Chapter 6. Civil Context for SOF Theory

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As a mid-grade officer, Admiral William McRaven (U.S. Navy, Retired) applied professional military education to derive from eight specific instances of the employment of Special Operations Forces (SOF) a set of principles to improve the likelihood of success for particularly risky missions. Undertaken as a study while at the Naval Postgraduate School, Admiral McRaven’s presentation draws examples from the experiences of five nations, both within major conflicts (WWII and Vietnam) and in an isolated operation during peacetime (the Entebbe hostage rescue). In a later exploration of SOF theory, Robert Spulak correctly notes that then-Commander McRaven’s study is actually an exploration of direct-action missions—i.e., a specific subset of SOF missions—that provide a basis for more generalization. Although he notes non-wartime roles for SOF, in particular in foreign internal defense, counterterrorism, and civil affairs, Spulak nonetheless focuses on wartime because the “value of SOF in peacetime is derived from their unique roles in war.”

The wartime–peacetime dichotomy complicates the development of a SOF theory to the point that some may see the distinction between direct-action missions and persistent-presence roles as sufficiently different to preclude a theory applicable to both. But many in the SOF community are strident advocates of definitions that account for the “spectrum of conflict,” from peacetime competition through low-intensity conflict to war. Although we

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may expect wartime experiences to lead policymakers to call for preserving, if not expanding, the SOF structure, there should be little doubt that the challenges short of war that the U.S. experienced between periods of major conflict prevented the usual demobilization pattern, which hits military specialties differentially. In an effort to preserve conventional combat power when “peace dividends” demand a reduction in the armed forces, those units with special skills developed for a specific environment or circumstance are most likely to case their colors or move to the reserve components. But without an element constantly attending to identifying emerging challenges, the options for responding to sudden crises short of war are too limited, as the U.S. discovered with Operation Eagle Claw, the attempted rescue of hostages in Iran. The SOF truth about being unable to mass produce special operators in a short time helps diminish pressure to reduce SOF force structure, but more important yet is recognition of the continuing utility of SOF in environments other than major conflict. If indeed the utility of SOF spans the spectrum of conflict, theories of SOF’ effectiveness should be applicable across that spectrum.

Admiral McRaven opens his exploration by proposing a need for a theory of special operations. Noting the existence of “theories of war escalation and war termination, theories of revolution and counterrevolution, … theories of insurgency and counterinsurgency … general airpower and sea power theories, and more specific theories on strategic bombing and amphibious warfare,” he then sets his inquiry into the necessary features of successful special operations as a response to the need to reduce “the frictions of war to a manageable level.”

In essence, this approach contributes to a specific theory of armed force—a category that would include air and sea power theories. This category differs from general theories of armed force such as Clausewitz presents in his classic, *Vom Kriege*, in that the latter moves from the specifics of tactics through strategy to broader goals in interstate relations, often called the political, or grand-strategic, level. The gap in recent approaches to theories of special operations is at this broader level. It may be that exploration of the utility of special operations to achieving foreign policy goals leads us to conclude that a theory of effective special operations must be a subset of the general theory that Clausewitz offered. But if the utility of SOF extends across a spectrum of interstate relations, theories of SOF’ effectiveness ought to account for such varying circumstances.
The consistent emphasis on the small footprint of special operations offers advantages across the spectrum that facilitate interagency integration to achieve a national objective. Such integration, which has been lacking in both conventional campaigns and special operations, is necessary from analysis through planning and execution to post-operation assessments.

In particular, special operations should not constitute an independent activity nor are they just an option to achieve a conventional military end state. Rather, as with the tie between military power and policy goals, the policy goals must remain in focus.

**Strategic Impact**

One aspect of SOF lore and argument for SOF utility needs some examination before turning to this broader context. Spulak opens his Joint Special Operations University monograph with a characterization of special operations as “missions to accomplish strategic objectives where the use of conventional forces would create unacceptable risks due to Clausewitzian friction.”

Citing Dr. James Kiras's [Air University] dissertation on special operations and strategy, Spulak extends Kiras's view that special operations “enable conventional operations and/or resolve economically politico-military problems at the operational or strategic level that are difficult or impossible to accomplish with conventional forces alone” by asking why special operations don’t have strategic roles of their own. Thus, both Kiras and Spulak accept the proposition that SOF emphasize accomplishing strategic objectives. Does the historic record validate this assertion? If not, in what ways does the lore differ from the record and what is the impact of that difference?

Admiral McRaven’s primary concern is not whether the operation pursued a Clausewitzian center of gravity that would result in strategic impact. He concentrates on analyzing the cases to derive principles to improve the chances of success and then looks for conformity or divergence from those principles. Admiral McRaven provides a succinct definition of success that he applies to most of the cases he studied. He writes, “[i]n wartime the success of an operation is judged almost solely on the achievement of the objectives.”
But the objectives he considers are the immediate tactical ones rather than the intended strategic impact. Thus, he can conclude that most of the cases he examined succeeded.

This focus also allows Admiral McRaven to conclude that the Son Tay raid to recover American prisoners of war (POWs) in Vietnam, Operation Kingpin, “is the best modern-day example of a successful special operation and should be considered textbook material for future missions.” If one’s focus is on the intended outcome, the fact that there were no POWs in the compound means the mission failed to meet its objective. As he notes, the public reaction to war escalation and the press indictment of the intelligence community for failing to verify the continuing presence of POWs in the compound both had an impact on public attitudes. The lack of public support of course violates the Clausewitzian trinity of people, army, and public, which has been known to American military readers since Army Colonel Harry Summers published his immensely influential study, *On Strategy: The Vietnam War in Context*.9

The focus on military tasks without linkage to political objectives is not at all unusual, even among some who evoke Clausewitz as a theoretical mentor. In a work that looks back at the 1991 Gulf War (Operation Desert Storm) to determine whether the technical advantage U.S. and coalition forces enjoyed over the Iraqi Army required reassessing Clausewitz’s concept of friction, Barry Watts concludes:

[T]here was no shortage of friction at any level—tactical, operational, strategic, or even political. Indeed, close examination of Desert Storm suggests that frictional impediments experienced by the winning side were not appreciably different in scope or magnitude than they were for the Germans during their lightning conquest of France and the Low Countries in May 1940.10

Watts cites an assessment of the concept of a Military Technical Revolution, then in vogue, that would “imbue the information loop with near-perfect clarity and accuracy, to reduce its operation to a matter of minutes or seconds, and—perhaps most important of all—to deny it to the enemy.” Watts rejects the conclusion that technological advances will obviate the concern over the concept of friction. Yet, Watts too foregoes any connection between the conduct of war and its political aims. To restore this connection, it is necessary to recognize interrelations among elements of national power.
in the analysis of a policy challenge and in the formulation and execution of a response.

**Policy Objectives and the Focus of Military Campaigns: Harnessing Essential Elements of National Power**

With many regimes that replace predecessors that repressed a majority of the populace, the successor asserts its power with majoritarian support and fails to safeguard minority rights. Examples are easy to find as far apart as the Reign of Terror following the 1789 French Revolution and the Mugabe regime in Zimbabwe that replaced British colonial rule in Rhodesia. Similarly, the competition among political parties seeking to replace civil administrators who were members of an ousted regime offers a challenge the U.S. government has consistently failed to address, with examples readily available from WWII, the aftermath of the 1992–95 Bosnian war, and Operation Iraqi Freedom.

The trajectory toward interagency collaboration has a long arc. In modern military history, an early touchstone lies in the observation by the long-serving chief of the German General Staff, Helmuth von Moltke, the elder, that the lack of mutual support across the combat arms constituted an urgent problem to be rectified. In time, similar reasoning applied across land, sea, and air services. In turn, jointness in the post-Goldwater-Nichols era built a foundation for interagency collaboration in the execution of campaigns. An interagency approach to assessment and planning should also have been forthcoming, but conducting a whole-of-government approach to foreign-policy challenges has been stymied by both institutional prerogatives and structural hindrances in the deployment of civilians. In the aftermath of the Northern Alliance defeat of the Taliban and the U.S. and coalition defeat of the Iraqi Army, a common theme in Washington corridors was the need for a “Goldwater-Nichols II,” to do for the interagency environment what the 1986 legislation did for joint forces. For about a decade, think tanks and various Washington agencies devoted considerable attention to the need for national security professionals conversant with the capabilities and perspectives of various federal agencies, for personnel to take assignments in other agencies to develop such expertise, and for professional development to address whole-of-government responses to security challenges through a National Security University.
The response to various foreign challenges prior to Operations Enduring Freedom and Iraqi Freedom had uncovered significant gaps in interagency collaboration. In 1997 (during the President Bill Clinton administration), the White House issued Presidential Decision Directive 56, “Managing Complex Contingency Operations,” which directed mechanisms to establish and conduct: (1) an interagency executive committee, (2) a political-military plan, (3) an interagency rehearsal of the plan, (4) interagency training, (5) agency review, and (6) an after-action review. In 2002, the Association of the United States Army and the Center for Strategic and International Studies jointly published “Post-Conflict Reconstruction,” which offered a framework that specified tasks under four general categories—security, justice and reconciliation, social and economic well-being, governance and participation—without assigning tasks to any specific agency. Two years later, the Defense Science Board devoted its summer study to “Transition to and from Hostilities,” and in the same year, the Center for Technology and National Security Policy issued a volume that explored interagency contributions to stabilization and reconstruction. The following year, the President George W. Bush administration promulgated National Security Policy Directive 44, “Management of Interagency Efforts Concerning Reconstruction and Stabilization,” which identified roles for 10 federal agencies that were to respond to foreign crises through a coordinator for reconstruction and stabilization. In 2006, the Iraq Study Group, co-chaired by former Secretary of State James Baker and former Congressman Lee Hamilton, echoed this call for interagency training and operations “following the Goldwater-Nichols model” as well as for improving the response of civilian agencies to stability operations.

The path to National Security Presidential Directives (NSPD) 44 was by no means an even one. The consolidation of the Iraq campaign had demonstrated both competition among agencies for influence and lack of collaboration in conducting an occupation to empower a replacement for the Saddam Hussein regime. In 2003, NSPD 24 had given the Department of Defense (DOD) the lead for reconstruction, but in 2004, NSPD 36 assigned that responsibility to the Department of State. The root of the failure to address the key issues in establishing the structure for a transition to a representative democracy however, lay in the failure to coordinate between State and Defense in planning that transition. The Department of State had undertaken a significant effort known as the Future of Iraq project. The project’s working groups held 23 meetings with some 200 expatriate Iraqis.
who identified issues across sectors of Iraqi society. Although the project
did not produce a blueprint for transition that either Lieutenant General Jay
Garner (U.S. Army, Retired) or Ambassador Bremer could pick up and seek
to implement, it did present a broad background on each of these sectors and
identified both desired outcomes and pitfalls to avoid.17

State Department personnel indeed saw the need for expertise from
other federal agencies if Iraq was to become stable. The fate of this State
Department project is a benchmark that advocates for reform of the national-
security structure use to call for changes in structure and process. *The Wash-
ington Post* journalist Bob Woodward writes that National Security Advisor
Stephen Hadley saw the question of stability broadly: “It wasn’t just achieving
stability—political or otherwise. The president wanted to achieve democracy.
So Hadley realized they needed a comprehensive postwar plan.”18

In the early stages of the civilian surge, there was considerable public
criticism regarding the inability of the State Department to deploy personnel
to hardship posts, first Iraq, then Afghanistan.19 Criticism came from the
DOD as well, which had to fill civilian positions in Provincial Reconstruc-
Admiral Edmund Giambastiani, then Vice Chairman of the Joint Chiefs, and
quoted him as saying, “[w]e send out orders, we execute orders, we deploy
our military, and guess what happens? They turn up and do their job.”20

Missing in this description is any perception of the differences in career
patterns, employment modes, and support structures between military
and civilian personnel. Even the DOD encountered substantial difficulties
deploying its civilian staff. The term-hire option, typical for the United States
Agency for International Development, which most frequently uses imple-
menting partners (contractors), became routine through various mecha-
nisms for other agencies as well.21 This option was common in the DOD’s
experience of filling positions through the Civilian Expeditionary Work-
force, though the pattern was to use term-hires (typically of one-year dura-
tion) in the early stages of the program and gradually transition to career
employees. But the impact on the careers of volunteers was not sanguine:
approximately one third of career civilians who deployed lost their positions
when they returned to their previous stations.22
Unconventional Warfare and Steady-State Operations

These issues were primarily attributable to the scale of the civilian surge. The major problem civilian agencies have in deploying personnel is meeting the numbers required, which would not be true for civilian support to special operations. In 2007, there were over 200,000 more civilians in DOD than civilians with skills appropriate for stabilization activities across 10 domestic agencies with applicable missions. Since there have always been volunteers for deployment assignments, small-footprint operations, such as SOF undertake, can more easily obtain access to civilian expertise than can their conventional counterparts, in some instances on operations, in others for support in field sites or headquarters.

In his 2016 monograph, Will Irwin states with conviction that “unconventional warfare is an inherently interagency affair.” Noting that “non-wartime UW efforts rarely succeed,” Irwin addresses factors and actors in non-violent civil resistance to achieve policy goals at the lower end of the conflict spectrum, but above steady-state diplomatic engagement. His description evokes Sun Tzu’s dictum, “To subdue the enemy without fighting is the acme of skill.”

As Irwin concludes, states subjected to the range of activities he describes may very well react to the threat against their power as an act of war. The gray zone of supporting a non-violent insurgency will remain controversial in the absence of international agreements on the level of influence that crosses a threshold recognized as interference in the polity of another state. Consequently, the potential for escalation demands consideration of the affiliation, by agency, of personnel sent to conduct specific activities. Not only does a public association of foreign military personnel with anti-government activity offer a regime a propaganda point of foreign interference, as Irwin notes, but activity outside a civilian agency’s normal range of expertise can also backfire.

The matter of state fragility and the factors that contribute to it lie well beyond the focus of this chapter, as does consideration of the circumstances that would engender a U.S. government response to threats to a state’s stability. But assessment of these conditions should be an on-going process. A salient point in an article about the need to understand societies and their politics before tensions turn violent is a focus not only on the adequacy or character of security structures in these societies but on the character
of the societies themselves. That analysis requires multiple perspectives obtainable from members of a country team steeped in the expertise of their home agencies. Herein lies a potential SOF role, if carefully scoped and adequately prepared.

The choice of agencies to assess conditions in fragile states colors the type of response and reflects the priorities of ambassadors and their country teams. In an article in *The National Interest*, “Fixing Fragile States,” former Director of National Intelligence Dennis Blair, Ambassador Ronald Neumann, and Admiral Eric Olson call for empowering ambassadors to direct resources through their country teams rather than having representatives on the country team send recommendations back to home agencies for approval in Washington.

In addressing a state’s stability, the default recommendation from the defense sector has become to follow the strategy of building partner capacity. But ambassadors may be wary of this recommendation, both from recent analyses and prior history. A 2013 RAND study that looked at the effectiveness of building partnership capacity found that securing access to the country was a higher priority than building the partner state’s defense capacity. Moreover, in describing persistent presence as Phase 0, the model of campaign phasing presented in Joint Publication 5-0 (*Joint Operation Planning*) can easily strike diplomats as supporting confrontation when they would prefer de-escalation. Recent events in Mali implicated troops in the oppression of citizens, and although SOF advocates can point to the reliability of the battalion the U.S. elements had mentored, the overall public impression is still that support of the military in some countries makes them more proficient at repression.

Such a record of events recalls Army General Stanley McChrystal’s comments in his 2013 interview by *Foreign Affairs*: “When we first started, the question was ‘Where is the enemy?’ … As we got smarter, we started to ask, ‘Who is the enemy?’ … and then … we asked, ‘What’s the enemy trying to do?’ And it wasn’t until we got further along that we said, ‘Why are they the enemy?’” Answers to these questions reflect the perspectives of the agencies supplying them. Herein lies a potential assessment role that SOF is well qualified to undertake.

The challenge lies in the compilation of agency assessments. Because SOF field elements, particularly both special forces and civil affairs, are accustomed to working in interagency environments, they are better situated than
any institutional structure outside an embassy’s country team to conduct such a holistic analysis. The SOF education model comes closest to that projected for a national security university since that concept was introduced. During the brief period the Civilian Response Corps existed, its pre-deployment qualification program introduced its practitioners to the capabilities resident across federal agencies. The closest such programmatic introduction of capabilities is at the senior service colleges, where the theme of “all elements of national power” gets its due but is primarily theoretical. Interagency participation occurs at this level, but it is limited in its reach across agencies, and familiarity with agency capabilities is still missing. The SOF education model introduces these themes at an earlier stage in the practitioners’ careers.

**Conclusion**

To return to the departure point of this discussion—the strategic impact of special operations—one can conclude that the best example of a special operation that truly had a strategic impact is the Entebbe hostage rescue. The narrow objective was self-contained in that its accomplishment concluded the crisis. As this exploration has shown, for strategic impact, the desired outcome must be clear, and this outcome is not the province of a specific agency so much as it is a U.S. government goal. In the absence of both multiagency perspectives and an office that seeks to integrate agency analyses, it is unlikely that any given agency will develop a sufficient operational picture to propose a holistic response to meet the national policy goal. Whereas a good number of senior executives in the foreign policy arena have embraced the notion that unstable states can harbor threats to the security of the United States, its friends, and allies, the defense-sector response of building partner capacity addresses only part of the challenge. If conducted with sensitivity toward multiagency analysis, the low profile typical of special operations offers options that do not currently exist elsewhere in the U.S. government. To demonstrate utility across the spectrum of conflict, the SOF community
needs to address not only its contribution to the military instrument of power but also to long-established connections between power and policy. Such an approach provides a useful starting point for developing further theories that undergird the effectiveness of special operations.

Endnotes


7. Ibid., 318.

8. The comparison with Operation *Eiche*, the Mussolini rescue, is striking in that Mussolini had been moved several times and intelligence reports conflicted, but the planners got it right.


12. Abtheilung für Kriegsgeschichte der Großen Generalstab, *Moltkes Militärische Werke II: Die Thätigkeit als Chef des Generalstabs der Armee in Frieden* [War History Section, Great General Staff, *Moltke’s Military Works II: The Activity as Chief of Staff of the Army in Peacetime* (Berlin: Mittler, 1900), 67–164, esp. 74. The reference is to peacetime reflections on the 1866 war against Austria.


27. Note, however, that the State Department maintains numerous small embassies with very limited multi-agency capabilities.


