Sensors

As already stated, great power competition is likely to see a struggle for influence across a wide geographic area. It also encompasses deterrence and potential flashpoints over concentrated areas where great power interests collide. Here there is a risk of conflict in which, similar to the recent fighting in Nagorno-Karabakh in 2020,<sup>159</sup> clashes between Indian and Chinese troops in the Ladakh,<sup>160</sup> or the Falklands War in 1982, warring parties will strive to localise fighting for fear of runaway escalation. The challenge confronted by conventional forces in such localised conflicts is increasingly the assurance of theatre access. The density of high-fidelity sensors and the increasing range of and seeker performance of missiles is driving back ships, aircraft

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156. Nick Turse, ‘Pentagon’s Own Map of U.S. Bases in Africa Contradicts Its Claim of “Light” Footprint’, *The Intercept*, 27 February 2020.

157. Ian Williams and Shaan Shaikh, ‘The Missile War in Yemen’, Center for Strategic and International Studies, June 2020.

158. Gibbons-Neff, ‘How a 4-Hour Battle Between Russian Mercenaries and U.S. Commandos Unfolded in Syria’.

159. Author video interview with Azerbaijan’s President Ilham Aliyev, 13 April 2021.

160. *The Economist*, ‘A Border Dispute Between India and China Is Getting More Serious’, 30 May 2020.

and echelons. Variously problematised as anti-access area denial,<sup>161</sup> or layered stand-off,<sup>162</sup> this challenge is now central to warfighting concepts for militaries. US multi-domain operations, for example, calls for forces to penetrate and thence disintegrate layered stand-off to allow close combat forces to reach their objectives. Within this framework, special forces are seen as critical to finding the components of anti-access systems and either destroying them or fixing them for attack from joint assets. Russian warfighting concepts also place a heavy emphasis on special reconnaissance actions with special forces penetrating far behind the enemy to disrupt their assembly and projection.<sup>163</sup>

Assumptions about the ability of special forces to conduct this task, however, are worth scrutinising. For special forces, the problem is worse than for conventional units. Conventional units are primarily concerned about enemy sensors acquiring track quality data against them, enabling targeting. Special forces, by contrast, who rely on surprise for their effects or hope to conduct strategic reconnaissance, must avoid detection altogether. Against a peer adversary, the aircraft that conduct parachute insertions have large radar cross-sections and are no longer viable, save in the most permissive of environments.<sup>164</sup> The technique may still have value in rapidly approaching non-state actors in remote regions, but is not a sound proposition in warfighting. Helicopters have historically provided a means of evading detection by working their way into enemy airspace at low altitude.<sup>165</sup> The increasing proliferation of airborne active electronically scanned array radar, however, means that helicopters will struggle to remain undetected. There are limited radar shadows from overhead observation, helicopter radar cross-sections will remain quite distinct,<sup>166</sup> and radar that are able to adjust their focus and intensity are well suited to picking up and tracking objects from clutter. In areas like the High North, for example, small numbers of Mig-31BM or A-50s can monitor a vast area.<sup>167</sup> Long-range vehicle insertion is not viable in densely populated terrain because it would be observed and is favoured in remote open country. Here, however, it becomes vulnerable to detection

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161. Michael Jonsson and Robert Dalsjö, ‘Beyond Bursting Bubbles – Understanding the Full Spectrum of the Russian A2/AD Threat and Identifying Strategies for Counteraction’, FOI, 2020.
  162. US Army, ‘The US Army in Multi-Domain Operations 2028’.
  163. US Department of the Navy, ‘Spetsnaz’, FMFRP 3-201, 18 January 1991, <<https://ia800705.us.archive.org/22/items/MMManuals/UsMarinesSpetsnazRussianSpecialForces1991.pdf>>, accessed 17 April 2021; Sutyagin with Bronk, *Russia’s New Ground Forces*, pp. 54–58.
  164. Justin Bronk, ‘Modern Russia and Chinese Integrated Air Defence Systems: The Nature of the Threat, Growth Trajectory, and Western Options’, *RUSI Occasional Papers* (January 2020).
  165. Jack Watling and Justin Bronk, ‘Maximising the Utility of the British Army’s Combat Aviation’, *RUSI Occasional Papers* (April 2021).
  166. US General Accounting Office, ‘Operation Provide Comfort: Review of U.S. Air Force Investigation of Black Hawk Fratricide Incident’, GAO/OSI-98-4, November 1997, <<https://www.gao.gov/assets/160/156037.pdf>>, accessed 9 September 2020.
  167. Yefim Gordon and Dmitriy Komissarov, *Russian Tactical Aviation Since 2001* (Manchester: Hikoki Publications, 2017), pp. 128–30.

from Ground Moving Target Indication (GMTI) radar,<sup>168</sup> which is similarly proliferating and able to sweep a large area. Submarine-based insertion is much less susceptible to detection, but is clearly restricted to littoral environments, while the restrictions on equipment that can be deployed via these means must limit the range of troops once inserted.

The challenge becomes more problematic against military targets from the mixture of automated security and stand-off sensors that are now part of military formations. Electronic warfare (EW) systems are not new, but they are proliferating.<sup>169</sup> The first issue is that EW systems today can capture a range of communications emissions. There is also the ability to detect the functioning of unshielded electronic devices carried by personnel, such as watches, at considerable distances. Communications transmissions can be very brief and hard to pinpoint. But once a system has noticed that emissions are emanating on an unusual frequency or from where they do not routinely, then the area can be subjected to more sensitive and precise monitoring, or an adversary can begin to jam certain frequencies within a defined area.<sup>170</sup> Jamming may deny communications. But limited jamming can have more useful effects, either forcing the emitting source to increase its power level and thereby increase the signature, making detection easier, or forcing the emitter to move to another part of the electromagnetic spectrum (EMS). Narrowing the bands within which communications can take place similarly narrows the focus for monitoring and can help to flush out military signals from civilian noise in an electromagnetic environment.

Once an anomalous signal is detected, stand-off sensors have the advantage that they can make the assignment of patrols and other stand-in assets much more efficient. This could be done using GMTI radar to detect movement, even in quite dense terrain, over limited distances. The next layer would be electro-optical sensors mounted on masts or UAVs that could use thermal imaging to scan for personnel within a defined area. These technologies do not overcome the need to interdict an identified target with personnel, but they mean that a small number of personnel can monitor a large area and only go to the lengths of patrolling if they detect an anomaly. These systems also reduce the human oversights that have often allowed special forces to exploit lazy or neglectful monitoring of surveillance systems. For example, in a sub-zero environment a sentry is more likely to respond to an indication of movement against a stretch of fencing by dismissing it as an animal and checking it in the morning if it means they have to physically walk to the point as opposed to launching a small quadcopter to examine it. Rather than having to go out into the cold to either find a false alarm or else run into armed enemies, the sentry can break the monotony of guard duty by flying a UAV, and if it does turn out to detect an intrusion can then confront it while prepared and having called for assistance.

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168. John A Richards, 'GMTI Radar Minimum Detectable Velocity', Sandia Report, April 2011, <<https://core.ac.uk/download/pdf/193260166.pdf>>, accessed 22 February 2021.

169. Bryan Clark, Whitney McNamara and Timothy Walton, *Winning the Invisible War: Gaining an Enduring U.S. Advantage in the Electromagnetic Spectrum* (Washington, DC: Center for Strategic and Budgetary Assessments, 2019).

170. Dave Hewitt, 'Electronic Warfare and Cumulative Risk', The Western Way of War, podcast, series 2, episode 29, 17 December 2020, <<https://rusi.org/multimedia/electronic-warfare-and-cumulative-risk>>, accessed 23 February 2021.

The proliferation of EW equipment, UAVs, and thermal and infrared optics – even among non-state forces<sup>171</sup> – poses a particular challenge for Western special forces because of the experiences of the War on Terror. For the past 30 years, Western special forces have ‘owned the night’ and made use of an expanding range of tactical communications systems, electronic accessories and high signature supporting assets such as gunships and UAVs. These systems will continue to be prominently employed on operations in permissive environments because the advantages they offer are considerable. However, it also means that operational experience, even down to basic personal administration, in permissive environments is not only a poor preparation for facing a state adversary but ingrains bad habits. There are techniques to reduce the risk of exposure to the sensors outlined over the preceding paragraphs. The mission is not impossible. But to perform these roles effectively requires precision and discipline. It must be practised, and insertion in this context is also entirely distinct from techniques in permissive environments. For the US, mass has allowed a significant proportion of Special Operations Command to shift to address the challenge posed by hostile state actors. For other NATO members, however, special forces are already widely committed. Policymakers must therefore consider carefully whether they are giving their special forces units sufficient leeway to prepare for the missions that will be demanded of them in the most dangerous of contingencies.

The difficulty of infiltrating hostile territory against the full array of modern sensors suggests that accessing the area pre-conflict in a covert posture offers considerable advantages. Here too, however, the density of sensors is changing how such operations must be carried out. Today’s major airports have three independent points to check that a person’s identity corresponds with their documentation and that neither has changed during their travel through the process. Monitoring of groups through networked cameras will extend across most of the transportation links connecting a modern airport to the cities it services. Areas of the airport will be monitored by behavioural specialists, looking for suspicious activity.<sup>172</sup> The time taken for a person to traverse key points will be detected by logging the unique pattern of radiation emitting from their body and shaped by the items they wear or carry in their pockets. Unique identifiers are also taken by tracking mobile phones and other electronic devices, while these devices can be penetrated by a range of stand-off systems if they connect to networks controlled by third parties. In countries with strong privacy legislation much of this data is anonymised at capture as the intent is to gather aggregated data on footfall and time spent exposed to advertising or in shops.<sup>173</sup> Security records will similarly be held for a limited period, although they do enable rapid and detailed analysis of who a person of interest interacts with. In states with less robust privacy

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171. Including the Houthis and the Taliban. See CalibreObscura, <<https://twitter.com/CalibreObscura/status/1363496394917617665>>, accessed 23 February 2021.

172. C A Lansley et al., ‘Observe, Target, Engage, Respond (OTER): High-Stake Behaviour Analysis Using an Integrated, Scientific Approach Within an Airport Context’, White Paper Series, EIA/SRI/OTP, Emotional Intelligence Academy, April 2017, <<https://e-space.mmu.ac.uk/620124/1/EIA-CNAB-SRI-iALERT-White-Paper-restricted-Apr2017.pdf>>, accessed 2 May 2021.

173. Paul Freathy and Frank O’Connell, ‘Spending Time, Spending Money: Passenger Segmentation in an International Airport’, *International Review of Retail, Distribution and Consumer Research* (Vol. 22, No. 4, 2012), pp. 297–416.

legislation, much of this information – especially against groups deemed to be associated with countries or identities of interest – can be stored and cross-examined with other archived records. This, in combination with intelligence generated through active means against an adversary force, can provide an archive of unique identifiers that allow the personnel of an adversary military to be rapidly identified and monitored. Airports are a particularly intrusive surveillance environment, but much of the technology is proliferating into wider use.<sup>174</sup> Special forces – who inevitably fall within narrow identity groups – will often find that though there may be a large number of people in a space, that does not mean that there is a large amount of noise within which they can hide. For many of the monitoring systems employed today special forces are no longer anonymous but unique data-sets that can be tracked over time. Again, this presents challenges for special forces that have historically been valued in part for their flexibility. As special forces are widely deployed around the globe to confront sub-peer opponents, they rarely practise the full gamut of mitigations against identity capture when operating in comparatively permissive environments. Yet this means that they may struggle to be reassigned to penetrate a non-permissive environment if a surge in capacity becomes necessary. Policymakers are therefore likely to need to choose whether they wish to hold back personnel from partnered operations or counterterrorism missions in order to preserve their admissibility into hostile environments.

## Personalised War

The use of passive and active sensors to identify special forces is much easier if an adversary knows their identity to begin with. In a context where social media creates a substantial archival footprint of people's lives, and in which cyber attacks will often provide lists of personnel and their posts within national bureaucracies,<sup>175</sup> it is increasingly easy to track these lists over time and build up indicators that can provide a limited target list of persons likely to have joined special forces units.<sup>176</sup> The sudden silence or dramatic change in tone of their social media activity, the strange lack of posts and official engagements combined with a steady rise in rank within militaries, all make trackable the individual members of special forces. Furthermore, the archive of images and data that now permeates the web and the ability to interrogate it at machine speeds means that it is becoming easier to track a suspicious individual picked up through surveillance to an identifiable person.

Assassination is not new to special forces units. It has long been a mission set that special forces have carried out, albeit usually under a euphemism. Russia's GRU continues to practise 'wet

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174. Ilya Arkhipov and Jane Rudnitsky, 'In Moscow, Big Brother Is Watching and Recognizing Protesters', *Bloomberg*, 2 May 2021; Chris Buckley and Paul Mozur, 'How China Uses High-Tech Surveillance to Subdue Minorities', *New York Times*, 22 May 2019.

175. Jason Chaffetz, Mark Meadows and Will Hurd, 'The OPM Data Breach: How the Government Jeopardized Our National Security for More than a Generation', Committee on Oversight and Government Reform, US House of Representatives, 114<sup>th</sup> Congress, 7 September 2016.

176. BBC News, 'Fitness App Strava Lights Up Staff at Military Bases', 29 January 2018; Dustin Volz, 'Russian Hackers Tracked Ukrainian Artillery Units Using Android Implant: Report', *Reuters*, 22 December 2016.

work' internationally.<sup>177</sup> Israel routinely resorts to assassination of its adversaries.<sup>178</sup> For the West, assassination has historically been carried out by covert and clandestine forces,<sup>179</sup> but this has arguably changed over the past 30 years. Counterterrorism – with its roots in law enforcement – has been about disrupting and therefore detaining or killing individuals identified by name. The blending of intelligence and special forces in the War on Terror has made targeted killing a central part of special forces activity.<sup>180</sup> The West may justify this by how it categorises targets, but it must be recognised that other countries categorise things differently and are likely to build on Western actions to justify expanding a mode of fighting that they are inclined to pursue in any case. This is especially true when the West has explicitly used counterterrorism as a justification for the targeted killing of enemy special forces commanders.<sup>181</sup>

If the logic is accepted that special forces will increasingly deploy in support of partners where adversaries are also competing for influence and that a combination of sensors and prior data about special forces organisations will leave competitors with a high volume of data about exactly who their counterparts are, the assassination of one another's personnel may become a dynamic in a range of operating environments. This is not inevitable, but it does appear to be a plausible trajectory and policymakers should consider whether it is desirable, and if not, how it may be avoided.

Assassination of special forces may be categorised differently from attacks on conventional forces because casualties among special forces can often go unreported and therefore offer a distinct layer of escalation before overt confrontation that many states may find convenient in messaging their interests. It is also worth highlighting that such killings may become hyper-personalised, targeting individuals within an opposing force as individuals rather than purely because of their membership of a group. As the level of data about individuals increases, it becomes possible to ask the question who should be engaged and whether engaging different members of a unit either sends different messages or has a different effect. In a context where targeting as a process can draw in data about individual soldiers and details about their personal lives and backgrounds, considerations such as their family commitments may be determined to have a disproportionate effect on the morale of their comrades. These kinds of judgements may arise as a deliberate policy, or simply because the availability of such information begs the question during the targeting process. However uncomfortable, such considerations should raise questions about how special forces are selected, how their data is managed, the relationship between their deployed and non-deployed identities, and if anonymity often proves impossible, how such personalised violence is factored into concepts of deterrence and escalation.

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177. *Bellingcat*, 'The Dreadful Eight'.

178. Bergman, *Rise and Kill First*.

179. For example, the assassination of Reinhardt Heydrich during Operation Anthropoid, Prague, in May 1942. See, TNA, HS 4/39, 'Operation Anthropoid'.

180. Namir Shabibi and Jack Watling, 'Britain's Covert War in Yemen: A VICE News Investigation', *VICE News*, 7 April 2016; Ewen MacAskill, 'Drone Killing of British Citizens in Syria Marks Major Departure for UK', *The Guardian*, 7 September 2015.

181. *BBC News*, 'Qasem Soleimani: US Kills Top Iranian General in Baghdad Air Strike', 3 January 2020.



# III. Optimising Special Forces for the Future Operating Environment

THE MISSIONS THAT special forces have historically undertaken, surveyed in Chapter I, highlight three consistent attributes that explain why these tasks are assigned to special forces rather than conventional troops: the ability to operate unsupported; the licence to operate in a covert or clandestine posture; and the assurance they offer with the highest possible tactical proficiency. The changes to the future operating environment outlined in Chapter II suggest that special forces will find an increasing demand to conduct partnered operations. At the same time, however, operating with partners will leave operators vulnerable to their identities being discovered by adversaries. Finally, the tools that offer the greatest flexibility and assurance in partnered operations – including insertion by aircraft and covering fires from the joint force accessed with flexible communications – are increasingly at odds with the capabilities required to successfully conduct strategic reconnaissance and raiding in the context of a major conflict. This chapter unpacks the implications of these challenges for how special forces units are organised, trained and fight. The key conclusions are that as it is becoming harder to shift from an overt to a covert posture, a more dedicated generation of a covert profile for a portion of the force is necessary. In the face of dense enemy sensors, troops specialised in strategic reconnaissance and raiding will increasingly need to fight unplugged. In partnered operations there is a need to reverse the present dynamic from special forces being enabled by the joint force to enabling conventional forces to work more closely with partners. Building and managing relationships in this context calls for forces to be deployed for long periods, which is difficult to balance against the nature of other special forces tasks.

## Casting Shadows

On 4 March 2018, Russia's GRU attempted to assassinate Sergei Skripal in Salisbury.<sup>182</sup> The plot did not work out as planned. It was quickly established by the British authorities that Skripal had been attacked using a nerve agent and he received appropriate medical attention. Even more problematically for the Russians, their agents were tracked as they used the British public transport system, revealing their identities and methods.<sup>183</sup> The identification of these GRU officers has led to ridicule at the supposed sloppiness of Russian tradecraft.<sup>184</sup> The Russians could certainly have done things more competently. That their identification papers used their real first names, patronymics and dates of birth allowed the perpetrators, along with a large

182. *Bellingcat*, 'Skripal Suspect Boshirov Identified as GRU Colonel Anatoliy Chepiga', 26 September 2018.

183. *Bellingcat*, 'Full Report: Skripal Poisoning Suspect Dr. Alexander Mishkin, Hero of Russia', 9 October 2018.

184. Andrew Osborn, 'Espionage Scandals Show Russian Army's Growing Clout', *Reuters*, 9 October 2018.

proportion of the unit they belonged to, to be identified. However, they are not the first to be identified in the wake of an attempted assassination. On 19 January 2010, Israel's Mossad had a significant proportion of its targeted killing unit identified after a hit in the UAE on Mahmoud al-Mabhouh, the chief of logistics and weapons procurement for Hamas.<sup>185</sup> Few would argue that the Mossad were incompetent in the art of assassination, although the repeated use of the same identification papers and their command and control process were rushed and did not stand up to scrutiny. These two incidents are indicative of the difficulties of conducting covert action today. Traditionally, covert operatives have sought to remain in the shadows, avoiding observation through a bland and forgettable demeanour, but in a world of pervasive sensors, where every individual in frame can be examined and tracked, there are few places left to hide. Instead, covert operatives must cast their own shadows. They must operate in a posture that tells a compelling and acceptable story so that those who take an interest do not hold it for long.

This requirement for active cover is not new for the intelligence services but it poses a distinct set of problems for military covert operatives. Historically, militaries have generated covert operators from the pool of special forces personnel. This has the advantage of ensuring that covert operatives are experienced and tested soldiers who have been observed under pressure. However, it also means that they conform to a narrow set of physical profiles owing to the layers of selection they have gone through, some of which have not been optimised to deliver covert operatives. For instance, a long-range patrol – critical to the strategic reconnaissance task – requires immense physical endurance. This is one reason why special forces selection tends to involve gruelling and extensive marches over difficult terrain. However, the result is a pool of talent for covert operations that almost exclusively comprises men in their 30s and 40s who appear to be lean, muscular and above average height. Unfortunately, there are a relatively limited number of legends that can explain a group of four to six men exhibiting these physical characteristics travelling together. Their service prior to joining special forces and eventually covert units also tends to lead to ingrained behaviours and mannerisms that are unfortunately quite distinctive, and even more so when observed in a group. To give one simple example of how diversity can expand options for active cover, consider the available legends for two or three male/female couples. And yet the standards required for entry to special forces units will ensure a very limited pool of female operators. This is for the simple reason that even assuming equal opportunity, there are proportionately fewer women who are tall enough and have sufficient muscle mass to pass selection. It would not be sensible to alter the requirements for troops expected to conduct long-range patrolling. The ability to haul oneself through bog, for example, is likely to be essential for these troops. But, as the proportion of body-mass that is submerged increases so does the difficulty of movement. Thus, this will discriminate against shorter candidates and therefore reduce the pool of females who can meet the standard. This is not to claim that females cannot meet the standard,<sup>186</sup> but that there are fewer candidates who will pass. Selecting covert operatives as a sub-set of personnel selected for long-range patrolling therefore appears to produce conflicting imperatives.

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185. Bergman, *Rise and Kill First*, pp. 610–24.

186. Philip Athey, 'First Female Marine Earns Recon Military Occupational Specialty', *Marine Times*, 21 November 2019.

One way in which special forces units have sought to get around this issue is through collaboration with intelligence services. The use of civilians in permissive environments may work well, but in a context where combat is likely has also proven problematic. For example, during Operation *Spring of Youth*, in which Israel conducted a raid into Beirut in 1973, the Mossad found that employing operatives without military experience for strategic reconnaissance in support of special forces was a recipe for mistakes.<sup>187</sup> There is therefore a strong argument for having a suitably diverse set of personnel organic to the unit, prepared and trained for working under combat conditions. A successful example includes SOE operations in France during the Second World War, which saw women recruited and given the same training as male counterparts.<sup>188</sup> However, imposing the fitness standards required of troops expected to conduct long-range patrols on all those working in a covert posture is counterproductive. There is therefore a strong argument for forces expected to execute military operations in a covert posture to be separate from those tasked with long-range patrolling. Operatives who are specialised in conducting military tasks amid a human population – traversing human terrain – while they need to be fit, are less likely to be required to conduct extended marches across broken country.

Another consideration is that drawing experienced troops from special forces units for covert action means that these personnel have been in circulation for a prolonged period, conducting operations in various postures. It is likely that in a range of areas of operation they will have been identified, photographed and therefore flagged by competitors. Again, therefore, it is worth selecting candidates for covert work as a separate stream, selected from varying ages, rather than from a sub-set of the existing special forces community.

Retaining the distinct character of such a covert organisation presents cultural challenges. Special forces units are often highly exclusive in terms of what they see as meeting their standards and status. Furthermore, some special forces units gain more public exposure and therefore recognition in popular culture than others. These units tend to define the wider perception of what special forces personnel should be and in doing so inadvertently create strong incentives for parallel units to gain status by matching their aesthetic, levels of fitness and language. This gravitational cultural effect must be resisted because if a special forces community is to retain the diversity of skills and profiles increasingly required in the operating environment, it is important to assign value and recognition based on what different elements the force contributes in order to preserve the necessary diversity of appearance and approach.

The final reason for covert operations needing to be a distinct specialism is the lead time involved in modern planning. Special forces are usually classified as a strategic asset and are used to respond quickly to crises. However, as the lessons learned from the unmasking of Mossad operatives in the UAE demonstrated, the cost of rushing covert operations in the modern world is identification. This means that those tasked with covert activities must operate in a much more deliberate manner and with a distinct operational tempo from those units tasked with

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187. Bergman, *Rise and Kill First*, pp. 166–74.

188. Elizabeth Kate Vigurs, *Mission France: The True History of the Women of SOE* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2021).

raiding or counterterrorism. The time necessary to develop plausible and robust cover, and especially to avoid detection after the event, will be vital if special forces units are to gain the licence to operate that can only be secured through assurance of success. The need to have distinct planning processes and cycles will also create intelligence and support demands that are different from those required by special forces conducting more conventional military tasks.

## Fighting Unplugged

The distinct requirements for future covert operations – especially those among populations – does not eliminate the need to be able to conduct strategic reconnaissance in remote and austere environments or to conduct raids against high-value military targets. These tasks require considerable endurance, teamwork and expertise to be carried out with any confidence of success. Nevertheless, there are two distinct and bifurcating modes of operation that will increasingly shape how these operations are conducted and the skills required to prosecute them. Against sub-peer adversaries, assurance is best achieved through joint enablement consistent with techniques perfected over the past three decades. Yet against peer adversaries the capability of modern sensors means that special forces will need the confidence to fight unplugged from both much of their technology and from higher echelons. Indeed, given the scarcity of enablers across most militaries, it is the lack of a heavy demand for enablement that has historically made special forces of particular use. This has profound implications for how special forces are trained and how they fight.

Modern light infantry and cavalry tactics are highly technology dependent. Even section attacks today rely on a company net to coordinate base of fire and assault elements.<sup>189</sup> The net has become a critical source of situational awareness and therefore comfort for soldiers on the battlefield and is central to future warfighting concepts.<sup>190</sup> Tactical communications may be partially denied in a conventional battle, but there are ways around this problem. The signatures of the units employing communications at such a scale can be lost in the noise amid major divisional manoeuvre and masked by the deliberate inundation of enemy systems with false positives. This latter strategy is not viable for small, independent units seeking to infiltrate enemy territory. It must be stressed here that there is no halfway house. Personal devices such as watches will emit and are detectable. The intermittent blips of call and response between dispersed elements will stand out if they emanate from an area where such signals are not supposed to be. Special forces, therefore, seeking to approach targets, must minimise their communication. While there are technologies that allow for low signature transmission, they have limited bandwidth and are not easy to use. Much special forces activity in this context will need to rely on pre-planned schemes of manoeuvre, with fall-backs and reversionary courses of action in the event of desynchronisation. This in itself requires a great deal of training. Teams

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189. This is why the British Army is so intent on assuring its ‘digital backbone’. See Ministry of Defence (MoD), ‘Army Digitalisation: THEIA’, last updated 8 February 2021, <<https://www.gov.uk/guidance/army-digitalisation-theia>>, accessed 18 April 2021.

190. John R Hoehn, ‘Joint All Domain Command and Control (JADC2)’, Congressional Research Service, updated 18 March 2021, <<https://fas.org/sgp/crs/natsec/IF11493.pdf>>, accessed 26 February 2021.

must also trust each independent team leader to exercise considerable mission command to resolve the challenges that arise that could risk desynchronisation.

NATO militaries have become increasingly concerned with the need to practise fighting unplugged since Russia demonstrated the effects of offensive EW against the Ukrainian army in 2014.<sup>191</sup> This has led to some tactical exercises assuming an EMS-denied environment, especially among Baltic state militaries anticipating being overrun by hostile forces.<sup>192</sup> Many of the techniques for effectively conducting operations unplugged can draw on historical methods. Emissions control was well understood during the Cold War.<sup>193</sup> The greatest barrier at present to assuring the ability to fight unplugged is that policymakers approving missions presently demand high-bandwidth transmission – often including live video – from operations as there is an expectation among commanders to know where forces are. Military or civilian chains of command are not comfortable with tactical units stopping transmitting for prolonged periods. The result is that beyond some limited tactical activities, larger exercises and actual operations continue to be conducted with a large EMS footprint. Unless policymakers appreciate the need for change, permissions will not be forthcoming to unplug, which, given the importance placed on good habits and discipline in controlling emissions, is a recipe for errors if the requirement to stop emitting becomes a sudden priority.

Beyond traditional emission control there are new threats that demand innovative solutions. The most obvious of these is thermal imaging. Its ubiquity on the modern battlefield among tactical units demands that special forces develop techniques for reducing their thermal signature.<sup>194</sup> This includes familiarity with multi-spectral thermal sheeting, the use of which must become habitual. This is particularly important when emplacing observation posts (OPs) and other static positions and must be factored in when checking an OP's appearance. A second requirement is to be highly conscious of observation from above given the growing availability of UAVs for over-the-hill observation.<sup>195</sup> Combined with thermal cameras, UAVs present a challenge

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191. Duncan McCrory, 'Russian Electronic Warfare, Cyber and Information Operations in Ukraine: Implications for NATO and Security in the Baltic States', *RUSI Journal* (Vol. 165, No. 7, 2020), pp. 34–44.
  192. Stephen J Flanagan et al., 'Deterring Russian Aggression in the Baltic States Through Resilience and Resistance', Research Report, RAND Corporation, 2019, <[https://www.rand.org/content/dam/rand/pubs/research\\_reports/RR2700/RR2779/RAND\\_RR2779.pdf](https://www.rand.org/content/dam/rand/pubs/research_reports/RR2700/RR2779/RAND_RR2779.pdf)>, accessed 18 April 2021.
  193. Richard Aldrich, *GCHQ: The Uncensored Story of Britain's Most Secret Intelligence Agency* (London: Harper Press, 2010), pp. 107–68.
  194. Thermal imaging is now widely available at the tactical level to non-state actors, let alone peer adversaries, see UN Security Council, 'Letter Dated 27 January 2020 from the Panel of Experts on Yemen Addressed to the President of the Security Council', S/2020/70, 27 January 2020, <<https://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/%5BEN%5DLetter%20dated%2027%20January%202020%20from%20the%20Panel%20of%20Experts%20on%20Yemen%20addressed%20to%20the%20President%20of%20the%20Security%20Council%20-%20Final%20report%20of%20the%20Panel%20of%20Experts%20on%20Yemen%20%28S-2020-70%29.pdf>>, accessed 18 April 2021.
  195. Aniseh Tabrizi and Justin Bronk, 'Armed Drones in the Middle East: Proliferation and Norms in the Region', *RUSI Occasional Papers* (17 December 2018).

since their loitering presence risks desynchronising operations, while knocking them out attracts attention.

If it is accepted that the conduct of strategic reconnaissance and raiding will see enablers pushed back by layered stand-off, special forces must also return to conducting an extended approach to their objectives, which has not been a common feature during the War on Terror. That higher echelon capabilities cannot stand-in also leaves special forces increasingly unplugged from the firepower and situational awareness to which they have become accustomed. For maritime forces this may call for further rapid surface connector or semi-submersible capabilities to work at the seams of detection. For land insertion there is a requirement for low-signature light-mobility vehicles to enable units inserted by helicopter to manoeuvre long distances. In many environments neither of these will necessarily mitigate the need for an extended approach on foot across difficult terrain. Furthermore, for many targets special forces may increasingly need to carry capabilities to affect them, being in many cases constrained in being able to call for air strikes both because of the electronic signature of communications and the threat to aircraft within a hostile missile engagement zone. The implications of this on training are worth emphasising. The War on Terror has seen a transition from long patrols on exercises to high-tempo day-long or otherwise short operations. There is likely a need to return to the former with an emphasis on personal administration in the field; a capability that has been de-emphasised in a context where support arms are prevalent and available. There may be a need to maintain a strategic reconnaissance unit in place for a prolonged period while raiders deploy to strike what they have found. A good example is the preliminary deployment of the Grouse Team some time before<sup>196</sup> the insertion of a raiding party for the attack on the Norsk Hydro plant during the Second World War.<sup>197</sup> The Grouse Team were required to maintain themselves on the Hardanger Plateau for four months during winter and then conduct an extended march to escape Norway while being pursued.

## Enabling Others

Operating by, with and through partner forces has long been a task of special forces<sup>198</sup> and, as outlined in Chapter II, is an area of expanding importance. The US is well positioned to meet this increased area of activity since it already has in the US Army Special Forces an organisation that focuses on this function. Other states that have traditionally employed what in US parlance comprise ‘Tier One’ special forces for this role face a challenge. The UK, for example, has long used the 22 Special Air Service Regiment to support partners with great success, most famously in Oman.<sup>199</sup> There is a growing need to dedicate units to this function that are able to optimise

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196. TNA, HS 2/172, ‘Operation Grouse’.

197. TNA, HS 2/189, ‘Operation Gunnerside’.

198. Anthony F Heisler, ‘By, With, and Through: The Theory and Practice of Special Operations Capacity-Building’, Thesis, Naval Postgraduate School, December 2014, <<https://apps.dtic.mil/dtic/tr/fulltext/u2/a620833.pdf>>, accessed 22 February 2021.

199. John Akehurst, *We Won a War: The Campaign in Oman, 1965–1975* (Salisbury: Michael Russell, 1982).

in delivering partnered operations.<sup>200</sup> Effective partner force capacity building takes time and is dependent upon human relationships.<sup>201</sup> Operations with partners require mutual trust and respect and that is best engendered by having a consistent relationship and communication between a patron and partner force. Keeping special forces personnel embedded with partners for a sustained period creates challenges for those that need to conduct extensive training to maintain the necessary level of proficiency for raiding and strategic reconnaissance. It also makes the personnel unavailable for highly responsive operations, although being forward deployed to an environment can enable these personnel to facilitate other special forces in accessing a theatre. Beyond the challenge of balancing training and readiness with sustained deployments, there is the challenge of identification discussed earlier. It therefore makes increasing sense to detach sustained train, advise and assist missions from units required to conduct other special forces tasks.

Partner force capacity building demands specific skill sets. The first is a body of military experience that the trainers can speak about and draw on to have credibility and gravitas with partner forces. Non-commissioned and field grade officers with time in service are better placed to function as trainers. The second is language skills and cultural expertise. Language proficiency in particular cannot be fast-tracked and takes time to learn and master. It also fixes individuals to geographic areas where they are best placed to conduct operations. Language not only enables these soldiers to develop rapport with their counterparts and to build relationships, but also improves situational awareness and is vital for force protection. This facilitates obtaining a licence to operate given that partnered operations are subject to more scrutiny and expose a force to legal and political risks that are difficult to avoid, such as the conduct of partners. Obtaining sufficient permissions from ministers necessitates accurate information and language and cultural knowledge are invaluable for building confidence that soldiers understand their environment and can move confidently within it.

For all of the above reasons special forces will remain important for conducting partnered operations. But if we accept that capacity is increasingly a problem then their relationship with conventional forces in this context is likely to have to change. During the War on Terror, special forces have benefited from an increasing level of conventional enablement. In the future operating environment special forces will be key enablers for access by the joint force. The strategic reconnaissance role, identify appropriate partners, building relationships, and negotiating access will be vital for conventional trainers, as well as military assistance from JTACs and stand-off digital effects, to be able to get permissions to deploy. This means that special forces will be most important in the early stages of a relationship when a patron is assessing a partner, although some of the individuals involved in outreach should continue to work with the partner to maintain the trust built up through individual relationships.

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200. This is reflected in the proposal to establish a Ranger Regiment in the UK armed forces aimed at delivering these activities, see MoD, 'Army Announces Special Ops Army Ranger Regiment', 23 March 2021, <<https://www.gov.uk/government/news/army-announces-special-ops-army-ranger-regiment>>, accessed 18 April 2021.

201. Watling and Reynolds, *War by Others' Means*, pp. 91–104.

The transition from being enabled by the joint force to enabling it is similarly true of strategic reconnaissance and raiding against hostile state actors. In a range of environments, the effects of layered stand-off not only require special forces to be projected further and to operate unplugged, but until key threats are identified, located and destroyed, the joint force may struggle to project into theatre. This is especially true of some of the areas of increasing economic competition where there is a comparative lack of civilian clutter and the austerity of the environment significantly reduces the size of military units that are able to function effectively. Perhaps the most relevant of these is the High North. The dense sensor arrays that watch the region, the prevalence of dual-use military and industrial infrastructure, the dependence upon undersea cables, power plants and relay stations,<sup>202</sup> and the opening up of sea lanes make it an environment that is particularly favourable to the kinds of competition and warfare for which some special forces are equipped and trained.<sup>203</sup> It is also an environment where adversary reconnaissance-strike complexes make access for conventional forces difficult unless the enemy's sensors can be disrupted. Dedicating training to the Arctic environment therefore seems to be a sensible proposition for special forces expected to perform the raiding function in high-intensity conflict, as an area where the capability contributes to deterrence below and competitiveness above the threshold of armed conflict. Again, however, here it must be stressed that such missions would see special forces as a key enabler of the joint force. Rather than being able to call upon protection and fire support from conventional units, therefore, special forces would need to successfully prosecute their attacks, or to provide a critical link in the kill chain for a limited number of long-range precision strikes, as a precondition for conventional forces to enter the environment. This is worth emphasising, because the available options for extraction or for dynamic alterations to operations in progress would be severely limited. This in turn means that special forces would struggle to provide policymakers with nearly as many reversionary courses of action in case of setback, and it is important that those responsible for approving such missions understand and are prepared for the different manner in which risk will need to be discussed under these conditions.

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202. Matthew Melino and Heather Conley, 'The Ice Curtain: Russia's Arctic Military Presence', Center for Strategic and International Studies, 2020.

203. Nathanael Melia, Keith Haines and Ed Hawkins, 'Future of the Sea: Implications from Opening Arctic Sea Routes', UK Government Office for Science, July 2017.

# Conclusions

THE ALLURE OF special forces to policymakers is plain: they offer a responsive tactical tool that can be assigned to confront challenges with a great deal of assurance. For this reason, policymakers have become accustomed to responding to threats by employing special forces as their preferred military instrument. This report argues that the future operating environment is likely to see an increased need for special forces as the only element of the military well suited to several critical missions, including covert strategic reconnaissance in dense human terrain, building relationships with partners in complex environments, penetrating layered stand-off to enable entry for the joint force, and raiding and deterrence in globalised competition. The size of special forces units is limited, however, and hard to expand, making the allocation of special forces to these missions a difficult policy trade-off, in which fixing troops to these tasks comes with an increased opportunity cost.

Exacerbating the resource tension in employing special forces is the fact that the future operating environment is likely to impose significant constraints on the flexibility that special forces have long enjoyed. In great power competition, adversaries will likely strive to disrupt special forces activity in semi-permissive environments and will use the data gathered from these competitive skirmishes to track and thereby foil the use of the same personnel for subsequent operations. The layers of stand-off through which forces will need to manoeuvre to conduct strategic reconnaissance and raiding will demand innovative methods of insertion, prolonged exposure to harsh environments, and comfort with working unplugged. For operators to be proficient in these techniques will require training and experimentation. But perhaps more important is the shift in mindset among policymakers and commanders to allow special forces to untether themselves. The current demand for real-time information on the location and status of units is fixing special forces to ways of operating that are not suitable for higher-risk contingencies.

Perhaps ironically, special forces have principally been specialised generalists: adaptability has been a key selling point in their policy relevance. This report argues that the discrete posture that has allowed special forces to shift between roles is becoming harder to maintain. As a result, special forces will likely have to specialise to a greater degree in separate skills, such as those who conduct strategic reconnaissance in austere terrain and raiding, those who conduct operations in a covert posture, and those who conduct partner force capacity building. There is a risk here, however, that specialisation will threaten the cohesion of the special forces community. Always competitive, special forces units tend to see themselves as superior to other elements of the group. As units specialise, however, they are liable to become more co-dependent upon one another. In this context there will need to be less cultural value placed on conformity and a wider appreciation that a diverse range of expertise contributes to making the community an effective tool.

The detail of how special forces optimise for the future operating environment will necessarily be conducted away from public view. Many of the issues raised in this report are those with which parts of the community are already grappling. The risk is that because of the secrecy in which these challenges must be addressed, policymakers fail to appreciate the scale of the task required in ensuring that special forces are able to meet the demands that they are expected to satisfy in major conflict. The willingness to extend permissions to special forces – and the reluctance to empower conventional forces – that has characterised the War on Terror risks special forces being overcommitted. It also means that conventional forces may expect a level of effect from special forces that they will struggle to meet in conflict because they have not had adequate resources or, perhaps more importantly, the time to think creatively about how to go about these challenges. Given that special forces appear to be key to confronting threats in the future operating environment it is important that policymakers ensure that the convenience of employing special forces today is not exploited to the detriment of their readiness to confront the challenges of tomorrow.

# About the Author

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