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Why Special Operations? A Risk-Based Theory

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Abstract

There is today a burgeoning discussion in the literature as to what really constitutes a "special operation," what makes the forces that conduct them "special," whether these aspects are so different from conventional military operations and forces as to warrant their own theory, and, if they do, what such a theory should be. This paper addresses an aspect of special operations that has yet to be explained adequately—the question of *why special operations are conducted*. The answer lies in the consideration of risk. Because policy-makers are inherently reliant upon some form of popular support to maintain their positions of power, they are also inherently averse to taking risky actions. The centrality of risk to policy decisions leads directly to this definition: special operations are unorthodox military solutions to difficult policy problems that lower the level of risk to policy-makers. This definition leads to a risk-centric theory of why special operations are conducted: if policy-makers have a difficult policy problem and they are unsatisfied with the level of risk presented by orthodox solutions or inaction, then they will choose special operations. After deriving this theory, this paper evaluates it, applies it to the raid on Osama bin Laden's compound in Pakistan, and discusses implications of the theory for the future of US special operations forces.

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Cover image credit: National Guardsmen with Company A, 2nd Battalion, 20th Special Forces Group (Airborne) prepare to exit a C-130 Hercules during a night training mission over Muscatatuck, Ind., Monday, Aug. 3, 2015. (Photo by Staff Sgt. Jeremiah A. Runser, Indiana National Guard)

Approved by: **September 2020**

Eric V. Thompson, Vice President and Director
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Executive Summary

In 1993, then-Commander William H. McRaven submitted a thesis to the Naval Postgraduate School titled "The Theory of Special Operations,"[1] in which he advances a theory to explain why special operations succeed. Although McRaven's theory has since been the subject of some criticism, it has also inspired a cadre of authors to craft their own theories of special operations. There is today a burgeoning discussion in the literature as to what really constitutes a "special operation," what makes the forces that conduct them "special," whether these aspects are so different from conventional military operations and forces as to warrant their own theory, and, if they do, what such a theory should be. In this paper, I add my thoughts to this theoretical discourse. In particular, I address an aspect of special operations that has yet to be explained adequately—the question of *why special operations are conducted.* Given that they are inherently dangerous endeavors—one author described them as "handfuls of heroes on desperate ventures"—one has to wonder why special operations are ever undertaken.[2]

The answer lies in the consideration of risk. Because policy-makers are inherently reliant upon some form of popular support to maintain their positions of power, they are also inherently averse to taking risky actions. Thus, when considering solutions to various policy problems, they will seek and select the options that present the lowest overall risk. Here, risk can take a number of forms, but I focus on two: risk of failure in resolving the policy problem, and risk of blowback. Regarding the first, leaders naturally want their decisions to resolve problems facing them and their organizations, and they are sensitive to various options' likelihood of effectively doing so. They weigh the probability of success (or risk of failure) in deciding which potential solution to choose. Regarding the second, leaders typically want to remain leaders, and thus they weigh the possibility of blowback (from both popular audiences and bureaucratic organizations) from their decisions as part of their decision calculus. The centrality of risk to policy decisions leads directly to this definition: ***Special operations are unorthodox military solutions to difficult policy problems that lower the level of risk to policy-makers.***[3]

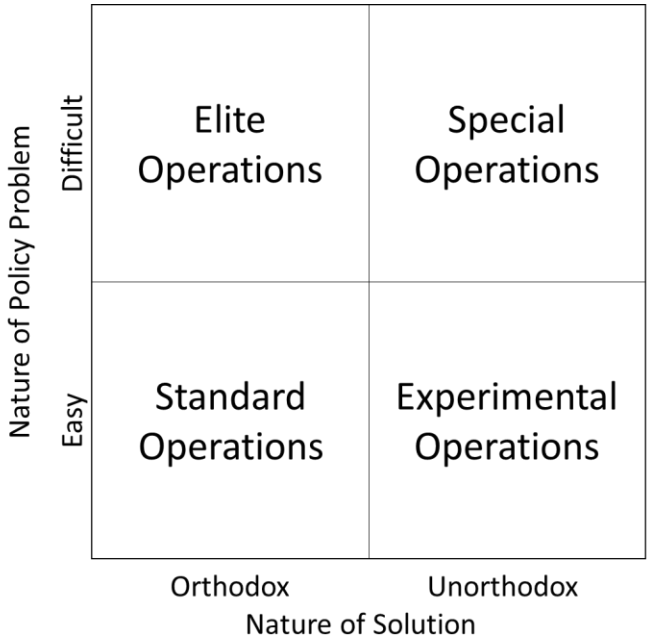
[1] William H. McRaven, "The Theory of Special Operations," Naval Postgraduate School, AD-A269484, June 1993.

[2] Colin S. Gray, "Handfuls of Heroes on Desperate Ventures: When do Special Operations Succeed?" *Parameters*, Spring 1999.

[3] Here "unorthodox" is defined as "(of behavior, ideas, or methods) different from what is usual or expected" and "difficult" is defined as "not easy or simple; hard to do or to understand." See: Cambridge Dictionary, available at https://dictionary.cambridge.org/us/dictionary/english.

For problems that are inherently easy, policy-makers will generally be satisfied with options naturally produced by their bureaucracies, because these problems are of such a routine nature that the leader can be assured of successful resolution via standard means, and because standard solutions engender the lowest risk of blowback. Figure 1 shows various types of operations according to the nature of the policy problem (easy or difficult) and nature of the solution (orthodox or unorthodox). In it, I have labeled orthodox solutions to easy policy problems as "standard operations."

Figure 1. Types of operations as determined by level of policy risk and nature of the solution



Source: CNA.

Difficult policy problems—for example, those that are hard to fully understand or are particularly politically sensitive—pose a different situation. In these cases, policy-makers will be more attuned to the risks of failure and blowback. The bureaucracies supporting policy-makers will still be inclined to produce orthodox solutions to those problems, but they will attempt to lower the risk of failure by offering to have those operations be conducted by elite individuals or units (in some cases also featuring elite equipment or technologies).[4] Thus, orthodox solutions to difficult policy problems constitute "elite operations." The default position of policy-makers attempting to address difficult policy problems will be to prefer elite

[4] I take as the definition of "elite" that of the Oxford English Dictionary: "A select part of a group that is superior to the rest in terms of ability or qualities." See: https://www.lexico.com/en/definition/elite.

operations, because they offer a means of lowering the risk of failure while keeping the risk of bureaucratic blowback low (because orthodox solutions are typically the preference of the bureaucracy).

In some cases, however, even an elite orthodox solution to a difficult policy problem will be viewed by policy-makers as unacceptably risky. In these instances, leaders may choose inaction and either acceptance or mitigation of negative consequences likely to accrue from the policy problem. Or, they may be unwilling or unable to accept those consequences, and may instead ask for options that are wholly different from those the bureaucracy might normally produce—in essence, asking for creative and novel solutions, up to and including those that have never been tried before. If these unorthodox solutions to the difficult policy problem appear to be less risky than elite orthodox solutions and inaction/mitigation, the leader might choose to implement such a "special operation."

This discussion leads to the formulation of my risk-centric theory: ***if*** *policy-makers have a difficult policy problem* ***and*** *they are unsatisfied with the level of risk presented by orthodox solutions or inaction,* ***then*** *they will choose special operations.*

This formulation is meant to address the *centrality of risk* to special operations and the *causal relationships* required of a good theory. Policy-makers understand that special operations are risky to undertake. But, if special operations—unorthodox solutions—can offer a lower overall risk profile than elite operations or inaction/mitigation, then they are more likely to be chosen by policy-makers as the preferred solution to their policy problem.

That both elite and special operations attempt to reduce the risk profile to policy-makers explains why they often involve individuals or units that are highly trained and equipped with the best gear available. What distinguishes modern-day special operations forces (SOF) from elite forces is that SOF are assessed and selected for attributes that are fundamentally different—and typically unorthodox—from those of (elite) conventional forces. Thus, it is not specialized equipment, training, or modes of operation that make SOF "special," but the fundamentally different nature of their personnel,[5] who are selected specifically for qualities that should lead them to generate fundamentally different solutions to policy problems. Today's SOF, via specialized assessment and selection processes, have sought to *institutionalize* the generation of unorthodox solutions to difficult policy problems.

This risk-centric theory answers directly the question of why special operations are conducted. But it has additional benefits: it is organization-agnostic, as the key element of this theory is not SOF, but the nature of risk to policy problems and bureaucratic options for solving them—an element common to all organizations; it does not rely on the nature of who or what SOF are,

[5] See, for example, Robert G. Spulak, Jr., "A Theory of Special Operations: The Origin, Qualities, and Use of SOF," JSOU Report 07-7, Oct. 2007.

what gear they have, what training they receive, or what environment they operate in; and the theory applies across all times, whether preceding the creation of SOF, existing in the present day, or extending well into the future.

It also offers four implications for the future. First, there will always be policy-makers grappling with difficult policy problems. Inevitably, some of those problems will not be resolvable within policy-makers' risk tolerances and they will seek unorthodox solutions. Thus, the theory suggests that there will *always* be some demand for special operations—for the military, they are a natural feature of the strategic level of war. Second, because the theory is centered on unorthodox solutions that lower policy risk, it *does not* guarantee that future special operations will be conducted solely by SOF. The existence of modern-day SOF—forces specially assessed and selected to institutionalize the generation of unorthodox solutions—is a historical anomaly, as one can identify special military operations having been conducted across all of recorded time. Thus, the theory not only allows for the conduct of special operations by non-SOF entities, but also predicts that this will inevitably happen unless SOF can somehow monopolize the production of unorthodox solutions (which seems unlikely).

Third, at least within the US military, there has been remarkable growth in the size, structure, resources, and responsibilities afforded to US SOF over the past 20 years. This growth has brought with it the increasing institutionalization of SOF. The theory captures two historical aspects of this institutionalization:

- The desire of US policy-makers to decrease steadily the risk profile of US activities overseas has led to a consistent trend of them asking SOF to solve their most difficult policy problems, but also increasingly to solve their easy ones, too. The net result of this situation is that US SOF are increasingly being asked to undertake elite or, in some cases, standard operations as opposed to being used only for special operations.
- This situation is compounded by the absence of bureaucratic blowback that might otherwise be expected from a policy-maker's request for an unorthodox solution. At this point within the US military, SOF are no longer generally seen as secretive, squirrely, fringe elements that should be viewed with bureaucratic suspicion. The net result is that the bureaucracy (e.g., the military services) has mostly accepted both the growth of the special operations enterprise and the drift of SOF into elite and standard operations (indeed, in some instances the services have deliberately pushed standard operations that they do not want to conduct over to SOF). This carries with it the risk of the US special operations enterprise becoming less "special" over time, since increased adoption and execution of elite and standard operations necessarily dilutes the focus of the enterprise on those aspects that make it unorthodox.

Extending these trends via the theory reveals a fourth implication—that the future is likely to hold significant choices and tensions for SOF leaders (Figure 2). Should they chart a course for SOF that errs on the side of remaining consistently unorthodox and incur bureaucratic risk (e.g., to resources and prestige) that might accompany a retrenchment to a narrower focus on special operations as defined in my theory? Or should they give in to the entreaties of the conventional force for greater integration, interoperability, and interdependence—and succumb to the pull of the orthodoxy? The theory predicts that these tensions about the future trajectory of US SOF will persist, as long as the force designed to be unorthodox remains institutionalized.

Figure 2. The tension facing future SOF leaders

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Introduction

> *Nothing can appear more unpractical, less promising of useful result, than to approach the study of war with a theory.*[6]
>
> *Theory helps us to bear our ignorance of fact.*[7]

In June 1993, then-Commander William H. McRaven submitted a thesis to the Naval Postgraduate School (NPS) titled "The Theory of Special Operations."[8] In it, he examined eight historical case studies and used lessons derived from them to develop a theory that, as he states, "explains why special operations succeed." McRaven's theory has since been the subject of some criticism (more on this later), but it also inspired a cadre of thinkers and authors to craft and describe their own theories of special operations. As of this writing (and as will be addressed in the next section), there is a burgeoning discussion in the literature as to what constitutes a "special operation," what makes the forces that conduct them "special," whether these aspects are so different from conventional military operations and forces as to even warrant their own theory, and, if they do, what such a theory should be. That discussion also sometimes raises, addresses, or simply ignores the question of whether special operations forces (SOF) do or should care whether their profession has a formalized theory of its own.

In this paper, I will add my own thoughts to this theoretical discourse. I will not aim so high as to try and develop an all-encompassing theory of special operations, as some authors have sought to do. Rather, I will address an aspect of special operations that I think has yet to be adequately explained—the question of *why special operations are conducted*. Given that special operations are inherently risky endeavors—one author described them as "handfuls of heroes on desperate ventures"—one has to wonder why they are ever undertaken.[9] Below, I will answer that question by introducing a theory centered on considerations of risk.

There is by now a more or less standard template for papers purporting to develop a theory of special operations. It includes the following steps:[10]

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[6] Julian Corbett, *Principles of Maritime Strategy* (New York: Dover Publications, 2004).

[7] George Santayana, *The Sense of Beauty* (New York: Dover Publications, 1955).

[8] McRaven, "The Theory of Special Operations."

[9] Gray, "Handfuls of Heroes on Desperate Ventures: When do Special Operations Succeed?"

[10] See all of the papers discussed in the following section.

- First, one needs to define what theory is (starting from the Latin root is best), why it's important in general, why it's important to the military, and what previous examples of military theories entail (naval or air power are recommended starting points).
- Second, one must argue why a theory of special operations is needed, what the advantages of having such a theory would be, and why SOF should care about a theory most usually written by someone outside of their own community. Here it's best to include quotations liberally from both the titans of strategy past (Clausewitz, Sun Tzu, Jomini, Napoleon) and those of the present (Colin Gray).
- Third, one must define what special operations are, typically by throwing out the US joint doctrinal definition and creating a new one that better fits your preferences. Or, if you prefer, you can define special operations as "those operations conducted by SOF" and instead address the question, "What are SOF?" (though hopefully you don't then answer that question with "those units that conduct special operations").
- Fourth, one needs to survey preceding theories of special operations and argue that they are grievously flawed, and that therefore a new attempt is both justified and necessary. This is easiest to do if you've never met any of the preceding authors.
- Fifth, one must present and explain a new theory of special operations. Specifically, what the central challenge is that your theory seeks to address and how it does so. Here it's useful to create a visual model of some kind so that the reader can digest your many pages of dense theoretic prose.
- Sixth, depending on how much time, energy, and available pages one has, two additional steps might be included:
    - One that looks backward via the application of the new theory to some number of historical cases that are hand-picked to illustrate the utility and superiority of the new theory.
    - One that looks forward at the possible implications of the new theory for the future of special operations and the forces that conduct them (bonus points are awarded these days for the number of times you can tie in the phrase "great power competition").[11]

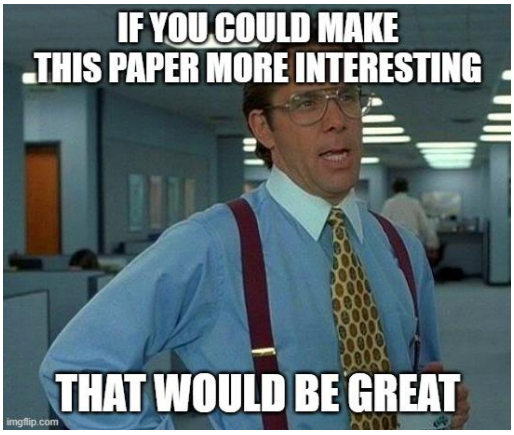
In this paper, I will follow this template, except when I don't—the major deviation being that I will present a survey of some of the more interesting prior works before I define what special operations are. I do this because no one seems to agree what they are and so it makes sense to

[11] "Great power competition" is popularly tied to the US National Defense Strategy of 2018, though interestingly the unclassified summary of the strategy does not include that phrase. See: US Department of Defense, "Summary of the 2018 National Defense Strategy of the United States of America: Sharpening the American Military's Competitive Edge," 2018, available at: https://dod.defense.gov/Portals/1/Documents/pubs/2018-National-Defense-Strategy-Summary.pdf.

conduct the survey of prior works before attempting to settle on a definition. Additionally, I will at times take shortcuts in addressing some of these aspects, for two simple reasons. First, because I do not have enough resources or time to follow it to the letter. While the life of a thinker at an academic institution revolves around obtaining grants and other resources to enable the conduct of deep, methodical, and time-consuming original research, the life of an analyst at a federally funded research and development center is one of executing analytic projects to solve sponsor problems while occasionally identifying scraps of funding to pen an original and unsolicited set of thoughts in the small windows of time between one project's end and another's beginning. This is precisely the position in which I find myself presently. And second, because I do not believe that all of the theories discussed in the next section are grievously flawed. In fact, I think all of them are quite interesting, creative, and useful in their own way, and I enjoyed reading and thinking about them immensely. I have also had the privilege of meeting some of the authors, which makes hurling arrows at their works an unpleasant task that I will unabashedly avoid.

Last, I note that writing a theory paper is only slightly less daunting than reading one, as they are often dense, laden with jargon, and aimed at a narrow audience of people who *really want to go deep* on a particular topic. In writing this one, however, I have chosen to inject periodic moments of levity in the hopes of reducing the paper's density and increasing the "stickiness" of its message. I also just really enjoy making memes (Figure 1).[12]

Figure 1. An attempt to make the paper more enjoyable



Source: imgflip meme generator, available at: https://imgflip.com/memegenerator.

With that preamble, let us begin at the beginning.

[12] Vera Zakem, Megan K. McBride, and Kate Hammerberg, *Exploring the Utility of Memes for U.S. Government Influence Campaigns*, CNA DRM-2018-U-017433-Final, Apr. 2018.

On Special Operations Theory

> *"Would you tell me, please, which way I ought to go from here?" "That depends a good deal on where you want to get to," said the [Cheshire] Cat. "I don't much care where," said Alice. 'Then it doesn't matter which way you go," said the Cat.*[13]

What is theory?

A good theory makes sense of what we know about the past and provides testable predictions about the future. If it's parsimonious, elegant, and focused on something deemed really important, cool, or exotic, people's impression of the author's genius will be enhanced, but those are aspirational qualities, not necessary ones.

Here, my aim will be at a lower target. My goal with this paper is to put forth enough of a coherent set of thoughts to (a) warrant being considered a theory (if even a mediocre one) and (b) result in some degree of advancement of the fields of special operations and military theory.

Why do we need theories of special operations?

We need theories of special operations for the same reason that we need theories about any topic: to help us make sense of the past and to anticipate the future. But special operations are a professional endeavor, so theories about them also help those individuals undertaking the endeavor understand why it's necessary and how best to do it. In the absence of theories of what special operations are, why they're undertaken, and how and why they work, every future special operation will either be a crapshoot or a tedious re-enactment of past events.

Some special operators may know the answers to these questions already. Others may not suffer from even one degree of questioning why or how they do what they do. The same is true in any profession. Still others, though, may be interested in engaging various ideas on these matters in the hopes of deepening their own understanding. If you've read this far, I will assume you're in the latter camp and I need convince you no further why theory matters.[14]

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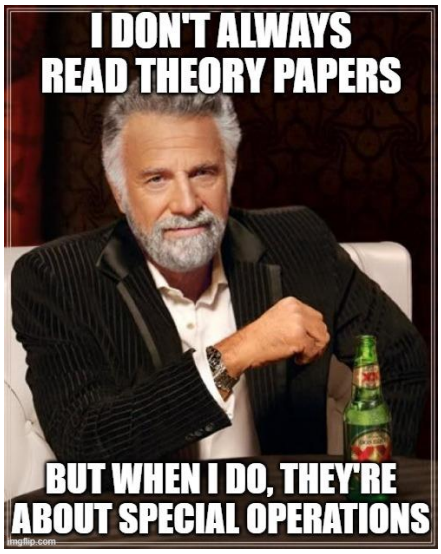
[13] Lewis Carroll, "Alice's Adventures in Wonderland," available at: https://www.alice-in-wonderland.net/wp-content/uploads/alice-in-wonderland.pdf.

[14] If you do care to read a lot more about why theory matters, though, I would suggest perusing the introductory sections of each of the papers discussed in the next section.

Previous works on special operations theory

In this section, I will summarize three theories that address two specific types of special operations (i.e., direct and indirect action) as well as a series of five works on general theories of special operations that were commissioned by the Joint Special Operations University (JSOU). I'll apologize in advance to the authors of these theories for reducing their well-explained and comprehensive works to a few paragraphs of summary points (Figure 2).

Figure 2. The most interesting theories in the world



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McRaven's theory of direct action

In McRaven's thesis, he examines eight historical case studies and uses lessons derived from them to develop a theory that, as he states, "explains why special operations succeed."[15] Why was such a theory deemed necessary? McRaven addresses this question in the abstract of his thesis:

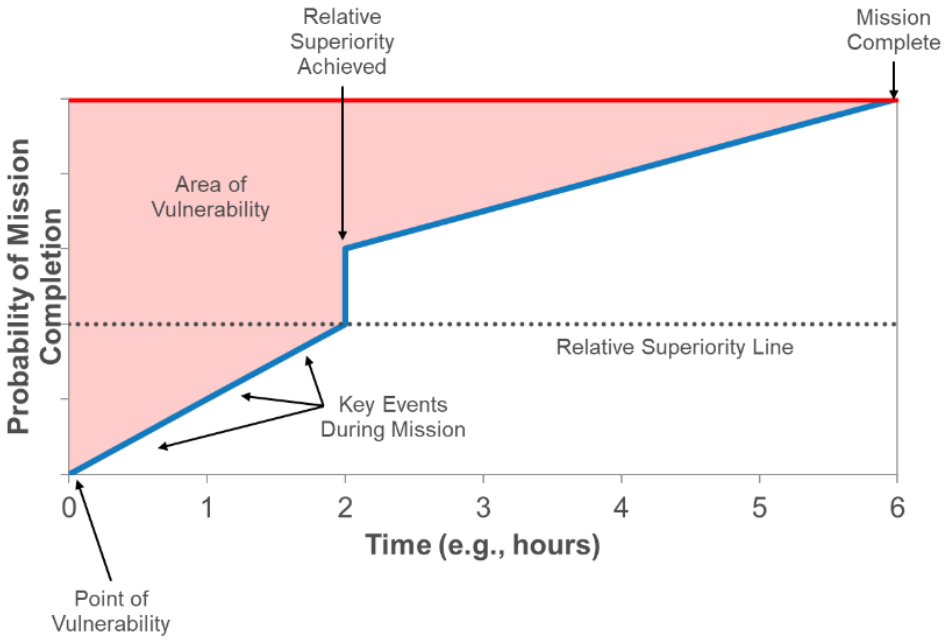
> The theory is important because successful special operations defy conventional wisdom. Special operations forces are usually numerically inferior to the enemy and generally these forces are attacking fortified

[15] McRaven, "The Theory of Special Operations."

positions. According to Carl von Clausewitz, both of these factors should spell defeat, and yet, time and again—these missions succeed.[16]

To explain this phenomenon, McRaven establishes the principle of *relative superiority*, which he defines as "a condition that exists when an attacking force, generally smaller, gains a decisive advantage over a larger or well defended enemy."[17] As he describes, once this condition is achieved, the attacking force overcomes its initial disadvantages and suddenly gains the initiative to exploit enemy weaknesses and emerge successful in its mission. Relative superiority is often quite difficult to achieve. Sustaining it, in McRaven's view, requires intervention of the "moral factors" of war—courage, intellect, boldness, and perseverance—and losing it can be catastrophic to the attacking force.[18] McRaven illustrates this concept through the relative superiority graph shown in Figure 3.

Figure 3. McRaven's graph of relative superiority



Source: McRaven, "The Theory of Special Operations."

This chart depicts the probability of successful mission completion as a function of time. The attacking force begins at a point of vulnerability, as it has not yet achieved relative superiority.

[16] McRaven, "The Theory of Special Operations," p. i.

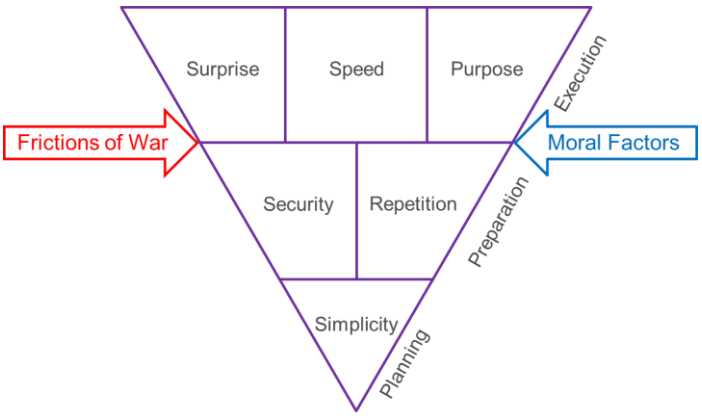
[17] McRaven, "The Theory of Special Operations," p. 2.

[18] McRaven, "The Theory of Special Operations," p. 7-8.

Thus, its position is inferior to that of the defending force. As time unfolds and the attacking force carries out its mission, at some point it successfully achieves relative superiority over the defending force, at which time its probability of mission success jumps discontinuously and the "area of vulnerability" above the mission profile (blue line) decreases significantly. As long as the attacking force can maintain relative superiority, the rest of the mission will proceed on a trajectory to successful mission completion.

McRaven's graph illustrates several important components. First, the longer it takes for the attacking force to reach the point of relative superiority, "the greater will be the area of vulnerability, and hence the greater the impact of the frictions of war." To mitigate this vulnerability, the attacking force should seek to establish relative superiority as early in the mission as possible (even better is setting conditions to have it at the outset). To help it do so, and also to help it maintain relative superiority once gained, McRaven identifies six critical principles from the study of his historical cases: simplicity, security, repetition, surprise, speed, and purpose. Each one of these principles is designed to decrease the area of vulnerability and improve the probability of successful mission completion.[19] The integration of all six is a precarious balance, however, that is constantly affected by both the frictions of war and its moral factors, as McRaven illustrates via his special operations model shown in Figure 4. According to McRaven, at its heart, a special operation is "a simple plan, carefully concealed, repeatedly and realistically rehearsed, and executed with surprise, speed, and purpose."[20]

Figure 4. McRaven's special operations model



Source: McRaven, "The Theory of Special Operations."

[19] McRaven, "The Theory of Special Operations," p. 11.

[20] McRaven, "The Theory of Special Operations," p. 16.

McRaven's thesis remains a seminal work in the field of special operations theory, and every author since has paid homage to it as an important and lasting contribution. But most authors also quickly point out two criticisms: (1) what McRaven established was not "the" theory of special operations, but "a" theory; (2) the theory McRaven produced was not a theory of "special operations" in total, but rather a theory of one type of special operation: direct action.[21] Those criticisms notwithstanding, McRaven's foray toward the development of a theory of special operations inspired a number of other authors to expound on the subject.

Theories of indirect action

Finlan's theory of Special Forces

Most contemporary authors exploring the theory of special operations have included a broad definition of SOF—as either "those units that conduct special operations" or those units that have been deemed different enough from conventional forces as to be considered "special." In thinking about special operations theory, Alastair Finlan[22] is one of the few authors who draws a sharp distinction between SOF and Special Forces (SF) as being "conceptually markedly different."[23] He seeks to develop a theory specific to SF—an endeavor he notes has received scant attention to date.

Finlan characterizes SF via three propositions: (1) that they are fundamentally different than conventional units (or even their elite versions, many of which are lumped under the US SOF umbrella today, such as the US Army's Ranger Regiment) and that because they were first developed in World War II, they are "out of time" with respect to classic military theories and therefore not included in them; (2) that SF do not conform to traditional models of war, most notably the annihilation (seeking to destroy your enemy) or attrition (seeking to wear your enemy out) models; and (3) that SF are "defined by a technology fusion that could only occur once a certain level of technological development had been reached"—in other words, that there is a connection between SF and technology that is critical to their effectiveness on the battlefield.[24]

[21] Joint Publication 1-02 (Department of Defense Dictionary of Military and Associated Terms, June 2020 edition) defines *direct action* as: "short-duration strikes and other small-scale offensive actions conducted as a special operation in hostile, denied, or diplomatically sensitive environments and which employ specialized military capabilities to seize, destroy, capture, exploit, recover, or damage designated targets."

[22] Alastair Finlan, "A Dangerous Pathway? Toward a Theory of Special Forces," *Comparative Strategy*, 38:4, 2019, 255–275.

[23] Finlan, "A Dangerous Pathway? Toward a Theory of Special Forces," p. 257.

[24] Finlan, "A Dangerous Pathway? Toward a Theory of Special Forces," p. 258–262.

In seeking to employ his characterization of SF in the context of war strategy (which Finlan argues is a primary function of war theory), he proffers what he calls "the anaphylaxis model" of warfare. In this model, military forces shift their primary orientation away from an enemy's military forces (as is the case in annihilation and attrition models) and onto the enemy's civilian population (as the source of both military and political power of the adversary state). Finlan argues that SF have always been focused on those populations, but because of limitations in past technologies, they were often difficult to reach. In the modern world, however, technologies abound that offer direct lines to adversary populations that can be exploited—not to bring about the military defeat of the enemy, but "rather to create a moment of intense political, military, and social vulnerability of a paralyzing kind that opens space for a third outcome on the peace/war continuum: not victory or defeat, but accommodation.[25]

Driver and DeFeyter's theory of unconventional warfare

In their co-authored NPS thesis, William "Dave" Driver and Bruce E. DeFeyter attempt to directly mirror McRaven's theory of direct action by developing a theory of indirect action (unconventional warfare (UW)).[26] In so doing, they seek to answer the question: "Given that the defense is the superior form of warfare and numbers count…how can a sponsored insurgent organization or resistance movement defeat the state, which begins with an opening advantage of vastly superior numbers and already in the defense posture?"[27]

Driver and DeFeyter answer this question through their theory of UW, which identifies a parallel set of constructs to those developed by McRaven. For example, they postulate that relative superiority for UW "is a condition whereby two parties measure the relative strength of three components: intelligence, resources, and political opportunity structures."[28] Intelligence and resources are defined here according to common interpretations. "Political opportunity structures" are more colloquially described as political "room to maneuver," and the authors define them in relation to the degree to which a country relies on consensus enforcement of rules and norms (which creates more maneuver room for the government) versus coercive means (which creates more maneuver room for insurgents).[29] Taking these

[25] Finlan, "A Dangerous Pathway? Toward a Theory of Special Forces," p. 265.

[26] William "Dave" Driver and Bruce E. DeFeyter, "The Theory of Unconventional Warfare: Win, Lose, and Draw," Naval Postgraduate School, December 2008.

[27] Driver and DeFeyter, "The Theory of Unconventional Warfare: Win, Lose, and Draw," p. v.

[28] Driver and DeFeyter, "The Theory of Unconventional Warfare: Win, Lose, and Draw," p. 5.

[29] Driver and DeFeyter, "The Theory of Unconventional Warfare: Win, Lose, and Draw," p. 8.

three elements together, the authors propose the following mathematical relationship between them for the insurgency (i) and the government (g):

$$S_g = I_{(g)}^2 \times R_g \times POS_g$$

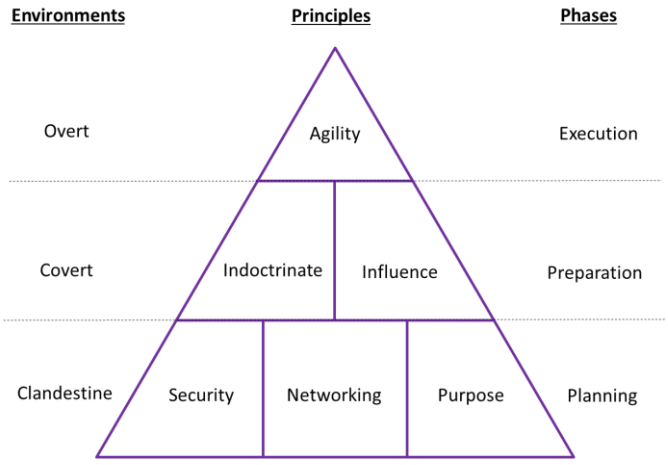
$$S_i = I_{(i)}^2 \times R_i \times (5 - POS_g)$$

$$Relative\ Superiority = \frac{S_g}{S_i}$$

Here, the authors define intelligence (*I*), resources (*R*), and political opportunity structures (*POS*) on a 0-5 scale with specific definitions for each ordinal value,[30] and I have defined *S* as the "superiority score" of either side.[31] The multiplicative nature of the formula illustrates the necessity of all three elements for both sides—a zero or low rating for *I*, *R*, or *POS* minimizes the superiority score of either side. The fact that *I* is squared indicates its increased importance in Driver and DeFeyter's theory, relative to the other two factors.

Driver and DeFeyter go on to apply their formula to three historical cases (one win, one loss, and one draw), and from these they derive an analog to McRaven's model of direct action, which they call "The Unconventional Warfare Model" (Figure 5).

Figure 5. Driver and DeFeyter's model of unconventional warfare



Source: Driver and DeFeyter, "The Theory of Unconventional Warfare."

[30] Driver and DeFeyter, "The Theory of Unconventional Warfare: Win, Lose, and Draw," p. 8.

[31] And you thought there would be no math! In their thesis, Driver and DeFeyter write S_g and S_i as being equal to one another, which is mathematically incorrect and not in keeping with several examples they discuss which identify the proportion between these two values as the relative superiority score. The set of equations shown here corrects this error.

As with McRaven's model, the authors identify six key principles in their model of UW: security, networking, purpose, indoctrination, influence, and agility. However, unlike McRaven's model of an unstable, inverted pyramid, Driver and DeFeyter see their six principles of UW as being a regular pyramid, built on a stable base of activities in clandestine planning and covert preparation phases. This design is established deliberately to allow UW forces to survive inevitable and repeated setbacks as they seek to gain the intelligence, resources, and political maneuver space needed to achieve and sustain relative superiority over a government.[32]

As with McRaven's articulation of why a raiding force can sometimes conduct an effective mission against a numerically superior force in the defense, Driver and DeFeyter claim that their theory illustrates how a numerically inferior insurgent force can defeat a numerically superior government in the defense.[33]

Overarching theories of special operations

In addition to theories that focus on specific sub-categories of special operations—and despite several authors who have argued that anything more than this is unnecessary (and potentially dangerous)[34]—there have been a number of efforts to develop theories that cover all special operations. Here, we will discuss five efforts that were sponsored by JSOU. Although there are many other papers that purport to develop a theory of special operations,[35] the five papers discussed below represent the most scholarly and advanced attempts to do so.

Spulak's theory of SOF

The first of these was published by Robert Spulak in 2007.[36] Notably, and in contrast to McRaven's approach, Spulak claims that "special operations (and SOF) cannot theoretically be defined in terms of specific and unchanging missions, skills, or capabilities."[37] Because the attributes of what is considered "special" are ever changing, Spulak argues that some other,

[32] Driver and DeFeyter, "The Theory of Unconventional Warfare: Win, Lose, and Draw," p. 12.

[33] Driver and DeFeyter, "The Theory of Unconventional Warfare: Win, Lose, and Draw," p. 88.

[34] Christopher Marsh, Mike Kenny, and Nathanael Joslyn, "SO What? The Value of Scientific Inquiry and Theory Building in Special Operations Research," *Special Operations Journal*, 1:2, 2015, p. 89-104 and James Kiras, "A Theory of Special Operations: 'These Ideas are Dangerous,'" *Special Operations Journal*, 1:2, Nov. 2015, p. 75-88.

[35] See, for example: Joe Osbourne, "Advancing a Strategic Theory of Special Operations," *Small Wars Journal*, May 15, 2016, available at https://smallwarsjournal.com/jrnl/art/advancing-a-strategic-theory-of-special-operations or William D. Harris, Jr., "Special Operations, Irregular Warfare, and Operational Art: A Theory of Special Operations," School of Advanced Military Studies, US Army Command and General Staff College, Feb. 2013.

[36] Spulak, Jr., "A Theory of Special Operations.

[37] Spulak, Jr., "A Theory of Special Operations," p. 2.

unchanging variable must be identified on which to anchor a theory of special operations. To do so, Spulak explores the enduring nature of war and how it leads to the requirements and limitations of military forces. In particular, he focuses on the concept of *Clausewitzian friction*, for which he uses Barry J. Watt's definition as "the effect of reality on ideas and intentions in war—that is, the difference between plans and reality."[38] Spulak describes how the friction of the battlefield inherently limits what conventional forces can accomplish. Because conventional forces typically recruit and employ individuals who are valued for their ability to follow orders, such forces are limited in their flexibility and creativity in the midst of a conflict. SOF, however, specifically recruit and select individuals for these and similar attributes, which means they approach problems in conflict with a fundamentally different mindset than conventional forces.

In Spulak's formulation, "SOF execute operations to accomplish goals in ways that conventional forces cannot but without a greater risk to themselves, greater risk of failure, or greater risk of negative political consequences…to use a sports metaphor, SOF are *game changers*, and the new game has different limits."[39] In his view, the origin of SOF stems from the impact of friction on military forces in combat—the attributes for which SOF are selected are what define SOF, and the employment of these attributes are what defines his theory of special operations:

> Special operations are missions to accomplish strategic objectives where the use of conventional forces would create unacceptable risks due to Clausewitzian friction. Overcoming these risks requires special operations forces that directly address the ultimate sources of friction through qualities that are the result of the distribution of the attributes of SOF personnel.

Yarger's theory of American special operations

The second JSOU study was written by Harry Yarger in 2013.[40] With this study, Yarger aims to advance a unified theory and school of thought for American special operations. In addition to describing his theory through the use of 26 all-encompassing premises, he advances two key concepts. The first is that, in the American approach to war, SOF and special operations are inseparable—the definition of one is tied inextricably to the definition of the other:

> Special operations, as practiced by the United States, achieve effects through the application of SOF. SOF are specifically selected and trained people, who apply a distinctive set of attributes, values, principles, and organizational

[38] Barry D. Watts, Clausewitzian Friction and Future War (Revised Edition), McNair Paper 68 (Washington, DC: National Defense University, 2004).

[39] Spulak, "A Theory of Special Operations," p. 20–21.

[40] Harry R. Yarger, "21st Century SOF: Toward an American Theory of Special Operations," JSOU Report 13-1, Apr. 2013.

> structure to the planning, preparation, and execution phases of missions, to achieve strategic, operational, and tactical objectives that are vulnerable to and better served by an alternative military capability. The reason for the existence of special operations is to couple *extraordinary* opportunity with *extraordinary* performance (exceptionality of personnel and organizations) to achieve *extraordinary* results.[41]

The second is the idea of "SOF power," which is akin to other theoreticians' formulations of land, sea, or air power. Yarger argues that:

> since the end of the Cold War, policy-makers have found SOF have a particular strategic utility in this security environment for policy options that require special military operations, use a small footprint, provide for plausible deniability when needed, and are not representative of a national commitment…SOF power, like land, sea, and air power, is employable as a distinct instrument of power or as an integrated part of national military power and joint warfare.[42]

In Yarger's view, the implication of these concepts is an ever-increasing demand by policy-makers for special operations and the use of SOF, and a resultant responsibility of SOF leaders to continuously monitor and analyze whether SOF are being used in accordance with their special attributes.

Rubright's unified theory of special operations

The third JSOU study was authored by Richard Rubright in 2017, as the first of a three-part series.[43] In a deliberate effort to take a provocatively different approach than previous attempts, Rubright sought to identify a single "unified theory" of SOF—one that is "holistic in nature, timeless, focused solely upon special operations, and serves as an umbrella framework for other theories about special operations and SOF."[44] To do so, he employs a lexically semantic argument—combined with the assertion that previous theories have erred in conflating special operations and SOF—to construct a theory that is as encompassing as it is short: "*Special operations are extraordinary operations to achieve a specific effect*."[45]

Rubright admits that his theory seems underwhelming at first blush, but he argues that the best theories are those that can take myriad complex ideas and express them parsimoniously

[41] Yarger, "21st Century SOF: Toward an American Theory of Special Operations," p. 43.

[42] Yarger, "21st Century SOF: Toward an American Theory of Special Operations," p. 18.

[43] Richard W. Rubright, "A Unified Theory for Special Operations," JSOU Report 17-1, May 2017.

[44] Rubright, "A Unified Theory for Special Operations," p. 1.

[45] Rubright, "A Unified Theory for Special Operations," p. 7.

(e.g., Darwin's theory that "species change over time to adapt to their environment," or Einstein's theory of special relativity ($E=mc^2$), both of which are deceivingly simple).[46] He then uses his theory to articulate how special operations exist apart from SOF, and even outside of the military (e.g., the Smokejumper community of firefighters); to debunk concepts like that of "SOF power" being semantically extraneous to existing ideas; and to claim that the forces that conduct special operations need not be "special" (i.e., fundamentally different in nature), but rather "elite" (i.e., better selected, trained, or equipped variations of regular forces).

Searle's new general theory of special operations

The fourth JSOU study was the second of a three-part series authored by Tom Searle.[47] In contrast to the theories of Spulak and Rubright, Searle draws a sharp distinction between SOF as being "special"—in other words, qualitatively different—as opposed to just being "elite" (i.e., able to do the same things as conventional forces, but better). To formulate his theory, Searle therefore seeks to define what special operations are qualitatively different from, settling on the following definition: "Special operations are operations outside the conventional operations box"[48] (Figure 6). Searle argues that while:

> other authors recognize that special operations are different from conventional operations…they still tend to see the world from inside the box. The inside the box point of view leaves them burdened with the assumption (usually implied) that conventional tasks represent the essence of military responsibilities and authorities. These authors tend to see special operations as useful because they support conventional operations, or because they execute conventional tasks (sink a battleship, capture a fortress, destroy the enemy's port facilities, etc.) in unusual ways and thus accomplish conventional tasks when conventional forces cannot. From outside the box things look different.[49]

Searle argues that while some will see his theory as unsatisfying because it defines special operations as a dependent variable determined by whatever is considered "conventional" at a given time, his definition of special operations accurately captures their nature, since what is considered "special" has historically evolved in relation to conventional operations. Conversely, in some cases (e.g., the ability to fly helicopters using night-vision goggles) what was previously considered special has become completely conventional.

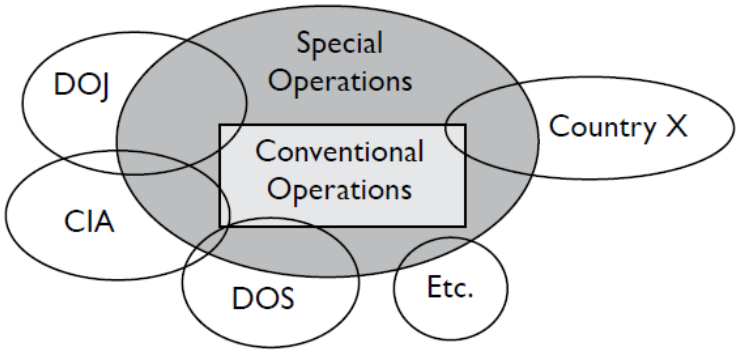
[46] Rubright, "A Unified Theory for Special Operations," p. 7.

[47] Tom Searle, "Outside the Box: A New General Theory of Special Operations," JSOU Report 17-4, July 2017.

[48] Searle, "Outside the Box: A New General Theory of Special Operations," p. 14.

[49] Searle, "Outside the Box: A New General Theory of Special Operations," p. 2.

Figure 6. Searle's relationship between conventional operations, special operations, international partners, and interagency partners



Source: Searle, "Outside the Box: A New General Theory of Special Operations," p. 23.

In discussing the implications of his theory, Searle states that special operations capabilities—as distinctly different from conventional ones—serve as insurance against the possibility that leaders have guessed wrong about the nature of future threats and what future capabilities the military might need to address them. He also notes that because SOF operate outside of the conventional military box, their activities and authorities are likely to align, and in some cases overlap, with those of other US government agencies (Figure 6).

Essays on special operations theory

The fifth JSOU effort, and the third in a three-part series, is a collection of essays on special operations theory edited by Peter McCabe and Paul Lieber.[50] In addition to chapters by Spulak and Searle that expound upon their theories as described above, the collection includes detailed discussions on the concept of SOF power (Bernd Horn), the need for a theory of special warfare (Travis Homiak), the role of the US president in special operations (Francisco Wong-Diaz), and SOF in the US national security apparatus (Rich Yarger), among others. One author (James Kiras) goes so far as to challenge the view that special operations need a theory, claiming that extant theories (e.g., of irregular warfare) are sufficient.[51] In closing the compendium, Lieber concludes that a theory of special operations would be useful to SOF, but that to be most helpful, it would need to move beyond answering the most basic questions about special operations and evolve to be more detailed and encompassing (Figure 7).

[50] "Special Operations Theory," Edited by Peter McCabe and Paul Lieber, JSOU Report 17–6, Aug. 2017.

[51] Kiras' chapter draws from a prior publication: Kiras, "A Theory of Special Operations: 'These Ideas are Dangerous.'"

Figure 7. Lieber's conclusion[a]

[a] Not a photo of Paul Lieber.
Source: imgflip meme generator, available at: https://imgflip.com/memegenerator.

What's wrong with these theories?

I will forgo the requisite takedown of the theories described above, for three reasons: (1) I'm transparently short on time and resources in writing this paper; (2) in the appendix to his paper, Searle already provides a lengthy critique of the theories proffered by McRaven, Spulak, Yarger, and Rubright; and (3) I think each of the theories discussed here has its own merits, and my intent is not to supplant them, but to provide a different lens through which to focus our understanding of special operations.

In addition, an astute reader would point out that the theory I describe in the next section is in some ways similar to Spulak's theory of SOF, at least insomuch as he focuses on a desire to reduce Clausewitzian friction as a source of risk and believes SOF offer fundamentally different options for doing so than conventional forces. However, unlike the approach of Spulak or the other authors discussed here (which generally place great emphasis on the capabilities, means, tactics, or locations of special operations and SOF), I am encouraging the reader to focus instead on *why special operations are asked for and conducted* and what this subsequently tells us about their nature. Although I acknowledge that some discussion of this occurs in extant theories, none of them centers on it. I believe that, if we are to truly understand special operations and their place in the broader panoply of military theories, we must have a detailed understanding of the "why" behind them. I provide such an understanding in the next section.

Why Special Operations? A Risk-Centric Theory

If you are not willing to risk the unusual, you will have to settle for the ordinary.[52]

In this section, I will complete the remaining steps of developing a theory as articulated in the introduction, with the exception of conducting detailed analysis of a set of historical case studies. As mentioned previously, I simply don't have the time or resources to do so beyond the single case that I discuss below. If a future version of me finds himself in changed circumstances, I may endeavor to expand on this work by testing the theory against a large set of historical (and ideally contemporary) cases. But, I would also not be at all disappointed if other researchers did so first.

A risk-centric definition

The US military formally defines special operations as "operations requiring unique modes of employment, tactical techniques, equipment and training often conducted in hostile, denied, or politically sensitive environments and characterized by one or more of the following: time sensitive, clandestine, low visibility, conducted with and/or through indigenous forces, requiring regional expertise, and/or a high degree of risk."[53]

That this statement defines special operations by what capabilities they require, with some additional set of considerations of where and how they are conducted, leaves much to be desired, and is the principal reason that many of the authors in the preceding section have chosen to set it aside in favor of some other definition (Table 1).

Table 1. Theory authors' definitions of special operations

Author	Definition of Special Operations
McRaven	A special operations mission is conducted by forces specially trained, equipped, and supported for a specific target whose destruction, elimination, or, in the case of hostages, the rescue of, is a political or military imperative.

[52] Jim Rohn, available at: https://www.goodreads.com/quotes/246066-if-you-are-not-willing-to-risk-the-unusual-you.

[53] Joint Staff, "DOD Dictionary of Military and Associated Terms," June 2020.

Author	Definition of Special Operations
Spulak	Missions to accomplish strategic objectives where the use of conventional forces would create unacceptable risks due to Clausewitzian friction.
Yarger	Military operations conducted by SOF. Special operations are overt, covert, and clandestine operations of an unorthodox and frequently high-risk nature, undertaken to achieve or support significant political or military objectives in support of national security and foreign policy.
Rubright	Extraordinary operations to achieve a specific effect.
Searle	Operations outside the conventional operations box.

Source: McRaven, "The Theory of Special Operations"; Spulak, "A Theory of Special Operations"; Yarger, "21st Century SOF"; Rubright, "A Unified Theory for Special Operations"; and Searle, "Outside the Box."

I am, generally speaking, not a cavalier disregarder of doctrine, given that it often encapsulates the hard-earned wisdom of the past—something upon which a great theory might be situated. But here the US military's definition is too broad and, more importantly, it fails to address the principal question with which I'm concerned: *why special operations are conducted*.

Thus, going forward I will use the following definition: ***special operations are unorthodox military solutions to difficult policy problems that lower the level of risk to policy-makers***.[54]

Here, I have attempted to mirror Rubright's emphasis on parsimony. I have also borrowed two aspects from other authors, namely that the intent of special operations is strategic in nature (McRaven, Spulak, Yarger) and that they are fundamentally different from—not just better versions of—conventional operations (Spulak, Searle).

However, I have recast the focus of the definition away from special operations as missions conducted by SOF, because, as McRaven so boldly states, "special operations can be conducted by 'non-special operations' personnel" and there are plenty of historical examples of this having been the case.[55] There are also plenty of examples today of SOF conducting missions

[54] Here "unorthodox" is defined as "(of behavior, ideas, or methods) different from what is usual or expected" and "difficult" is defined as "not easy or simple; hard to do or to understand." See: Cambridge Dictionary, available at https://dictionary.cambridge.org/us/dictionary/english. I chose the word "unorthodox" both because its definition provides clarity on what is different (i.e., behavior, ideas, or methods) and because the word "unconventional" immediately conjures up connotations of unconventional warfare, which is separately defined.

[55] McRaven, "The Theory of Special Operations," p. 3. McRaven cites as examples Doolittle's raid on Tokyo and the submarine raid on the German battleship *Tirpitz.*

that could be conducted equally well by conventional forces.[56] Instead, I have anchored the definition on solving *difficult policy problems*.

Why have I done this? Two reasons. First, as Clausewitz made clear, policy and the military are inseparable, one being an extension of the other: "The Art of War in its highest point of view is policy, but, no doubt, a policy which fights battles instead of writing notes"[57] (Figure 8). At their essence, special operations aim to bypass the operational level of war and connect tactical actions by small groups of military individuals directly to strategic aims—namely, the solution of challenges at the level of policy. Second—and this is the most important element of my definition—*they are designed to solve difficult policy problems by lowering the risk profile of the solution.* I will discuss the importance of the risk element of the definition in more detail below.

Figure 8. Obligatory Clausewitz quote

Source: imgflip meme generator, available at: https://imgflip.com/memegenerator.

[56] The example of SOF conducting security force assistance missions in permissive environments has been specifically called out by the US Congress as a mission that would be more appropriate for conventional forces ("Report of the Committee on Armed Services House of Representatives on H.R. 2500 Together with Additional and Dissenting Views," 2020, available at: https://www.govinfo.gov/content/pkg/CRPT-116hrpt120/html/CRPT-116hrpt120.htm).

[57] You knew this was coming. See: Carl von Clausewitz (as translated by J.J. Graham), *On War* (Kegan Paul, Trench, Trubner, and Co: London, 1908), p. 126.

A risk-centric theory

Building the theory

If special operations are *unorthodox military solutions to difficult policy problems designed to lower the overall risk profile to policy-makers,* what does that mean in practice?

Because policy-makers are inherently reliant upon some form of popular support to maintain their positions of power,[58] they are also inherently averse to taking risky actions, for the simple reason that risky actions impart risk to their position of power. Thus, when considering solutions to various policy problems, they will seek and select the options that present the lowest overall risk.

Here, I acknowledge that "risk" can take a number of forms, but I'll focus primarily on two types to which anyone in a position of authority will be sensitive: risk of failure in resolving the policy problem, and risk of blowback. Regarding the first, leaders naturally want their decisions to resolve problems facing them and their organizations, and they are sensitive to various options' likelihood of effectively doing so. They weigh the probability of success (or risk of failure) in deciding which potential solution to choose. Regarding the second, leaders typically want to remain leaders, and thus they weigh the possibility of blowback from their decisions as part of their decision calculus. Here, popular and bureaucratic blowback are important, because both have the potential to threaten the leader's position of power (though the relative importance of the two will depend on the type of bureaucratic systems in which the leader operates).[59]

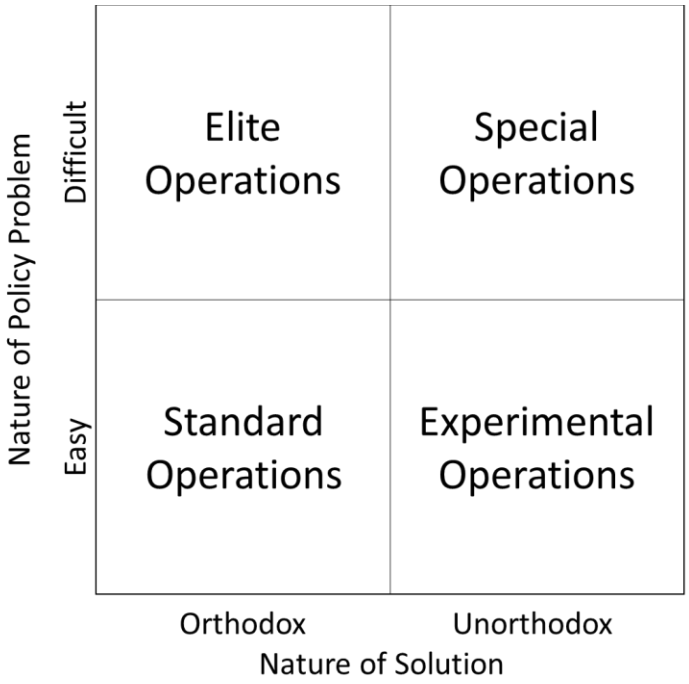
For problems that are inherently easy, policy-makers will generally be satisfied with options naturally produced by their bureaucracies, for two reasons. First, because it is likely that these problems are of such a routine nature that the bureaucracy has already identified, created, and successfully employed capabilities to address them—or that they are similar to problems the bureaucracy has successfully addressed in the past—the leader can be assured a low risk of failure and successful resolution via standard means. Second, because these are the solutions with which the bureaucracy and popular audiences are most familiar, they engender the lowest risk of blowback as well. Figure 9 on the next page shows various types of operations according to the nature of the policy problem (easy or difficult) and nature of the solution (orthodox or

[58] This is obviously true in democratic societies, but even in autocratic ones, leaders draw their power from various constituencies whose support must be maintained to stay in power. See: Jessica L.P. Weeks, *Dictators at War and Peace* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 2014).

[59] Weeks, *Dictators at War and Peace.*

unorthodox). In it, I have labeled orthodox solutions to easy policy problems as "standard operations."[60]

Figure 9. Types of operations as determined by level of policy risk and nature of the solution



Source: CNA.

As the figure illustrates, there are also unorthodox solutions to easy policy problems. Given that such options are outside the norm and might induce blowback from the bureaucracy, policy-makers would deliberately choose them only if there is some additional benefit to be gained beyond the solution of the policy problem. One example of such a benefit might be the knowledge gained by experimentation with some new type of solution. If a policy-maker

[60] I refrained from using the term "conventional operations" here because that phrase evokes the use of "conventional forces," which is defined by the Department of Defense (DOD) as forces that are non-nuclear and not SOF (Joint Staff, "DOD Dictionary of Military and Associated Terms"). While standard operations will be carried out typically by conventional forces, they do not have to be and it is possible that any part of the bureaucracy—even SOF—could be asked to conduct standard operations. One could further argue that any type of operation, if done consistently and long enough, will become standard even if it was once in one of the other categories, as its routine conduct will result both in its eventual reclassification as an orthodox solution and a lower risk profile in the minds of policy-makers. Such is the nature, for example, of many counterterrorism missions conducted by US SOF today.

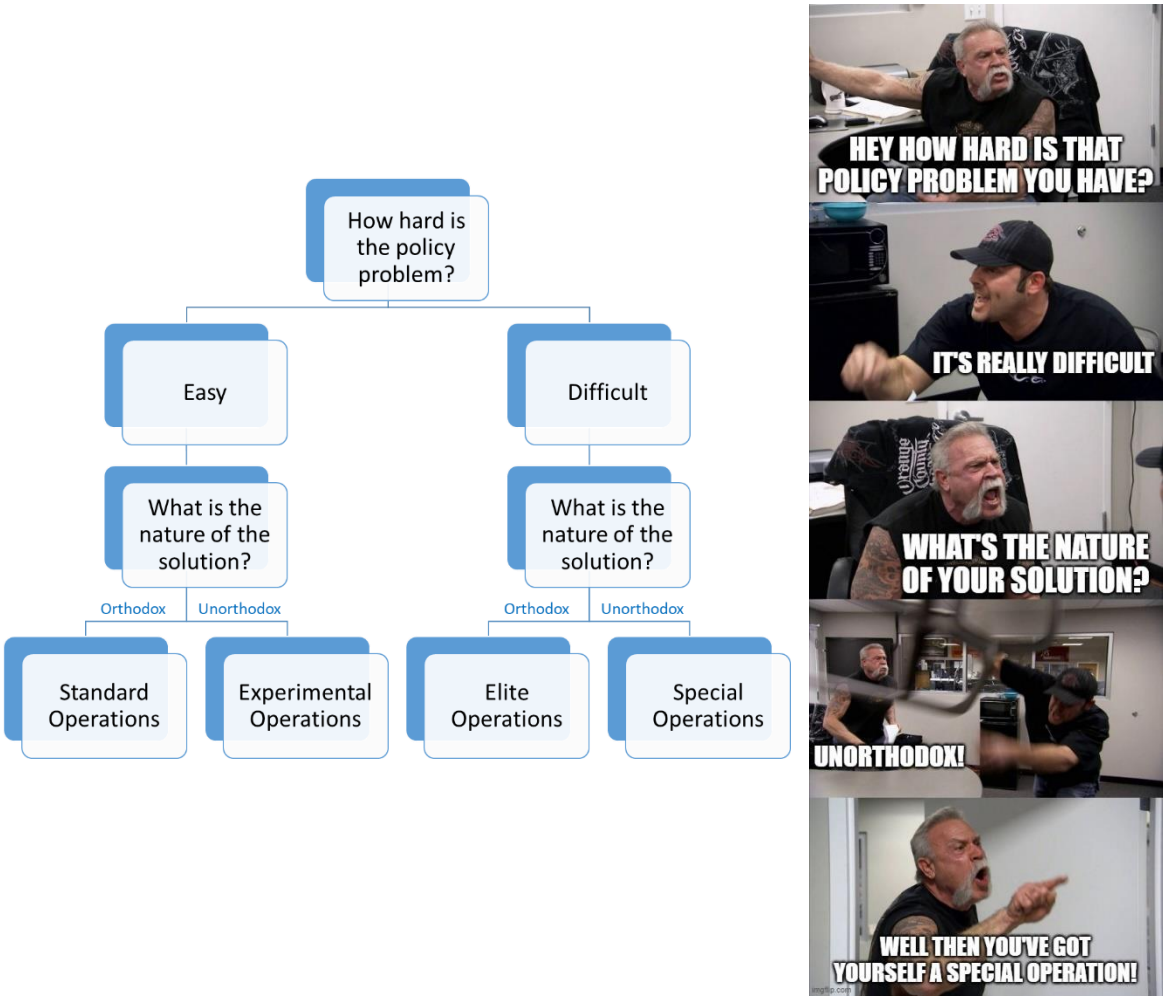
believes the unorthodox solution will both solve the policy problem and provide some unique and valuable new behaviors, ideas, or methods, they may authorize its use. In Figure 9, I have therefore labeled unorthodox solutions to easy (low-risk) policy problems as "experimental operations."

Difficult policy problems pose a different situation. In these cases, the policy-maker will be more sensitive to the risks of failure and blowback than in the cases described above. The bureaucracies supporting the policy-maker will still be naturally inclined to produce orthodox solutions to those problems, but they will attempt to lower the risk of failure by offering to have those operations be conducted by elite individuals or units (in some cases also featuring elite equipment or technologies).[61] Thus, in Figure 9 I have labeled orthodox solutions to difficult policy problems as "elite operations." The default position of policy-makers attempting to address difficult policy problems will be to prefer elite operations, because they offer a means of lowering the risk of failure while keeping the risk of bureaucratic blowback low (because orthodox solutions are typically the preference of the bureaucracy).

In some cases, however, even an elite orthodox solution to a difficult policy problem will be viewed by policy-makers as unacceptably risky. In these instances, leaders may sometimes choose inaction and either acceptance or mitigation of whatever negative consequences are likely to accrue from the specific policy problem. In other cases, they may be unwilling or unable to accept those consequences, and thus they may ask for options that are wholly different from those the bureaucracy might normally produce—in essence, asking for creative and novel solutions, up to and including those that have never been tried before. If these unorthodox solutions to the difficult policy problem appear to be less risky than elite orthodox solutions and inaction/mitigation, the leader might choose to implement them. In that case, the policy-maker has ordered the execution of a "special operation," as indicated in Figure 9. These distinctions can also be visualized via the decision tree shown in Figure 10 on the next page.

[61] I take as the definition of "elite" that of the Oxford English Dictionary: "A select part of a group that is superior to the rest in terms of ability or qualities." See: https://www.lexico.com/en/definition/elite.

Figure 10. Decision tree for various types of policy problems and solutions



Source: CNA and imgflip meme generator, available at: https://imgflip.com/memegenerator.

Stating the theory

This brings me to the formulation of my risk-centric theory: ***if*** *policy-makers have a difficult policy problem* ***and*** *they are unsatisfied with the level of risk presented by orthodox solutions or inaction,* ***then*** *they will choose special operations.*

This formulation is meant to address the *centrality of risk* to special operations and the *causal relationships* required of a good theory. For easy policy problems, the absolute risk to policy-makers is low simply because these are easy problems to solve. Thus, the choice of whether to conduct standard operations or experimental ones is less about reducing risk and more about

whether policy-makers (or bureaucracies) believe they will accrue sufficient additional benefits to choose experimental operations over standard ones. An example might be a training mission for a foreign partner military unit, conducted in a permissive host country. The US military has standard units of action for such missions (e.g., an infantry battalion); standard tactics, techniques, and procedures (TTPs); and standard gear that it would deploy along with the training unit. However, there may be opportunities for the deploying unit to bring with it some experimental equipment—perhaps a new type of radio or rifle optic—that would allow the unit to conduct some degree of technical experimentation in a foreign environment while also conducting the training mission.

For difficult policy problems, the absolute risk is inherently high. In this atmosphere, choices between elite and special operations are related primarily to policy-makers' desires to reduce the overall risk profile. Here, policy-makers understand that special operations are risky to undertake. But, if special operations—unorthodox solutions—can offer a lower overall risk profile than elite operations or inaction/mitigation, then they are more likely to be chosen by policy-makers as the preferred solution to their policy problem.

That both elite and special operations attempt to reduce the risk profile to policy-makers explains why they often involve individuals or units that are highly trained and equipped with the best gear available. As discussed extensively by Spulak, what distinguishes modern-day SOF from elite forces is that SOF are assessed and selected for attributes that are fundamentally different—and typically unorthodox—from those of (elite) conventional forces.[62] Thus, contrary to what some authors have claimed,[63] it is not specialized equipment or the types of operations they conduct that make SOF "special," but the fundamentally different nature of their personnel, who are selected specifically for qualities that should lead them to generate fundamentally different solutions to policy problems. Today's SOF, via specialized assessment and selection processes, have sought to *institutionalize* the generation of unorthodox solutions to difficult policy problems. Whether this can be done while maintaining standing SOF organizations as fundamentally different types of bureaucracies is a subject I address in more detail below.

[62] Spulak, "A Theory of Special Operations."

[63] Finlan, "A Dangerous Pathway?"

Evaluating the theory

Advantages of a risk-centric theory

Having articulated the theory, it's now time to pat myself on the back for having done so. Notably, I see four advantages of a theory for why special operations are conducted that is centered on policy risk.

First, as with Rubright's theory of special operations, the theory I've articulated above is not specific to military operations—it could apply equally well to any number of other types of organizations and their operations. The key element of this theory is not SOF, but the nature of risk to policy problems and bureaucratic options for solving them. This element is common to all organizations, not just the military.

Second, this theory ties special operations directly from the tactical level to the strategic level, through the concept of policy risk. This has the advantage of making clear *why* policy-makers ask for special operations—namely, that they are unsatisfied with orthodox solutions and are looking for unorthodox options—and what they are hoping to get from them—namely, a lower overall risk profile than that offered by orthodox solutions. Again, this is centered on the concept of risk, and thus is more broadly applicable than to just SOF or military organizations.

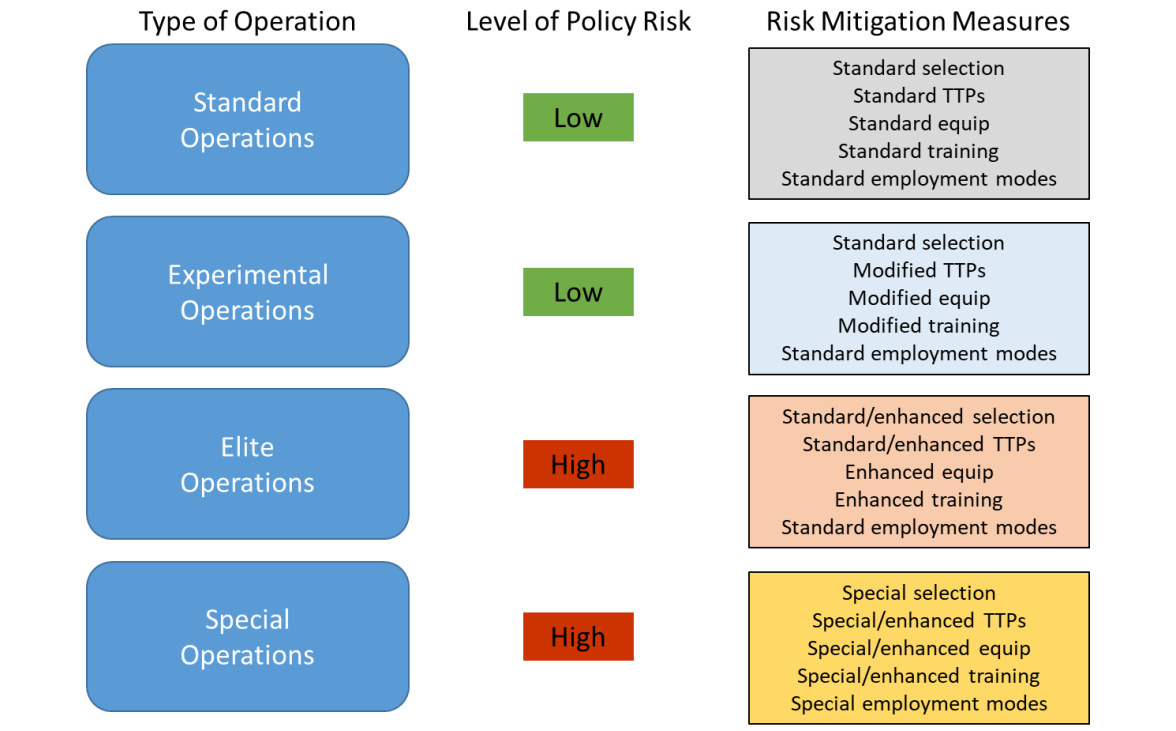
Third, this theory does not rely on the nature of who conducts special operations, what gear they have, what training they receive, or what environment they operate in. This is important because, contrary to what US joint doctrine and some other authors have claimed (e.g., Finlan, Spulak, Yarger), special operations need not (and should not) be defined by any of these attributes. Rather, as shown in Figure 11 on the next page, these are all means of trying to reduce the overall risk profile of the potential solution to a policy problem. As the figure shows, there is duplication in these measures across various types of operation (e.g., elite operations may use some of the same gear and TTPs as special operations), which is why these are poor discriminators between special and other types of operations.

Fourth, this theory is time-agnostic. It can be situated anywhere in time, whether preceding the creation of forces known as "SOF," existing in the present day, or extending well into the future. As other authors have noted (e.g., Spulak, Rubright, Searle), definitions of special operations that center on what they entail (e.g., the core activities listed for US SOF in Section 167 of Title 10, US Code[64]) are inherently flawed because those activities may come and go over time. Similarly, many of the specific capabilities, technologies, and TTPs that are currently

[64] US Code Title 10, Section 167, available at: https://uscode.house.gov. This section of law lists 10 core activities of US SOF as follows: (1) direct action; (2) strategic reconnaissance; (3) unconventional warfare; (4) foreign internal defense; (5) civil affairs; (6) military information support operations; (7) counterterrorism; (8) humanitarian assistance; (9) theater search and rescue; (10) such other activities as may be specified by the president or the secretary of defense.

"special" and unique to SOF will eventually transition to elite or experimental forces, and then to conventional ones, for use during standard operations. An advantage of a time-agnostic theory such as the one described here is that it is free from such limitations because the concept of strategic risk is enduring.

Figure 11. Risk-mitigation measures by type of operation



Source: CNA.

Disadvantages of a risk-centric theory

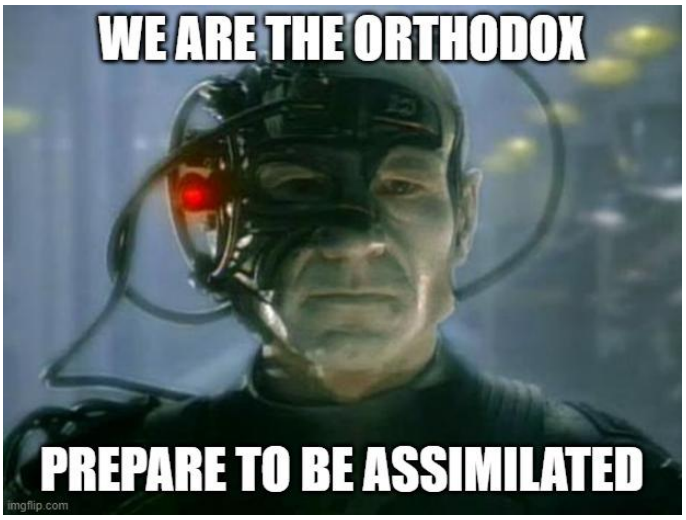
As much I would like to believe that the theory I've articulated above is perfect, all theories suffer from shortfalls (they are theories, after all, not scientific laws) and this one is no different. Common criticisms of the risk-centric theory are likely to include at least the following two arguments.

First, there is not a perfect delineation between "easy" and "difficult" policy problems in practice, nor will the distinction between "orthodox" and "unorthodox" solutions always be crystal clear. I have chosen binary terms in constructing the theory both to keep it simple and to minimize the overlap, but I acknowledge nonetheless that overlap may occur and that some amount of subjectivity will be required to make easy/difficult and orthodox/unorthodox determinations for any particular case (though I believe the focus of the definition of

unorthodox on behaviors, ideas, or methods provides a useful start point for such a determination). Although some of the other theories described above may allow for easier identification of any specific operation as "special," the risk-centric theory gives up this ground in an attempt to provide a clearer *a priori* articulation of why special operations are desired.

Second, the theory, when applied to operations conducted by US SOF, may be viewed by some as too narrow in its determination of what constitutes a special versus an elite operation. US joint doctrine and Title 10, US Code paint a fairly broad picture of what the US military and government consider to be the purview of SOF. Application of the decision tree in Figure 10 to the suite of operations conducted by US SOF today would identify at least some fraction of them as being in the other categories. This is largely a result of the increased level of comfort of US policy-makers with SOF, the US military's institutionalization of SOF, and the growth of the US special operations enterprise over the past couple of decades. Once SOF have been institutionalized, the orthodox parts of the military gain increased exposure to them and begin to adopt some of their behaviors, ideas, and methods (including gear). This creates a persistent "pull" from the unorthodox to the orthodox over time. Although this has the positive effect of increasing the overall capability of conventional forces (e.g., by moving some of them from standard to elite over time), it also poses risks to SOF. For if SOF are not ruthlessly engaged in a cycle of innovation and divestiture of their own behaviors, ideas, and methods, they will increasingly be absorbed by, and eventually into, what Searle describes as the "conventional box." This is less a criticism of the risk-centric theory in general and more a criticism of its direct application to the US special operations enterprise today.

Figure 12. The pull of the orthodox on SOF



Source: imgflip meme generator, available at: https://imgflip.com/memegenerator.

Application of the theory

As noted earlier, I will not endeavor to apply the risk-centric theory systematically to a set of case studies here, though I invite other researchers to do so. In an attempt to not completely shirk this aspect of a theory paper, however, I will discuss the theory in the context of one of the most well-known modern special operations: the raid on Osama bin Laden.

The bin Laden raid

During the period of darkness between May 1 and 2, 2011, a joint team of US Navy SEALs, aviators from the Army's 160th Special Operations Aviation Regiment, and members of the Central Intelligence Agency's (CIA) Special Activities Division launched a 162-mile raid—consisting of a dual-helicopter insertion of a 79-man (and one dog) raiding team—from a military base near Jalalabad, Afghanistan, against bin Laden's compound in Abbottabad, Pakistan. Code named Operation Neptune Spear, the raid lasted 38 minutes and resulted in the death of the al-Qaeda leader.[65] The tactical details of the raid have been well-described elsewhere, thus I won't repeat them here.[66] Rather, I'll briefly explore the application of the risk-centric theory to this particular example.

Osama bin Laden was the unquestioned leader of the al-Qaeda terrorist group and, in the wake of the September 11, 2001, attacks on the World Trade Center and Pentagon, the source of inspiration for many jihadist groups around the world. When Barack Obama took office as the president of the United States in 2009, bin Laden was still a wanted, but free, man. Upon taking office, President Obama told the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) that finding bin Laden was to be a top priority of his administration and directed them to "put whatever resources you need into it."[67] Within a year, the CIA was able to identify and track a courier of bin Laden's, which eventually allowed them to identify the compound in Abbottabad as a location of interest. The agency tried numerous means to verify whether bin Laden was, in fact, at that compound. However, it was never able to give the president a firm conclusion—according to a

[65] Wikipedia, "Death of Osama bin Laden," available at: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Death_of_Osama_bin_Laden#Operation_Neptune_Spear.

[66] See, for example: Nicholas Schmidle, "Getting Bin Laden: What Happened that Night in Abbottabad," *The New Yorker*, Aug. 1, 2011, available at: https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2011/08/08/getting-bin-laden.

[67] Quote attributed to Admiral (ret.) Bill McRaven, History Channel, "The Obama Years, Part 5: Bin Laden: Priority Number One," available at: https://www.history.com/the-obama-years/bin-laden.html.

former assistant to the president, "they had all of these assessments and some people said it was an 80 percent chance and some said it was a 40 percent chance."[68]

This is an example of what was clearly a "difficult policy problem." The architect of the largest attack on the United States since Pearl Harbor and the leader of the world's premier terrorist organization had been on the loose for just over seven years after that attack, and no one in the US national security apparatus had a firm idea of where he was. President Obama ordered an intensification of the search for bin Laden, and upon gaining what appeared to be a relatively strong lead, asked the Pentagon for options. And what did he get? According to Admiral (ret.) William McRaven:[69]

> I presented one option. The last chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff was really responsible for the other options. One was kind of a massive bombing raid to level the compound. There was some concern that maybe there was a compound below the compound, that they had dug down deep and there could be a hide site where bin Laden was in a more secure area below the compound. There was concern that if you did a massive bombing raid, you were invariably going to kill women and children. And so I think the president discounted that option over a personal concern about the potential to lose innocent women and children…The second option was a little bit more refined: Can we target this individual [that might be bin Laden] when he is out in the open with a single bomb, a very precise ordnance that hopefully wouldn't kill anybody other than the target? That was a little problematic. Our ability to do that in certain circumstances is very high, but in this case…it was going to be a little more difficult. And the third option was the raid option…And it wasn't difficult. We'll take a couple helicopters. We'll fly the 162 miles in. We'll fast rope onto or near the compound. We'll surround the compound. We will breach the compound walls. We'll go in, make our way to wherever bin Laden is and either capture or kill him, get back on the helicopters and come home. Not difficult in theory. As time went on, it became more and more apparent that this [third option] would give the president an opportunity, one, to verify that we had in fact killed bin Laden or captured him. And if we did it right, we were going to protect the women and children [at the compound].

Looking at these three options, we see that the first was clearly an orthodox solution: use airplanes to level the compound with air-dropped munitions and kill everyone in it. Most certainly the military would have tasked its best pilots with the mission, and it's been reported

[68] Quote attributed to Ben Rhodes, History Channel, "The Obama Years."

[69] Bill McRaven, History Channel, "The Obama Years."

that the bombing would have been carried out by B-2 Spirit (stealth) bombers.[70] Thus, this option is clearly identifiable as an elite operation.

The second option—a surgical air strike—would have involved a "small guided munition that could be fired from a tiny drone…but the weapon had yet to be used in combat."[71] At that point in time, drones with missiles had been in extensive use by both the US military and the CIA, but this particular option appears to have involved a variant of that capability that had not yet been used operationally. Given that the use of an untested technology on the battlefield is an unorthodox solution (this not being something the US military typically does), when combined with the difficult nature of this policy problem, this option qualifies as a special operation in the context of the risk-centric theory.

The third option—the raid—could be a source of debate, insomuch as some might argue that raids are an orthodox solution; there are many parts of the US military that can and do conduct raids (even ones that involve helicopter insertion of the raid force). However, those arguments miss the details of this particular raid—the most pertinent of which are that it was a long-range raid (covering 162 miles) into a semi-permissive (and possibly denied) area. That is not an orthodox solution that would be preferred (or even proffered) by the military establishment. Indeed, in Admiral (ret.) McRaven's retelling, while the chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff presented the previous two options, McRaven (then the head of US Special Operations Command) was asked to produce the raid option.[72] Thus, using my theory, it is clear that the third option under consideration was also a special operation.

Interestingly, McRaven does not mention a fourth option that was also presented to the president, which was to wait while the CIA attempted to improve its intelligence picture and generate a more solid assessment of whether bin Laden was at the compound. According to journalist Mark Bowden, this "doing nothing" option "does not seem to have been ever seriously considered but it was an option presented during the final discussion" leading to the president's decision.[73]

How did President Obama choose among these options? He evaluated the risk profile associated with each one. McRaven again:[74]

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[70] Schmidle, "Getting Bin Laden."

[71] John A. Gans, Jr., "'This Is 50-50': Behind Obama's Decision to Kill Bin Laden," *The Atlantic*, October 10, 2012, available at: https://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2012/10/this-is-50-50-behind-obamas-decision-to-kill-bin-laden/263449/.

[72] McRaven, History Channel, "The Obama Years."

[73] Gans, "'This Is 50-50.'"

[74] McRaven, History Channel, "The Obama Years."

> I tried to convey…the risks involved. There is always the risk of a helicopter going down. There is always the risk that one of our SEALs would get shot. There is always the risk of us inadvertently shooting or killing civilians. Those are all risks. But we trained for this. We rehearsed this mission many times. We were going to reduce as many of those risks as possible. But it was hardly risk free…He wanted to make absolutely certain that we had reduced the risk to our soldiers, that we had reduced the potential civilian casualties, that our chances of achieving the mission were high…So he understood the impact of, if the intelligence was wrong, if we were on the wrong target and we had gone into Pakistan and inadvertently killed innocent Pakistanis, this would not look good on the international scene. It would not look good for this presidency, it certainly wouldn't look good for the Special Operations Forces. So that was a lot of the risk. In Afghanistan, when we conducted missions, we almost always knew that the individual we were going after was on the target or we weren't going to do the mission. Very rarely did we go in as blind as we were going into Pakistan.

As then-Vice President Joe Biden added, the president "knew he was putting his presidency on the line. If [the raid] had failed…it would have been the end of the administration."[75]

The president was attempting to solve a difficult policy problem, and he had been presented with both elite and special operations as potential solutions. Why did he eventually choose the long-range raid option? Because he became convinced that (a) doing nothing was unacceptable, and (b) that the long-range raid—while still quite risky—offered the lowest overall risk profile of the options presented. Here, his calculus seems to have centered on a combination of the two elements I asserted earlier that leaders will pay most attention to—namely, risk of mission failure and risk of blowback. In particular, the president seems to have evaluated the risk of failure through two lenses: (1) hitting the target successfully—which he appears to have mentally defined as not just killing the individual believed to be bin Laden, but being able to positively identify him in the wake of the operation; and (2) limiting collateral damage from the operation, most notably the killing of women and children at the compound. The president also clearly considered the risk of blowback—both from a failed operation and from the fact that the US was going to violate Pakistani sovereignty in the process.

Thus, President Obama's actions and choices confirm the theory as formulated above: *he had a difficult policy problem, he was unsatisfied with the level of risk presented by an orthodox solution or inaction, so he chose a special operation.*

I'll close out this example with a couple of observations:

- There was no discernible bureaucratic blowback from the president's decision to choose a special operation over an elite one. It is interesting that, for example, the Air

[75] Quote attributed to Joe Biden, History Channel, "The Obama Years."

Force doesn't seem to have pushed back on the president's decision to forgo the B-2 bombing option. It may be that the institutionalization of SOF within the US military has reduced this type of blowback and rendered some forms of unorthodox options (e.g., long-range raids) relatively uncontroversial to the bureaucracy.

- The risk-centric theory categorizes the second option—the untested mini-drone strike—as a special operation, and yet this option would have involved few (if any) SOF and was presented by the chairman, presumably as an option that would be carried out by the conventional Air Force (it stands to reason that if the Air Force component to Special Operations Command (SOCOM) was to do it, McRaven would have been asked to develop and present that option as well). This highlights a feature of my (and McRaven's own) definition of special operations, which is that they need not always be performed by SOF.

Future implications of the theory

Having briefly looked back at a single historical example, I'll offer four thoughts on implications of the risk-centric theory for the future.

First, whatever the future holds—whether it's an endless stream of great power competition, or counterterrorism, or armed killer robots—there will always be policy-makers grappling with difficult policy problems. Inevitably, some of those problems will not be resolvable within policy-makers' risk tolerances, and they will seek unorthodox solutions. Which is to say, the theory predicts that there will *always* be some demand for special operations.

Second, because the theory is centered on unorthodox solutions that lower policy risk, it *does not* guarantee that the future of special operations will be conducted solely by SOF. The existence of modern-day SOF—forces specially assessed and selected to institutionalize the generation of unorthodox solutions—is a historical anomaly, as one can identify special military operations having been conducted across all of recorded time. Thus, the theory not only allows for the conduct of special operations by non-SOF entities, but also predicts that this will inevitably happen unless SOF can somehow monopolize the future production of unorthodox solutions (which seems unlikely).

Third, at least within the US military, there has been remarkable growth in the size, structure, resources, and responsibilities afforded to US SOF over the past 20 years.[76] This growth has

[76] See: Congressional Research Service, "U.S. Special Operations Force (SOF): Background and Issues for Congress," updated March 11, 2020, along with prior years' updates of the same report.

brought with it increasing institutionalization of SOF. The theory captures two historical aspects of this institutionalization:

- The desire of US policy-makers to steadily decrease the risk profile of US activities overseas has led to a consistent trend of them asking for SOF to solve their most difficult policy problems, but also increasingly to solve their easy ones, too (Figure 13). The ability to conduct military activities in foreign countries—if even benign ones like setting up a range and teaching foreign forces how to shoot—with smaller-sized units and better-trained individuals than the conventional forces can offer is proving to be the preferred option of both military and civilian leaders. The net result of this is that US SOF are increasingly being asked to undertake elite or, in some cases, standard operations as opposed to being used only for special operations.
- This situation is compounded by my second observation, which is the absence of bureaucratic blowback that might otherwise be expected from a policy-maker's request for an unorthodox solution. At this point within the US military, SOF are no longer generally seen as secretive, squirrely, fringe elements that should be viewed with bureaucratic suspicion. The net result is that the bureaucracy (e.g., the military services) has mostly accepted both the growth of the special operations enterprise and the drift of SOF into elite and standard operations (indeed, in some instances the services have deliberately pushed standard operations that they do not want to conduct over to SOF). This carries with it risk of the US special operations enterprise becoming less "special" over time, since increased adoption and execution of elite and standard operations necessarily dilutes the focus of the enterprise on those aspects that make it unorthodox.

Figure 13. The SOF easy button

Source: imgflip meme generator, available at: https://imgflip.com/memegenerator.

Extending these trends via the theory reveals a fourth implication, which is that the near-term future is likely to hold significant choices and tensions for SOF leaders (Figure 14). Should they chart a course for SOF that errs on the side of remaining consistently unorthodox and incur bureaucratic risk (e.g., to resources and prestige) that might accompany a retrenchment to a narrower focus on special operations as defined in my theory? Or should they give in to the entreaties of the conventional force for greater integration, interoperability, and interdependence[77]—and succumb to the pull of the orthodoxy? The theory predicts that these tensions in the future trajectory of US SOF will persist, as long as the force designed to be unorthodox remains institutionalized.

Figure 14. Tensions in the force

Source: imgflip meme generator, available at: https://imgflip.com/memegenerator.

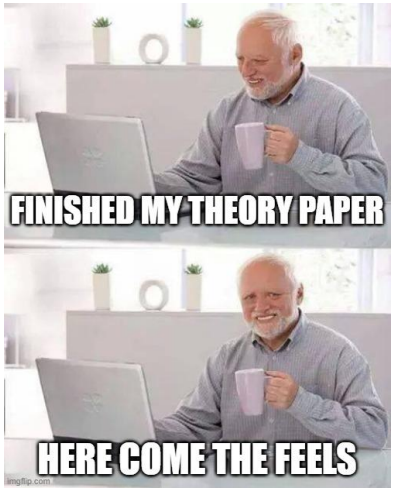
[77] See, for example: Jonathan Schroden, David Broyles, Vera Zakem, Jerry Meyerle, and Ryan Evans, *Improving SOF-GPF Integration for Crisis Response: An Action Plan for HQMC and SOCOM*, CNA DRM-2015-U-012266-Final, Dec. 2015.

Conclusion

The four stages of acceptance: 1. This is worthless nonsense. 2. This is an interesting, but perverse, point of view. 3. This is true, but quite unimportant. 4. I always said so.[78]

Earlier in the paper, I stated that I had two goals in writing it. The first was to answer the question of why special operations are conducted, and the second was to proffer an answer that might reasonably be considered a theory that advances our understanding of special operations. I believe I have accomplished the first of these goals by focusing my discussion on the nature of policy risk and policy-makers' desires to lower that risk, including (sometimes) via the use of unorthodox means. I acknowledge that my limitations have prevented me from accomplishing the second goal as thoroughly as I might have liked and as thoroughly as other authors have been able to do. Here I will have to rely on the judgment and future contributions from readers of this paper as to whether what I have described merits consideration as a useful theory of why special operations are conducted. As my metric for that judgment, I will look to see which of the four stages of acceptance future literature discussions apply to my theory. In any case, I hope this paper will at least further readers' interest in this field and stimulate additional works in it. Or, at the very least, that one of my memes will go viral (Figure 15).

Figure 15. Phew, we made it.



Source: imgflip meme generator, available at: https://imgflip.com/memegenerator.

[78] J.B.S. Haldane, review of the *The Truth About Death*, in *Journal of Genetics* (1963), Vol. 58, p. 464.

Figures

Abbreviations

CIA	Central Intelligence Agency
DOD	Department of Defense
JSOU	Joint Special Operations University
NPS	Naval Postgraduate School
POS	political opportunity structures
SF	Special Forces
SOCOM	Special Operations Command
SOF	special operations forces
TTP	tactics, techniques, and procedures
UW	unconventional warfare

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