



121 Readings on Special Operations and Special Operations Forces

A review of the literature 2014–2024

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Sammanfattning

Denna litteraturöversikt är av intresse för alla som vill få en bättre förståelse för utvecklingen under det senaste decenniet inom forskningsområdet specialoperationer och specialförband. För den redan insatte läsaren kan denna rapport fungera som ett slags uppslagsverk där läsaren lätt kan navigera till olika intresseområden och få inspiration till vidare forskning. För läsare som är mindre bekanta med litteraturen kan rapporten läsas från början till slut vilket ger en koncentrerad men omfattande översikt över området och dess kärnfrågor.

Utan att rekommendera specifika definitioner behandlar rapporten begreppsfrågor såväl som teoretiska debatter kring specialoperationer och specialförband. Rapporten redogör kortfattat för ett antal forskningsämnen inom specialoperationer och specialförband som återkommer i litteraturen och ger förslag på ämnen för framtida forskning. Dessa ämnen kategoriseras i tre teman: internationellt samarbete, interaktion med den omgivande konflikten samt organisation, kultur och etik. Slutligen består bilagan av en omfattande läslista med 121 texter organiserade efter teman för att inspirera och underlätta vidare läsning.

Nyckelord: Specialoperationer, specialförband, litteraturöversikt.

Summary

This literature review will interest anyone seeking a better understanding of developments in the Special Operations (SO) and Special Operations Forces (SOF) research field over the past decade. For the well-versed reader, it serves as a guidebook pointing to the sections of most interest and providing suggestions for future research. For those less acquainted with the literature, the report can be read from start to finish for a distilled but comprehensive overview of the field and its key debates.

This report considers definitional issues as well as theoretical debates surrounding SO and SOF but does not recommend a specific terminology. It also identifies and briefly accounts for a number of SO and SOF research topics that are reoccurring in the literature and provides suggestions for future research. The suggestions are categorised into three themes: international cooperation, interaction with the conflict environment, as well as organisation, culture, and ethics. Finally, the appendix consists of a comprehensive reading list of 121 texts organised in themes in order to inspire and facilitate further reading on the topics that are most interesting to the reader.

Keywords: Special operations, special operations forces, literature review

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1 Introduction

While secrecy is part of their essence, Special Operations (SO) and Special Operations Forces (SOF) are subject to increasing academic interest. The growing academic field is relatively small compared to many other strands of military research and is heavily infused by a US perspective. Many theories and problems related to military structure and activity in general are also applicable for understanding SO and SOF. Nevertheless, it could be argued that the specific traits of SO and SOF justify considering research on these phenomena as a separate strand of military studies and for academics and practitioners to have both deeper and broader knowledge about the content of that strand.

Exemplifying the need for a holistic overview of the field are the scholarly disagreements about how to define SO and SOF and that these concepts are used differently depending on the geographical context. For instance, in Sweden, Special Forces (*specialförband*) are considered what in the United States (US), and in most of the academic literature, is referred to as SOF. In some literature, SOF is used interchangeably with special forces written in lower case to distinguish them from the US Special Forces (also known as the Green Berets).¹

In addition, with the resurgence of great power competition, a deteriorating security situation in Europe and its neighbourhood, and long-standing areas of conflict across the globe, Western militaries face profound challenges. The new strategic context and current global security landscape are transforming the theatre of operations and imposing increasingly complex demands on SO and SOF. This shift calls for an assessment and inventory of the state of knowledge on SO and SOF, including identifying research gaps and examining the subjects of academic interest.

Against this background, this report aims to present an overview of the literature on SO and SOF from the last decade. More specifically, it seeks to provide readers with an understanding of contemporary research on SO and SOF, inspire further reading, and identify topics for future research. The report reviews a vast array of literature and presents a list with 121 recommended readings on SO and SOF (see appendix).

The review is of interest to both academics and students of military, security, and international relations studies, as well as practitioners seeking to put their everyday activities in a larger theoretical and empirical context. This review fills a void in this regard, as there are no recent comprehensive literature reviews on SO and SOF.

¹ As this report is an overview of international literature, the report uses the term SOF. See Burgos, R. A. "Pushing the easy button: special operations forces, international security, and the use of force." *Special Operations Journal*, 4(2), 109–128. 2018, p. 113.

1.1 Literature selection and processing

While the literature on SO and SOF is relatively small and has extensive overlaps with other studies on international relations, defence, and security, as well as military studies, this report treats the body of research on SO and SOF as a distinct research field. The contours of the field are visible since studies on SO and SOF tend to speak to each other and treat these phenomena as distinct study objects.

In addition, there are a number of edited volumes specifically focused on SO and SOF. There are also journals explicitly devoted to the field. Examples include the *Special Operations Journal*, which was published between 2015 and 2021, and the more recent *Inter Populum — Journal of Irregular Warfare and Special Operations*, both of which have their editorial base in the US. Moreover, the field has a key research hub in the form of the Joint Special Operations University (JSOU) in Florida.

As research on SO and SOF can primarily be found within the broader scope of political sciences, this review concentrates on this literature and excludes medical, legal, and technical studies related to SO and SOF. It encompasses primarily academic literature, i.e., not only peer-reviewed articles and books, but also reports from research institutes and a smaller number of doctoral theses and specialised non-fiction books.

The time frame for the review is 2014-2024. There are two principal reasons for this. First, ten years' literature is the limitation of what could be handled within the scope of this project and the past decade is considered the limit of what can be thought of as the "contemporary field." With that said, no contemporary research can be entirely understood without some reference to earlier seminal texts such as William McRaven, Colin Gray, and Robert Spulak, which is reflected especially in Chapter 3, on theory.

Second, 2014 marks a pivotal time in history, not only in relation to SO and SOF but in the understanding of the global security landscape at large. With Russia's illegal occupation of Crimea and the growing competition from China, the focus of Western military and defence objectives shifted away from the Global War on Terror to strategic competition in Eastern Europe and the Indo-Pacific. In order to fit the scope of the study and remain responsive to the challenges arising from this new security landscape, the review is limited to literature on Western SO and SOF.² It is worth noting here that not only are US (and subsequently Western) SO/SOF organisations substantially larger in numbers and wider in scope than their non-Western counterparts, but there is also a great imbalance in the literature, where Western SO and SOF have gained considerably more attention than others. These aspects are further elaborated on in Chapter 4 Section 4.2.1.

² "Western" here refers to SO by, and SOF in, the military forces in Europe, the US, Canada, Australia, and New Zealand.

Based on these delimitations, the corpus underpinning this study consists of 197 texts.³ All texts collected for this review have been inductively coded in full or in part (e.g., abstracts, introductions, or conclusions) using NVivo, a software for qualitative content analysis.⁴ The use of NVivo has also enabled iterated reviews of the corpus.

Once the basic coding structure was set, further text- and word-frequency searches, along with word trees and clusters, could tease out additional references and help verify the patterns and themes generated in this review. These themes have inspired the structure of this report and are also reflected in the analysis of the literature in each chapter.

1.2 Outline of the study

For the already well-versed reader, this report can function as a guidebook, where clear headings direct the reader to the sections of most interest and give suggestions for further reading on particular topics. For readers less acquainted with the literature, the report can be read from beginning to end for a distilled but comprehensive overview of the field and its key debates. In this regard, the report in its entirety is of interest to anyone who wants to better understand the SO and SOF research field. The chapters are structured as follows.

Chapter 2: How studies define SO and SOF

Chapter 2 is dedicated to the definitional issues surrounding the SO and SOF concepts. Using US and NATO doctrine as a point of reference when analysing the literature, Chapter 2 indicates that there are a number of differences and challenges in defining SO and SOF that may have practical implications. Yet, due to these implications, the chapter also highlights the importance of clear definitions in the field.

This chapter is of particular interest for readers who wish to:⁵



- understand what SO and SOF are;
- attain an overview of SO and SOF doctrine;
- understand the challenges and practical implications of defining SO and SOF.

³ This number includes edited books (separate chapters are not counted individually), books, and journal articles. Doctrinal text is not included in this number.

⁴ Inductive coding means, in this context, that no pre-designed theoretical framework has been used to approach and categorise the material. Rather, the codes and topics have been entirely derived from the material and then categorised and grouped into analytical themes.

⁵ Chapter symbols: Shutterstock Inc.

Chapter 3: Theoretical perspectives on SO and SOF

After having dealt with the definitions of the objects of inquiry, in Chapter 3, the report turns to how the literature studies SOF and SO. The chapter focusses on texts that conduct theory development or theorisation about SO and SOF. The chapter highlights not only debates regarding the need for theory but also disagreements surrounding whether theory should focus on explaining SO, SOF, or their context.

This chapter is of particular interest for readers who wish to:



- obtain an understanding of foundational theories prior to 2014;
- understand arguments about the need for a theory of SO and SOF;
- engage with the theories of SO and SOF, along with the theories that explain their contexts;
- briefly understand SO and SOF functions and contexts, also from a small-state perspective.

Chapter 4: SO and SOF research topics

Chapter 4 looks further into the empirical areas of interest or, in other words, what SO and SOF studies study. The chapter begins by highlighting the general challenges to SO and SOF that have been identified in most of the literature. The chapter then identifies the research topics that reoccur in the literature and categorises these into three themes: SO and SOF actors, country cases, and organisational structure. Finally, the chapter pays attention to women in SOF, an emerging research area.

This chapter is of particular interest for readers who wish to:



- obtain an overview of various research topics, including that of small states as SO and SOF actors, within the field;
- obtain directions for further readings on various research topics;
- understand the overarching challenges facing SO and SOF.

Chapter 5: Opportunities for future SO and SOF research

Finally, Chapter 5 identifies areas for future research. The chapter combines the ideas for future research areas suggested by the Joint Special Operations University with those emerging from the literature in this review. Suggestions for future research related to the SO and SOF of small states are given particular emphasis here as that is an understudied area with many opportunities for further research.

This chapter is of particular interest for readers who wish to:



- obtain an overview of the trajectory of SO and SOF as a research field;
- be inspired to conduct further research on SO and SOF.

Appendix: 121 readings

In the appendix, the report provides a reading list of 121 texts on SO and SOF from 2014–2024. These texts have been selected based on their significance and with the aim to provide a palette of examples of different topics in the field. To inspire and facilitate further reading on the topics of most interest to the reader, the texts are organised into themes.

2 How studies define SO and SOF

This chapter is of particular interest for readers who wish to:



- understand what SO and SOF are;
- attain an overview of SO and SOF doctrine;
- understand the challenges and practical implications of defining SO and SOF.

To provide the reader with an overview of various definitions, their meanings, and the consequences of their use, this chapter aims to analyse how the scholarly community defines the concepts of SO and SOF. As shown throughout this chapter, conceptual vagueness exists in SO and SOF research. For the purpose of this study, the aim is to encompass this definitional range without settling on one specific definition.

The chapter begins with a short discussion of why definitions of SO and SOF matter. The two following sections in turn deal with definitions of these concepts. Each section contains an overview and analysis of the available US and NATO doctrines. This analysis provides conceptual building blocks that act as points of reference when discussing the scholarly definitions of SO and SOF.

Note that this chapter solely examines definitions identified in the reviewed literature. Chapter 3 discusses some definitions that were developed prior to 2014.

2.1 Why define SO and SOF?

Delving into definitions of SO and SOF may be considered something best left to academia, as it may not seem to concern the “real world.” However, there is a risk that a lack of understanding of SO and SOF could lead decision-makers to refrain from using them, thus not fully exploiting their potential.

The literature also points to the reverse, that perceptions of SO and SOF as cheap and easy options bring the risk of their being overused. As a result, SO and SOF may eventually be diluted to the point of resembling conventional forces or operations, thus losing their distinctiveness. For instance, some argue that United States Special Operations Command (USSOCOM) now only performs “hyperconventional operations” rather than special operations.⁶

⁶ Rothstein, H. *Afghanistan & the Troubled Future of Unconventional Warfare*. Annapolis, MD: Naval Institute Press, 2006, p. 102 in Searle, T. “Outside the Box: A Theory of Special Operations” in McCabe, P., & Lieber, P. (Eds.) *Special Operations Theory*. JSOU, 2017.

These challenges have, according to some, heightened with the transition to the new strategic context. This shift has increased uncertainty about what makes SOF special, further amplifying doubts about when to use them.⁷

Popular culture has also contributed to obstacles in defining SOF, as their operatives are often depicted as romanticised superhumans.⁸ Such definitions may stem from the public's search for modern heroes. Highlighting SOF's "cultural entrepreneurship,"⁹ these images also emerge as SOF (particularly in the US) needs to create a distinct reputation vis-à-vis other units, navigating the hierarchy of the armed forces and maintaining a strategically communicated image in the public eye.¹⁰ It can be argued that this romanticised image of SOF also influences policymakers.¹¹

As one scholar admits, "[t]erminology can be somewhat challenging in special operations research."¹² There are researchers who therefore suggest that it may be advisable not to define SO and SOF, as some concepts are impossible to define.¹³ Yet, without clear definitions, the question is: If policymakers do not understand these instruments, how is it possible to determine if they are suitable tools for addressing a particular kind of threat?¹⁴

All these definitional challenges indicate that how SO and SOF are defined and understood has practical implications. The image that SOF holds in the public perception is also of strategic importance.

⁷ Ucko, D. H. "The Role and Limits of Special Operations in Strategic Competition: The Right Force for the Right Mission". *RUSI Journal*, 168(3), 10–20. 2023.

⁸ Searle, T. *Outside the Box: A New General Theory of Special Operations*, JSOU, 2017.

⁹ Pettersson, U., & Ben-Ari, E. "'Kill and Tell': The Cultural Resonance and Reverberation of Creative Nonfiction on Special Operations Forces." *Special Operations Journal*, 4(2), 232–242. 2018, p. 233

¹⁰ In this text, the treatment of abbreviations like SO and SOF (as singular or plural) varies depending on the context to reflect the nuanced and diverse interpretations present in existing literature and among readers.

¹¹ Pettersson, U., & Ben-Ari, E. "'Kill and Tell.'"

¹² Burgos, R. A. "Pushing the easy button," p. 113.

¹³ Tugwell, M., & Charters, D. "Special Operations and the Threats to United States Interests in the 1980s," in Barnett, F., Tovar, H., & Shultz, R. (eds.). *Special Operations in US Strategy*. Washington, DC: National Defense University Press. 1984, p. 29. in Asklund Johnsen, A., & Højstrup Christensen, G. "Clarifying the Antisystemic Elements of Special Operations: A Conceptual Inquiry," *Special Operations Journal*, 2(2), 106–123. 2016, p. 108.

¹⁴ Asklund Johnsen, A., & Højstrup Christensen, G. "Clarifying the Antisystemic Elements," p. 107.



Key takeaways: Reasons for defining SO and SOF

- Scholars suggest that SO may be a concept that is too difficult to define.
- Other scholars suggest that definitions are important, so that decision-makers utilise SO and SOF appropriately.
- If SO and SOF are overused, they may lose their specialness.
- Popular culture may influence how people, including decision-makers, view SO and SOF.

2.2 Definitions of SO

According to scholar Funs Titulaer, the US and NATO doctrines on SO have formed “the basic conceptual building blocks of Western special operations doctrine.”¹⁵ When reviewing the literature from the previous decade, there are indications that it also relies on these doctrinal building blocks but incorporates other elements of SO as well. The literature also highlights some definitional disagreements. To give further substance to the academic literature’s definitions of SO, the following section discusses them in relation to the building blocks that Titulaer has identified in the doctrine, namely that SO are defined in relation to their:

- specially trained and selected personnel;
- direct strategic or operational effect;
- military or political risk;
- secrecy.

Finally, a fifth building block, derived from NATO and US doctrines, is discussed:

- unique or unconventional modes of employment.

2.2.1 Specially trained and selected persons

According to *U.S. Joint Publication 3-05 Special Operations*, special operations are operations: “requiring unique modes of employment, tactical techniques, equipment and training.” An SO doctrine has also been developed in the *NATO Allied Joint Doctrine for Special Operations AJP-3.5(B)*. The latter doctrine defines SO as “military activities conducted by specially designated, organised, trained, and equipped forces, manned with selected personnel.” At the same time, the US doctrine recognises that “most SO missions require non-SOF support,”¹⁶ meaning that SO are not necessarily performed by SOF operating on their own.

¹⁵ Titulaer, F. “Special operations (forces) explained. On the nature of Western special operations and the forces that conduct them”. *Militaire Spectator*. 190(2). 2021, p. 90.

¹⁶ US Department of Defense, *Joint Publication 3-05 Special Operations*, April 18, 2011, p. II-3.

In general, there is academic debate regarding whether SO should be defined in relation to the specialness of their operations or the operators.¹⁷ Similarly to the doctrine, a strand of literature loosely defines SO as “an operation that no other force is capable of conducting.”¹⁸ However, in contrast to current doctrine, in this approach SO are not a subcategory of conventional warfare, as they are distinctly different.¹⁹

Critiquing the approach of seeing SO as just another conventional operation but better, this literature maintains that SO cannot be defined “as simply more of the same.”²⁰ In other words, SO consists of “qualitatively different elements,” which reflects that they are characterised by elements outside the realm of conventional operations.²¹

Inferring from ideas about the SOF mindset, one strand of this literature defines SO in relation to a set of core attributes that distinguish them qualitatively from conventional operations. The attributes include: unruliness (opposing standard procedures), creativity (thinking outside the box), cross-institutional ways (transcending institutions, norms, domains, and agencies), and unexpectedness (flexible and, at times, operating against established conventional procedures).²²

2.2.2 Direct strategic or operational effect

Another aspect that has been used to identify SO is their effect. The NATO doctrine suggests that the purpose of SO is to produce results on the operational or strategic level.²³ Similarly, the US doctrine highlights that an SO can be aimed at specific military ends but also in support of other instruments of power such as diplomatic, economic, and informational measures.²⁴

In the academic literature, there is disagreement regarding how SO should be defined in relation to strategic effect. Some scholarly definitions suggest that SO are “extraordinary operations to achieve a specific effect,”²⁵ meaning that SO cannot alone resolve strategic problems.²⁶ One SO attribute identified in relation to this line of reasoning is that they are small actions that produce relative effect

¹⁷ For an extended discussion, see Rubright, R. *A unified theory for special operations*. JSOU Press. 2017; see Wey, A. “Principles of Special Operations: Learning from Sun Tzu and Frontinus”. *Comparative Strategy*, 33(2). 2014, 131–144.

¹⁸ Olson, E. T. “USSOCOM and SOF: War around the Edges,” *Journal of National Security Law and Policy*. 12(1) pp. 71–80, 2021, p. 78.

¹⁹ Gray, C. *Explorations in Strategy*, Westport, CT: Praeger. 1998, p. 149 in Titulaer, F. “Special operations (forces) explained.”

²⁰ Askund Johnsen, A., & Højstrup Christensen, G. “Clarifying the Antisystemic Elements,” p. 110.

²¹ Askund Johnsen, A., & Højstrup Christensen, G. “Clarifying the Antisystemic Elements,” p. 111.

²² Askund Johnsen, A., & Højstrup Christensen, G. “Clarifying the Antisystemic Elements,” p. 111.

²³ NATO, *Allied Joint Doctrine*, p. 1-1.

²⁴ US Department of Defense, *Joint Publication*, p. II-1.

²⁵ Rubright, R. *A unified theory*, p. 7.

²⁶ Kiras, J. “A Theory of Special Operations: ‘These Ideas Are Dangerous,’” *Special Operations Journal*, 1(2), 75–88. 2015, p. 83.

but do not have the mass to yield decisive effect. Another attribute is that SO can influence the speed of conflict and that their strategic utility lies in providing “appealing economy of force options.”²⁷

2.2.3 Military and political risk

A third building block concerns the political and military risk relating to SO. In US doctrine, SO are seen as often conducted in “hostile, denied, or politically sensitive environments.”²⁸ NATO doctrine also highlights that SO are joint strategic assets employed in sensitive or uncertain environments.²⁹ Similarly, academic definitions suggest that SO are missions that are impossible or difficult to complete using conventional forces,³⁰ or are options that are employed when there are unacceptable risks in using conventional forces.³¹

2.2.4 Secrecy

Both NATO and US doctrines recognise that SO may need to be clandestine or covert due to political and military considerations, as they are surrounded by higher military or political risk than conventional forces.³² However, both doctrines emphasise that this is something that may need to be present in a special operation. Thus, secrecy should perhaps not be seen as a defining attribute of SO, as it is often a consequence of the political and military risks surrounding the operations.

2.2.5 Unique or unconventional modes of employment

In addition to the elements identified by Titulaer, the NATO and US doctrines also identify that the operations require “using unconventional techniques and modes of employment.”³³ Similarly, the literature under review defines SO as “unconventional actions against enemy vulnerabilities in a sustained campaign,” which also relate to the attributes (unruliness, creativity, cross-institutional ways, and unexpectedness) identified when discussing what makes SO distinctly different from conventional operations.³⁴

²⁷ Kiras, J. “A Theory of Special Operations,” p. 83.

²⁸ US Department of Defense, *Joint Publication*, p. GL-12.

²⁹ NATO, *Allied Joint Doctrine*, p. 1-1.

³⁰ Parentheses in original, Kiras, J. “A Theory of Special Operations,” p. 83.

³¹ Spulak, R. “Epistemology, Paradigms, and the Future of Special Operations Theory,” in McCabe, P., & Lieber, P. (Eds.) *Special Operations Theory*. JSOU Press, 2017, p. 51.

³² NATO, *Allied Joint Doctrine*, p. 1-1; US Department of Defense, *Joint Publication*, p. I-1.

³³ NATO, *Allied Joint Doctrine*, p. LEX-5; US Department of Defense, *Joint Publication*, p. GL-12.

³⁴ Parentheses in original, Kiras, J. “A Theory of Special Operations,” p. 83.

2.2.6 Summary

When consulting Figure 1, which contrasts the academic definitions (in blue) to the doctrinal building blocks (in grey), it is apparent that there are some differences. For instance, doctrine defines SO in relation to elite operators, which indicates that doctrinal definitions see SO as conventional operations, just somewhat superior. Yet, some of the literature depicts SO as inherently different from conventional operations. The way that SO are different, is due, for instance, to their ability to transcend institutions and their use of creativity, domains, and agencies.

All the attributes of the SOF mindset identified as making SO distinctly different, to some extent also fit with the building block of “Unique or unconventional modes of employment.” Yet, following the reasoning of those who see SO as distinctly different, one could argue that while these characteristics may be similar to the building block, to be relevant in defining SOF, they need to be interpreted as “qualitatively different.”³⁵ To paraphrase, if SO are just defined as being more than conventional forces, they are no longer special.³⁶ The potential for overlap of these characteristics illustrates the meaning of either assuming SO as “different” or “more of the same.”

³⁵ Asklund Johnsen, A., & Højstrup Christensen, G. “Clarifying the Antisystemic Elements,” p. 110.

³⁶ Rubright, R. *A unified theory*.

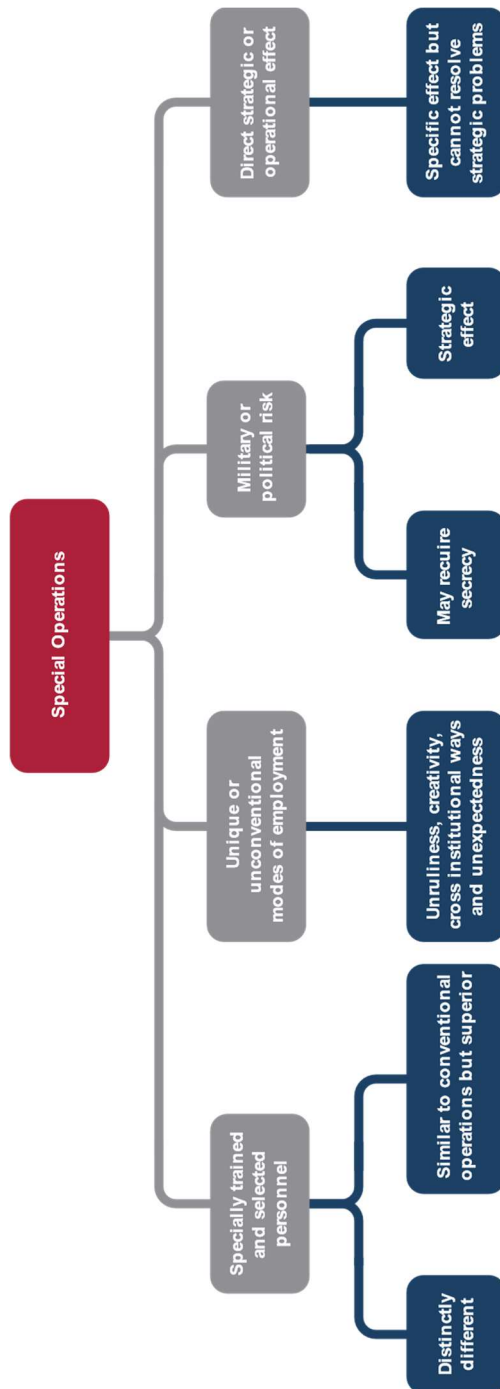


Figure 1: Doctrinal building blocks of SO (grey) and the literature (blue)

In the doctrine, SO are defined in relation to military and political risk, which is somewhat related to the literature that sees SO as tasks that conventional forces cannot perform. While these are here interpreted to be related, there is a conceptual problem with assuming that political and military risks, per definition, call for SO. If one accepts that SO are tasks that conventional forces cannot perform, it may increase the risk that SO are used merely because conventional forces cannot address a situation and not because a special operation is the best option.

A more marginal but important difference that emerges when comparing the literature with doctrine is that the doctrine sees SO as producing direct strategic or operational effect, while some literature indicates that even though SO can perform “disproportionate effects relative to their size and scale,” this effect is not decisive, and SO alone cannot resolve strategic problems.³⁷ The importance of this difference is that it may translate into varying policy expectations for what SO can achieve.



Key takeaways: Defining SO

- Characteristics of SO identified in doctrine and the literature: specially trained and selected personnel, military or political risk, direct strategic or operational effect, secrecy, and unique or unconventional modes of employment.
- The literature debates whether SO should be defined in relation to having strategic effect or specific effect.
 - How this is defined may influence policy expectations.
- The literature debates whether SO should be defined as being similar to conventional operations but superior or as being distinctly different.
 - How this is defined may lead to “incorrect” employment of SO.

2.3 Definitions of SOF

The US and NATO doctrines have also defined SOF. While there is a plethora of studies examining SOF and their activities, there is surprisingly little research from the past decade focusing on concrete definitions of these forces. In contrast to defining SO, research from the past decade closely adheres to doctrinal definitions. This is expected, as SOF are part of established military structures. Yet, at the same time, it is notable that there is such limited research, given the likely vast diversity of SOF worldwide. For instance, the SOF of small states probably do not have the same organisational structures or engage in the same activities as US SOF.

When analysing the doctrine and literature, a number of characteristics of SOF can be identified, namely that they:

³⁷ Kiras, J. “A Theory of Special Operations,” p. 83.

- are joint endeavours;
- have advanced training and a SOF mindset;
- have an autonomous command and control structure.

2.3.1 Joint endeavours

The US doctrine sees SOF as inherently joint endeavours, while remaining autonomous in their command and control structure.³⁸ In the doctrine, SOF are “specifically organised, trained, and equipped to conduct and support special operations.”³⁹ Similarly, the NATO doctrine suggests that SOF “are organised in a joint manner with aviation, maritime, and land units from the troop-contributing nations.”⁴⁰

In the literature, SOF are seen as being specialised in operating in a complex environment where they are interlinked with other actors such as local communities, military forces, and government institutions. Thus, they are “specialised generalists or troops who specialise in being generalists.”⁴¹

2.3.2 Advanced training and the SOF mindset

The NATO doctrine suggests that SOF are different from conventional forces, due to their selection processes and training, as well as that they can be employed in situations that conventional forces cannot.⁴² According to US doctrine, SOF’s mindset makes them well suited for irregular warfare.⁴³

Similarly, some of the literature also describes SOF as elite units.⁴⁴ These units consist of highly trained personnel operating in adversary-controlled areas, in small groups that have a vast array of capabilities and resources, able to resolve problematic situations with innovative solutions.⁴⁵

Alistair Finlan points out that definitions like the ones above suggest that SOF are essentially conventional forces with more capacity. Therefore, he proposes that SOF are the elite of conventional forces, constituting of “high-quality, usually battalion-size, infantry units of the shock variety.”⁴⁶ Similarly, Rubright maintains that while SOF are elite, they are *not* special; their status as SOF is contextual, as

³⁸ US Department of Defense, *Joint Publication*, p. IX-X.

³⁹ US Department of Defense, *Joint Publication*, p. GL-12.

⁴⁰ NATO, *Allied Joint Doctrine*, p. 1-1.

⁴¹ Shamir, E., & Ben-Ari, E. “The Rise of Special Operations Forces: Generalized Specialization, Boundary Spanning and Military Autonomy,” *Journal of Strategic Studies*, 41(3), pp. 335–371. 2018, p. 337.

⁴² NATO, *Allied Joint Doctrine*, p. 1-2.

⁴³ US Department of Defense, *Joint Publication*, p. II-1.

⁴⁴ Burgos, R. A. “Pushing the easy button,” p. 114.

⁴⁵ Shamir, E., & Ben-Ari, E. “The Rise of Special Operations Forces,” p. 338.

⁴⁶ Finlan, A. “A Dangerous Pathway? Toward a Theory of Special Forces,” *Comparative Strategy*, 38(4), pp. 255–275. 2019, p. 262.

both what they do and what is considered elite changes over time.⁴⁷ As is explained further in Chapter 4, because definitions of SOF are tied to specific contexts, Rubright sees only the special operations as truly special, while SOF are better understood as elite.

2.3.3 Autonomous command and control structure

Finally, the NATO doctrine, like the US doctrine, identifies that the SOF units are small and exhibit “self-sufficiency (for limited periods of time).”⁴⁸ Similarly, the academic literature identifies that SOF have a level of autonomy in comparison to conventional forces.⁴⁹ For instance, one defining feature of SOF is that they are directly reporting to the strategic level.⁵⁰ In this way, a SOF is defined as a “strategic corporal,” which is creating change by linking “the tactical to the operational and strategic levels in a uniquely active way.”⁵¹ Thus, SOF should be understood as “warrior diplomats” as opposed to “elite killing machines.”⁵²

2.3.4 Summary

In sum, as shown in Figure 2, the literature (in blue) and doctrines (in grey) define SOF in similar ways. SOF are considered joint endeavours, yet, they maintain autonomous and self-sufficient structures. Moreover, these forces are identified by their advanced training, which makes them suitable for specific environments and warfare.

⁴⁷ Rubright, R. *A unified theory*.

⁴⁸ NATO, *Allied Joint Doctrine*, p. 1-2.

⁴⁹ Burgos, R. A. “Pushing the easy button,” p. 114.

⁵⁰ Shamir, E., & Ben-Ari, E. “The Rise of Special Operations Forces,” p. 338.

⁵¹ Shamir, E., & Ben-Ari, E. “The Rise of Special Operations Forces,” p. 337.

⁵² Højstrup, Gitte. “Introduction,” in *Interdisciplinary Perspectives on Special Operations Forces*. The 2016 Royal Danish Defence College (RDDC) conference proceedings. Royal Danish Defence College. 2017.

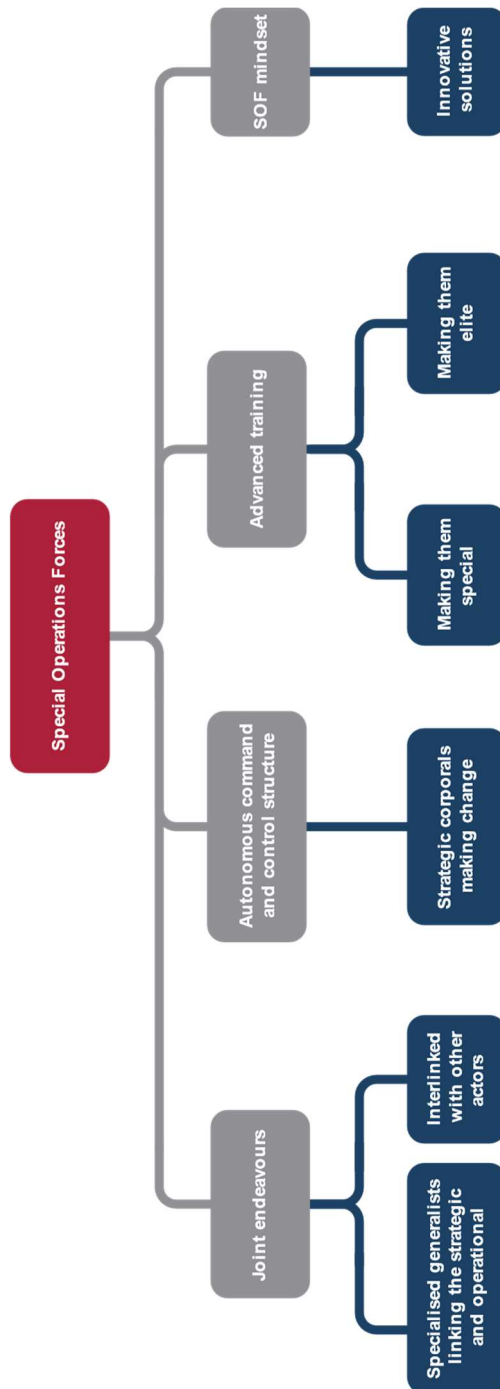


Figure 2: Building blocks of SOF in doctrine (grey) and the literature (blue)

However, considering the suitability of specific environments or certain forms of warfare as a building block of SOF may have practical implications. For instance, this may lead to SOF being associated with and employed in specific contexts or overlooked for others.

The suitability of SOF for a specific context may be a consequence of their training and problem-solving skills (the SOF mindset) rather than a building block. The literature identifies one characteristic that alludes to a SOF mind-set, namely that they provide “innovative solutions to problematic circumstances.”⁵³



Key takeaways: Defining SOF

- The doctrine and literature describe SOF’s building blocks as joint, with autonomous command and control structures, advanced training, and specific mindsets.
- There is academic debate about whether SOF should be defined as special or elite.
- There could be practical implications in defining SOF in relation to certain tasks and contexts, as they may be overused or not used at all.

2.4 The SO and SOF tasks and context

In relation to defining SO and SOF, scholars and doctrines have identified and categorised the tasks that SOF perform and the context where SO are conducted. NATO identifies three principal tasks of SOF: military assistance (MA), direct action (DA), and special reconnaissance (SR). The US doctrine lists these activities together with eight others as core SOF activities. As shown in Table 1, of these eight, NATO has identified three as supporting SOF activities.⁵⁴ The table shows how SOF activities vary vastly depending on the context of the actor performing them. The table also reflects the wide scope of US SOF and the extent of their activities. In contrast, the NATO doctrine has a more general formulation, likely in order to avoid clashes with national doctrines and policies and to facilitate interoperability.

⁵³ Shamir, E., & Ben-Ari, E. “The Rise of Special Operations Forces,” p. 338.

⁵⁴ The tasks that are not mentioned in NATO doctrine but in the US’s are military information-support operations, civil-affairs operations, unconventional warfare and foreign internal defence. NATO has listed hostage release operations as a supporting activity, which is not mentioned in US doctrine. As reflected in the table, the US SOF conduct a vast array of activities that may be outside the scope of other states and NATO.

Table 1. SOF tasks in US and NATO doctrines.

	US	NATO
Direct action	<i>Core activity</i> Raids, ambushes, and assaults, terminal guidance operations, maritime interception operations, mine emplacement, standoff attacks by fire from air, ground, or maritime platforms, sabotage, anti-ship operations	<i>Principle task</i> Raids, ambushes, and assaults, terminal guidance operations, precision destruction operations, opposed boarding operations, precision destruction operations, recovery operations
Special reconnaissance	<i>Core activity</i> Environmental reconnaissance, target assessment, post-strike reconnaissance, assessment of chemical, biological, residual nuclear, radiological, or environmental hazards in a denied area, collecting information on the activities of an actual or potential enemy	<i>Principle task</i> Environmental reconnaissance, threat assessment, target assessment, post-strike reconnaissance
Security force assistance/military assistance	<i>Core activity</i> Organising, equipping, training, advising, and rebuilding	<i>Principle task</i> Training, advising, and mentoring/partnering
Counterproliferation of weapons of mass destruction (WMD).	<i>Core activity</i> To undermine the threat/ or use of WMD, prevent acquisition, deter use, minimise consequences of WMD use, and reverse proliferation	<i>Supporting task</i> May assist in WMD disablement missions
Counterterrorism	<i>Core activity</i> Prevent or defeat terrorist attacks, disrupt terrorist networks, prevent terrorist acquisition of WMD, help partner nations prevent terrorist activities, and prevent a favourable environment for terrorists	<i>Supporting task</i> SOF used in high-risk environments, in a covert or clandestine fashion together with joint forces or using DA, SR, or MA
Counterinsurgency	<i>Core activity</i> DA, establish stable conditions, train and advise, SR, cooperation with indigenous population	<i>Supporting task</i> Area assessment; early command, control and communication; support joint forces using DA, SR, and MA
Information operations	<i>Core activity</i> Integrated operations aiming to corrupt, disrupt, or influence adversaries' decision-making	<i>Not mentioned in the doctrine.</i>

Most commonly, the scholarly literature organises SOF activities, as does the NATO doctrine, along the lines of military assistance, direct action, and special reconnaissance.⁵⁵ However, there are various ways of categorising the actions within these activities.

For instance, Yair Ansbacher and Ron Schleifer point out that there are three contexts for SOF in direct action. These contexts are peacetime (covert with small numbers), low-intensity conflict (for instance, arrests and ambushes), and war.⁵⁶

Special operations have also been categorised according to context. For example, they can be clandestine (hidden and secret operations, not meant to be detected, e.g., reconnaissance operations), covert (not necessarily hidden but attribution can be denied, e.g., diversionary tactics), and overt (e.g., training operations).⁵⁷

As alluded to throughout this chapter, the literature and doctrine defining SO and SOF have produced contextual definitions, specifically when including unconventional warfare or the grey zone as defining attributes.⁵⁸ However, these forms of explanation do not concern what characteristics SOF or SO have; they are portrayals of the context of the actor performing them and in which they are employed. SO and SOF can be employed in many varying situations, such as in grey zones,⁵⁹ peacetime,⁶⁰ and maritime operations.⁶¹

Tying the definitions of SO and SOF to a specific context may have practical implications, as they are used for tasks that others could perform or not used at all because, in the mind of the decision-maker, they are not associated with the task.

⁵⁵ Eriksson, G. & Pettersson, U. *Special Operations from a Small State Perspective*. Palgrave Macmillan. 2017.

⁵⁶ Ansbacher, Y., & Schleifer, R. "The Utility Knife Effect in Special Operations," *RUSI Journal*, 2024. 168(6), 54-63. 2024.

⁵⁷ Ansbacher, Y., & Schleifer, R. "How Special Operations Forces Can Contribute Strategically to Modern Wars," *RUSI Journal*, 166(4). pp. 30-39. 2021.

⁵⁸ Byman, D., & Merritt, I. "The New American Way of War: Special Operations Forces in the War on Terrorism," *The Washington Quarterly*, 41(2), pp. 79-93. 2018; Hardy, J. "Hunters and Gatherers: The Evolution of Strike and Intelligence Functions in Special Operations Forces," *International Journal of Intelligence and Counter Intelligence*, 36(4), pp. 1143-1163. 2023.

⁵⁹ Lohaus, P. "Special Operations Forces in the Gray Zone: An Operational Framework for Using Special Operations Forces in the Space Between War and Peace." *Special Operations Journal*, 2(2), pp. 75-91. 2016.

⁶⁰ Bester, L. "The utilization of special forces in peace missions: perspectives from South Africa," *Small Wars & Insurgencies*, 34(59), pp. 985-1006. 2023.

⁶¹ Valdengo, J., LaChance, E., & Andrews, D. "Training Special Operations Forces to Conduct Maritime Surveillance: A New Approach." *Special Operations Journal*, 4(2), 202-212. 2018.



Key takeaways: SOF tasks and context

- The US SOF conduct a vast array of activities that may be outside of the scope of other states and NATO.
- Both doctrine and the literature categorise SOF tasks into MA, DA, and SR.
- DA can be categorised according to conflict intensity (peace, low-intensity conflict, and war).
- SO can be categorised according to visibility (clandestine, covert, and overt).
- Defining SO and SOF in relation to a specific context could lead to their misuse.

2.5 Reflections on definitions

This chapter finds that SO are defined in relation to their level of strategic effect (disproportionate but detrimental effect, specific effect, or direct effect). In practice, a definition that includes effect means that there will be certain expectations of what SO can achieve.

Colin Gray maintains that special operations should be studied in relation to their strategic value “or the consequences of tactical and operational behaviour within a specific war or conflict, positive, negative, or both.”⁶² Yet, the strategic value is contextual. If defined in relation to their strategic value, SO are also bound to a specific context, which means that, in practice, SO may be associated and used, appropriately or not, in certain contexts while overlooked in other contexts for which they would be relevant.

If SO and SOF are not defined in terms of an environmental context, they could be defined in relation to the context of what conventional forces and operations cannot do. Yet, this is also problematic, as defining them in this way risks SO and SOF becoming a catch-all solution to problems that conventional forces and operations cannot address, which dilutes the specialness of SO. Thus, this chapter, while first introducing the arguments for recognising the importance of defining SO and SOF, has also highlighted the consequences and challenges of doing so.

⁶² Lambakis, S. “Colin Gray on the strategic utility of special operations,” *Comparative Strategy*, 40(2), pp. 205–208. 2021, p.205.



Chapter 2 takeaways

Reasons for defining SO and SOF

- Scholars suggest that SO may be a concept that is too difficult to define.
- Other scholars suggest that definitions are important, so that decision-makers utilise SO and SOF appropriately.
- If SO and SOF are overused, they may lose their specialness.
- Popular culture may influence how people, including decision-makers, view SO and SOF.

Defining SO

- Characteristics of SO identified in doctrine and the literature: specially trained and selected personnel, military or political risk, direct strategic or operational effect, secrecy and unique or unconventional modes of employment.
- The literature debates whether SO should be defined in relation to having a strategic effect or a specific effect.
 - How this is defined may influence policy expectations.
- The literature debates whether SO should be defined as being similar to conventional operations but superior or as being distinctly different.
 - How this is defined may lead to that SO is “incorrectly” employed.

Defining SOF

- The doctrine and literature describe SOF’s building blocks as joint, with autonomous command and control structures, advanced training, and specific mindsets.
- There is academic debate about whether SOF should be defined as special or elite.
- There could be practical implications in defining SOF in relation to certain tasks and contexts, as they may be overused or not used at all.

The SO and SOF tasks and context

- The US SOF conduct a vast array of activities that may be outside of the scope of other states and NATO.
- Both doctrine and the literature categorise SOF tasks into MA, DA, and SR.
- DA can be categorised according to conflict intensity (peace, low intensity conflict, and war).
- SO can be categorised according to visibility (clandestine, covert, and overt).
- Defining SO and SOF in relation to a specific context could lead to their misuse.

3 Theoretical perspectives on SO and SOF

This chapter is of particular interest for readers who wish to:



- obtain an understanding of foundational theories prior to 2014;
- understand arguments about the need for a theory of SO and SOF;
- engage with the theories of SO and SOF, along with the theories that explain their contexts;
- briefly understand SO and SOF functions and contexts, also from a small-state perspective.

Since the new millennium, the number of SO and SOF has rapidly increased. However, theoretical development within the research field has not followed at the same pace.⁶³ In 1998, Colin Gray had already highlighted the field's lack of conceptual clarity and theoretical soundness.⁶⁴ According to Dennis Gyllensporre and Alistair Finlan, this was still true in 2017.⁶⁵ Since then, there have been a number of important contributions toward theoretical development. For instance, the Joint Special Operations University (JSOU) has published a series focusing on theory building.⁶⁶ There has also been theory development of SO and SOF in a small-state context.⁶⁷

This chapter reveals that there is some ambiguity within the field over what the referent object of theory is (SO or SOF). There are also disagreements over what exactly a theory should explain, including whether a theory should be general, explaining all the workings of SO or SOF, or be specific and explain a particular phenomenon. Scholars also debate whether there is any need for SO or SOF theory at all.

While this chapter focusses on recent theoretical developments within the field of SO and SOF, it begins with a brief overview of foundational texts published prior to the selected period. This is followed by a presentation of current debates regarding SO and SOF and the state of their theoretical development, which includes identifying theoretical commonalities and challenges and an account of the literature that theorises on SOF in specific contexts.

⁶³ Searle, T. Searle, T. *Outside the Box: A New General Theory of Special Operations*, JSOU Press, 2017; Gyllensporre, D. "Contemporary Hybrid Warfare and the Evolution of Special Operations Theory," in Eriksson, G. & Pettersson, U. *Special Operations form a Small State Perspective*. Palgrave Macmillan. 2017.

⁶⁴ Gray, C. *Explorations in Strategy*, Westport, CT: Praeger. 1998.

⁶⁵ Gyllensporre, D. "Contemporary Hybrid Warfare"; Finlan, A. "A Dangerous Pathway?"

⁶⁶ Rubright, R. *A unified theory*.

⁶⁷ Eriksson, G. & Pettersson, U. (eds.). *Special Operations*.

3.1 Theoretical debates prior to 2014

While several scholars contributed to theory development prior to the selected period, since 2014 this work has specifically built on the contributions of Colin Gray, William McRaven, and Robert G. Spulak Jr. This section briefly accounts for these three contributions. Table 2 outlines these and other significant theoretical contributions prior to 2014.⁶⁸

Table 2. Important theoretical contributions prior to 2014.⁶⁸

Scholar and their work	Central argument/contribution
Joseph D. Celeski (2011): <i>A Way Forward for Special Operations Theory and Strategic Art.</i>	Argues for an overarching theory of SO. Focuses on the challenges of developing a theory of SO (the relatively recent institutionalisation of SOF and the lack of a distinct SOF domain). The role of SOF in categories of warfare (conventional, irregular, and political). Suggests that SO has had the most effect when used to prevent war.
James Kiras (2006): <i>Special Operations and Strategy: From World War II to the War on Terrorism.</i>	Argues that special operations should be viewed through strategic attrition (wearing down the adversaries' morale and resources). Suggests that SO has the most utility in the context of a campaign, which requires integration with conventional forces.
Harry Yarger (2013): <i>21st Century SOF: Toward an American Theory of Special Operations.</i>	Argues for an American theory of SO. Identifies attributes of SOF. Focuses on how SOF fits in with national security. Sees SOF as an instrument of power.
Colin Gray (1998; 1999): <i>Explorations in Strategy; "Handfuls of heroes on desperate ventures: When do special operations succeed?"</i>	Argues that SO should be analysed in relation to their strategic utility. Suggests that this is explained by the economy of force (SO as a cost-efficient option) and expansion of choice (SO as an additional option).
William McRaven (1993; 1996): <i>Spec ops: Case studies in special operations warfare—theory and practice; The Theory of Special Operations.</i>	Argues that SO has strategic effect, meaning that it can achieve relative superiority against an adversary. Identifies six principles for success: simplicity, security, repetition, surprise, speed, and purpose.
Robert Spulak (2007): <i>A Theory of Special Operations.</i>	Argues that SOF operators facilitate SO success due to their unique qualities. Suggests that SO and SOF theory cannot be separated.

⁶⁸ The table is based on Celeski, J. *Report of Proceedings, Joint Special Operations University SOF-Power Workshop: A Way Forward for Special Operations Theory and Strategic Art*, JSOU Press, 2011; Gray, C. *Explorations in Strategy*; Gray, C. "Handfuls of heroes on desperate ventures: When do special operations succeed?" *Parameters*, 29(1), pp.2-24. 1999; Kiras, J. *Special Operations and Strategy: From World War II to the War on Terrorism*, New York: Routledge. 2006; McRaven, W., H. *Spec ops: Case studies in special operations warfare: theory and practice*. Presidio Press. 1996; McRaven, W. *The Theory of Special Operations*, Department of National Security Affairs, Naval Postgraduate School, Monterey, CA, June. 1993; Spulak, R. *A Theory of Special Operations*. No. SAND2007-4520P. Sandia National Lab. Albuquerque, NM: United States). 2007; Yarger, H. *21st Century SOF: Toward an American Theory of Special Operations*, JSOU Press. 2013. The table does not constitute an exhaustive list of all important

One of the main contributions to SO theory development is the work of Colin Gray. He proposes that SO should be seen “as mission, as forces, and as state of mind” and highlights that not all SO are performed by SOF, nor do SOF only perform SO.⁶⁹ Gray suggests that an important aspect of understanding SO is that they are distinct from regular warfare.⁷⁰

In relation to the success of SO, Gray explores their strategic utility. He defines this as “the contribution of a particular kind of military activity to the course and outcome of an entire conflict.”⁷¹ Strategic utility depends on the context of war. The utility may not only constitute an independent effect in war but also provide support to conventional forces. SO utility is evaluated in relation to the strategic ends of the conflict and whether it furthers the nation’s abilities to reach such ends.⁷² Gray sees SO’s contribution via the operational level, in other words, whether the “strategic utility flows from action in the field that special operations forces may generate.”⁷³

Gray formulates the strategic utility of SO as two master claims. The first, *economy of force*, means that SO relative to their size are an efficient and cost-effective way to reach military ends. The second, *expansion of choice*, suggests that they “present options to political and military leaders” other than conventional military forces.⁷⁴

Gray also identifies specific conditions for operational success (see Figure 3 below).⁷⁵ His thinking has inspired scholars across the field (some of whom are explored later on in this chapter). However, much of Gray’s work and legacy is based on assumptions about great military powers that may not be applicable to most other states.⁷⁶

Another important contribution to theory development is William McRaven’s work focusing on the strategic effect of SO. McRaven sees strategic effect as achieving relative superiority, which means that “an attacking force, generally smaller, gains a decisive advantage over a larger or well-defended enemy.”⁷⁷ He defines operational success as being evaluated in relation to the ability to meet set objectives.⁷⁸ The success of an operation occurs when elite forces conduct

works, merely scholarly work that has been frequently cited in the literature underpinning this review. We do not suggest that these works are less relevant or more important than the works of others.

⁶⁹ Lambakis, S. “Colin Gray”.

⁷⁰ Gray, C. *Explorations in Strategy*, p. 150 in Titulaer, F. “Special operations (forces) explained”.

⁷¹ Gray, C. *Explorations in Strategy*, p. 163 in Modigs, R. “The Utility of Special Operations in Small States,” in Eriksson, G. & Pettersson, U. (Eds.) *Special Operations from a Small State Perspective*, p. 45.

⁷² Lambakis, S. “Colin Gray,” p.209.

⁷³ Modigs, R. “The Utility of Special Operations,” p. 45.

⁷⁴ Lambakis, S. “Colin Gray,” p.209.

⁷⁵ See Gray, C. “Handfuls of heroes,” p. 2–3

⁷⁶ Gyllensporre, D. “Contemporary Hybrid Warfare.”

⁷⁷ McRaven, W. *Spec Ops*, p.4. in Mooney, M. “Like a Bolt from the Blue: Relative Superiority and the Coup de Main Assault on the Caen Canal and River Orne Bridges, 6 June 1944,” *Inter Populum: The Journal of Irregular Warfare and Special Operations*, 1(1), pp. 1–40, 2023, p. 2.

⁷⁸ Müller, K. “Civil Context for SOF Theory” in McCabe, P., & Lieber, P. (eds.) *Special Operations Theory*. JSOU Press, 2017.

“excellent planning, execution and command with the element of surprise against less capable average units.”⁷⁹ In this interpretation, special operations are what SOF do.⁸⁰

To avoid operational miscalculations and errors, the so-called Clausewitzian friction, McRaven identifies at the execution, preparation, and planning stages six principles — simplicity, security, repetition, surprise, speed, and purpose — necessary for SO to produce strategic effect.⁸¹ In studying the 2011 Abbottabad raid, the special operation that led to the death of Osama Bin Laden, later research finds that the principles were still relevant in that context.⁸²

However, the research also points out that McRaven’s principles only concern direct-action operations.⁸³ Scholars also find that not all principles of McRaven’s theory are needed to achieve operational success, and they can be adopted by other forces than SOF while still amounting to successful special operations.⁸⁴ Other conditions than McRaven’s principles may also be necessary for operational success. For instance, scholars see collaboration between policy and strategy as a key component for operational success.⁸⁵

Like McRaven, Robert G. Spulak has focused on Clausewitzian friction. He defines special operations as “missions to accomplish strategic objectives where the use of conventional forces would create unacceptable risks due to Clausewitzian friction.”⁸⁶ To mitigate friction, Spulak argues for the employment of SO, as the qualities of SOF personnel mean that they can address the source of friction. Because SOF conduct SO, he maintains, SO and SOF theory cannot be separated.⁸⁷

Spulak upholds that theory should be prescriptive, implying that it should provide a guide for using SOF to reach concrete ends.⁸⁸ He identifies a set of unique qualities of SO that correspond with SOF capabilities and are considered necessary for operational success.⁸⁹

Analysing SOF and SO as inseparable may have consequences for Spulak’s theory, as it “is not a theory on special operations but rather a conceptualisation of

⁷⁹ Wirtz, J. “The Abbottabad raid and the theory of special operations.” *Journal of Strategic Studies*, 45(6-7), pp. 972–992. 2022, p. 987.

⁸⁰ Wirtz, J. “The Abbottabad raid.”

⁸¹ Wirtz, J. “The Abbottabad raid.”

⁸² Wirtz, J. “The Abbottabad raid.”

⁸³ Müller, K. “Civil Context”; Osborne, J. “Advancing a Strategic Theory of Special Operations,” *Small Wars Journal*, 13 May. 2016.

⁸⁴ Wirtz, J. “The Abbottabad raid”; Mooney, M. “Like a Bolt from the Blue.”

⁸⁵ Wirtz, J. “The Abbottabad raid.”

⁸⁶ Spulak, R. *A Theory of Special Operations*, p 1.

⁸⁷ Spulak, R. *A Theory of Special Operations* in Searle, T. *Outside the Box*.

⁸⁸ Wong-Diaz, F. “The President of the United States and Special Operations Theory,” in McCabe, P., & Lieber, P. (eds.) *Special Operations Theory*. JSOU Press, 2017.

⁸⁹ These are: relative superiority, certain access, unconventional operations, integrated operations, and strategic initiative. For an explanation, see: Redding, R., et al. “War in the Falklands: Case Studies in British Special Operations,” *Special Operations Journal*, 6(1), pp. 18–34. 2020.

the attributes of Special Forces personnel.”⁹⁰ Nevertheless, recent research has also indicated the value of the theory in evaluating, for example, the strategic achievements of British special operations in the Falklands war.⁹¹

The common denominator for all the theories explained above is that they identify that it is important for theory to explain the result of SO. However, there are some nuances. For instance, Gray defines his focus on strategic utility less clearly than the other theorists do. The strategic utility of SO is assessed against if the operation moves the nation closer to its ends, but also against its attractiveness as a policy option. In this sense, Gray’s definition captures varying contextual conditions.⁹²

For McRaven and Spulak, operational success is more related to SO actions in the field, which, according to McRaven, are dependent on their relative superiority to an adversary.⁹³ This definition is thus more descriptive and quantifiable.⁹⁴

All three scholars follow the ends-means distinction common in military theory, yet Gray does not necessarily see the need for instant effect, only that SO results eventually align with strategy. Thus, there appears to be a temporal aspect to the ends-means distinction in his theory. All the theories also identify conditions for success (see Figure 3).

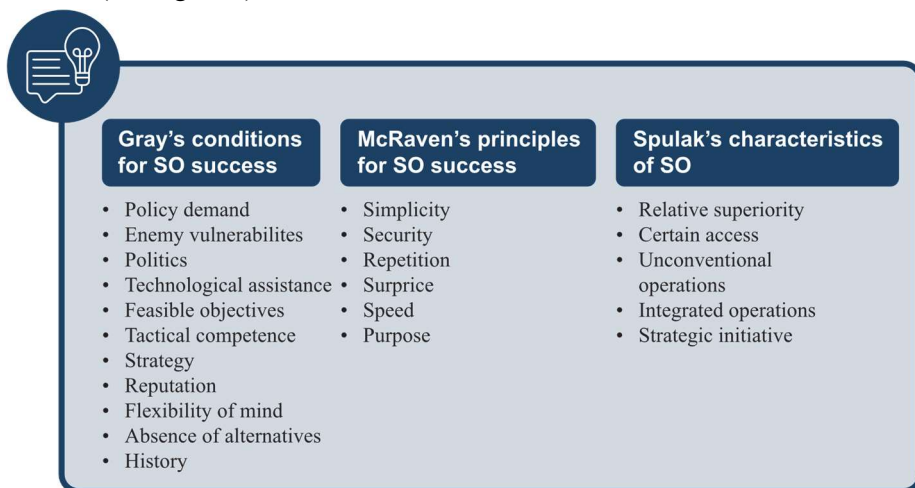


Figure 3: Illustrating the different focusses on how to achieve success in foundational theories⁹⁵

⁹⁰ Gyllensporre, D. “Contemporary Hybrid Warfare,” p. 28.

⁹¹ Redding, R., et al. “War in the Falklands.”

⁹² Asklund Johnsen, A., & Højstrup Christensen, G. “Clarifying the Antisystemic Elements.”

⁹³ Müller, K. “Civil Context.”

⁹⁴ Asklund Johnsen, A., & Højstrup Christensen, G. “Clarifying the Antisystemic Elements.”

⁹⁵ Note that the table is not a comparison of the conditions, principles, and characteristics. Gray, C. “Handfuls of heroes,” p. 2–3.; McRaven, W. *The Theory of Special Operations*; Redding, R., et al. “War in the Falklands.”

When considering the conditions in Figure 3, it is clear that Spulak, McRaven, and Gray all adopt different focusses or levels of analysis. While Gray heavily focusses on the strategic context, McRaven's and Spulak's focus is on the operational and tactical level. As Dennis Gyllensporre highlights, although theory-building by McRaven and Spulak provides tactical insights about special operations, "[t]he strategic-level thinking is yet to be adequately developed."⁹⁶ In contrast, Gray's approach is more holistic than either Spulak's or McRaven's, as he sees the success of SO as not only dependent on the actions in the field but also in relation to how the value of using SO is appreciated and related to strategic goals.



Key takeaways: Ideas in foundational theories

- Colin Gray sees SO's strategic utility as evaluated in relation to strategic ends. SO have utility as they, due to their size, present a relatively cost-effective choice and an additional option for political and military leaders.
 - The theory is based on great military powers and may not be applicable to other states.
- While William McRaven focusses on SO's strategic effect, which means achieving relative superiority, his theory mostly concerns the operational level. He identifies six principles for operational success
 - The principles only concern DA; they may not be the only recipe for success, and not only SOF can use them for success.
- Robert Spulak suggests that SO can prevent miscalculations in war due to the qualities of SOF personnel. SO and SOF theory cannot be separated.
 - According to some, this is a description of SOF personnel but not a theory.

3.2 The need for theory

Since McRaven, Spulak and Gray published their seminal works, scholars have debated the necessity of a theory of special operations. James D. Kiras argues that a theory of SO or SOF is unnecessary as other theories about war and conflict "are already sufficient to describe the role of special operations within them."⁹⁷ He highlights that there are personal and organisational impediments to theory building in relation to SO. Examples of the former include time, research credibility, and limited access to empirical evidence. As a result, and in addition, it will be difficult to develop a theory that is accepted by practitioners.⁹⁸

Scholars have also pointed out that special operations vary in nature, which means that they are "distinct (though interrelated) phenomena, not a single

⁹⁶ Gyllensporre, D. "Contemporary Hybrid Warfare," p. 28

⁹⁷ Kiras, J. "A Theory of Special Operations," p. 84.

⁹⁸ Kiras, J. "Do We Even Need a Theory?" in McCabe, P., & Lieber, P. (Eds.) *Special Operations Theory*. JSOU Press, 2017.

phenomenon.”⁹⁹ Therefore, they advise against a general theory of SO, highlighting instead the value of existing theories within social and political science.¹⁰⁰

To develop or test a theory, there needs to be empirical data. Accessing data, however, has proved difficult in relation to SO and SOF. The lack of access to data has led to creative data collection, such as using US officers’ masters theses as proxies for tracking changing views within the SOF organisation under study.¹⁰¹

The literature under review also reflects a significant use of more conventional methods such as case studies¹⁰² or data collection through interviews.¹⁰³ However, using case studies can lead to selection bias, implying that the selection of cases is done in order to support theory.¹⁰⁴ Most significantly, while there have been attempts at rigorous data collection, some of the literature relies on (personal) anecdotes.¹⁰⁵

Even if there is data available and a theory of SO or SOF would be accepted by practitioners, Kiras suggests that a theory of SO could in fact be dangerous.¹⁰⁶ He worries that because theory risks becoming dogma and co-opted by bureaucratic agendas, it will hinder critical thinking.¹⁰⁷

Alistair Finlan disputes Kiras’ argument that a theory of SO is dangerous, suggesting instead that it can be emancipatory.¹⁰⁸ In short, this means that a theory may encourage thinking that is not tied to the assumptions underlying traditional military thought.

Other scholars highlight that misunderstandings of SO as last-resort occurrences have contributed to sentiments that a theory of SO is irrelevant. Yet, scholars point out that special operations are not the option of last resort; they are frequently used in achieving national security ends.¹⁰⁹ Hence, “special operations need a theory every bit as much as other military operations do.”¹¹⁰

⁹⁹ Marsh, C., Kenny, M., & Joslyn, N. “SO what? The value of scientific inquiry and theory building in special operations research”. *Special Operations Journal*, 1(2), 89–104. 2015, p. 95.

¹⁰⁰ Marsh, C., Kenny, M., & Joslyn, N. “SO what?” p.89.

¹⁰¹ Gielas, A. M. “Quarrelsome Siblings–The Relationship Between Special Operations and Conventional Forces.” *Journal of Strategic Security*, 17(1), pp. 58–75. 2024.; Gielas, A. M. “Prima Donnas in Kevlar zones. Challenges to the Unconventional Warfare efforts of the U.S. Special Forces during Operation Enduring Freedom,” *Small Wars & Insurgencies*, 35(4), pp. 573–595. 2024.

¹⁰² Redding, R., et al. “War in the Falklands”; *Jedburgh Teams — Lessons for Unconventional Warfare* J. Paul de.

¹⁰³ Dalgaard Nielsen, A. & Falster Holm, K. “Supersoldiers or Rulebreakers? Unpacking the Mind-Set of Special Operations Forces,” *Armed Forces & Society*, 45(4), pp. 591–611. 2019.

¹⁰⁴ Osborne, J. “Advancing a Strategic Theory.”

¹⁰⁵ Osborne, J. “Advancing a Strategic Theory.”

¹⁰⁶ Kiras, J. “A Theory of Special Operations.”

¹⁰⁷ Kiras, J. “A Theory of Special Operations.”

¹⁰⁸ Finlan, A. “A Dangerous Pathway?”

¹⁰⁹ Searle, T. *Outside the Box*.

¹¹⁰ Searle, T. *Outside the Box*, p. 1.

Scholars mostly agree that there is a need for theory to explain SO and SOF, yet they disagree on whether the theory needs to be of SO and/or SOF or whether theories from other fields suffice to explain the phenomena surrounding these concepts.¹¹¹ Regardless of which side of the argument one takes, Kiras' reservations about theory are useful when thinking about, studying, or even developing SO and SOF theory.¹¹²



Key takeaways: The debate about the need for theory

- Some scholars argue that there is no need for a theory, as other theories can explain SO and SOF.
- Theory can be dangerous as it can be used for bureaucratic purposes or become dogma.
- There is a data-accessibility problem, which makes it difficult to test theory.
- A theory can be emancipatory: encouraging thinking outside traditional military thought.
- SO are a common occurrence that need theoretical explanation.

3.3 Theoretical developments 2014–2024

This literature review identifies two categories of theories: theories *for* special operations and theories *of* special operations.¹¹³ In the following, theories aiming to provide general explanations of SO denote the latter, while theories exploring a SOF phenomenon constitute the former. Following this distinction are disagreements regarding whether the so-called unit of analysis is and should be SO, SOF, or their context. The remainder of this chapter analyses the unit-of-analysis theories (SO and SOF) but also explores theories focusing on the contexts of SO and SOF.

3.3.1 Theories of SO

Some scholars urge that theory-building should focus on SO and exclude SOF.¹¹⁴ The reason for this argument is that to include SOF in a theory of SO prevents the theory from being timeless, as SOF are bound to contextual aspects such as the institutional arrangements of the US Special Operations Command (USSOCOM).¹¹⁵ Moreover, there is conceptual conflation between SOF and SO.

¹¹¹ Marsh, C., Kenny, M., & Joslyn, N. "SO what?"

¹¹² Askland Johnsen, A., & Højstrup Christensen, G. "Clarifying the Antisystemic."

¹¹³ This categorisation is also identified in Westberg, A. "To see and not to be seen: Emerging principles and theory of special reconnaissance and surveillance missions for special operations forces," *Special Operations Journal*, 2(2), 124–134. 2016.

¹¹⁴ See Searle, T. *Outside the Box*; Rubright, R. *A unified theory*.

¹¹⁵ Rubright, R. *A unified theory*.

As result, it is a mistake to suggest that SO does not need a theory, and to base these claims on assumptions related to SOF.¹¹⁶ Finally, as Richard Rubright highlights in the following example of a conversation, the inclusion of SOF in theory leads to circular reasoning:

- What are special operations?
- Oh, those are what SOF do.
- What are SOF?
- Oh, they conduct special operations.”¹¹⁷

For these reasons, both Tom Searle and Rubright attempt to develop an overarching and timeless theory of SO.

Rubright's theory is purposefully simple: “Special Operations are extraordinary operations to achieve a specific effect.” He focusses on semantics and intentionally defines “special” in a very broad way as merely meaning “unusual.”¹¹⁸ Rubright points out that the unusual is closely related to the usual in a specific context, which means that “there must be a specific reason the unusual operation is being undertaken; otherwise, by definition, it would be usual.”¹¹⁹

Rubright's theory does not merely focus on special military operations; it includes all special operations regardless of the operator performing them. He includes the concept of specific effect in his theory instead of McRaven's strategic effect, as specific effect is relevant for not only a specific SO communities but also because special operations do not always have a strategic effect. He exemplifies this point with the raids against Osama Bin Laden; although the raids “did not actually accomplish a strategic objective,” they had specific effect as they demonstrated American resolve.¹²⁰

Tom Searle also views SO in relation to conventional operations. He aims to develop a general theory of military SO based on the assumption that they are “outside the box.” Thus, SO are “different from conventional operations.” This means that special operations cannot be defined as some ideal type, as this would lead them into a “box.” It also suggests that as the operational space of SO is defined in relation to conventional operations, theory must consider their changing nature.¹²¹

Searle's and Rubright's theories are contextual in the sense that SO changes depending on how conventional operations change. If one accepts Searle's premise that the “out of the boxness” is defined in relation to the contextual developments of conventional force, so should Rubright's unusualness be contextual. Thus, the

¹¹⁶ Finlan, A. “A Dangerous Pathway?”; Rubright, R. *A unified theory*. Højstrup, G. “Introduction”.

¹¹⁷ Rubright, R. *A unified theory*, p. 21.

¹¹⁸ Rubright, R. *A unified theory*.

¹¹⁹ Rubright, R. *A unified theory*.

¹²⁰ Rubright, R. *A unified theory*, p. 38.

¹²¹ Searle, T. *Outside the Box*, p. 2.

theories are timeless, since being relationally defined is always a feature of SO, while the meaning of this may change over time.



Key takeaways: Ideas in SO theory

- Inclusion of SOF in theory development hinders theory from being timeless and leads to circular reasoning.
- Rubright's focus on specific effects recognises that SO do not need strategic impact or SOF execution.
- Searle sees special operations as "outside the box" of conventional operations.
- Both theories defines SO in relation to conventional operations.

3.3.2 Theories of SOF

In contrast to the focus on a general SO theory, most literature concerning the theory development of SOF aims to explain a specific phenomenon in relation to SOF rather than SOF as a whole. Most of these contributions are prescriptive, as they identify conditions or characteristics of SOF that are important for operational success and strategic utility. These theories typically advocate against a general theory.¹²² For instance, Emily Spencer argues for separate theories of both SO and SOF. Spencer urges that SOF and SO theories are significantly different but also interrelated.¹²³ She suggests that a theory of SOF is necessary to maximise both their and SO's utility.¹²⁴

Focus on SOF actions to explain success

The literature includes theorising that concentrates on SOF activities. For instance, this literature highlights a gap in theory-building, as theories mostly focus on direct actions and do not explain the operational activities of special reconnaissance and surveillance. To fill this gap, research has focused on developing a theory of these SOF core activities that can guide practitioners.¹²⁵ Instead of relative superiority, the theorising focusses on principles for successful special reconnaissance and surveillance operations. The principles aim to achieve relative certainty, which is "the threshold where there is sufficient actionable intelligence on the opponent or target."¹²⁶

The literature includes suggestions that other theories can explain SOF activities such as surgical strike (for instance, special reconnaissance, direct action, and

¹²² Modigs, R. "The Utility of Special Operations," p. 43.

¹²³ Spencer, E. "The Future is Now: The Need for a Special Operations and SOF Theory," in McCabe, P., & Lieber, P. (Eds.) *Special Operations Theory*. JSOU Press, 2017.

¹²⁴ Spencer, E. "The Future is Now."

¹²⁵ Westberg, A. "To see and not to be seen," p.124.

¹²⁶ Westberg, A. "To see and not to be seen," p. 126.

counterterrorism) and special warfare (foreign internal defence, irregular warfare, unconventional warfare, counterinsurgency, and stability operations).¹²⁷ For instance, social movement theories could also explain special warfare and theories such as McRaven's about relative superiority can explain the surgical strike.¹²⁸

Other literature uses existing theories to explain SOF more broadly. For instance, concepts from social movement theory and institutional entrepreneurship are used to explain that SOF is particularly capable of inducing change.¹²⁹

Focus on strategic utility to explain success

While some theorising of SOF focuses on their actions, a number of studies also concentrate their theory development on strategic utility. As people are the main asset of SOF, some literature suggests that relationships need to be an integral part of explaining SOF utility. For instance, focusing on SOF's relations to the global environment, conventional forces, special operations, and assisting units may help understanding, among other things, SOF capabilities as well as how to efficiently employ and organise SOF.¹³⁰

Another focus in relation to SOF's strategic utility is how they achieve policy goals. This literature highlights that a starting point for theory should be not only on SOF's "contribution to the military instrument of power but also to long-established connections between power and policy."¹³¹ Therefore, the literature suggests that a multiagency perspective is necessary.¹³² For an operation to have a direct strategic impact, the scope needs to be very limited and restricted to a single agency; however, this does not reflect SO in practice. As a result, without a multiagency perspective, it is difficult to achieve the nation's strategic goals.¹³³

Similarly, other research focuses on the power of SOF, which is defined in terms of SOF's capability, effect, and cost, to understand SOF's evolution and strategic utility.¹³⁴ This theorising suggests that there is no SOF theory, but that decision-makers who understand SOF power have throughout history operationalised the theoretical tenets of SOF. Understanding SOF theory therefore means to comprehend how decision-makers operationalise SOF power.¹³⁵

However, it is not only policymakers' understanding of SOF that has been attributed to operational success. Another contributing factor to SOF's success that has been identified in the literature is how well bureaucratic pressures are

¹²⁷ Marsh, C. et al. "SO what?" p. 100.

¹²⁸ Marsh, C. et al. "SO what?"

¹²⁹ Turnley, J. G. *Special Operations Forces as Change Agents*. JSOU press. 2017, p. 12.

¹³⁰ Spencer, E. "The Future is Now."

¹³¹ Müller, K. "Civil Context," p. 99.

¹³² Müller, K. "Civil Context."

¹³³ Müller, K. "Civil Context," p. 98.

¹³⁴ Horn, B. "Operationalizing SOF Theory: A Function of Understanding SOF Power," in McCabe, P., & Lieber, P. (Eds.) *Special Operations Theory*. JSOU Press, 2017.

¹³⁵ Horn, B. "Operationalizing SOF Theory."

handled.¹³⁶ The pressure come from the organisational formalisation of SOF, which could eventually transform them to be more like conventional forces as well as undermine the attributes that constitute their specialness. To navigate this normalisation, some problems require more flexibility than bureaucratic structures permit, while others allow for planning through these structures.¹³⁷



Key takeaways: Ideas in SOF theory

- The literature suggests a theory of SOF is needed to maximise utility.
- There is theorising concerning SOF activities and how SOF induces change.
- Theories explaining MA and SR are scares, but theories from other fields may explain these activities.
- There is theorising that focuses on SOF strategic utility, highlighting SOF's different levels of relationships, the importance of multiagency perspectives, SOF power, and SOF's ability to navigate bureaucracy.

3.3.3 Approaches explaining SO and SOF in context

The disagreement over the extent to which theory should be general not only influences the focus on SO and SOF, it also translates into scholarly divisions about the importance of context in explaining them. For instance, scholars point out that as the term 'special' is so vague and relative, SOF need to be studied in their specific context.¹³⁸

The US SOF has been one context that has gained attention in the literature.¹³⁹ However, due to "the divergence in geostrategic conditions, national interest, ambitions, and thus the willingness to use SO as a strategic tool," scholars also argue for a theory that explains SO and SOF in a small-state context.¹⁴⁰ The recent published work on small states in relation to theory-building has focused on the specific constraints and enablers of SO and SOF utility as well as the SOF capacity of small states.

¹³⁶ Dalgaard-Nielsen, A. "Organizing Special Operations Forces: Navigating the Paradoxical Pressures of Institutional-Bureaucratic and Operational Environments," *Special Operations Journal*, 3(1), pp. 61–73. 2017.

¹³⁷ Dalgaard-Nielsen, A. "Organizing Special Operations Forces," p. 70.

¹³⁸ Ansbacher, Y., & Schleifer, R "How Special Operations Forces Can Contribute Strategically to Modern Wars."

¹³⁹ Wong-Diaz, F. "The President of the United States."

¹⁴⁰ Modigs, R. "The Utility of Special Operations." p. 44.

Theorising about SO and SOF in a small-state context

Applying Gray's two so called "master claims" (the economy of force and the expansion of choice), scholars find that the claims also apply to small states.¹⁴¹ Research indicates that SO has utility for small states at the strategic and political level in a national and international context. Moreover, SO performed by small states have the advantage of "being small and agile and having very competent personnel."¹⁴²

Other research using Gray's master claims examines the role that small states' SOF can have in multilateral operations. The research highlights that SOF can expand the available choices in the grey zone and that they can have actual material impact on an enemy in a maritime context.¹⁴³

Building on ideas from the literature on revolution in military affairs as well as on asymmetric warfare, some research also explores the utility of SO for small states. The research finds that in the new strategic context, a small state's SOF must continually adjust the use of military power during different phases of war according "to the environment and tailor special operations against enemy actions so that asymmetry is ensured."¹⁴⁴ Specifically, this means that SO theory needs to explain further small states' employment of SOF for defensive purposes.¹⁴⁵

Theorising about SO and SOF in conflict environments

The focus on revolution in military affairs also aligns with other literature that theorises about SO and SOF in a new strategic context. For instance, some literature develops a framework for analysing the utility of SOF through the spectrum of conflict,¹⁴⁶ while other research explores how the use of SO stabilises or destabilises international security.¹⁴⁷ In light of the new strategic context, some literature proposes a design-thinking approach to build a framework for strategy that addresses the necessary conditions for SOF campaigning. The framework focuses on aspects of SOF that are compatible with design thinking: uncertainty, system thinking, and open-mindedness.¹⁴⁸

Related to the new strategic context, research also suggests that there is a theoretical gap concerning special forces because of the traditional views of war. The dominant theoretical models of war rest on the assumption that conventional

¹⁴¹ Modigs, R. "The Utility of Special Operations"; Burchall Henningsen, T. "Frogmen and pirates: The utility of special operations forces for small states against for-profit, illicit networks," *Defence Studies*, 21(3), 292–311. 2021.

¹⁴² Modigs, R. "The Utility of Special Operations." p. 56.

¹⁴³ Burchall Henningsen, T. "Frogmen and pirates."

¹⁴⁴ Gyllensporre, D. "Contemporary Hybrid Warfare." p. 24.

¹⁴⁵ Gyllensporre, D. "Contemporary Hybrid Warfare." p. 23.

¹⁴⁶ Lohaus, P. "Special Operations Forces in the Gray Zone."

¹⁴⁷ Burgos, R. A. "Pushing the easy button."

¹⁴⁸ Day, T. "Designing a SOF campaign for strategic competition," in Coombs, H. G. & Marsh, C. (eds) *Operating on the Margins: SOF in the Gray Zone. Canadian Special Operations Forces Command*. 2023.

forces are used to winning wars, but special forces does not fit into these assumptions. Alistair Finlan therefore proposes a theory focusing on anaphylaxis. The analogy of anaphylaxis means that just as a bee can paralyse a human, special forces have the ability to paralyse a state. Unlike the focus in the traditional views of war on destroying the enemy, anaphylaxis entails that special forces focuses on paralysing them by undermining state leaders' popular support and "creating internal political and social space for a realignment away from military action."

While Finlan's focus is on special forces, it resonates with literature that focuses on SOF in relation to what is perceived as an ongoing transformation of conflict. For instance, some research proposes a framework for understanding SOF in the grey zone focusing on negative decisions and non-decisions. Resembling Finlan's strategic condition of anaphylaxis, these decisions are defined as the unmaking of a conclusion or as questioning established facts, which often leave decisions undecided. The role of SOF is "to support military deterrence and create strategic military coercive options" that facilitate the projection of negative decisions on adversaries.¹⁴⁹

Another related context in the focus of theory-building is how SO and SOF interact with local conflicts or adversaries.¹⁵⁰ David C. Ellis criticises the current US emphasis on networks in conflicts and the war on terror. He argues that as this orientation assumes a centre of gravity (for instance, by killing a leader of a terrorist organisation) and concentrates on eliminating networks, it misses the fact that social systems go beyond these networks. Instead of predicting actors in terms of terrorists' behaviour, Ellis argues that focusing on social systems allows engagement "with complex adaptive challenges at the strategic level and moves SOF beyond the tyranny of mid-range, operational-level concepts."¹⁵¹

In sum, the literature on building theories with regard to a specific context is considerably diverse. It ranges from the context of states performing the SO to the type of conflict that SOF engage in. While the contexts are diverse, all these works assume that a context is so specific that it requires a detailed explanation. Albeit in different ways, these studies also all highlight and question some of the pre-existing assumptions in SO and SOF theorising.

¹⁴⁹ Allem, T., Longley, J., McMichael, R. A., & Miron, W. B. Canadian special operations forces theory of gray zone conflict in Coombs, H. G. & Marsh, C. (eds) *Operating on the Margins: SOF in the Gray Zone*. Canadian Special Operations Forces Command. 2023.

¹⁵⁰ Dearing, M. P., Jeffreys, J. L., & Depue, J. A. "Entry Point: Accessing Indigenous Perspectives During Complex Operations," *Special Operations Journal*, 1(1), pp. 7–18. 2015.

¹⁵¹ Ellis, D. C. "From Networks to Systems and the Limits of the Center of Gravity," *How a Network-Centric Special Operations Culture Impedes Strategic Effect*, JSOU. 2022.



Key takeaways: Ideas in the theorising about SO and SOF in context

- As the term “special” is so vague, SO and SOF need to be studied in a specific context.
- There is theorising about SO and SOF in a small-state context that focusses on their strategic utility and adjustment in different phases of war.
- There is theorising about the SO and SOF roles in a new strategic context focusing on SO utility, their relation to international security, and the usefulness of design thinking.
- There is theorising that concerns how SF and SOF can create favourable conditions that undermine the adversary.

3.4 Reflections on theory

The purpose of this chapter is to analyse the state of theory-building within the field of SO and SOF. It also aims to highlight the scholarly debates on theory-building. Understanding these debates gives a specific insight into the recent decade’s SO and SOF research. These insights provide the reader with a number of questions that may be useful to consider when engaging in further reading, thinking, and research about SO and SOF.

Should there be a theory of SO and SOF?

A universal theory of SO/SOF could be dangerous. It could lead to “inside-the-box” thinking that is in stark contrast to the core attributes of SO and SOF. Kiras warns that this may lead to a theory being used or developed to align with bureaucrats’ agendas. Yet, without theory, there are only observations. Emily Spencer illustrates this with the example of gravity: we may recognise the existence of gravity, and an apple falls regardless of, or even in the absence of, any theory of gravity.¹⁵² However, a useful theory enables us, for instance, to calculate and build safer bridges, as well as taller and more complex buildings.

During the past decade, the literature has motivated the need for theory by suggesting that, as SO and SOF are so unique, there is a need to explain and further improve what these unique options can achieve, in other words, the effect of SO and SOF. Scholars also argue that because SO is a unique occurrence, it warrants a more general theory of SO. These justifications prompt two questions: *How is SO and SOF effect explained?* and *Is there a general theory of SO?*

¹⁵² Spencer, E. “The Future is Now”

How is SO and SOF effect explained?

Theory-building has focused on explaining the results of SO and SOF. Gray sees this in terms of the utility of SO as a policy option meeting specific strategic objectives. McRaven explains the results in terms of concerted measurable effect in theatre. Rubright focuses on SO's specific effect, which does not necessarily entail strategic effect.

SOF and SO effect has been analysed in relation to their appropriateness as means for reaching a specific strategic end. However, Rubright alludes to time as a relevant aspect when considering the specific effect of SO, as their strategic impact is not instantly measurable. According to his reasoning, SO appears as an option for solving a specific policy problem (strategic or otherwise) rather than an overarching strategic end. Yet, other scholars suggest that it is impossible to understand SO and SOF without understanding their relationship to strategy.

In addition, the focus on specific measurable objectives has influenced theories concerning SOF to resemble recipes for success rather than holistic theories. While some of the publications reviewed here have confirmed these theories, most of the literature has refrained from developing recipe-like theories, but rather focused on expanding the pre-existing recipes to understand SO and SOF's strategic utility or effect. These approaches have directed attention, for instance, to SOF's relations to various global and local contexts, how SOF navigate a multiagency landscape, and bureaucratic pressures to normalise SOF, as well as how decision-makers operationalise SOF power.

Is there a general theory of SO and SOF?

Some scholars maintain, however, that since SOF do not necessarily perform SO, theory needs to be applicable to a wider context that includes all sorts of SO. Following Colin Gray's assertion that theory should reflect principles that are observable through time, Searle and Rubright argue for a general theory of SO.

However, it is precisely because of the vast variety of SO that other scholars argue for specific theories explaining particular SO phenomenon, often related to the activities of SOF, such as surgical strikes and special warfare.

One aspect that all these scholars directly or indirectly agree on is that SO is defined in relation to conventional operations. If that is the case, can they also be defined in relation to war or other contexts? For instance, is the utility of SO and SOF different in small states?

What can context-specific approaches to theory explain?

Some research highlights the strategic utility of SOF for small states. However, more theorising is required to understand how small states use SO as a defensive measure. Other research suggests that SOF has different utility depending on the level of conflict. In fact, some scholars argue that SO and SOF need to be

understood using a completely new approach to conflict that is not tied to violence. These approaches explain SO and SOF in the grey zone and how this environment can be formed in a favourable way.

While the state of theoretical development of SO and SOF is wrought with scholarly disagreement, Robert Spulak highlights that this is not necessarily a bad thing. He suggests that “theory becomes the knowledge that informs expectations” and the presence of a variety of theories creates the opportunity to develop a rigorous field of special operations research.¹⁵³

¹⁵³ Spulak, R. “Epistemology, Paradigms, and the Future of Special Operations Theory,” p. 50



Chapter 3 takeaways

Ideas in foundational theories

- Colin Gray sees SO's strategic utility as evaluated in relation to strategic ends. SO have utility as they, due to their size, present a relatively cost-effective choice and an additional option for political and military leaders.
 - The theory is based on great military powers and may not be applicable to other states.
- While William McRaven focusses on SO's strategic effect, which means achieving relative superiority, his theory mostly concerns the operational level. He identifies six principles for operational success
 - The principles only concern DA; they may not be the only recipe for success, and not only SOF can use them for success.
- Robert Spulak suggests that SO can prevent miscalculations in war due to the qualities of SOF personnel. SO and SOF theory cannot be separated.
 - According to some, this is a description of SOF personnel but not a theory.

The debate about the need for theory

- Some scholars argue that there is no need for a theory, as other theories can explain SO and SOF.
- Theory can be dangerous as it can be used for bureaucratic purposes or become dogma.
- There is a data-accessibility problem, which makes it difficult to test theory.
- A theory can be emancipatory: encouraging thinking outside traditional military thought.
- SO are a common occurrence that need theoretical explanation.

Ideas in SO theory

- Inclusion of SOF in theory development hinders theory from being timeless and leads to circular reasoning.
- Rubright's focus on specific effects recognises that SO do not need strategic impact or SOF execution.
- Searle sees special operations as "outside the box" of conventional operations.
- Both theories defines SO in relation to conventional operations.

Ideas in SOF theory

- The literature suggests a theory of SOF is needed to maximise utility.
- There is theorising concerning SOF activities and how SOF induces change.
- Theories explaining MA and SR are scares, but theories from other fields may explain these activities.
- There is theorising that focuses on SOF strategic utility, highlighting SOF's different levels of relationships, the importance of multiagency perspectives, SOF power, and SOF's ability to navigate bureaucracy.

Ideas in the theorising about SO and SOF in context

- As the term "special" is so vague, SO and SOF need to be studied in a specific context.
- There is theorising about SO and SOF in a small-state context that focusses on their strategic utility and adjustment in different phases of war.
- There is theorising about the SO and SOF roles in a new strategic context focusing on SO utility, their relation to international security, and the usefulness of design thinking.
- There is theorising that concerns how SF and SOF can create favourable conditions that undermine the adversary.

4 SO and SOF research topics

This chapter is of particular interest for readers who wish to:



- obtain an overview of various research topics, including that of small states as SO and SOF actors, within the field;
- obtain directions for further readings on various research topics;
- understand the overarching challenges facing SO and SOF.

The literature on SO and SOF generally has a strong empirical, rather than theoretical, focus. This chapter aims to provide an overview of the topics and cases that have concerned academic research on SO and SOF in the past decade. When dissected, the field comes across as broad and diverse and includes a wide range of topics.

As direct action, special reconnaissance, and military assistance are often described as core activities of SOF, these concepts (especially DA and MA) are also frequently found in the empirical studies. In many ways, these concepts tend to guide the understanding of the subject in a large number of the texts; different approaches look at how these concepts play out in practice. Nevertheless, as Table 3 indicates, empirical studies of SO and SOF also cover many other aspects. The table provides a non-exhaustive but rich list of examples on empirical topics of interest found in the SO and SOF literature after 2014. This chapter presents an overview of empirical research on SO and SOF from the last decade and does so by clustering the studies under five different overarching themes of analysis: challenges, SO and SOF actors, country cases, organisational structure, and women in SOF. The chapter considers these in turn.

Table 3. Examples of empirical topics.

Regions and countries	Function, challenges and tasks	SOF state or actor
Afghanistan	Civil resistance	Belgium
Arctic	Capabilities	Canada
Asia	Cyber	Denmark
Balkans	Doctrine	Estonia
China	Education and training	NATO
DRC	Ethical dilemmas	Netherlands
Falklands	Innovation and technology	Norway
Iraq	Intelligence-sharing	Sweden
Lybia	Leadership	UK
Mali	Local population	US
Philippines	Military assistance	
Russia	Operators, soldiers, and staff	
Somalia	Piracy	
Syria	Politics and civil affairs	
Ukraine	Small states	
	Peacekeeping	
	Relationships with other actors	
	Terrorism	
	Unconventional warfare	
	Women in SOF	

4.1 Challenges

Given the specific capabilities and situations related to the use of SO and SOF, a large part of the literature is devoted to understanding the different types of challenges that SO and SOF encounter. Some are specific for SO and SOF, while others are more general but have a heightened salience in an SO and SOF context. Overall, the empirical literature engages both in the identification of operational challenges as well as in a discussion of how to address them.¹⁵⁴

Examples of challenges include the implications of technological power in current geopolitical competition,¹⁵⁵ how to reform an outdated system of SOF intelligence-sharing,¹⁵⁶ or the challenge of choosing how and when to make use of SOF.¹⁵⁷ Other studies focus on ethical challenges, a key dilemma in warfare activities at large, but which are specifically salient for SOF. Sven Behnke even asks, “Is the price of the demanding training and operational reality of special operations forces a fundamentally different ethos that requires its own ethics?”¹⁵⁸ Other writers direct their attention to the ethical dilemmas in decision-making,¹⁵⁹ or the ethical challenges of different forms of direct action, such as targeted killings.¹⁶⁰ In general, many of the challenges surrounding SO and SOF arise from the setting in which SO take place and SOF take action. The literature approaches such challenges by both analysing the specific conditions presented by unconventional warfare and acting in the grey zone as well as a more overarching perception of a shifting strategic context.

4.1.1 Unconventional warfare and the grey zone

The term unconventional warfare refers to the indirect activities that sidestep or complement conventional confrontation and warfare. Many of these activities are related to SOF’s tasks, such as psychological operations (PSYOPS), subversion, or providing support to resistance movements. Despite its name, unconventional warfare can be employed during all phases of the conflict spectrum, from peace to

¹⁵⁴ Eaton, D. et al. *Supporting Persistent and Networked Special Operations Forces (SOF) Operations. Insights from Forward-Deployed SOF Personnel*. Rand Corporation. 2017.

¹⁵⁵ Davis, Z. S. et al. (eds.). *Strategic latency unleashed: the role of technology in a revisionist global order and the implications for special operations forces*. Center for Global Security Research Lawrence Livermore National Laboratory. 2021.

¹⁵⁶ Long, A. *NATO Special Operations: Promise and Problem*. Foreign Policy Research Institute. 2014..

¹⁵⁷ Burgos, R. A. “Pushing the easy button”; Pettersson, U., & Ilis-Alm, H. “Resistance Operations: Challenges and Opportunities for Special Operations Forces”. *Journal on Baltic Security*, 8(1), 76–93. 2022.

¹⁵⁸ Behnke, S. “Special Ethics for Special Soldiers? Thoughts on Ethical Standards in the Special Operations Forces of the Bundeswehr” in Hoffenaar, J. (ed.). *Special Operations in Past and Present. Implications for Policy Makers*, Heerde: Royal van der Most, 186–201. 2022. p. 194

¹⁵⁹ Mitchell, R. “Dynamic Ethical Decision-Making and its Importance to Special Operations”. *Inter Populum: The Journal of Irregular Warfare and Special Operations*, 1(1). 2023.

¹⁶⁰ Michael, K. “Special operations forces (SOF) as the ‘silver bullet’” in Turnley, J.G. et al. (eds.). *Special Operations Forces in the 21st Century: Perspectives from the Social Sciences* (1st ed.). Routledge. 2017.

war.¹⁶¹ The challenges of unconventional warfare are central and permeate a substantial part of the SO and SOF literature, even when it is not the primary focus of study. Studies that are specifically concerned with the challenges of unconventional warfare consider, for instance, the historical use of unconventional warfare,¹⁶² the intersection of terrorism and unconventional warfare,¹⁶³ unconventional warfare techniques in specific operations,¹⁶⁴ and structural-organisational and cultural-conceptual challenges,¹⁶⁵ as well as the assessment of unconventional warfare in relation to modern resistance movements.¹⁶⁶

A related concept studied in the context of challenges is SOF operations in the grey zone, which is generally understood as a situation that is neither peace nor has escalated into war. As with unconventional warfare, many of the studies in the field touch on the grey zone concept in different ways, even when it is not the central topic.

The challenges of conducting activities in the grey zone are also thoroughly studied in their own right. For instance, the book *Operating on the Margins*, published by the Canadian Special Operations Forces Command, offers a comprehensive take on how to operationalise existing research and thought on the grey zone in order to make it practically useful for Canadian SOF.¹⁶⁷ As already discussed in Chapter 3 on theoretical perspectives, Lohaus addresses the inadequacy of existing frameworks on SOF in the grey zone and suggests a new framework for how to make the most effective use of SOF power in this context.¹⁶⁸

Other texts have focused on deterrence,¹⁶⁹ or building competencies and readiness for SOF operations in the grey zone.¹⁷⁰ An argument common to all these studies is that SOF capabilities are well-suited for operations in the grey zone (and are indeed already used for that), but that there are different ways for SOF to adapt to a security landscape where the grey zone has a larger role.

¹⁶¹ Finlan, A. "A dangerous pathway?"; U.S. Department of Defense, *Joint Publication 3-05*

¹⁶² Gleiman, J. K. "The American Counterculture of War: Supporting Foreign Insurgencies and the American Discourse of War". *Special Operations Journal*, 1(1), 19–36. 2015.

¹⁶³ Cox, D. "Conceptualizing Terrorism with the Complications of Unconventional Warfare in Mind". *Special Operations Journal*, 3(1), 1–10. 2017.

¹⁶⁴ Riccardi, M. T., Dolan, J. P., & Redding, R. W. "OSS Operations in Occupied Yugoslavia: Enduring Principles". *Special Operations Journal*, 6(1), 55–69. 2020.

¹⁶⁵ Gielas, A. M. "Prima Donnas in Kevlar zones."

¹⁶⁶ Irwin, W. *Support to Resistance: Strategic Purpose and Effectiveness*. The Joint Special Operations University Press, 2019.

¹⁶⁷ Coombs, H. G. & Marsch, C. *Operating on the Margins*.

¹⁶⁸ Lohaus, P. "Special Operations Forces in the Gray Zone."

¹⁶⁹ Jones, B. "Deterring 'Competition Short of War': Are Gray Zones the Ardennes of Our Modern Maginot Line of Traditional Deterrence?" in Bazin, A. (ed.). *On Competition: Adapting to the Contemporary Strategic Environment*. JSOU report 21-5. JSOU University Press. 2021.

¹⁷⁰ Meredith, S. B., & Walton, D. C. "Building Competencies for Special Operations Forces' Readiness in the Gray Zone". *Special Operations Journal*, 3(1), 36–50. 2017.

4.1.2 The new strategic context

The literature on challenges in the grey zone clearly connects to, and to some extent overlaps with, the challenges of a transforming strategic context. While SO have always been characterised by high risk and high operational tempo, several writers suggest that the new strategic context places considerably larger demands and higher expectations on the capabilities and training of SOF.¹⁷¹ The overarching understanding is that the new context is characterised by the increased prevalence of hybrid warfare, war in the grey zone and growing linkages between direct action and intelligence, at the same time as “great power politics” again intensifies.¹⁷² For SOF, this implies an exceptionally complex operational environment. As the characteristics of war appear to be transforming, the components and theatre are shifting too.

The “new era of great power politics” identified by several writers refers to a development where the principal rivals of Western states are other state governments rather than armed groups.¹⁷³ One could question the novelty of this circumstance, as state governments have constituted the main adversaries during several periods in the past. Nevertheless, it does mark a shift in relation to the past couple of decades and the combination of new technology and hybrid strategies with power politics constitutes a new operating context for SOF. The merger of great power politics with hybridity and technological advancement also allows competitors to challenge their opponents anywhere in the world, which makes the complexity of the theatre of operations even greater.¹⁷⁴

China and Russia are highlighted as the main competitors in this new strategic context, for the US in particular and for other NATO and Western states in general.¹⁷⁵ In relation to this, decisive events such as the 2011 “Obama Asia Pivot” and Russia’s 2022 full-scale invasion of Ukraine underpin the new strategic context.

In light of a shifting security context, the focus for SO and SOF is transforming. For two decades, SOF have operated mainly in relation to the Global War on Terror, with counterterrorism and counterinsurgency as core tasks. As Western

¹⁷¹ Coombs, H. G. & Marsh, C. *Operating on the Margins*; Olson, E. T. “USSOFCOM and SOF”; Ucko, D. H. “The Role and Limits of Special operations.”

¹⁷² See for example: Hardy, J. “Hunters and Gatherers”; 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; Lewis, S. “Special Operations Forces’ Role in Political Warfare”. *Special Operations Journal*, 5(2), 179–187. 2019.

¹⁷³ Ucko, D. H. “The Role and Limits of Special Operations.”

¹⁷⁴ Olson, E. T. “USSOCOM and SOF.”

¹⁷⁵ Clemens, T. *Special Operations Forces. Civil Affairs in Great Power Competition*. JSOU University Press. 2020.; Howard, R. D., & Duvall, J. P. Jr. *The Asia Pivot: Implications for U.S. Special Operations Forces*. JSOU University Press. 2016; Kilcullen, D. “The rise of China and the consequences for special operations” in Kiras J. D. & Kitzen, M. (eds.). *Into the Void. Special Operations Forces after the War on Terror*. 2024; Watts, S. et al. *Countering Russia. The Role of Special Operations Forces in Strategic Competition*. RAND Corporation. 2021.

security policy is now redirecting its attention to the strategic competition between great military powers, the literature reflects that SOF are facing somewhat different challenges and tasks.¹⁷⁶



Key takeaways: Challenges

- The literature focuses on various SO and SOF organisational challenges as well as ethical dilemmas.
- The literature emphasises the challenges for SO and SOF in unconventional warfare relating to history, modern resistance movements, terrorism, and technology, as well as structural-organisational and cultural-conceptual challenges.
- The literature highlights SOF's challenges in the grey zone in relation to deterrence and building competencies.
- In the new strategic context, the combination of new technology and hybrid strategies with power politics is a new operating environment for SOF.
- Literature on SOF and international organisations mostly deals with NATO, but some publications also consider SOF in UN peacekeeping.

4.2 SO and SOF actors

The second theme identified by the literature as an empirical area of interest concerns the SO and SOF of particular states and organisations. This theme takes on the agents' perspective and considers the SO and SOF activities of different states. Apart from grouping the study according to actors, such as the US, UK, Canada, small states, and international organisations, the analysis also illuminates the specific issues of interest in relation to each actor.

4.2.1 United States

As mentioned, a substantive part of the academic and non-academic literature on SO and SOF circles around US special forces and/or is produced by US institutions such as the Joint Special Operations University (JSOU). The prevalence of the US perspective in SO/SOF literature and its influence on the wider understanding of the phenomenon cannot be overlooked. One explanation for this is that the US incomparably has the largest Western SOF in the world.¹⁷⁷ Another is that in contrast to many other armed forces, the US has chosen to be more open about its capabilities and activities.¹⁷⁸ There could also be a cultural aspect here, where US culture continuously glorifies war that can be assumed to have contributed to the

¹⁷⁶ Titulaer, F. "Special operations (forces) explained."

¹⁷⁷ Titulaer, F. "Special operations (forces) explained."

¹⁷⁸ Lyckman, M., & Weissmann, M. "Global shadow war: a conceptual analysis". *Dynamics of Asymmetric Conflict*, 8(3), 251–262. 2015.

“heroification” of SOF. This is reflected in the substantial amount of US SO and SOF outlets in academia as well as in popular culture.¹⁷⁹

Some studies of American SO and SOF take an overarching approach in explaining the US special forces’ abilities, structure, and development.¹⁸⁰ Others cover the role of US SOF in larger processes such as the combat of transnational organised crime.¹⁸¹ US SOF activities have also been studied in specific countries such as the Philippines¹⁸² and Iraq;¹⁸³ this includes their role in specific operations such as Operation Neptune Spear,¹⁸⁴ Operation Enduring Freedom, and the Global War on Terror.¹⁸⁵

4.2.2 The United Kingdom and Canada

The UK’s SOF is also considered in the literature, with particular interest given to WWII operations such as Operation Deadstick on D-Day, 1944,¹⁸⁶ and the establishment of the Special Operations Executive.¹⁸⁷ Later instances, such as British SOF operations during the Falklands War in 1982, are also addressed.¹⁸⁸ While studies on US SO and SOF generally focus on contemporary operations after 9/11, UK studies tend to be scarcer and more historical. This difference in focus can be understood as a reflection of the respective prevalence of the US and the UK over time. The UK special forces were part of the “birth” of modern SOF during WWII and were highly influential in the following decades, while the US SOF apparatus has grown extensively and spearheaded SOF activities on the

¹⁷⁹ This argument is reflected in, for example, Turnley, J.G.; Ben-Ari, E. & Michael, K. “Special operations forces (SOF) and social science. An introductory essay” in Turnley, J.G., et al. (eds.). *Special Operations Forces in the 21st Century: Perspectives from the Social Sciences* (1st ed.). Routledge. 2017. and extrapolated from discussions in Pettersson & Ben-Ari “Kill and Tell.”

¹⁸⁰ See for example Collins, N. W. *Grey Wars: A Contemporary History of U.S. Special Operations*. Yale University Press. 2021.; Olson, E. T. “USSOCOM and SOF”; Prados, J. *The US Special Forces: What Everyone Needs to Know*. Oxford University Press. 2015.

¹⁸¹ Johnson, S. R. “The Role of U.S. Special Operations Forces (SOF) to Combat Transnational Organized Crime (TOC) as an Evolving Threat to International Security”, *Special Operations Journal*, 4(1), 84–96. 2018.

¹⁸² Moores, C. C. *Preventing War: Special Operations Engagement in support of Security Sector Reform*. School of Advanced Military Studies. United States Army Command and General Staff College Fort Leavenworth, Kansas. 2020; Robinson, L., Johnston, P. B., & Oak, G. S. *U.S. Special Operations Forces in the Philippines, 2001–2014*. RAND Corporation. 2016.

¹⁸³ Ansbacher, Y. & Schleifer, R. “The Utility Knife Effect”; Long, A. et al. *Building Special Operations Partnerships in Afghanistan and Beyond. Challenges and Best Practices from Afghanistan, Iraq, and Colombia*. RAND Corporation. 2015; Stilwell, A. *Special Forces in Action: Iraq, Syria, Afghanistan, Africa, Balkans*. London, UK: Amber Books. 2015.

¹⁸⁴ Schroden, J. *Why Special Operations? A Risk-Based Theory*. CNA. 2020; Wirtz, J. “The Abbottabad Raid.”

¹⁸⁵ See for example Byman, D., & Merritt, I. A. “The New American Way of War”; Gielas, A. M. “Prima Donnas in Kevlar zones.”

¹⁸⁶ Mooney, M. “Like a bolt from the blue.”

¹⁸⁷ Gregory, D. *The Global Infrastructure of the Special Operations Executive* (1st ed.). Routledge. 2021.

¹⁸⁸ Miller, M. “Special Operations in the 21st Century: Revisiting the Falklands war”. *Inter Populum: The Journal of Irregular Warfare and Special Operations*, 1(1). 2023.

international scene since the beginning of the war on terror. In contrast, studies concerning Canadian special forces focus on institutional dynamics and how SOF can adapt to grey-zone conflicts.¹⁸⁹

4.2.3 Small-state SOF actors

Case studies have also been conducted on the SOF activities of smaller states such as the Netherlands,¹⁹⁰ Denmark,¹⁹¹ Norway,¹⁹² Estonia,¹⁹³ Belgium,¹⁹⁴ and Sweden.¹⁹⁵ There is a specific strand of studies focusing on the small-state problematic.

The argument is that the considerations of how SOF should be designed, what capacity they should have, and when they should be used are different in small states than in, for instance, the US. Small states do not have the same resources as a large military power and are thus, to a larger degree, forced to choose between breadth and depth. In other words, this involves whether it is better to focus on developing a few capabilities very well or to have the same capabilities as larger states, just in smaller scale.

Small states also have to more carefully ruminate on the strategic use of their SOF, as that resource is particularly scarce. Misuse of SOF thus has larger consequences in a small state. Small-states studies therefore also ask questions about how SOF can be most efficiently used and how it can complement other countries' SOF in multinational operations.¹⁹⁶

¹⁸⁹ Allem, et al. "Canadian Special Operations Forces Theory"; Quellet, E. "The self and the mirror. Institutional tensions and Canadian Special Operations Forces" in Turnley, J.G. et al. (eds.). *Special Operations Forces in the 21st Century: Perspectives from the Social Sciences* (1st ed.). Routledge. 2017.

¹⁹⁰ Dimitriu, G. et al. "Formative Years: Military Adaptation of Dutch Special Operations Forces in Afghanistan". *Special Operations Journal*, 2(2), 162–63. 2016.

¹⁹¹ Burchall Henningsen, T. "Dare to Know: The Problem of Overcoming Information Asymmetry for Special Operations Forces in Military Assistance Operations". *Special Operations Journal*, 5(2), 162–178. 2019.; Dalgaard-Nielsen, A. "Organizing Special Operations Forces."

¹⁹² Brundtland Steder, F., & Rones, N. "'Why Make a Special Platoon for Women?' An Assessment of the Jegertroppen at the Norwegian Special Operations Commando (NORSOC)". *Special Operations Journal*, 5(1). 2019.; Danielsen, T. "The 'Seamen's Council'. A SOFish way of making decisions" in Turnley, J.G. et al. (eds.). *Special Operations Forces in the 21st Century: Perspectives from the Social Sciences* (1st ed.). Routledge. 2017.

¹⁹³ Toomse, R. "Small States' Special Operations Forces in Preemptive Strategic Development Operations: Proposed Doctrine for Estonian Special Operations Forces". *Special Operations Journal*, 1(1), 44–61. 2015.

¹⁹⁴ Resteigne, D. "Aiming to punch above their weight" in Turnley, J.G. et al. (eds.). *Special Operations Forces in the 21st Century: Perspectives from the Social Sciences* (1st ed.). Routledge. 2017.

¹⁹⁵ Eriksson, G. & Pettersson, U. *Special Operations from a Small State Perspective*; Osterberg, J., Borjesson, M., & Enander, A. "Profiling the Swedish Ranger" in Turnley, J.G. et al. (eds.). *Special Operations Forces in the 21st Century: Perspectives from the Social Sciences* (1st ed.). Routledge. 2017.

¹⁹⁶ See for example Burchell Henningsen, T. "Dare to know"; Burchell Henningsen, T. "Frogmen and pirates"; Eriksson, G. & Pettersson, U. *Special operations from a small state perspective*; Toomse, R. "Small States' Special Operations Forces."

4.2.4 International Organisations

When it comes to international organisations, SOF in the NATO context has attracted the most attention. Generally, studies on NATO try to identify the best ways for SOF units to contribute to NATO operations or they scrutinise the limitations and obstacles for doing so.¹⁹⁷

The use of SOF by the UN and the EU has gained less attention than NATO. Yet, all three organisations have SO doctrines, which have also been subjects of analysis and comparison.¹⁹⁸ The difference in interest might seem natural, given NATO's stronger military mandate together with heightened attention to NATO in the public debate in the past few years and a decreased interest in UN operations.

Nevertheless, SOF from different member states also play important roles in UN and EU operations, but this has not spurred academic attention in recent years. One of the few examples is Louis Bester's work on SOF in African peace missions.¹⁹⁹

While the theme "actors" took the perspective on SO and SOF in relation to *who* performs the activities, the next theme identified in the literature takes another view, looking at *where* these activities take place.



Key takeaways: Actors

- There is a significant prevalence of the US perspective in SO/SOF literature. The literature's focus is on US SOF's abilities, structure, development, tasks, and operations.
- Literature focusing on UK SOF are mostly historical case studies.
- There is a growing literature that considers the small-state context and how SOF can be most efficiently used.

¹⁹⁷ Fabian, S. "NATO Special Operations Forces: Even if It Is Not Broken Yet, It Needs to Be Fixed". *Special Operations Journal*, 4(2), 188–201. 2018.; Long, A. "NATO Special Operations"; Miller, M. "NATO Special Operations Forces, Counterterrorism, and the Resurgence of Terrorism in Europe". *Military Review*. July–August. 2016; Schwarzbauer, M., & Tuinman, J. "NATO's Special Operations Forces. Strategic Utility for Strategic Competition" in Kiras J. D., & Kitzen, M. (eds.). *Into the Void. Special Operations Forces after the War on Terror*. 2024.

¹⁹⁸ Stringer, K. D. "The Special Operations Doctrine of International Organizations: An Introductory Analysis to United Nations (UN), North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), and European Union (EU) Approaches". *Special Operations Journal*, 7(1), 87–93. 2021.

¹⁹⁹ Bester, L. "The utilization of special forces."

4.3 Country cases

An inherent characteristic of SO and SOF activities is that they often take place abroad. Therefore, another way to approach the SO/SOF literature is to look at the country settings in which the operations play out.

Studies on SO and SOF in Afghanistan stand out, not only in relation to other country case studies but also to the field as a whole. The focus of the studies is primarily SOF capacity/capability-building and advising of their Afghan counterparts.²⁰⁰ An example of a particular question under scrutiny is about how continuity is maintained across rotations in order to make operations as efficient as possible and not forget important lessons garnered over time.²⁰¹

Another common setting for country case studies is Iraq after 2003.²⁰² In this setting, scholars have studied partnership-building²⁰³ as well as the ethical considerations of supplying remote advise and assistance.²⁰⁴ Other studies concern specific task forces, such as the Iraq Task Force 20, and how some of their activities were used for publicity and to convey political messages of victory.²⁰⁵

²⁰⁰ See, for example, Bălăceanu, I., & Birsan C-M. "United States Special Operations Forces in Afghanistan". *Review of the Air Force Academy*. 1(36). 2018.; Bolduc, D. C., & Hensley, C. "Special Operations Forces and Afghan Local Police programs" in Sheehan, M.A., Marquardt, E., & Collins, L. (eds.). *Routledge Handbook of U.S. Counterterrorism and Irregular Warfare Operations* (1st ed.). Routledge. 2021.; Helmus, T. C. *Advising the Command: Best Practices from the Special Operations Advisory Experience in Afghanistan*. RAND Corporation. 2015; Mitchell, M. E. "The horse soldiers: lessons from expeditionary unconventional warfare", in Sheehan, M.A., Marquardt, E., & Collins, L. (eds.). *Routledge Handbook of U.S. Counterterrorism and Irregular Warfare Operations* (1st ed.). Routledge. 2021.

²⁰¹ Long, A. et al. *Building Special Operations Partnerships*.

²⁰² Bury, P. "US Special Forces transformation: post-Fordism and the limits of networked warfare" *International Affairs*, 98(2), 587–607. 2022.; Collins, L. "Dismantling al-Qaida in Iraq in special warfare in Sheehan" in M.A., Marquardt, E., & Collins, L. (eds.). *Routledge Handbook of U.S. Counterterrorism and Irregular Warfare Operations* (1st ed.). Routledge. 2021.

²⁰³ Long, A. et al. *Building Special Operations Partnerships*.

²⁰⁴ Baker, D. P. "Special operations remote advise and assist: an ethics assessment". *Ethics and Information Technology*. 21, 1–10. 2019.

²⁰⁵ Ansbacher, Y. & Schleifer, R. "The Utility Knife Effect in Special Operations."

Apart from Afghanistan and Iraq, case studies have been conducted on SO and SOF in, for instance, the Arctic,²⁰⁶ Colombia,²⁰⁷ the Balkans,²⁰⁸ Philippines,²⁰⁹ a number of African countries,²¹⁰ Syria,²¹¹ and Ukraine.²¹²

In addition, there are a number of historical country case studies, most notably from World War II and the Cold War. World War II is often referred to as the 1st wave or age of SOF.²¹³ Case studies on operations in Germany and France are prevalent here, with studies that shed light on British Horsa gliders in Normandy on D-Day,²¹⁴ Special Air Service teams on German territory in Operation

²⁰⁶ Kristiansen et al. "Special operations forces in the Arctic. From heroes to zeroes?" in Strauss, L., & Wegge, N. (eds.). *Defending NATO's Northern Flank: Power Projection and Military Operations* (1st ed.). Routledge. 2023

²⁰⁷ Higgins, K. "Plan Colombia and the U.S. Army's 7th Special Forces Group" in Sheehan, M.A., Marquardt, E., & Collins, L. (eds.). *Routledge Handbook of U.S. Counterterrorism and Irregular Warfare Operations* (1st ed.). Routledge. 2021; Long, A. et al. *Building Special Operations*; Koven, B. S., & Lindquist, K. "U.S. Special Operations Forces Counterterrorism in Colombia: Winning the War, Losing the Peace" in *Barriers to Special Operations Forces-Led Counterterrorism Effectiveness*, JSOU Press, 2021.

²⁰⁸ Ricciardi et al. "OSS Operations in Occupied Yugoslavia."

²⁰⁹ Koven, B. S., & Lindquist, K. "U.S. Special Operations Forces Counterterrorism in the Philippines: Tactical Successes Without Strategic Gains" in *Barriers to Special Operations Forces-Led Counterterrorism Effectiveness*, JSOU Press, 2021.; Maxwell, D. S. "Operation Enduring Freedom-Philippines: lessons in special warfare" in Sheehan, M.A., Marquardt, E., & Collins, L. (eds.). *Routledge Handbook of U.S. Counterterrorism and Irregular Warfare Operations* (1st ed.). Routledge. 2021. Robinson, L., Johnston, P. B., & Oak, G. S. *U.S. Special Operations Forces*; Robinson, L. "The SOF Experience in the Philippines and the Implications for Future Defense Strategy". *PRISM*, 6(3), 150-167. 2016.

²¹⁰ Zuckoff, M. *13 Hours: The Inside Account of What Really Happened in Benghazi*. New York, NY: Twelve. 2014; Hellquist, E., & Sjökvist, E. *Accompanying Partners during Military Operations. Early Expectations for Task Force Takuba*. FOI memo 7210, Swedish Defence Research Agency (FOI). 2020; Moores, C. C. *Preventing war*; Rietjens, S., & Zorner, J. "In search of intelligence" in Turnley, J.G., et al. (Eds.). *Special Operations Forces in the 21st Century: Perspectives from the Social Sciences* (1st ed.). Routledge. 2017; Burchall Henningsen, T. "Dare to Know"; Haugegaard R. "Fighting Danger at Sea: The Quest for Speed in Special Operations", *Inter Populum: The Journal of Irregular Warfare and Special Operations*, 1(1). 2023; Sheehan, M. A., & Siegel, P. C. "Operation Serval."

²¹¹ Messenger, A. et al. "Defeating the Islamic State. Special Operations Forces in Syria" in Sheehan, M.A., et al. (eds.). *Routledge Handbook of U.S. Counterterrorism and Irregular Warfare Operations* (1st ed.). Routledge. 2021; Althuisen, T., & Kitzen, M. The new way of limited warfare: the value of the Afghan model of warfare after the fight against ISIS. JSOU Press. 2024.

²¹² Searle, T. R., Marsh, C., and Petit, B. "Ten Surprising Lessons for Special Operations Forces from the First 20 Months of Putin's Full-Scale Invasion of Ukraine". *Inter Populum: The Journal of Irregular Warfare and Special Operations*, 1(1). 2023; Harper, B. "SOF Support to Counter Hybrid Warfare: A Case Study of the NATO-Ukrainian Special Operations Forces Development Project", in *The NATO STO SAS-161 Research Task Group (RTG) – Military Aspects of Countering Hybrid Warfare: Experiences, Lessons, Best Practices Volume III: Comprehensive Defence, Capacity Building, and Enhanced Forward Presence*, STO Technical report tr-SAS-161-Vol-III. 2023.

²¹³ 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?"; Horn, B. "The evolution of SOF and the rise of SOF Power 1" in Turnley, J.G., et al. (eds.). *Special Operations Forces in the 21st Century: Perspectives from the Social Sciences* (1st ed.). Routledge. 2017; Spencer, E. "The Special Operations Forces Mosaic" in Turnley, J.G., et al. (eds.). *Special Operations Forces in the 21st Century: Perspectives from the Social Sciences* (1st ed.). Routledge. 2017.

²¹⁴ Mooney, M. "Like a bolt from the blue."

Archway,²¹⁵ and female undercover Special Operations Executive agents in France.²¹⁶

Case studies post-WWII include, for example, US SO in Berlin during the Cold War,²¹⁷ US Special Forces in Laos in the 1960s,²¹⁸ and US special forces' assistance to the Colombian Army counterdrug brigade in the 1990s.²¹⁹ Historical case studies are common in this field. One important reason is the inherent component of confidentiality and secrecy; sufficient time must thus pass in order to attain clarity on many past SO and SOF operations. In this way, even though the context and means for SO and SOF are constantly changing, historical cases are key to understanding the mechanisms underpinning SO and SOF activities today.



Key takeaways: Country cases

- The literature has a significant focus on Afghanistan, with an emphasis on capacity-building.
- The literature occasionally considers Iraq, emphasising partnership-building and ethical considerations.
- The literature provides examples of current and historical country case studies from almost all continents and parts of the world.

4.4 Organisational structure

Questions regarding the design and organisation of SOF are prevalent to some extent in most empirical studies. As SOF are a scarce resource, their design must be carefully considered in order to achieve the desired strategic effect and relative superiority. In light of this, Linda Robinson et al. have developed a framework to assess the effectiveness of SO.²²⁰ Zweibelson argues that SO design must draw from different design options and concepts than conventional forces.²²¹ Stanczak et al. have looked at novel design options and argue that there is a growing design movement in the international SO community.²²² Kiras et al. question current

²¹⁵ Wellsted, I. *With the SAS Across the Rhine: Into the Heart of Hitler's Third Reich*. Frontline books. 2020.

²¹⁶ Vigurs, K. *Mission France: The True History of the Women of SOE*. Yale University Press. 2021.

²¹⁷ Stejskal, J. *Special Forces Berlin: Clandestine Cold War Operations of the US Army's Elite, 1956–1990*. Casemate. 2017.

²¹⁸ Celecki, J. *The Green Berets in the Land of a Million Elephants. U.S. Army Special Warfare and the Secret War in Laos 1959–74*. Casemate Publishers. 2018.

²¹⁹ Higgins, K. "Plan Colombia."

²²⁰ Robinson et al. *Measuring the Effectiveness of Special Operations*.

²²¹ Zweibelson, B. "Special Operations and Design Thinking: Through the Looking Glass of Organizational Knowledge Production". *Special Operations Journal*, 2(1), 22–32. 2016.

²²² Stanczak, J., Talbott, P., & Zweibelson, B. "Designing at the Cutting Edge of Battle: The 75th Ranger Regiment's Project Galahad". *Special Operations Journal*, 7(1), 1–16. 2021.

requirements for SOF recruits and ask if these are indeed still relevant. In order to create an organisation that is apt to current challenges, they argue that SOF skills and talents should be diversified.²²³

4.4.1 Leadership

It may be assumed that the somewhat unorthodox design and challenges for SOF require unorthodox leadership. What type of leadership is required for a force that operates under exceptionally high risk and complexity but that is, at the same time, trained to be exceptionally independent? The SO/SOF leadership research strand reflects on this question using different approaches. One answer is provided by Rothstein:

. . . while general leadership principles apply to SOF leaders, these unique circumstances generate a few distinctive leadership attributes necessary for irregular warfare. Leaders of successful irregular warfare operations must be ready to seize opportunities, be prepared to break long-held paradigms, understand the big picture, and experiment and learn from mistakes.²²⁴

Another approach is to look at the cognitive mechanisms at work between thinking and acting. The argument is that SOF leaders need to be mindful of the reasons they act in a specific way in order to adequately adapt to every kind of situation. This is particularly important for SOF leaders in small states, as their resources for using SOF are much scarcer.²²⁵ Other examples of SOF leadership studies have explored this theme in the context of “the liberator’s dilemma”,²²⁶ leadership and management strategies in US special forces during the Global War on Terror,²²⁷ and SOF leadership design for complex contexts.²²⁸

4.4.2 SOF Operators

Another common theme identified in the literature concerns the specific traits and challenges for SOF operators. It has been well argued that the qualification processes and high demands for SOF operators distinguish them from other

²²³ Kiras, J., Dalgaard-Nielsen, A., & Nielsen, N. J. “Introduction: Recruiting and Organizing to Meet Future SOF Challenges”. *Special Operations Journal*, 5(1), 1–5. 2019.

²²⁴ Rothstein, H. “Conclusion” in Sheehan, M. A., et al. (eds.). *Routledge Handbook of U.S. Counterterrorism and Irregular Warfare Operations*. Routledge. 2022, p. 497.

²²⁵ PBO, “Do we need to get smarter? Small State Leadership” in Eriksson, G., & Pettersson, U. (eds.). *Special Operations from a Small State Perspective*. Palgrave Macmillan. 2017.

²²⁶ Long, J. “The Liberator’s Dilemma: The Paradox of American Leadership”. *Inter Populum: The Journal of Irregular Warfare and Special Operations*, 1(2). 2023. The liberator’s dilemma is a model that tries to capture the complex relationship between military interventions and local populations. The “liberator” depends on the support of the “liberated” at the same time as the liberation from an oppressive power has a potential to spur other complications or new power competition.

²²⁷ Woolbridge Ross, D. A. *Phenomenological Study of U.S. Army Special Forces Senior Noncommissioned Officer Leadership Strategies during the Global War on Terror*. Colorado Technical University. 2023.

²²⁸ Zweibelson, B. “Change Agents for the SOF Enterprise: Design Considerations for SOF Leadership Confronting Complex Environments”. *Special Operations Journal*, 3(2), 127–140. 2017.

military personnel. Some studies have explored the SOF culture, the “common ways of thinking, acting, and meaning-making within a group that is enduring over time”²²⁹ and argued that many examples of SOF misconduct and internal crises have been attributed to military culture in general and SOF culture in particular but that such a culture should also offer opportunities for learning and growth.²³⁰

A number of studies even set out to dissect the “SOF mindset,” by which they mean characteristics related to non-hierarchical organisational interaction, tactical proficiency, and the “ability to cope with ambiguous and complex environments.”²³¹ Working as an SOF operator is also set apart by the fact that it is seldom referred to as a job but “a way of life,”²³² while the exceptional demands (psychological, risk-taking, readiness, etc) placed on SOF operators feed into their and their families’ personal lives.

Other studies have considered the personal characteristics of SOF operators, which is also often emphasised as the most important part of SOF capability. Specific studies of SOF operators’ mentality have found both that SOF soldiers have an exceptionally high mental and psychological resilience and functioning²³³ and that they are more prone to risk-taking than others.²³⁴ These studies share the view that the SOF profession is different from any other, even in comparison with other roles within the armed forces. While this allows for targeted and potentially helpful analyses of the specific challenges and demands of working in the special forces, it also contributes to the mystification of these individuals.

4.4.3 Education and training

Studies on SOF operators and personnel are closely related to research on their education and training. In fact, this has been one of the most discussed topics in SO/SOF research over the last decade. Almost all texts analysed for this review mention either education or training, and many of them heavily focus on it. However, not all of them constitute case studies on education and training per se; rather, their frequent occurrence reflects how they permeate most analyses, regardless of their particular focus on SO and SOF.

Nevertheless, there are studies that specifically single out SOF education for investigation. Examples are Peter McCabe’s assessment of the gaps and limitations of SOF education,²³⁵ as well as studies focusing on the training of

²²⁹ Yantzi, E. “The Question of SOF Culture”. *Insights*, 1(9). The Kingston Consortium on International Security. 2021, p. 2.

²³⁰ Yantzi, E. “The Question of SOF Culture.”

²³¹ Dalggaard Nielsen, A. & Falster Holm, K. “Supersoldiers or Rulebreakers?” p. 594.

²³² Resteigne, D. “Aiming to punch above their weight.”

²³³ Goldenberg, I., & Saindon, M. “The resilience of SOF personnel” in Turnley, J.G., et al. (eds.). *Special Operations Forces in the 21st Century: Perspectives from the Social Sciences* (1st ed.). Routledge. 2017.

²³⁴ Osterberg, J. et al. “Profiling the Swedish Ranger.”

²³⁵ McCabe, P. “State of Special Operations Forces Education”. *Special Operations Journal*, 3(1), 51–60. 2017.

specific competencies, such as Justin Valdengo et al.'s article on training SOF to conduct maritime surveillance.²³⁶

4.4.4 Design considerations in small states

As described under “SO and SOF actors” above, US SO and SOF are by far the most researched in relation to those of other countries. Subsequently, their view frames the understanding of what constitutes “good” design, leadership, and training. It is therefore valuable to look specifically into the choices that smaller states need to make when undertaking the design of SOF.

Ronny Modigs scrutinises the subject of small-state challenges and finds, for instance, that the relatively recent but rapid development of SO capability means that the strategic- and policy-level understanding of SO has not followed at the same pace. As the “affordability” of SO is seen as particularly attractive to small states due to limited capacity, there is a risk that SO are being used because they are a “cheap” option. Modigs warns that if SO are becoming more like conventional forces, they will lose their uniqueness and comparative advantage. In small states, SO are often dependent on the armed forces in international operations, which “limits the explicit utility of SO” and instead “SO often become a joint mission dependent on supporting enablers such as helicopters, air and sea transports, logistics, and other assets.”²³⁷

Rene Toomse, on the other hand, uses the case of Estonian SOF to argue that small-state SOF should concentrate their limited resources in the areas where they excel, for instance, in cyber security and information technology (in Estonia's case), and in that way contribute to a larger international SOF structure. Moreover, Toomse emphasises that the small size of their militaries, as well as other political and societal structures, is an advantage to small-state SOF, as this makes them much more flexible and prone to adapting to changing circumstances than the SOF of larger states.²³⁸

²³⁶ Valdengo, J. et al. “Training Special Operations Forces to Conduct Maritime Surveillance.”

²³⁷ Modigs, R. “The Utility of Special Operations.” p. 60.

²³⁸ Toomse, R. “Small states’ special operations forces.”



Key takeaways: Organisational structure

- There is research focusing on how to best design an SOF organisation.
- Because of the unique circumstances surrounding SOF, other research highlights the kind of leadership styles that it requires.
- There is also research that concentrates on how SOF operators face SOF's demands, culture, mindset, and mentality.
- SOF education is one of the most discussed topics in SO/SOF research over the last decade, with studies specifically investigating the quality of SOF education.
- Some research focusses on the specific organisational challenges and opportunities of SOF in a small-state context.

4.5 Women in SOF

A small strand of studies has looked at the role and inclusion of women in SOF. Most of the publications in this area consist of token chapters in edited volumes or articles from a special issue of the *Special Operations Journal* on the theme of "Recruiting and Organising to Meet Future SOF Challenges."²³⁹ Nonetheless, the arguments and topics illuminated in these texts are crucial for the integration of women in SOF and to upholding a diversified force over time.

Generally, the studies on women in SOF concern either potential challenges for integration or the unique competencies that women can contribute to SOF units and the SOF sphere. For instance, Thomas S. Szayna et al. find that there is a deep and wide opposition to integrating women in US SOF based on presuppositions that women do not meet the physical requirements and that the inclusion of women based on other competencies would diminish trust and lower performance standards of SOF units.²⁴⁰

Deborah E. Gibbons et al. have found similar concerns when studying the integration of women in US Naval special warfare combat teams. In addition, they find that there is fear that the inclusion of women will have a negative impact on performance, male bonding, competitiveness, and male decision-making in combat, as "American men have an inclination to protect women."²⁴¹

Drawing on experiences from the early integration of women in other parts of the military, the authors suggest a number of actions that can facilitate the integration

²³⁹ *Special Operations Journal*, Vol. 5, Issue 1.

²⁴⁰ Szayna, T. et al. *Considerations for Integrating Women into Closed Occupations in U.S. Special Operations Forces*. RAND Corporation. 2015.

²⁴¹ Gibbons, D., Nelson, A., & Suchan, J. "Integrating men and women within Naval Special Warfare combat teams" in Turnley, J.G., et al. (eds.). *Special Operations Forces in the 21st Century: Perspectives from the Social Sciences* (1st ed.). Routledge. 2017.p. 165.

of women in SOF. These actions include clear pro-integration and anti-harassment leadership, the exchange of integration strategies and experiences between women, and a focus on teambuilding. Moreover, Gibbons et al. find that emphasising the important contribution of women to SOF (not least in cultural and emotional understanding and female relationship-building) can ameliorate many of the concerns raised among SOF operators.²⁴²

Other studies have a more outspoken focus on the unique competencies of women and their importance for SOF. Frank Gaska et al., for instance, have presented examples from around the world of the successful integration of women in SOF and have also provided illustrations of their specific contributions in operations in Afghanistan and Iraq.²⁴³

Even though several studies highlight women's cultural contributions to SOF, not least their ability to reach out to women and children in a different cultural setting, other writers have also underscored the problems of directing too much attention to the uniqueness of women in SOF. Indeed, this might conceal the core SOF capabilities of female operators (they have to pass the same recruitment tests as their male colleagues, after all). Moreover, the lack of nuance in this perspective runs the risk of obscuring the unique identity and traits of the individual SOF operator, female or not.²⁴⁴ In a similar vein, Rikke Haugegaard argues that while her study on female military cultural advisors to Danish SOF shows that they can facilitate communication with the local population, it is important to shift the narrative away from concerns about women as a military distraction towards seeing women as competent, professional soldiers.²⁴⁵



Key takeaways: Women in SOF

- There is research on both the challenges of integrating women into SOF and the methods for doing so.
- Other research concentrates on how women can contribute to SOF.
- The possibility that the focus on women in SOF creates a distraction and undermines appreciation of their professional achievements has been problematised in the research conducted so far.

²⁴² Gibbons, D. et al. "Integrating Men and Women."

²⁴³ Gaska, F. Voneida, R., & Goedecke, K. "Unique Capabilities of Women in Special Operations Forces". *Special Operations Journal*, 1(2). 2015.

²⁴⁴ Turnley, J. G. "Funhouse Mirrors: Reflections of Females in Special Operations Forces". *Special Operations Journal*, 5(1), 25–41. 2019.

²⁴⁵ Haugegaard, R. "Female Specialists as Operational Enablers for Special Operations Forces? – A Pilot Study among Danish Military Linguists". *Special Operations Journal*, 5(1), 72–81. 2019.

4.6 Reflections on research topics

While Chapters 2 and 3 explore *how* the literature under review studies SO and SOF, this chapter sets out to survey *what* is being studied in SO and SOF studies. The overview finds that the literature is interested in a wide range of topics that try to describe and explain the larger geopolitical context in which SO takes place and SOF operates, the specific situations in which they are employed, and the means at their disposal, as well as how they are structured. In addition, these studies, implicitly or explicitly, often also include arguments on how all these components and conditions could or should be improved.

As a result of the size of the US organisation but also stemming from the tradition of conducting research on SO and SOF, which is spearheaded by the JSOU, the data collected in the studies are from US SO and SOF especially. Even so, a considerable number of smaller actors are also studied, to some extent grounded in the rationale that small-state SO/SOF actors face specific considerations and dilemmas.

Compared to many other fields in international relations, political science, sociology, and military studies, SO and SOF studies are generally less inclined to engage in theory development. Admittedly, the studies make use of theories as lenses for illumination and explanation. William McRaven's theories on strategic effect and relative superiority are frequently referred to and employed as are Gray's arguments on strategic utility as well as Spulak's framework on SOF attributes and capabilities. As is further expanded on in Chapter 3, many studies are also inspired by other theoretical schools such as organisation theory, military sociology, and network theory. Nevertheless, the overall assessment of the field is that there is a greater interest in expanding empirical knowledge than in developing theories.

After having reviewed the definitions, theoretical perspectives, and empirical topics in the SO and SOF literature over the last decade, the next and final chapter summarises the findings, analyses where the field is heading, and identifies research gaps that can inspire future research.



Chapter 4 takeaways

Challenges

- The literature focuses on various SO and SOF organisational challenges as well as ethical dilemmas.
- The literature emphasises the challenges for SO and SOF in unconventional warfare relating to history, modern resistance movements, terrorism, and technology, as well as structural-organisational and cultural-conceptual challenges.
- The literature highlights SOF's challenges in the grey zone in relation to deterrence and building competencies.
- In the new strategic context, the combination of new technology and hybrid strategies with power politics is a new operating environment for SOF.

Actors

- There is a significant prevalence of the US perspective in SO/SOF literature. The literature focusses on US SOF's abilities, structure, development, tasks, and operations.
- Literature focusing on UK SOF are mostly historical case studies.
- There is a growing literature on the small-state context and how SOF can be most efficiently used.
- Literature on SOF and international organisations mostly deals with NATO, but some publications also consider SOF in UN peacekeeping.

Country cases

- The literature has a significant focus on Afghanistan, with emphasis on capacity-building.
- The literature occasionally considers Iraq, emphasising partnership-building and ethical considerations.
- The literature provides examples of current and historical country case studies from almost all continents and parts of the world.

Organisational structure

- There is research focusing on how to best design an SOF organisation.
- Because of the unique circumstances surrounding SOF, other research highlights the kind of leadership styles that it requires.
- There is also research that concentrates on how SOF operators face SOF's demands, culture, mindset, and mentality.
- SOF education is one of the most discussed topics in SO/SOF research over the last decade, with studies specifically investigating the quality of SOF education.
- Some research focusses on the specific organisational challenges and opportunities of SOF in a small-state context.

Women in SOF

- Research has been conducted on both the challenges of integrating women into SOF and the methods for doing so.
- Other research concentrates on how women can contribute to SOF.
- The possibility that the focus on women in SOF creates a distraction and undermines appreciation of their professional achievements has been problematised in the research conducted so far.

5 Opportunities for future SO and SOF research

This chapter is of particular interest for readers who wish to:



- obtain an overview of the trajectory of SO and SOF as a research field;
- be inspired to conduct further research on SO and SOF.

This chapter elaborates on the current state of SOF research and highlights future research opportunities. As this study demonstrates, research on US SOF or SO is a dominant feature of the field. While recent years have seen excellent research on small states,²⁴⁶ opportunities to for further research on SOF and SO in this context persist. With the help of how the dominant actor within the research field, the Joint Special Operations University (JSOU), envisions future research opportunities, this chapter specifically identifies areas in need of future research within the small-state context.

5.1 Future research according to JSOU

While there are exceptions, the current SO and SOF research field is very much related to the JSOU, which describes itself as USSOCOM's scholarly publishing arm and "think-do tank."²⁴⁷ This academic platform is the source of most developments within this field.

Every year, the JSOU encourages research on a selection of priority research topics. They are developed with "the engagement of participants from across the SOE [the Special Operations Enterprise], as well as the larger Department of Defense (DOD) and U.S. government interagency participants."²⁴⁸ The topics match the priorities of the USSOCOM command team.

As a way of identifying opportunities for future research while also reflecting the scope of the SOF and SO field, all the JSOU research topics (2014–2024)²⁴⁹ have

²⁴⁶ Finlan, A. "A Dangerous Pathway?"; Eriksson, G. & Pettersson, U. *Special Operations form a Small State Perspective*.

²⁴⁷ Joint Special Operations University (JSOU) — Official Home Page, accessed November 2024: <https://jsou.edu/>

²⁴⁸ Joint Special Operations University. *Special Operations Research Topics 2024*, JSOU Press. 2024.

²⁴⁹ These years are referring to the year of publication. The topics sometimes are published prior to the year they are intended. The analysis was based on: *Special Operations Research Topics 2015*, JSOU Press. 2014; *Special Operations Research Topics 2016*, JSOU Press. 2015; *Special Operations Research Topics 2017*, JSOU Press. 2016; *Special Operations Research Topics 2018*, JSOU Press. 2018; *Special Operations Research Topics 2020*, JSOU Press. 2019. *Special Operations Research Topics 2020 (revised for 2021)*, JSOU Press. 2020; *Special Operations Research Topics 2022*, JSOU Press. 2021; *Special*

been inductively coded and categorised into themes. The themes span a wide range of issues such as cooperation (including, e.g., partners, or intelligence- and information-sharing); forms of conflict and warfare (including hybrid wars and influence operations); technology (including competition, energy, and AI); and organisation (including education, logistics, and culture). In this chapter, it is not possible to account all the topics in detail, but they feed naturally into the next section, where future research opportunities are identified with the help of the literature reviewed in the previous chapters.

5.2 Opportunities for future research

Except for the need for more theory development and conceptual clarity, which have been dealt with at length in Chapters 2 and 3, the literature of the last decade points to three topic areas where more research is needed: international cooperation, interactions with the conflict environment, as well as organisation, culture, and ethics. Of course, other topics also provide opportunities for further research, but the topics emphasised in this chapter have been selected as they were identified in several of the studies under review and by the JSOU.

The review of the literature indicates that the small-state context is a research area where many opportunities exist to build on the high-quality research that has been conducted in the previous decade. For small states, it might also be the most efficient use of limited research resources, as the US already conducts much of the more general SO/SOF research but largely neglects the small-state problematique. Each of the three topic areas below therefore draw connections to specific gaps in the research on small states' SO and SOF.

5.2.1 SOF and international cooperation

The literature of the last decade has pointed to specific SO and SOF topics that provide opportunities for further research in relation to international cooperation. For instance, while small states have gained some recent scholarly interest (as explained in Chapters 3 and 4), not much work has been conducted on NATO SOF in general nor on small states within NATO SOF in particular.²⁵⁰ The JSOU has in recent years identified the US SOF's role in "global and theatre-integrated deterrence, campaigning, and engagement" as a topic for future research.²⁵¹

While the US SOF will likely take a completely different role in integrated deterrence efforts compared to small states, opportunities exist for further research on small states' contributions to collaborative deterrence, particularly in a NATO

Operations Research Topics 2023, JSOU Press. 2022.; *Special Operations Research Topics 2024*, JSOU Press. 2024.

²⁵⁰ Fabian, S. "Nato special operation forces"; Long, A. "NATO Special Operations"; Miller, M. "NATO Special Operations Forces"; Schwarzbauer, M. & Tuinman, J. "NATO's Special Operations Forces."

²⁵¹ Joint Special Operations University. *Special Operations Research Topics 2024*.

context and with a whole-of-government approach. As highlighted in Chapter 4, there is scope to expand on the past decade's research that examines the challenges emerging when SOF contribute to NATO operations.

A similar research topic identified by the JSOU is how SOF can utilise its global network, maintain durable relations, build and attract partnerships, and foster mutual benefits, but also avoid the potential strategic challenges of these forms of cooperation.²⁵² The issue of global SOF networks has been brought up in a small state context by some authors who conclude that while network membership provides larger gains for small states than for more powerful ones, there are challenges in navigating what role a small state actor should take in those associations.²⁵³ Such discussions could benefit from more empirical and theoretical insights.

In relation to SOF and global cooperation, Troels Burchall Henningsen has researched small states in a multinational maritime context; yet, research about small states in an SOF alliance or in another international organisational context (such as the EU and UN) is scarce.²⁵⁴ Similarly, there are opportunities to pursue further research on how the SOF of small states contribute to peace missions, as this is a generally under-researched topic.²⁵⁵

Except for Burchall Henningsen's focus on small states in maritime missions and Justin Valdengo et al.'s research on capacity-building in maritime surveillance,²⁵⁶ the literature under review does not concern SOF in a maritime context to any large extent. By contrast, the JSOU has consistently identified this context as a topic for further research. For instance, future research can concern how to use SOF to mitigate Russian underwater warfare, and SOF's role in irregular maritime warfare and in the protection of maritime assets, as well as the training of partners in the "maritime environment."²⁵⁷

5.2.2 Interactions with the conflict environment

There are also opportunities for future research focusing on various forms of conflict context and different types of threats. For instance, in relation to the utility of SO and SOF in a small-state context, more research is needed on how SO can be used as an option when combating organised crime, which has also only

²⁵² Joint Special Operations University. *Special Operations Research Topics 2024*.

²⁵³ MLI & JCA, "Swedish Special Operations Forces in a Global SOF Network – Challenges, Recommendations, and Benefits" in Eriksson, G. & Pettersson, U. *Special Operations from a Small State Perspective*. 2017.

²⁵⁴ Burchall Henningsen, T. "Frogmen and pirates"; see also Stringer, K. D. "The Special Operations Doctrine of International Organizations."

²⁵⁵ Bester, L. "The utilization of special forces in peace missions: perspectives from South Africa," *Small Wars & Insurgencies*, 34:5, 985–1006. 2023.

²⁵⁶ Valdengo et al. "Training Special Operations Forces to Conduct Maritime Surveillance."

²⁵⁷ Joint Special Operations University. *Special Operations Research Topics 2020 (revised for 2021)*.

marginally been researched in a US context.²⁵⁸ Similarly, the JSOU has proposed that more research is needed to understand how SOF can mitigate the funding of transnational crimes.²⁵⁹ Moreover, both the literature and the JSOU have identified the need for more research on how the transition from the Global War on Terror to a new strategic context has influenced American SOF; this transition is something that is also relevant in a small-state context.²⁶⁰

In light of the argument that social systems are more engrained than networks (e.g., terrorist networks),²⁶¹ Jessica Glicken Turnley's examination of how SOF forms change in a mission context can be further expanded to a more general local context.²⁶² For instance, How can SOF as agents of change approach the various social systems that are in the background of various transnational networks?

This leads to another important and more general, but underexplored, area of SOF research: How do SOF induce change? Related to this is research on how SOF forms room for decisions and non-decisions, as well as how SOF shapes the trajectory of conflict or prevents conflict from happening.²⁶³ For instance, Phillip Lohaus proposes that more research is needed into "where and when" the shaping should begin.²⁶⁴

The literature has also identified that more research is needed on small states' SOF as part of the whole-of-government approach in the spectrum of conflict.²⁶⁵ In this regard, the JSOU proposes more research on how the US globally can shape the grey-zone environment, which may not be possible on as large a scale for small states.²⁶⁶ Yet, the difference in these abilities may be an interesting future research topic.

In relation to SOF grey zone assistance, Will Irwin suggests that more research is needed on external support for resistance, for instance, from a comparative approach. In addition, both he and the JSOU highlight the need for further research into resistance more broadly. He also suggests that a future research focus could be on how to support nonviolent resistance movements and how these types of operations align with national strategy.²⁶⁷ With regard to small states, Gunilla Eriksson and Ulrica Pettersson predict that military assistance may become an

²⁵⁸ Johnson, S. R. "The role of U.S. special operations forces"; Modigs, R. "The Utility of Special Operations"

²⁵⁹ Joint Special Operations University. *Special Operations Research Topics 2016*.

²⁶⁰ Gielas, A. M. "Quarrelsome Siblings."

²⁶¹ Ellis, D. C. "From Networks to Systems and the Limits of the Center of Gravity."

²⁶² Turnley, J. G. *Special Operations Forces as Change Agents*, p. 1.

²⁶³ Allem, T., et al. "Canadian special operations forces theory of gray zone conflict"; Finlan, A. "A Dangerous Pathway?"

²⁶⁴ Lohaus, P. "Special Operations Forces in the Gray Zone" p. 89.

²⁶⁵ Modigs, R. "The Utility of Special Operations."

²⁶⁶ Joint Special Operations University. *Special Operations Research Topics 2018*.

²⁶⁷ Irwin, W. *Support to Resistance*.

important aspect of “the whole government approach from a national perspective.”²⁶⁸

To gain more insight into SOF support in a national context, the Ukrainian SOF and resistance may provide important lessons learned.²⁶⁹ JSOU proposes further that future research is conducted on the topic of women in resistance movements and how SOF can use insights from the women, peace, and security agenda “into its planning and operational efforts for” security-sector reform.²⁷⁰ The JSOU mentions women’s resistance in Ukraine as a potential case study. A limited amount of the literature under review has focused on women and only in relation to the SOF organisation.²⁷¹

5.2.3 Organisation, culture, and ethics

The literature also points to the need for more research on SOF organisation, as well as SOF culture and ethics. For instance, new forms of leadership have been identified as an area for future research.²⁷² In light of generational changes and the increasing number of women in the military organisation, further research could look into which types of leadership an SOF organisation is shaping and how new forms of leadership culture can be facilitated.²⁷³ There are also opportunities for more research on how design thinking may assist the SOF leadership and organisation.²⁷⁴

Another research area in need of development in relation to leadership and the organisations identified in the literature is how small states’ policymakers perceive the strategic value of SOF.²⁷⁵ This is an interesting observation; as discussed in Chapter 2, there are implications for SOF when policymakers misperceive their strategic utility.²⁷⁶ Further research in this area is not only relevant for small states, as Kurt Müller highlights, more research is needed in general in relation to how SOF fits within power and policy.²⁷⁷

As discussed in Chapter 3, most scholars recognise some form of strategic impact of SOF. However, some acknowledge that this may not need to be instantaneous. Asking whether the current strategic competition is “a zero-sum game,” JSOU

²⁶⁸ Eriksson, G. & Pettersson, U. *Special Operations from a Small State Perspective*, p. 6.

²⁶⁹ Searle, T. R. et al. “Ten Surprising Lessons.”

²⁷⁰ Joint Special Operations University. *Special Operations Research Topics 2024*, p.28.

²⁷¹ Szayna, T. et al. *Considerations for Integrating Women*; Gibbons et al. “Integrating Men and Women,” p. 165.

²⁷² Long, “The liberator’s dilemma”; PBO, “Do we need to get smarter?”

²⁷³ PBO, “Do we need to get smarter?”

²⁷⁴ Zweibelson, “Special Operations and Design Thinking”; Stanczak et al., “Designing at the Cutting Edge of Battle”; Joint Special Operations University. *Special Operations Research Topics 2022*; Joint Special Operations University. *Special Operations Research Topics 2018*.

²⁷⁵ Modigs, R. “The Utility of Special Operations.”

²⁷⁶ Modigs, R. “The Utility of Special Operations.”

²⁷⁷ Müller, K. “Civil Context.”

highlights that more research is needed on how SOF promotes “a culture that recognises incremental progress and encourages consideration of metrics of success beyond one operation cycle or stint in a leadership role,” particularly in terms of resilience-building operations.²⁷⁸ Not only historical case studies but also lessons learned from Ukraine’s resistance may be a starting point for such research.

In addition, the JSOU ties the topic of incremental winning to the current landscape of strategic competition and suggests that research focusses “on ‘infinite games’ (as opposed to finite games like chess or Go).”²⁷⁹ Future research on small-states SOF may concentrate on the challenges and opportunities in promoting a culture of incremental change under resource constraints (or other small-state-specific conditions).

In relation to the strategic impact of SOF, another topic that has been identified as needing more research is the increased use of SOF. Russel Burgos suggests that a future research emphasis could be on how the increased use of SOF impacts global stability and instability.²⁸⁰ In general, more research in relation to international relations theory may be useful to understand SOF in international security.

In concrete terms, Burgos proposes more research on the cultural and political conditions that make SOF a sought-after policy choice.²⁸¹ These conditions may be different for small states; there may also be particular challenges for small states in international relations if SOF indeed are influencing global stability. If SOF are an increasingly used tool in the political toolbox, questions arise regarding whether there is also an enhanced risk of their misuse.

Moreover, Burgos calls for more research on the ethics of using SOF, for instance, by adopting points of departure similar to research on autonomous weapon systems.²⁸² Similarly, the JSOU suggests that more research examines how the ethics and morals among SOF operators are impacted by the tactical, operational, and strategic levels.²⁸³ If SOF are becoming an “easy option” for policymakers, their use could be particularly attractive in small states, which also makes the ethics topic interesting in this context.

The literature has identified that more research is needed on how various SOF cultures interact when cooperating, the relation between culture and identity in SOF, and how SOF imagine their wider community.²⁸⁴ Research could also focus on how SOF culture has evolved through history and organisations, as well as how

²⁷⁸ Joint Special Operations University. *Special Operations Research Topics 2024*, p.16.

²⁷⁹ Joint Special Operations University. *Special Operations Research Topics 2023*, p.2.

²⁸⁰ Burgos, R. A. “Pushing the easy button.”

²⁸¹ Burgos, R. A. “Pushing the easy button.”

²⁸² Burgos, R. A. “Pushing the easy button.”

²⁸³ Joint Special Operations University. *Special Operations Research Topics 2023*, p.12.

²⁸⁴ Yantzi, E. “The Question of SOF Culture.”

it is apt to meet challenges in the future.²⁸⁵ The JSOU proposes that this can be done by focussing on what they identify as a form of warrior culture that may need to change in the new strategic context, suggesting that more research is needed into the challenges of this culture and how it can transform.²⁸⁶ More research could focus on whether similar narratives inform SOF culture in small states or even if there is a specific small-state SOF culture.



Key takeaways: Opportunities for future research

- There are opportunities to conduct further research on SOF and international cooperation, especially in terms of:
 - small-states collaborative deterrence, in a NATO context and/or with a whole-of-government approach, and
 - small-states SOF efforts in the maritime domain.
- There are also opportunities to conduct research on the conflict environment in which SO and SOF function, especially in terms of:
 - how the transition from global war on terror to a new strategic context influence SOF in small states;
 - how SOF as agents of change approach the various social systems that are in the background of transnational networks;
 - where, how, and when small-states' SOF can induce change (including the direction of conflict);
 - if and how small-state SOF shape the grey-zone environment;
 - how small-state SOF builds cooperation and facilitates burden-sharing in peacetime to prevent conflict;
 - small-states' SOF support to resistance as a part of a whole-of-government approach;
 - how insights from women, peace and security may be used in MA.
- There are opportunities to conduct further research on the organisation, culture, and ethics of SO and SOF, especially in terms of:
 - how new forms of leadership style and design thinking may be useful for an SOF organisation;
 - how small-states' policymakers perceive the strategic value of SOF;
 - the challenges and opportunities in promoting a culture of incremental change under resource constraints (or other small-state-specific conditions);
 - the cultural and political conditions that make SOF a sought-after policy choice in small states;
 - what SOF influence on international relations means for small states and the risk of their incorrect use;
 - the ethical implications in the event that SOF becomes an "easy" option;
 - the narratives that influence SOF in a small state and whether there is a small-state SOF culture.

²⁸⁵ Yantzi, E. "The Question of SOF Culture"; Dalgaard Nielsen & Falster Holm "Supersoldiers or Rulebreakers?"

²⁸⁶ Joint Special Operations University. *Special Operations Research Topics 2023*, p.11.

5.3 Reflections on future research

The SOF and SO research field is not easy to define, perhaps because its subject is also difficult to define. Yet, this vagueness makes the field intriguing and full of potential.

Because SO and SOF are formed, located, and operating in many different contexts, the extent of the research field is particularly broad, from, for instance, SOF leadership styles to local military assistance. The main context that the past decade of research has concentrated on is the US SOF. While this is an important context, recent research has pointed to the need for a diversification of the field and examination of SOF in other types of states.

In particular, an emerging body of research considers small states. With the help of the literature of the last decade, this final chapter identifies areas that are providing opportunities to further expand the interest in SOF and SO in a small-state context.

Three areas stand out:

1. Further research is needed on how small-state SOF cooperate with others across the conflict spectrum.
2. Further research is needed on how small-state SOF influence, shape, and navigate a new strategic context.
3. Further research is needed on how SO and SOF are a policy choice in small states, not least in order to reduce their improper use.

6 Conclusion

This report reviews the literature on Western SO and SOF between 2014 and 2024. Its aim is to provide a broad-based overview that can serve both as an introduction to the field and a reference for experts, as well as a source of inspiration for new studies to further advance knowledge on SO and SOF.

This review discusses the ambiguity in SO and SOF definitions: the theoretical foundations *of* SO and *for* SOF as well as the empirical topics of interest. Examples of significant insights from the review are: first, that the field leans toward empirical, rather than theoretical, debates. Indeed, influential theorisation has been carried out, not least by followers of McRaven, Gray, or Spulak. Yet, most of these theoretical frameworks are empirically informed and useful, rather than rooted in debates within the philosophy of science. Second, the US dominates the field both in terms of SO/SOF research institutions and the fact that the activities of US SO and SOF are the most studied. The third insight, subsequently, is that a targeted research focus on the specific SO and SOF challenges of small states is essential.

To conclude, Chapter 5 wraps up a comprehensive analysis of the past decade of SO and SOF literature by highlighting several gaps in the field that offer opportunities for future research.

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