

# Zero dark squared: Does the US benefit from more Special Operations Forces?

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## Abstract

There is no question that the number of United States Special Operations Forces (SOF) is growing. This paper argues that focusing on the increase in size obscures what should be the real debate: what kind of SOF should the US employ in the twenty-first century? I conclude with two ideas: that SOF's best capability is at the tactical level, and that the largest benefit they can provide a democracy is in the conduct of special warfare, and not the more popular surgical strike operations. It would be wise, therefore, for democracies to resist the natural inclination to grow SOF simply because they perceive a growth in asymmetric threats. SOF, conducting special warfare, can offer democracies both a "special" capability and also more subtle, longer-term influence than is normally associated with conventional armed forces.

## Keywords

Special operations, special warfare, surgical strike, asymmetric threats, unconventional warfare, SOCOM, global SOF network

## Introduction

The growth in the United States' Special Operations Forces in terms of budgets, networks, and personnel since 2001 has resulted in an unprecedented level of capability, perhaps best exemplified by the successful operation against Osama bin Laden in 2011. The impressive growth in the ability of these forces has understandably led some to question their place in a transparent liberal democracy. Special operations forces, or SOF, constitute a double-edged sword for citizens who expect their government to remain answerable to the people: to be effective they must

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remain largely hidden from view. Their employment worldwide and their increasing cooperation with domestic intelligence services and foreign entities, however, present a strong contrast to the environment pre-2001. Prior to and even immediately after 9/11, US special operations forces did not enjoy the kinds of authority or resources they have today. It has taken more than a decade to form the robust relationships with external agencies and other countries' related forces that are the necessary precursors to the spectacular raids now recounted in books, movies, and news reports.

To those who do not see the value of maintaining much in the way of an armed force, it may seem that growth in special operations forces is even more objectionable than an increase in military forces in general. Special operations forces operate less transparently than conventional forces and are popularly associated with missions that attempt to destroy things or kill or capture specific people who appear to be threats, while minimizing collateral damage. There is a perception, not entirely unwarranted, that the less transparent one's activities are, the more likely they are to result in abuses. For the more hawkish supporters of national power, however, more asymmetric threats would seem to call for more unconventional forces to counter them. Why build a force of tanks and warplanes if one is facing terrorists hiding among civilians? Naturally, many within the special operations forces community believe that growth in special operations forces is a good thing. But is their position warranted?

Answering this question is more complicated than choosing between the two extreme positions presented above. This paper examines both the likely costs to a liberal democracy of increasing its special operations forces as well as the implications of not having sufficient special operations forces, using the US as an example. I argue that focusing on the increase in size obscures what should be the real debate: what kind of special operations forces should the US (and indeed other liberal democracies) employ in the twenty-first century? I conclude with two points: that special operations forces' best capability is at the tactical level, and that the largest benefit they can provide a democracy is in the conduct of special warfare<sup>1</sup> and not the more popular surgical strike operations. It would be wise, therefore, for democracies to resist the natural inclination to grow special operations forces simply because they perceive a growth in asymmetric threats. Such actions risk conventionalizing these forces in terms of both their approaches to situations ("planning," for lack of a better term) and their institutional culture. In other words, they can begin to be affected by the same systemic constraints that cause conventional forces to become overly bureaucratic, slow to adjust, and overly enamoured of the technical. What is more, such conventionalization can

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1. Special warfare is described by the US Army Special Operations Command as one of the extreme ends of a continuum of special operations that includes engagement with and influence upon partner nations' militaries and people. The other end is made up of surgical strike operations: direct action missions that are often unilateral and focused on a specific target. See US Army Special Operations Command, *ARSOF 2022* (Washington: Department of the Army, n.d.), [http://www.specialoperations.org/ARSOF2022\\_vFINAL%5B1%5D.pdf](http://www.specialoperations.org/ARSOF2022_vFINAL%5B1%5D.pdf) (accessed 17 April 2014).

remain largely hidden from the domestic populace in the name of state security and result in controversial strategies and military action that is hardly debated or even acknowledged in public. In contrast, special operations forces that focus on special warfare can offer democracies both a “special” capability and also more subtle, longer-term influence than is normally associated with conventional armed forces.

## **What has happened since 9/11?**

Since 9/11, US special operations forces have “increased” in at least four ways: raw numbers, capability to take action on military targets, collaboration with other countries’ special forces, and cooperation with intelligence services. All of these increases have resulted in special operations forces either conducting or supporting less transparent operations than their conventional brethren. These actions have had real implications on the battlefield, as many US conventional force commanders have complained about special operations forces operating in their areas without letting anyone know what they were doing. Indeed, a common refrain among US conventional force commanders over the last decade has been that they need command and control of special operations forces to avoid the need for extensive synchronization efforts that now have to take place regularly.<sup>2</sup>

It is worth noting that US special operations forces officially both resist conventional control as well as advocate their own control of conventional forces. US special operations forces even debate internally about putting all special operations forces under a single authority. All of this is to say that the current environment is one in which special operations forces play an increasingly influential role in the conduct of and preparation for warfare, whereas, in the past, special operations forces were arguably misused or left out of important strategy and employment planning. The contemporary order has, I suggest, resulted in dramatic and easily measured special operations forces “successes” on the battlefield: a number of high-ranking terrorists have been killed or captured and tremendous amounts of raw information have been collected. One of the seminal events representing the growth in special operations forces was the raid on Osama bin Laden’s compound in Pakistan: a large number of capable special operations forces deployed in greater numbers than would have in the past; worked effectively with similar forces from other countries in the region; and linked in unprecedented ways to multiple intelligence organizations in order to take down the US’ number one terrorist target.

Along with the impressive “surgical strike” that took out bin Laden, however, come many different criticisms of special operations forces and their associated partners. The prisoners being held at Guantanamo Bay, media reports of secret prisons functioning around the world, the connections between intelligence services from democratic countries and those from more autocratic states, and the more

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2. Grant M. Martin, “Special operations and conventional forces: How to improve unity of effort using Afghanistan as a case study,” School of Advanced Military Studies monograph, 2009.

recent revelations of data mining of citizens' personal information by democratic governments are all connected in many minds to liberal democratic states' special operations forces. One can add drone strikes and direct action raids to this list, once more increasing the perception around the world that those using special operations forces methods are just as bad as those they are targeting.

Less known, but perhaps more insidious, is the "conventionalization" of special operations forces. I explain this phenomenon as a natural effect of the growth of any government or bureaucratic entity, but especially a military one, and define it as a greater reliance on systematic processes, greater analytical rigour, and a deliberate-planning bureaucracy justified by self-reference and lacking in critical introspection. Conventionalization is less than preferable for conventional forces, but for special operations forces it is disastrous. With the increase in demand for special operations missions, special operations forces have either grown their own technically rational bureaucracy (one based on scientific approaches to all things) or have added to this "system of systems" approach within their respective militaries or governments. The negative effect, while not formally classified, is more subtle than the alleged secret prisons and abuses: the systems within these technically rational bureaucracies are so complex that there are few even within the bureaucracies themselves who understand them in their entirety, much less their effects. What average American, for example, has heard of JCIDS, SOFCIDS, JSPS, or PPBE?<sup>3</sup> To understand the effects of these systems, however, is asking too much of even those who work at United States Army Special Operations Command (USASOC): most members unconsciously assume that relying wholly on a systematic approach to national security is the only way.

As special operations forces in the US have increasingly taken on a more formal role in directing campaigns and planning regional strategies, some have begun to question whether special operations forces can or should become the main US entity advocating engagement in a given region or even in a single country. Indeed, some will argue that, absent a full-scale war (and perhaps not even then), militaries in general should limit themselves to simply supporting civilian-led diplomatic efforts. Within the US, Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld first prodded special operations forces to take more of a lead in developing campaign plans and directing operations overseas in 2002–2003. Prior to that, few, if any, overseas efforts were controlled exclusively or for a long period of time by special operations forces headquarters. A decade later, US special operations forces are involved in developing plans and running long-term operations.<sup>4</sup> Their efforts might make sense if the technically rational bureaucracy

3. Joint Capabilities and Integration Development System; Special Operations Capabilities and Integration Development System; Joint Strategic Planning System; Programming, Planning, Budget, and Execution. All of these systems are parts of a deliberate attempt to support the president's policy objectives through a technically rational bureaucratic approach: using logically linked and reductive processes backed up by data-driven feedback.
4. Over the last decade, thanks largely to the NATO special operations forces component of the International Security Assistance Force headquarters in Afghanistan, many of the US' methods have been adopted by other countries as well.

mentioned previously had not tied them to the same planning and operating constructs used by conventional forces. Since special operations forces use these same constructs, however, there is no reason to assume they will have any more success than the average conventional force headquarters.<sup>5</sup> Indeed, there are reasons to believe that special operations forces, using conventional planning constructs, could be more “successful” in convincing others to pursue military-centric solutions instead of more situation-specific and necessarily non-military ones, a result that should and will concern most citizens of liberal democracies.<sup>6</sup>

One must also consider the effect of the US’ faith in the application of the scientific method, including warfare and other military action, as a solution to social problems. This penchant for the scientific method demands what science requires: data, studies of historical cases in a quest for lessons to be applied in the future, and logical analysis. There are, of course, no other easier metrics to collect than “numbers of terrorists killed or captured” and “amount of raw information gathered.” Repeatable experiments in the realm of the social are difficult, if not impossible, and thus the application of logic and analytics would naturally run into obstacles when used to address seemingly intractable problems like world hunger and poverty. This means that the growth in special operations forces in the US has arguably not resulted in more forces engaged in long-term relationship building and nuanced support to diplomacy, but instead has resulted in special operations forces being very capable of attacking networks of terrorists.<sup>7</sup> Where special operations forces (and increasingly conventional forces) *do* engage with others, it is usually to attempt to transfer their own processes onto those they are engaging with, similar to what has been attempted in Afghanistan since 2002 (and was attempted in Iraq) even though US military doctrine recognizes such activity as counterproductive to sustainable development.<sup>8</sup>

## What to do?

I will first reiterate the problems that the increasing number of special operations forces has arguably created for the US. First, Washington’s foreign policy is

5. US Army Special Operations Command (USASOC) has recently attempted to address this concern through the development of an SOF operational design handbook. USASOC sees a need for a proprietary SOF planning method because there is a perception that the US Army is focused on, as opposed to trying to avoid, combat.
6. Assuming efforts “short” of war are preferable, the conventional forces’ systematic approaches that defy critical and creative thinking can lead to recommendations for military-centric solutions to all problems and attempts to apply historical and out-of-context lessons to unique situations. Special operations forces could be “better” (in a negative way) in such a context if their more “surgical” nature makes military action seem more palatable in the short term.
7. USSOCOM has effectively admitted this by embarking on the Global SOF Network effort wherein the command is attempting to orient the force more toward long-term engagement rather than direct action operations.
8. A natural outcome of a technically rational bureaucracy is, I suggest, the inevitable copying of oneself as opposed to offering situational-unique solutions, regardless of one’s doctrine.

becoming less transparent. Second, the resultant growth in the overreliance on a systematic, and therefore less “special,” approach within special operations forces has likely reduced their effectiveness. Third, special operations forces have become more involved in running entire campaigns and initiating national strategies. Fourth, and finally, the cumulative effect of special operations forces’ control of operations and a systematic approach results in the attempt to apply only the scientific method to address social problems—as opposed to matching one’s sociological approach to the situation at hand.<sup>9</sup>

In order to frame an understanding of how special operations forces can be used, USASOC has developed a construct that describes two concepts: surgical strike and special warfare. These two concepts are at the extreme ends of a continuum of operations that span the different mission sets of special operations forces. At the most kinetic end of the continuum is surgical strike: “The execution of activities in a precise manner that employ SOF in hostile, denied or politically sensitive environments to seize, destroy, capture, exploit, recover or damage designated targets, or influence threats.” At the other end of this spectrum is special warfare, defined by USASOC as “the execution of activities that involve a combination of lethal and non-lethal actions taken by specially trained and educated forces that have a deep understanding of cultures and foreign languages, proficiency in small-unit tactics, subversion, sabotage and the ability to build and fight alongside indigenous combat formations in a permissive, uncertain or hostile environment.”<sup>10</sup> Unconventional warfare and foreign internal defence are examples of missions that are associated more with special warfare than surgical strike. Notice that unconventional warfare, defined by the US military as “operations conducted with or through irregular forces in support of a resistance movement, an insurgency, or conventional military operations,” and foreign internal defence, defined as “an overt, direct method of assistance to free and protect a host nation government from insurgency or lawlessness” both emphasize working through others: this is the essence of special warfare. Counterterrorism and combating weapons of mass destruction operations are more unilateral, and thus bookend the other side of the spectrum as more descriptive of surgical strike types of operations.

It follows that special warfare is characterized by long-term efforts that are supportive of emergent and local solutions and more nuanced action. Surgical strike, however, is more short term in nature and does not necessarily accomplish anything sustainable for the nation. Nevertheless, when special operations forces officially talk about special warfare, their approach is often tainted by the need to feed the bureaucracy with the metrics so important to the scientific approach and the linear logic so important to politicians and public officials. This approach is anathema to engaging in long-term efforts, but more easily supported through surgical strike operations.

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9. Christopher Paparone, *The Sociology of Military Science* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2013). Paparone explains a multi-paradigmatic sociological approach to military operations.
  10. US Army John F. Kennedy Special Warfare Center and School, “ARSOF 2022,” *Special Warfare Magazine*, 4 April 2013, 10.

Taking all of this into account, it would be wise for liberal democracies to resist the natural inclination to grow special operations forces simply because they perceive a growth in asymmetric threats. Perceived asymmetry perhaps says more about a state itself than the actual threats against it. The perception of an asymmetric capability can be highly correlated with the use of emergent and evolutionary forces (as opposed to deliberate and hierarchical forces), and thus seen as confusing by nation states that take pride in administration and predictability. Linear logic and deterministic approaches can counterintuitively lead to a greater threat in many “asymmetric” situations. Thus, for example, growing one’s special operations forces and employing them more often in surgical strike operations may paradoxically lead to a greater perceived threat and more asymmetry and thus the circular logic to constantly grow and employ more special operations forces. Foreign policy, military operations, and the use of special operations forces should not be undertaken lightly, wholly systematically, or simply intuitively. Above all, the organization must be aligned to investigate, learn, and assist in emergent forces as opposed to using predetermined, doctrinaire approaches. This would seem to support a decentralized and flexible organization that is not tied down to systematically approaching all situations, one that is able to structure itself differently depending on the context, and one that is more focused on bottom-up methods and processes than centralized and hierarchical means.

To combat the growth in a technically rational bureaucracy, special operations forces cannot be allowed to grow their own systematic processes or be tied too closely to the systems that make more conventional government organizations less “special.” At the same time, however, the relative uniqueness of special operations forces must be balanced by the need to keep government organizations in check. In other words, more special operations forces does not necessarily always translate into more capability to meet national security objectives; sometimes, more special operations forces means both less accountability and less “specialness.” Furthermore, more special operations forces, especially in Western liberal democracies, does not necessarily result in a savvy and nuanced approach that favours long-term and emergent solutions to seemingly intractable social problems. To avoid this last problem, special operations forces must rely on something that is counter to most professional militaries’ traditional approach to warfare: a non-scientific methodology. So-called special warfare SOF can be beneficial to some democracies if it results in across-the-board nuanced approaches to situations as opposed to systematic, deliberate, science-based, and metrics-requiring methodologies that make the “I’m here from the government and I’m here to help” cliché that much more apropos.

Lastly, democracies should focus special operations forces on the tactical. That is, these forces are best when they are decentralized and entrusted (when feasible) with broad guidance and wide latitude to craft local approaches within a larger diplomatic effort, but are more likely to add to the problem when put in charge of crafting campaigns and regional strategies. If conventional headquarters cannot craft nuanced engagement strategies short of full-scale warfare, then the problem

most likely lies within allowing military headquarters in general to craft “less-than-war” approaches. Defaulting to another military entity—even special operations forces—is not necessarily the answer, unless the special operations within a country have been able to divorce themselves from the traditional military approach that assumes predetermined and systematic methodologies are sufficient to address social problems. Even then, special operations forces should attempt to assist diplomatic efforts as opposed to taking the lead in establishing regional and global strategies themselves.

## **Conclusion**

Lately, there have been some encouraging signs within the US special operations forces community. USASOC has advocated the so-called “Global SOF Network,” which has the potential in theory to concentrate on a more special warfare approach as opposed to the unilateral surgical strikes with which special operations forces are popularly associated. In addition, USASOC has attempted to codify the special warfare concept by articulating the difference between the direct action image of special operations forces and the more nuanced, influenced-based engagement activities that seek to learn about others, build relationships, and encourage local and situation-specific solutions to local realities.

Unfortunately, many of these efforts are being undermined both externally (to special operations forces) and internally by the US government’s belief in a technically rational and systematic approach to all things social. Perhaps contemporary democracies are not meant to handle so-called “asymmetric” threats effectively and are not built to deal with intractable and complex social problems, reliant as Western democracies are on the scientific approach to all situations and the balancing of effectiveness with control mechanisms to offset any one entity becoming too powerful. And perhaps a future theory of special operations might explain that special operations forces—within a democracy or not—are not the best construct for encouraging solutions that require emergence, counterintuition, and nuance, tied as most special operations forces are to the larger military and ultimately their governments, which arguably aim to appease many different stakeholders, as opposed to risking decentralized and lightly controlled forces.

It is equally possible, however, that special operations forces, even more special operations forces, can result in greater benefits than drawbacks for democracies; if, that is, these forces are structured according to the home state’s situation and values, are focused less on the surgical strike capabilities often highlighted in the media, and are engaged more toward the special warfare approach. Such special operations forces would most likely require a radically different organization than most militaries are accustomed to, and perhaps one that most democracies would be uncomfortable establishing. One has to wonder, however, at the historical penchant for democracies to keep their special operations efforts limited to specific missions. How can today’s democracies maintain a cutting-edge capability and an



overseas influencing and learning mechanism but still avoid undue influence on their foreign policy from a process-driven and technically rational bureaucracy bent on applying the scientific method to all things in order to justify the goal of most government monopolies: greater resources? Each democracy has to answer that question in its own way, but the real question is what sorts of activities those special operations forces will be engaged in, not how many of them there are. If those forces are allowed to engage in a chase for positive metrics while executing or supporting direct action raids or conducting special warfare, they will not benefit democracies in the long term. When feasible, special operations forces, working through situational-specific approaches and with local forces, can potentially assist in supporting regional strategies that preclude the need to conduct traditional warfare. That should be in the best interests of all democracies.

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### **Author Biography**

Grant Martin is a lieutenant-colonel in the US Army. He has served in the 82nd Airborne Division, 7th Special Forces Group (Airborne), US Army Special Forces Command, US Army Special Operations Command, and the US Army JFK Special Warfare Center and School. His opinions are his own and do not reflect the position of any organization within the US Department of Defense.