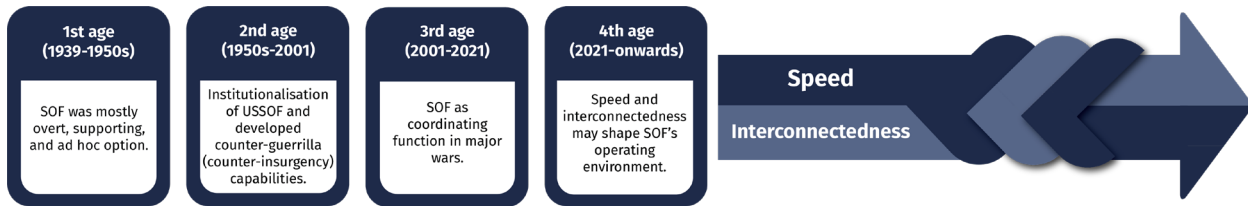


# The evolution of Special Operations Forces: Trends and Trajectories

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The evolution of SOF.

**The future is impossible to predict. However, past and current trends can offer indications of what is to come. This brief is a short survey of the evolution of Special Operations Forces that aims to equip the reader with ideas for further discussions about these forces' future trajectory.**

THE EVOLUTION OF Special Operations Forces (SOF) are often categorised into four separate ages in the literature.<sup>1</sup> This raises questions about where SOF as a phenomenon is heading next. Yet, this idea is mostly based on the US's development of SOF (USSOF). In this context, given the limited literature on the development of SOF by other states,<sup>2</sup> the purpose of this brief is to explore SOF's future pathways in a way that may be relevant for small states, and to provide a foundation for further discussion of how they can prepare for the future. To address this topic, we begin by presenting an account of the evolution of (mostly US) SOF. We then explore and assess the literature that focuses on the future development of SOF in order to reflect upon where, as a function and a concept, it is heading.

This brief predominantly addresses the SOF community. Readers interested in understanding more about SOF-related tasks and concepts are directed to the FOI report *121 Readings on Special Operations and Special Operations Forces—A review of the literature 2014-2024*.<sup>3</sup>

## THE FIRST AND SECOND AGES OF SOF

The first age of SOF began during the Second World War (WWII). This age saw the establishment of the British Special Operations Executive, as well as the creation of special units in each of the US's services.<sup>4</sup>

In this period, SOF became a complement to conventional forces,<sup>5</sup> and were composed of "mostly overt, relatively broadly based elite military forces drawn from handpicked volunteer infantry fighters".<sup>6</sup> The US units

1 See, for example, Ansbacher, Y., & Schleifer, R. "The three ages of modern Western special operations forces". *Comparative Strategy*, 41(1), 32–45. 2022; Finlan, A. "A Dangerous Pathway? Toward a Theory of Special Forces". *Comparative Strategy*, 38(4), 255–275. 2019; Irwin, W., & Wilson III, I. *The Fourth Age of SOF: The Use and Utility of Special Operations Forces in a New Age*. JSOU report 22-1. JSOU University Press. 2022.

2 For an exception, see Illis-Alm, H. "Swedish Special Operations Forces: How It All Started", in Eriksson, G., & Pettersson, U. (eds.). *Special Operations from a Small State Perspective*. Palgrave Macmillan. 2017.

3 Jakobsson, E. & Karlsson, M. *121 Readings on Special Operations and Special Operations Forces—A review of the literature 2014-2024*, FOI-R-5696-SE. 2025.

4 Ansbacher & Schleifer. "The three ages"; Irwin & Wilson III. *The Fourth Age of SOF*.

5 Gyllensporre, D. "Contemporary Hybrid Warfare and the Evolution of Special Operations Theory", in Eriksson, & Pettersson. *Special Operations*.

6 Ansbacher & Schleifer, R. "The three ages of modern Western special operations forces," p. 35.

were deactivated after the war, and then reactivated and deactivated during and after the Korean War.<sup>7</sup>

Triggered by a new Soviet foreign-policy strategy that focused on wars of national liberation supporting anti-Western sentiments during the Cold War, the second age of SOF saw these temporary units become permanent elements of the US armed forces.<sup>8</sup> The Vietnam and Malayan wars prompted the SOF of major powers to develop counter-guerrilla (counter-insurgency) capabilities,<sup>9</sup> and capabilities to engage in interagency collaboration with civil agencies (such as the CIA).<sup>10</sup> After the Vietnam War, in the light of public backlash against US involvement, and with growing fears of direct war with the Soviet Union, the US Army reinvented itself as a warfighting entity, rather than an organisation reliant on SOF to perform counter-insurgency and nation-building. As a result, the US drastically reduced its SOF numbers.<sup>11</sup>

Increasing aircraft hijackings in the late 1970s induced USSOF to develop hostage-rescue capability and a counter-terrorism focus.<sup>12</sup> Thus, the second age was marked by SOF being both a covert and an overt option in conflict, as well as operating below the threshold of conflict.

With the Cold War as a backdrop, SOF were mostly used for traditional special-operations tasks such as unconventional warfare, direct action, special reconnaissance, and different types of military assistance.<sup>13</sup> The first Gulf War meant more extensive deployments and a focus on search-and-rescue operations. Soon, USSOF tasks were also focused on counter-terrorism, psychological operations, counter-proliferation of weapons of mass destruction, and information operations.<sup>14</sup>

### THE THIRD AGE OF SOF

The commencement of the “Global War on Terror” is generally understood as a signifier for the start of the third age of SOF.<sup>15</sup> This period was shaped by the large-scale wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, which further developed counter-terrorism and counter-insurgency capabilities.<sup>16</sup> USSOF were not only an assisting force in these wars, but were assigned a coordinating and leading role across American security branches.<sup>17</sup>

In these wars, the coalition countries aimed to achieve political ends with limited means, and relied heavily on new technologies, for instance, in communication, surveillance and precision weaponry.<sup>18</sup> Later on, the US developed a light-footprint approach heavily reliant on SOF.<sup>19</sup>

The developments in Afghanistan also corresponded with NATO’s becoming a more consolidated SOF actor with “the creation of the forerunner to NATO Special Operations Headquarters (NSHQ) in 2007”.<sup>20</sup>

From being mostly an overt, supporting, and ad hoc option in the first age of SOF, USSOF became institutionalised during the second age. This age also expanded SOF tasks to include what today are seen as various forms of military assistance, unconventional warfare, and counter-insurgency operations. The third age saw USSOF’s role in conflict evolve from merely being complementary to also having a coordinating function. While the task that has been the main focus of SOF has changed over the years, the development of USSOF has largely been incremental, with tasks evolving in response to contextual demands.

The global context has implications for the evolution of SOF in other states as well. For instance, the

7 Irwin & Wilson III. *The Fourth Age of SOF*.

8 Irwin & Wilson III. *The Fourth Age of SOF*.

9 Ansbacher & Schleifer. “The three ages”.

10 Irwin & Wilson III. *The Fourth Age of SOF*.

11 Ansbacher & Schleifer. “The three ages”; Fitzgerald, D. *Learning to Forget: US Army Counterinsurgency Doctrine from Vietnam to Iraq*. Stanford: Stanford University Press. 2013.

12 Ansbacher & Schleifer. “The three ages”; Irwin, & Wilson III. *The Fourth Age of SOF*.

13 For further explanations of SOF tasks, see: Jakobsson, & Karlsson. *121 Readings*.

14 Irwin & Wilson III. *The Fourth Age of SOF*.

15 Ansbacher & Schleifer. “The three ages”.

16 Irwin & Wilson III. *The Fourth Age of SOF*.

17 Ansbacher & Schleifer. “The three ages”.

18 Althuizen, T. “The new way of limited warfare: The value of the Afghan model of warfare after fighting ISIS”. *Atlantisch Perspectief*. 2021.

19 Irwin & Wilson III. *The Fourth Age of SOF*.

20 Ilis-Alm. “Swedish Special Operations Forces”.

development of designated Swedish SOF was partly influenced by Sweden's commitment to neutrality during the Cold War, since it was nearly politically impossible to obtain insights into NATO member states' SOF (such as the UK and US) training and lesson learning processes of their own. With the help of the UK in 1991, and later by neighbouring countries, Sweden started to develop a special-operations unit.<sup>21</sup>

This meant that Sweden's special forces started evolving by the end of the second age of SOF. The forces were initially focused on national operations, such as countering organised crimes aimed at military depots, as well as international protection missions for politicians. The scope thus corresponded to global developments, as "the main task was counter-terrorism, including hostage-release operations".<sup>22</sup> The limited tasks of Sweden's SOF are, of course, understandable as the forces were in their infancy, but the international context did not demand further evolution.

By the start of the millennia, Sweden's SOF became truly expeditionary as they were deployed to briefly support the initial deployment of the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) to Afghanistan. This facilitated Swedish SOF collaboration with NATO.<sup>23</sup>

#### **A NEW AGE OF SOF—THE FOURTH AGE AND BEYOND**

A number of studies explore the future evolution of SOF. While the majority of these are written from a US perspective and may not be the future of smaller states' SOF, they indicate where the evolution of SOF may be heading, and help to pose questions for further discussions.<sup>24</sup>

The withdrawal from Afghanistan marked the beginning of the current fourth age of SOF. This age has been identified as "unlike any previous period". In a US context, this is because US Special Operations

Command (USSOCOM) is presently focusing both on deterring potential future conflicts and on maintaining the US strategic advantage, as well as on counter-terrorism activities and activities in the grey zone.<sup>25</sup> However, while the notion of the fourth age of SOF is fairly new, the global security situation and strategic competition has intensified substantially after the full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022. Technological advancements, particularly in artificial intelligence (AI), have also made unprecedented leaps in the past couple of years. Therefore, the context and characteristics of SOF may already be transforming again. Against this background, the remainder of this memo reflects upon the traits that are likely to constitute the future trajectory of the fourth age of SOF, and perhaps even a new fifth age, in relation to smaller states.

Various futures are explored in the literature, but most accounts communicate similar themes.<sup>26</sup> One significant theme is strategic competition between powerful states. Some accounts make the case that it would be a mistake to think that just because we are witnessing an increase in strategic competition, irregular warfare will be outdated.<sup>27</sup>

As the balance of power between actors in global politics changes, conflict characteristics change, and there will, thus, also be changes in the context in which SOFs operate. When analysing the future of SOF, one study has identified that changes in the conventional operating environment will have implications for SOF. In relation to this, two themes have been identified as having the potential to shape the evolving context of SOF: speed and interconnectedness.<sup>28</sup> These themes are by no means a definitive set of developments, but can be helpful tools for further discussions. Below, we elaborate these themes with the help of literature that envisions SOF's future, and then discuss the strategic implications of these developments for SOF.

21 Ibid.

22 Ibid., p. 15.

23 Ibid.

24 With the exception of one study that is a collaboration between US and Canadian authors, see: Brown, A. L. (ed.). *A perilous future: high-intensity conflict and the implications for SOF*, Canadian Special Operations Forces Command. 2022.

25 Irwin & Wilson III. *The Fourth Age of SOF*.

26 See Black, C.H. "The Future of Special Operations", in McCabe, P. (ed.). *Special Operations Forces: Transformation in the Future Operating Environment*, JSOU Report 22 -2. 2022.

27 Lum, R. A., & Churchill, L. E. "Irregular as the new normal: low technology will change the prevalence and character of irregular warfare", pp. 447–456, in Davis, Z. S., Rager, C. B., Gac, F., Snow, J., & Reiner, P. (eds.) *Strategic latency unleashed: The role of technology in a revisionist global order and the implications for special operations forces*, Lawrence Livermore National Laboratory (LLNL), Livermore, CA (United States). 2021.

28 This is a simplification of themes identified in Brown, *A perilous future*. In this brief, these themes have been elaborated with the help of other studies.

### A fast-paced world

With the help of technology, decision-making is likely to become faster and more automated, which will reduce the time allowed for decisions concerning manoeuvre and fires. This also has implications for the relationship between defensive and offensive strategies.<sup>29</sup> In a fast-paced world, where retaliation may happen instantaneously, defensive and offensive actions will become indistinguishable.

It is not only the speed of action that is anticipated to change but also the speed of technological development. Rather than being driven by state actors, technological progression is envisioned to be increasingly controlled by non-state actors, such as business organisations.<sup>30</sup>

The speed of technological advancement will influence actors' behaviour. Increasingly, when adversaries do not adhere to norms regarding the use of emerging technologies, it can create an uneven playing field.<sup>31</sup> One account envisions that due to falling costs for technology and the fast-pace of development, non-state actors will not only be organisations, but also individuals commanding their own robotic arsenals.<sup>32</sup>

### A hyper interconnected but blurred reality

As actors are predicted to be even more interconnected, reality will simultaneously become increasingly blurry. This hyper connectivity may, for instance, facilitate what one author calls "armchair campaigns," meaning that, due to automation and Internet of Things (IoT), individuals or companies will be able to conduct irregular operations rapidly and, at times, anonymously. As a result, these forms of activities may prolong warfare by, for instance, aiding insurgents.<sup>33</sup>

It is not only actors that may be more interconnected in the future, but also humans and devices. The

IoT and AI may, for instance, enable various forms of global surveillance. In a world where a person's whereabouts and movements can be observed by anyone, it would be more difficult to perform SOF's covert action.<sup>34</sup>

Another factor contributing to these blurred lines is, according to one account, that non-state actors, such as criminal and business organisations, will build up state-like capabilities.<sup>35</sup> A trend identified in relation to this is that people are also expected to be even more interconnected in terms of geographical location. For instance, future operating environments are anticipated to include mega-cities. Urban warfare is not new for SOF, but the development of mega-cities, together with advancements in technology, would complicate the operating environment.<sup>36</sup> States may find that some of these cities are difficult to govern, and technology may enable non-state actors' governing capabilities. These cities may also facilitate criminal networks.<sup>37</sup> The navigation of mega-cities, and the identification of civilians, are likely challenges for SOF.<sup>38</sup>

Social media is also anticipated to contribute to the blurring of our perceived reality, as it creates echo chambers reinforcing political differences.<sup>39</sup> Through the growth of social media, non-state actors are increasing their power base. Among other things, social media is anticipated to continue to facilitate misinformation, to complicate covert action, and to serve as a means of non-kinetic warfare.<sup>40</sup>

### Strategic implications for SOF

Some accounts suggest that a complex world that is interconnected, fast, and blurred will constitute a more lethal operating environment. For instance, the increasing capabilities of non-state actors will lower the threshold for use of force, and may impact SOF mission success.<sup>41</sup>

29 Kiras, J. & Provencher, N. "The Most Dangerous Case: SOF in Conventional Conflict with Strategic Competitors", in Brown, *A perilous future*.

30 Leaf, D. "Chaos and Constraint: Special Operations and 'The Convergence'", pp. 492–501 in Davis, et al. *Strategic latency unleashed*.

31 McCabe. *Special Operations Forces*.

32 Lum, R. & Churchill, E. "Irregular as the New Normal: How Technology Will Change the Prevalence and Character of Irregular Warfare", in Davis, et al. *Strategic latency unleashed*.

33 Lum & Churchill, "Irregular as the New Normal".

34 Brown. *A perilous future*; Davis, et al. *Strategic latency unleashed*.

35 Leaf. "Chaos and Constraint".

36 Davis, et al. *Strategic latency unleashed*.

37 Lum & Churchill. "Irregular as the New Normal".

38 Leaf. "Chaos and Constraint".

39 Davis, et al. *Strategic latency unleashed*.

40 Snow, J. (2021). "Identity and Virtual Nations: Implications of Digital Citizenship and Developing Global Autonomous Communities for Special Operations Forces", in Davis, et al. *Strategic latency unleashed*.

41 Leaf. "Chaos and Constraint".

Moreover, high intensity conflict may “entail contemplating new risk acceptance models”.<sup>42</sup> In a world of fast-paced change, objectives may also be altered more quickly than before.<sup>43</sup> As the lines blur between defensive and offensive strategies, in strategic competition defined by great powers, SOF may have to deliver effect “without the benefit of clear political end-state objectives”.<sup>44</sup> This is likely also the case in irregular warfare.

At the same time as risk increases, SOF will have to develop a skill-set that can respond to both irregular warfare and great power competition. A dual threat may demand that SOF prioritises capabilities,<sup>45</sup> particularly in smaller states with fewer resources.

In relation to high-intensity conflict, one author maintains that SOF are well suited to act in the shaping phase of the conflict before violence breaks out.<sup>46</sup> Others suggest that in warfare that mixes conventional and unconventional methods, SOF need to adapt like a “chameleon”, operating along the full spectrum from peace to war.<sup>47</sup>

If war occurs in a small state, one author advises that SOF should be a complement to conventional forces and undermine the adversary’s will to fight. This could include undermining C2, information campaigns, cyber-attacks, and, for external SOF, intelligence gathering, deep operations, and support to resistance movements.<sup>48</sup>

Indeed, SOF “specialness” might increasingly depend on their ability to blend into local environments for extended periods of time. Cultural fluency with the local civilian population, together with a deep understanding of the enemy’s logic (so-called “strategic empathy”),<sup>49</sup> is likely to be a key competency for successful strategy, defence, and warfare in the future. SOF already have a head start in this regard. Given the increasingly complex socio-technical systems (i.e., local population, culture, AI, and information overload) that must be navigated, it can be assumed that SOF’s ethical and psychological resilience will be essential.

The examples outlined above are resource-intense engagements and easier to execute for large SOF enterprises (e.g., the US). For small states, cooperation with,

and strategic use of, other SOF structures and partnerships, including NATO, will likely be crucial.

Some studies maintain that the changes in speed and interconnectedness will amount to significant changes on a par with major changes in history that triggered completely new paradigms in social relations.<sup>50</sup> If so, are we perhaps entering a fifth age for SOF?

#### KEY TAKEAWAYS:

- The analysis here shows SOF evolving through four ages, each age triggered or significantly shaped by major conflicts or wars (e.g., WWII, the Vietnam War, and the Global War on Terror).

#### Major themes in the literature regarding SOF in the future are:

- how China and Russia, as well as non-state actors, may alter the future balance of power.
- how changes in the speed of decision-making and technological development will influence the future operating environment.
- how humans will be hyper-interconnected with each other and technology, which will lead to blurred lines (between, for instance, war and peace, combatant and civilian, non-state and state actors, moral and immoral actions, and defensive and offensive actions) in the operating environment.

#### Implications for SOF strategy are:

- the need to find a balance in capability width and depth, as well as to leverage and adapt existing skills in a new strategic context where the operational objectives are uncertain, and the risks are higher.

## CONCLUSIONS

An overview of what has been written on the future of SOF indicates that a new conflict environment characterised by strategic competition will set the trajectory for the evolution ahead. Within that scope, in particular, technological advancement and increased interconnectedness will impact future demands on SOF.

Every new age in history is transformative to those who live it. It is thus easy to think that the current shifts

42 Brown. *A perilous future*, p. 16.

43 See Black. “The Future of Special Operations”.

44 McCabe, P. “Introduction”, in McCabe. *Special Operations Forces Transformation*, p. 3.

45 Brown. *A perilous future*.

46 Leaf. “Chaos and Constraint.”

47 Gyllensporre. “Contemporary Hybrid Warfare”; see, also, Althuizen. “The new way of limited warfare”.

48 Gyllensporre. “Contemporary Hybrid Warfare.”

49 Abbe, A. & Johnson, O. E. Developing Strategic Empathy and Perspective Taking in Military Leaders. *Journal of Military Learning*. 2025.

50 Leaf. “Chaos and Constraint.”

and changes are particularly dramatic or consequential. This reminder is evident when studying the evolution of SOF. While contextual changes will impact the use of SOF, history indicates that SOF's core tasks such as military assistance, direct action, and special reconnaissance have remained relatively stable throughout the years.

However, when regarding the evolution of the function and phenomenon of SOF over time, we emphasise that even though we analytically tend to categorise SOF history into different ages or eras, the actual changes have been more incremental, than revolutionary. If history sets a standard, we may thus expect SOF tasks to remain largely the same in the near future. Nevertheless, increases in pace and interconnectedness are likely to complicate the operating environment.

The evolving fourth age is complicated, but every age of SOF has had its challenges. SOF's inherent ability to adapt to these challenges is a strength. In the fourth age, the threat of great-power competition both in the grey zone and in high-intensity conflict, combined with unconventional threats, and the need to maintain counterinsurgency capability, demands that SOF develop capabilities that could potentially stretch these forces thin. Small states' SOF are particularly vulnerable in this demanding situation. It is therefore even more important to remember to continuously find ways to improve capability within limited means.

SOF as a function and a phenomenon seem to be headed towards a context of strategic competition and a broader palette of unconventional warfare instruments, not only in terms of actions in the grey zone, but also in high-intensity conflict, by supporting resistance movements, mastering the playing field, and/or training foreign forces. At the same time, the mindset of the individual operators and the technological tools at their disposal will continue to be at the core of this evolution. In conclusion, SOF in the future are on track to be defined less by their adversaries and more by how these forces are able to shape the operating environment. ■

#### TOPICS FOR DISCUSSION:

How is the current context influencing small states' SOF?

How can changes in speed concerning decision-making and technological development influence small states' SOF on a strategic, and operational, level?

How can changes in interconnectedness influence small states' SOF on a strategic, and operational, level?

Are requirements and recruitment standards for SOF operators and leaders sufficiently tailored to the future operating environment and technological acceleration?

What may be the defining features of a new age of SOF?

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