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# The Future of NLD SOF: Towards an All-Domain Force

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Figure 1. The future *Korps Commandotroepen*. Photo: [NLD SOCOM](#)

## Executive Summary

*For almost 30 years, the activities of the Dutch Special Operations Forces (NLD SOF) took place primarily in the context of promotion of the international legal order. NLD SOF must now adapt to a significantly changed security environment and shift their focus to collective defense and domestic security. The advent of the digital and cognitive dimension as critical spheres of conflict requires the transformation of ends, ways and means of NLD SOF. As budgets are limited, priority setting is required. This Study aims to contribute to shaping that transformation. It presents a conceptual framework to help policy planners think through the challenges that lie ahead and prepare accordingly.*

**Special Operations Forces (SOF)** are designed, organized, equipped and trained to achieve critical objectives that typically combine (potentially) high risks and high pay-offs through low-visibility operations in politically sensitive and militarily risky environments. SOF are the elite of the armed forces, but they are not by nature *special*. Their high-end properties are a means to an end, and unique to SOF only in their combination and specific application in certain, strategically significant circumstances. The roles and tasks of SOF continues to evolve along with the changing security environment. The return to great power competition, in particular, requires fresh ideas about the role of SOF. Furthermore, as the current *special* tends to become absorbed in the regular armed forces, SOF will have to move forward to new areas of *special*.

**This Study.** Given these external and internal drivers of change, the goal of this Study is to identify and describe the functional requirements for future proof NLD SOF. It thereby seeks to contribute to a better informed and more articulate debate on the utility and use of SOF. This goal necessitates a critical review of the core SOF roles and tasks which, in turn, requires a clear vision and strategy how to best use limited and scarce SOF functionalities and capabilities. The time horizon is 10-15 years, mirroring the timeframe of the October 2020 Dutch [Defence Vision 2035](#).

The Study looks broader than the units currently classified under NLD SOF – *Korps Commandotroepen* (KCT) and the maritime special forces unit (NL MARSOF) – to include other ‘special’ units that may perform activities with strategical or political significance, particularly in the grey zone where domestic and international security overlap and merge.

**Dual-track approach.** The Study pursues a dual-track approach to assess future requirements for SOF. A more conventional approach starts with the current force to identify incrementally revised or new roles, activities, and capabilities needed for the future force. A more radical forward-looking approach seeks to identify novel capability options that are intentionally different from the current and planned force. The two tracks are synthesized to arrive at conclusions and recommendations for the future of NLD SOF.

**A changing security environment.** Due to ongoing global power shifts, future military operations will take place in a drastically changed geopolitical environment. Interventions to promote the international legal order are likely to decrease in saliency, while intensified competition between major states remains a mainstay for the period to come. But as investments in conventional force postures may effectively signal states' willingness to engage in military confrontation, actual actions are likely to occur at the lower, non-kinetic end of the force spectrum. For a variety of reasons, interstate competition has been pushed into the grey zone between peace and (overt) war. To remain below the threshold of an armed attack, states are employing a mixture of covert, clandestine and ambiguous military and non-military activities to attain their objectives, exploiting proxy forces, technology, and the power of the narrative. Such activities may create, either intended or accidental, *faits accomplis* that confront the adversary with the unsatisfactory choice between acquiescence or escalation. Russia's actions in Crimea are a case in point, forcing Ukraine and NATO to concede to Russia's influence or to escalate. In this new security environment, distinctions between international and domestic security are fading. Navigating this environment requires a holistic security strategy, one that relies on an integrated approach to combine various instruments of power and capabilities and operations in all domains of conflict.

**Overall framework.** These developments necessitate a reorientation of the roles, tasks and activities of SOF. To assess these roles, tasks and activities in various strategic and operational contexts, the three **main Defense tasks** of the Netherlands Armed Forces serve as a point of reference: (1) Collective Defense; (2) Promotion of the international legal order; and (3) Contributions to domestic security. SOF deployment is considered within the different **phases of an unfolding conflict** as depicted in Figure 8.

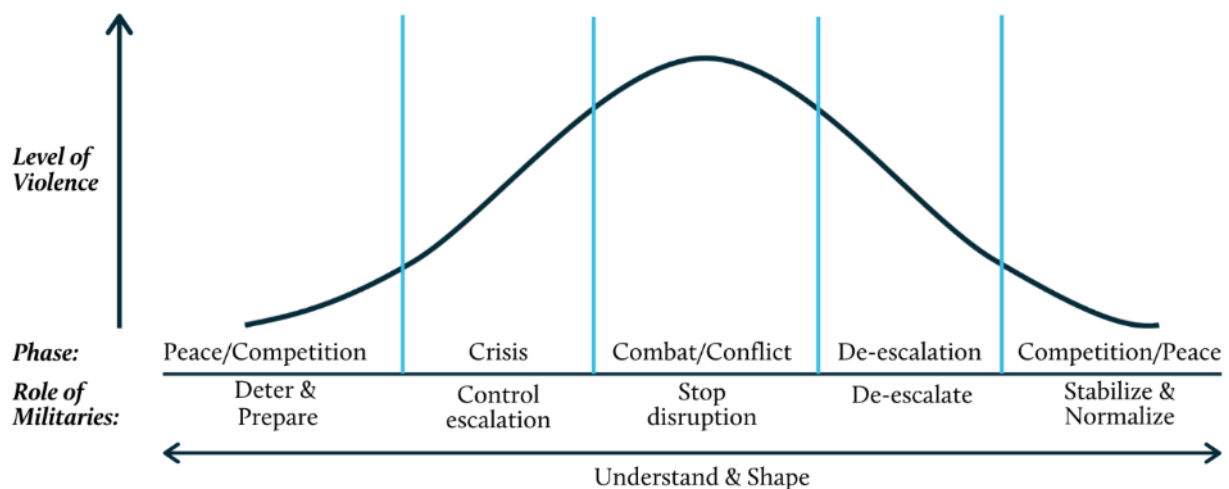


Figure 2: Representation of the conflict continuum and its phases

**Understand & Shape** is the permanent undercurrent of activities throughout all phases to understand and to influence the behavior of the opponent to further one's own objectives. In today's world of constant strategic competition, Understand & Shape is critically important. Understand & Shape includes broad intelligence gathering activities aimed at improving situational awareness and situational understanding in support of decision-making at the military and political strategic levels. In addition, it comprises building networks with a wide range of actors to shape (potential) conflict environments. SOF can play a crucial role in Understand & Shape, with both overt – but low key – and covert activities.

**Roles of SOF.** In the period up to 2030-35, SOF have important roles to play throughout the competition-crisis-conflict continuum through a range of overt, covert, and clandestine activities, some mission-driven, some as continuous efforts. SOF will be pivotal in crisis prevention and crisis containment, in preventing limited confrontations from escalating to interstate war in which the risk of nuclear weapons deployment is real. SOF will also come to play a more prominent role in collective defense and domestic security, deterring and defending against enemies outside but potentially also inside our borders. SOF's role in promoting the international legal order and maintaining or restoring stability remains relevant, even if the activities associated with this role are projected to become less frequent in the next decade compared to the recent past.

**SOF core tasks.** To express the changes as well as the constants in the tasks and activities of SOF, current NATO and US doctrines serve as our point of departure. Military doctrine is an established set of rules that expresses present thinking on how to conduct military operations, very much based on experience. We have opted to use as many as possible existing terms for SOF core tasks and activities, even if their implementation evolves in the changing security environment towards 2030-35. We thus describe this evolution primarily in terms of dynamics *within* existing tasks, rather than by introducing new tasks and new terminology. Regardless of the evolution in SOF roles and tasks, the traditional three generic core tasks remain valid:

- **Military Assistance (MA)** to support and influence critical friendly actors and assets. MA includes training, advising, mentoring, and capability building of friendly security forces; partnering with local, regional, and national leadership or organizations; and actions supporting and influencing the local population.
- **Direct Action (DA)**, short duration strikes such as precision destruction, raids, ambushes, assaults, and other small-scale offensive actions to seize, destroy, capture, exploit, recover, or damage designated targets in hostile, denied, or diplomatically and/or politically sensitive environments.
- **Special Reconnaissance (SR)**, mostly covert reconnaissance and surveillance actions typically to collect or verify threat, target, and post-action assessments, as well as other strategic information.



**SOF activities.** These three SOF core tasks can be conducted in a range of activities in support of the three main Defense tasks (i.e., collective defense, international legal order, domestic security). On that basis six different NLD SOF mission profiles can be distinguished; complemented with Understand & Shape as a permanent mission profile. Each profile includes a different arrangement of SOF core tasks and activities (Table 1).

Mission profiles		Core tasks	Activities <sup>1</sup>	Remarks
Understand & Shape		SR, NCE <sup>2</sup>	Faction Liaison, Psychological Operations	In all phases and all environments, underpinning all mission profiles below
Promoting the international legal order	Peacekeeping	MA, (DA)	Foreign Humanitarian Assistance, Security Force Assistance, Security Sector Reform; Hostage Rescue and Recovery, Personnel Recovery	Generally low risk, permissive environment
	Stabilization operations	MA, DA	Counter Insurgency, Counter Terrorism, Counter Criminality; Foreign Humanitarian Assistance, Security Force Assistance, Security Sector Reform; Hostage Rescue and Recovery, Personnel Recovery	Relatively low risk, partly permissive environment
	Expeditionary combat operations	DA, MA	Counter Insurgency, Counter Terrorism, Counter Criminality, Countering Proliferation, Countering Weapons of Mass Destruction; Security Force Assistance; Hostage Rescue and Recovery, Personnel Recovery	Defense of interests in a high-risk environment. COIN carried out by SOF together with proxies and other actors
	Expeditionary support operations	MA, (DA)	Unconventional Warfare, Hostage Rescue and Recovery, Personnel Recovery	Risk mitigation by the facilitation of UW executed by proxies
Collective defense		MA, DA	Unconventional Warfare; Counter Hybrid Threats, Countering Proliferation, Countering Weapons of Mass Destruction; Hostage Rescue and Recovery, Personnel Recovery	(Very) high-risk environment. UW and CHT largely executed by SOF
Domestic security		MA, DA	Counter Hybrid Threats, Counter Terrorism, Counter Criminality; Hostage Rescue and Recovery	Medium-risk environment. Operations in support of civil authorities

**Table 1: SOF tasks and activities in distinct SOF mission profiles**

**Priorities.** The emerging security environment requires that SOF broaden their focus beyond the almost exclusive emphasis of recent decades on the promotion of the international legal order. New demands placed upon SOF in the context of collective defense and domestic security generates a wider array of SOF mission profiles, possibly

<sup>1</sup> The activities are described in §3.4 of the main text.

<sup>2</sup> NCE = New Concepts Experimentation, a novel core task elaborated below under the heading of *New roles and tasks for (NLD) SOF*.



requiring substantially more SOF operators and budget. However, the availability of either of these two is certainly not a given in the period up to 2030-35. If hard choices must be made, the following priorities can be envisaged:

- Understand & Shape is a prerequisite for effective SOF and forces-wide action. Strengthening NLD SOF to conduct and support Special Reconnaissance, Faction Liaison and Psychological and Information Operations in the context of Understand & Shape should take precedence.
- In the context of promoting the international legal order, Military Assistance in support of proxies should be prioritized over Direct Action against hostile actors.
- In the context of collective defense, Direct Action in support of deployed troops has priority over Direct Action in support of counter hybrid warfare.
- In the context of domestic security, priority should be given to Military Assistance to national authorities and Direct Action in support of Counter Hybrid Threats.

**New roles and tasks for (NLD) SOF.** From the more radical forward-looking approach, three salient novel roles and tasks for (NLD) SOF arise:

- **SOF as forward innovator.** SOF need to adapt constantly and rapidly. They are the edging touchpoint for many efforts to sense and cope with emerging threats and opportunities. SOF are early adopters; they leverage their curiosity and drive to experiment. Against this background, NLD SOF can become a key actor in driving innovation for the larger defense organization by actively trying out new means and ways in rapidly changing environments. We call this role *New Concepts Experimentation* (NCE) and single it out as a new core task for SOF – one that is oriented to achieve armed forces' internal effects as opposed to all other SOF tasks and activities that aim for effects in the environment. The activities under this heading are continuous; and can be classified as an integral part of Understand & Shape, with the shaping focused on the own (SOF/armed forces) organization, and the understanding taking place on the crossroads between the environment and SOF's own capabilities.
- **SOF as an ecosystem shaper.** In current thinking, clearly delineated SOF deliver clearly outlined special effects in the context of largely one-on-one relationships. But it is increasingly hard to unite the high-quality, multidisciplinary capabilities required to achieve strategic effects in complex environments in nimble and small special forces units. Future SOF can become more inclusive and act as a hub that gives guidance to, coordinates, and integrates efforts by other parties in a network to achieve *special effects* as the net result of all those efforts combined. Connectedness, an important characteristic of our time, will increasingly be the mantra of NLD SOF too.
- **NLD SOF as synergizer.** NLD SOF can also take on the role of connector, translator, and synergizer in linking the various military domains within joint operations, as well

as the military and civil domains in whole of government approaches. In an era where the command levels end to intertwine and actions across the different domains of war require ever closer integration, SOF are uniquely qualified as specialized generalists to help bridge gaps and ensure seamless action in all-domain operations. Many strategic effects can be achieved through combinations of kinetic and non-kinetic measures. It is precisely at the juncture of the different levels, domains and modes of military action that NLD SOF can carve out an important role in the period up to 2030-35.

**Lines of development.** This Study's dual track approach to assess future requirements for NLD SOF points towards the following key developments to pursue towards 2030-35:

- **Engage in Understand & Shape.** Understand & Shape operations are a key stand-alone activity supporting all mission profiles (Table 1). NLD SOF can contribute to identify and mold possible future theaters of operations where Dutch vital interests could be affected. Special Reconnaissance to build situational understanding must be considered in the context of broad activities to prevent, manage, de-escalate and resolve conflict. In addition, as hybrid threats and support of proxies become a major concern for SOF, Military Assistance is instrumental in building networks with a wide range of actors, including allied operators and friendly hackers, in potential future operations theaters.
- **Create effects in the cognitive dimension.** Adaptation to the new security situation, emerging technologies, and societal and political acceptability of the use of force requires a future NLD SOF that strike a different balance between kinetic and non-kinetic force instruments. NLD SOF should increasingly aim to influence human behavior. To do so, SOF must take advantage of insights from social and cognitive psychology, marketing, social media, and the arts of influence and persuasion (as both commercial and enemy entities have done). In this context, they may employ technological capabilities that shape and manipulate hardware and software infrastructures, e.g. to improve access to denied areas and marginalized populations. This requires new expertises to be developed, but forward deployed personnel do not necessarily need to be specialists themselves. Instead, they can carry out operations instructed by a back-office of specialists deployed in headquarters.
- **Develop counter hybrid threat capabilities.** Countering hybrid threats requires complex, unorthodox and creative solutions. SOF can carry out kinetic and cyber-attacks behind enemy lines, making use of robotic systems as intelligence collectors and force providers. This requires truly integrated forces with seamless transitions between intelligence gathering, offensive cyber operations, influencing campaigns, and conventional battles. In addition, hybrid threats are likely to increase the demand for special units in domestic scenarios while further blurring distinctions

between international and domestic security. Counter Hybrid Threats is currently not part of the task portfolio of the special unit for domestic operations, the Special Interventions Service DSI. Note that NLD SOF's engagement in Counter Hybrid Threats presents political issues that need to be addressed.

- **Explore and experiment with new technology.** NLD SOF should play a central role in identifying emerging security opportunities that can be countered by technology supported innovation. We recommend setting up a special SOF unit for concept development and experimentation. Such a unit should be engaged in integrating cyber, robotics, and influencing methods into the traditional *modus operandi* of SOF units and develop new operational concepts putting less emphasis on kinetic force. For this reason, non-traditional experts should be incorporated into future of SOF discussions, strategy designs and plans to understand and exploit emerging innovative possibilities.
- **Build a SOF Air capability.** While both the Royal Netherlands Army and the Royal Netherlands Navy have dedicated special units, the Royal Netherlands Air Force does not. Experience with SOF deployments with and without dedicated SOF Air have moved NATO and many nations to intensify and accelerate the build-up of SOF Air. The Netherlands Armed Forces have also indicated to develop a dedicated SOF Air capability over the coming years as soon as budgetary constraints allow. A future SOF Air capability will probably focus on mobility support, backed-up by sensor capacity and possibly fire support. But SOF Air can complement NLD SOF in various other ways and create effects in all phases and activities. The precise layout requires further study and discussion as a thorough understanding of SOF Air as a concept and how to fully implement that concept within the constraints of the standing organization and organizational culture is currently lacking, also internationally. Indeed, the most prominent challenge in implementing a Dutch SOF Air capability, in addition to the allocation of funds, is related to required organizational and cultural changes.
- **Pool military and police special units.** With the field of activity of SOF expanding from the present focus on the promotion of the international legal order to include collective defense and domestic security, the distinction between special units operating internationally (NLD SOF) and domestically (Special Interventions Service, DSI) becomes less relevant, effective, and efficient. At the same time, the future availability of SOF constitutes a critical challenge. For example, if deployed abroad, a severe crisis within the Netherlands might demand SOF to be redeployed for domestic security, e.g., to counter hybrid threats. As it cannot be predicted when, where and how SOF is most needed, this Study suggests pooling the special units from the military and the police into a single structure that can be deployed for the three main tasks of Defense as well as in support of national authorities in the broader national security context. Note that bringing the various special units under

a single structure does not mean that the constituent parts need to give up their distinct characteristics. Differences in tools, tactics, techniques, and procedures often exist for a reason. As an example, domestic deployment of security units usually requires a bottom-up approach whilst deployment of SOF abroad requires a top-down approach. Cross-fertilization between different special units and teaming-up of special operators with different specializations creates synergy; creating a uniform blend does not.

**Towards an all-domain NLD SOF capability.** In sum, we envisage future NLD SOF to be an all domain, integrated force that acts as a forward innovator. The focus shifts from purely physical operations to cyber operations, influencing techniques, network management, and force multiplication through the application of advanced AI techniques, robotics and autonomous systems while making use of relevant insights drawn from the social sciences and humanities. This will result in a transformed SOF: innovator for the larger defense organization, shaper of the environment, and integrator of different lines of military and civilian means and actions. This includes SOF as a facilitator for proxies, including private security companies; and SOF at the center of networked, highly distributed operations in support of counter hybrid warfare. SOF have the right properties — adaptable, small, and capable of sensitive operations — and ample historical experience in shaping the environment to fulfill these important hub-functions. NLD SOF can realistically transform into such an effective and affordable force with niche tasks aimed at attaining strategic effects.

However, NLD SOF intrinsically remains a relatively small force, with its quantitative limitations also putting a cap on what it can qualitatively achieve. Senior political and military leadership must decide what priorities to set in balancing the role of NLD SOF in collective defense, the promotion of the international legal order, and domestic security, to maximize NLD SOF's utility in pursuing and defending national strategic interests. Whatever the outcome of priority choices, in the emerging security environment it seems very likely that the role of NLD SOF becomes more prominent. The coming character of conflict demands a transformed NLD SOF — one that strikes a new balance between traditional activities in the land, air and maritime domains, and new types of action for creating effects in the virtual and cognitive dimensions. SOF's capability to continuously re-invent itself will lead to an all-domain future SOF that continues to remain *special* in its ability to create strategic military and political effects, or to craft the conditions for other force elements to do so.

## 1 Introduction

### 1.1 Special Operations Forces

Special Operations Forces (SOF) are designed, organized, equipped and trained to achieve critical objectives that typically combine (potentially) high risks and high pay-offs. These risks and pay-offs are associated with often low-visibility operations in politically sensitive and militarily risky environments. The deployment of SOF concerns the strategic, operational and tactical levels of war, with SOF actions at the tactical level having operational or strategic-level effects.<sup>3</sup> SOF are both effectors and enablers: they can operate either together with or independently of conventional land, air and maritime forces and, increasingly, specialized cyber forces.

Nationally and internationally, as well as historically, a wide range of terms are used to capture the very essence of the units discussed in this Study. In the US, SOF is the generic term used to refer to any units throughout the US Armed Forces whose core task is special operations; the term 'special forces' is reserved for the green berets of the US Army. SOF is also the preferred term used by the Dutch Ministry of Defense for its special forces. The term puts emphasis on the *activities* – the 'special operations' – and on the *effects* created by those activities, which are strategic or political rather than tactical in nature. Surely, SOF have specific characteristics – their selection, training, skillset, equipment, versatility; their risk tolerance; the political license under which they operate, etc. SOF are the elite of the armed forces, they represent the qualitative high end of the spectrum of military personnel. But they are not by nature 'special'. Their properties are a means to an end, and unique to SOF only in their combination and specific application in certain strategically significant circumstances. This interpretation corresponds with the [Land Operations doctrine](#) of the British army that defines SOF as units that 'provide strategic insight and precision effects in all operating environments. Designed, trained and equipped to operate at the strategic and operational levels, they create effects beyond the reach, capability or expertise of conventional forces'. NATO doctrine stresses the nature of the environment in which SOF are deployed: "Special Operations may deliver strategic or operational-level results and might be executed where significant political risk exists."<sup>4</sup>

NLD SOF consist of a land special forces unit (*Korps Commandotroepen*, KCT) and a maritime special forces unit (NL MARSOF). The Royal Netherlands Air Force enables SOF missions with mobility (e.g., Cougar and Chinook transport helicopters to insert and extract SOF), intelligence (e.g., aerial imagery) and fire support (from e.g., AH64 Apache

<sup>3</sup> A notion referred to in literature as 'strategic compression': due to the rapidity of information transmission and 'datafication' of the Information Age world the traditional tactical, operational and strategic levels of war compress in time and in causal linkages. One corollary of this phenomenon is that it becomes easier to use tactical actions to create strategic effects.

<sup>4</sup> NATO Standard, Allied Joint Doctrine *AJP-3 for the Conduct of Operations*, Edition C Version, 1 February 2019, p1.35.

helicopters and F16 / F35 jet fighters) but there is no dedicated Air SOF unit and (hence) no standing SOF Air operating concept. However, the Netherlands armed forces have indicated plans to develop a dedicated SOF Air capability over the coming years as soon as budgetary constraints allow.<sup>5</sup>

In 2018 the Netherlands Special Operations Command was established to facilitate joint training and joint deployment, and to provide SOF with the necessary support during operations. NLD SOCOM is an operational headquarters directly under the Commander of the Armed Forces, primarily responsible for the planning and management of SOF deployment and readiness, and serving as a knowledge hub. NLD SOCOM is *not* a command at par with the operational commands for sea, land and air. KCT remains subordinate to the land forces command and NL MARSOF to the naval forces command. These commands remain responsible for the basic education and training of these special units.

Certain units of the Armed Forces are 'special operations capable', such as (elements of) the Marine Corps, the 11<sup>th</sup> Airmobile Brigade and the Special Security Missions Brigade (*Brigade Speciale Beveiligingsopdrachten*, BSB) of the Royal Netherlands Marechaussee. These units are not classified as SOF, because their core task is not special operations per se. They, however, share several of the properties that characterize SOF and can perform special operations within specific operational contexts. They fill the gap between the mainstream forces and SOF, thereby expanding the range of options the Armed Forces have.

With the continued fusion of internal and external security – one of the central themes of this Study – the domestic role of the Armed Forces, and thus possibly of special forces units, becomes more prominent. When considering the role of SOF in domestic security, the analysis must include the Special Interventions Service (*Dienst Speciale Interventies*, DSI) that oversees the deployment on Dutch soil of special units (*speciale eenheden*) of the police and Defense (including elements of the BSB and of NL MARSOF). This combination allows the DSI to act flexibly under various command & control structures and legal regimes.

## 1.2 Aim and scope of this Study

The return to great power competition requires fresh ideas about the role of SOF

The role of SOF continues to evolve over time. After the Cold War, SOF were typically deployed in the context of peace support operations and counter terrorism and counter insurgency missions outside the NATO area, typically in Africa and Asia. Since the Russian annexation of Crimea in 2014, the role of SOF is shifting from these sorts of expeditionary operations to collective defense and countering hybrid threats to and in

<sup>5</sup> Ministers van Defensie en van Buitenlandse Zaken, [Kamerbrief 28676 nr. 306, NAVO](#), december 2018.

NATO-member states. The implications of this shift are profound even if they have yet to fully materialize. The return to great power competition and potential conflict against the background of substantial change in the military technical sphere, require fresh ideas about the role of SOF in the conflict environment of the 2020s, and SOF activities, operating concepts, doctrine, and capabilities. Proper use of SOF also requires a clear vision on how, when, and where strategic national interests are at stake; and a political strategy about how to best use the increasingly scarce SOF functionality to promote and defend those interests. As a recent article in *The Atlantic* puts it, talking about US special forces, “[SOF] may foster the illusion that a strategic framework is not necessary. It’s good to have a Swiss Army knife. And yet even a versatile knife can do only so much.”<sup>6</sup> If the vastly bigger US SOF need to think about strategic priorities, certainly NLD SOF must do the same.

This Study thus seeks to contribute to a better informed and more articulate debate on the utility and use of (NLD) SOF in the emerging security environment. The goal is to identify and describe the functional requirements for future proof NLD SOF, with a time horizon of 10-15 years, mirroring the timeframe of the October 2020 Dutch [Defence Vision 2035](#). In doing so, the Study looks broader than the units currently classified under NLD SOF (KCT and NL MARSOF), to include other special units that may (increasingly) perform activities with strategic or political significance, particularly in the grey zone where domestic and international security overlap and merge.

The Study pays scant attention to legal international and national frameworks for SOF deployments. It also passes over possible political and societal sensitivities in the use of SOF. Of course, specific covert special operations such as targeted killings and influencing operations aimed at changing the behavior of the opponent or the population, involve important legal and ethical questions. Taking those constraints into account in this Study would hamper an in-depth analysis and impede out-of-the box thinking about possible future SOF. Furthermore, many of the legal and ethical considerations and dilemmas pertain to a broader range of defense activities than special operations. Of course, it should be emphasized, ultimately the actual choices regarding future SOF and special operations will be subject to democratic decision-making and oversight procedures and based on core legal, ethical and political principles of the Netherlands.

### 1.3 A forward-looking perspective

The Study pursues a dual-track approach to assess future requirements for SOF. The more conventional approach starts with the current force to identify new roles, activities and capabilities and follows the left-to-right logic as depicted in Figure 3. It shows three different time horizons: the current force, that inevitably absorbs most defense planning attention; the planned force, that is the target of the current investment pipeline aimed

<sup>6</sup> Mark Bowden, [American Special Ops Forces Are Everywhere](#), Atlantic April 2021 Issue.

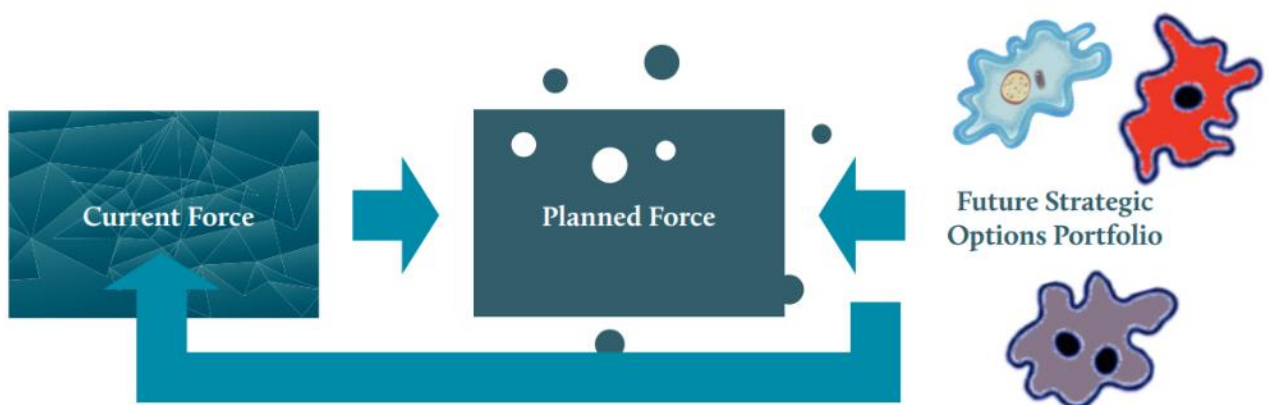


at a 5-10-year time horizon; and the future force, which often remains a vague and less (politically, financially, mentally) relevant but aspirational dot on the horizon.



**Figure 3: First track, starting from the current force**

The Study also pursues a less conventional right-to-left logic that is visualized in Figure 4. Here the future force is, unlike the planned force, no longer an incrementally improved set of capabilities into which the current force can morph. Instead, it is a diverse portfolio containing novel *and* promising capability options that are intentionally different from the current or planned force. The rationale behind this right-to-left logic is to elaborate on a strategic options portfolio that is diversified enough to enable the defense organization to ‘get there early’, considering the multiple possible futures that a prudent planner needs to contemplate. Over time, as different futures become more discernible and actual capability investment choices are being made, this strategic options portfolio will constantly have to be adjusted and updated. The right-to-left arrow on the bottom of the visual indicates that any ideated force elements from the options portfolio on the right might already today be experimented with or even introduced into the current force.



**Figure 4: Second track, starting from the future strategic options portfolio space**

An additional driver in our thinking is that, as the tasks and the design of the Armed Forces as a whole evolve with the changing security environment, the notion of what is ‘special’ also evolves. Elsewhere, we have coined the term ‘SOF-istication’ to indicate the trend

that a number of the characteristics of SOF and special operations become structurally applied to larger parts of the regular (particularly land) forces.<sup>7</sup> Among these characteristics are the ability, or even the appetite, to maneuver in small(er) combined arms teams; to operate and fight amongst the people with high levels of cultural awareness so as to exploit the human domain; to routinely operate with other partners at all levels; to develop an understanding of complex situations in depth, breadth, and context through the integration of intelligence and operations; to tease, test, and probe to create one's own opportunities; to operate on one's own timeline; all whilst retaining the mainstream forces' critical ability to create mass, typically lacking for SOF-units proper.

Thus, over time, the 'special' factor broadens and dilutes to include space for – albeit typically high-end – mainstream units. These conventional formations are traditionally larger, and typically carry more cultural capital within the armed forces, potentially leading to turf wars.<sup>8</sup> As part of the current 'special' becomes absorbed in the mainstream forces, SOF need to move forward to new areas of 'special'. This constant pressure necessitates a regular critical review of the core SOF roles and tasks.

SOF need to move forward to new areas of 'special'

#### 1.4 Reader's guide

Preceding the SOF-specific discussions of the subsequent Chapters, Chapter 2 sets the stage by sketching the systemic trends and developments that define the contemporary security environment and the current and future security challenges that it generates. This analysis guides and informs the more dedicated discussions, following the two approaches explained in §1.2.

Chapters 3 through 6 take the more evolutionary approach of Figure 3 as point of departure. These Chapters look at how the core tasks and activities of SOF have developed and, in our estimate, will develop over the next 10-15 years. In this approach, we use as many existing terms as possible for SOF core tasks and activities (as elaborated in Chapter 3), even if they will evolve because of changes in the security environment (as elaborated in Chapters 4 through 6, distinguishing between the three main tasks of the Dutch Armed Forces). We thus describe the evolution in the SOF tasks primarily as dynamics within existing tasks, rather than introducing new tasks and new terminology. We are aware of the potential pitfalls associated with this approach. NATO doctrine is quite limited in its definition of SOF tasks and activities as it still reflects the legacy of over 20 years of

<sup>7</sup> HCSS, *Playing to Your Strengths. A Different Perspective on Future Capabilities for the Royal Netherlands Army*, 2018, p44. A recent example of 'SOF-istication' in the UK Army is described [here](#).

<sup>8</sup> Alastair Finlan, *A dangerous pathway? Toward a theory of special forces*, Comparative Strategy 2019, VOL. 38, NO. 4, 255–275, p262; James Kiras, *A Theory of Special Operations: "These Ideas Are Dangerous"*, Special Operations Journal 1(2):75-88, November 2015, p84.

stabilization operations and counter terror.<sup>9</sup> We therefore not only consider codified doctrine, but also doctrine in the making, with a strong impetus from the American SOF community. A central tenet in the current debate concerns a more integrated approach to security wherein military (sea, land, air/space, cyber) forces operate more jointly and Defense works together with other departments; a development that is particularly relevant for SOF.

As a further antidote against recentism and presentism,<sup>10</sup> Chapter 7 takes the more radical approach depicted in Figure 4. Here, the Study considers a range of silhouettes of possible future rationales, and therefore layouts, for SOF, some fundamentally different from today's logic. From the discussion on these future vistas, the Chapter concludes by highlighting some promising new roles and tasks for SOF that are, at the very least, worthwhile to contemplate and further elaborate on when thinking about the future of SOF, in general as well as specifically for the Dutch context.

The final Chapter 8 summarizes and synthesizes the key insights derived in the previous Chapters, to arrive at policy recommendations and lines of development specific for NLD SOF. While most of the discussion in Chapters 0 through 7 applies to Western SOF in general, Chapter 8 elaborates the implications specifically for NLD SOF. NLD SOF operators are – and in all feasible scenarios will remain to be – counted in the hundreds, not in the thousands. This presents a *quantitative* limit on what NLD SOF can *qualitatively* pursue within the broad, and further expanding palette of possible tasks and activities. This final Chapter therefore reflects on opportunities and limitations associated with size and spells out specific implications for the Netherlands.

<sup>9</sup> This is less the case for the 2019 version of the Allied Joint Doctrine for Special Operations as compared to the previous version from 2013.

<sup>10</sup> These terms indicate the tendency to interpret the future in light of recent and current experiences, ideas and perspectives, thereby overlooking the possibility of game changers that shed new light on what constitutes (future) 'success' and 'failure'.

## 2 The Future Security Environment: Factors for SOF to Consider

This Chapter sets the stage for thinking about the future demands on SOF. It gives a concise overview of the dynamics that shape the security environment for the next 10-15 years. Not across the board; completeness is not our goal here. Rather, we present a selection of trends and developments that, in our assessment, are particularly relevant when thinking about the future roles, tasks and design of SOF and will complement thinking about the deployment of SOF for conventional warfare.

The nature of war, defined by Clausewitz as the continuation of politics by other means, is not expected to change over the next 10-15 years.<sup>11</sup> At the core, state and non-state actors will employ instruments of power to attain political objectives in the period up to 2030-35. However, the character of war, including *how* and *why* states use force, will change. Like the face of Janus, war has multiple faces and always adapts to changing contexts.<sup>12</sup>

Like the face of Janus, war has multiple faces and always adapts to changing contexts.

While the view that the character of war is changing is adopted by many, there is little consensus if one type of character will be dominant in the future security environment. This Chapter examines various factors and trends that are shaping the actors, motives, methods, and means of future warfare. It introduces the wider context that informs this Study's analysis of the possible roles, tasks, ways, and structure of NLD SOF in the future.

### 2.1 Strategic competition and interstate armed conflict

After the 9/11 terrorist attacks in 2001, political and military strategy focused on counter terrorism, counter insurgency, and stabilization operations in fragile states. Over the course of the last decade, attention has shifted to interstate strategic competition. With states vying for political and economic influence, hopes of integrating revisionist powers into the international order have been fading. China's global rise, Russia's resurgence and expansion in Eastern Europe, Iran's meddling in other Middle Eastern countries, North Korea's nuclear weapons testing, as well as the America First Strategy under former US-President Trump, have unsettled an already shaky international order.<sup>13</sup> The US 2018 National Defense Strategy opened with the statement that interstate strategic competition instead of and not terrorism is the primary concern to US national security.<sup>14</sup> The decline of American supremacy coincided with already nascent dissatisfaction with

<sup>11</sup> Carl von Clausewitz, *On War: Edited and Translated by Michael Howard and Peter Paret; Introductory Essays by Peter Paret, Michael Howard, and Bernard Brodie; with a Commentary by Bernard Brodie*, ed. Peter Paret and Michael Howard (New Jersey, United States: Princeton University Press, 1976), 7, 89.

<sup>12</sup> Jonathan Clifford, *AI Will Change War, But Not in the Way You Think*, War on the Rocks, September 2, 2019.

<sup>13</sup> James Dobbins and Shatz Ali Wyne, *Russia Is a Rogue, Not a Peer; China Is a Peer, Not a Rogue*, Perspective Expert Insights on a Timely Policy Issue (California, United States: RAND Corporation, October 2018).

<sup>14</sup> United States Department of Defense, *Summary of the 2018 National Defense Strategy of the United States of America, Sharpening the American Military's Competitive Edge*, 2018.

the US-led global order.<sup>15</sup> Over the course of the 2010s, these dynamics altered a relatively uncontested status quo into one that is widely contested by great and middle powers alike. States have increased their military expenditures, stepped up efforts to modernize their armed forces and strengthened their capabilities to fight conventional wars.<sup>16</sup>

States have increased their military expenditures, stepped up efforts to modernize their armed forces and strengthened their capabilities to fight conventional wars.

The result is a comparatively less stable environment. Major powers will rely on asymmetric forms of contestation, including hybrid warfare, unconventional warfare, deterrence, and the use of proxies to prevent all out conventional and nuclear wars, whilst lesser powers and non-state actors will bandwagon with major powers or attempt to achieve their political objectives through hybrid tactics and insurgencies.

## 2.2 Operating in the grey zone

Over the next decade, the dynamics of coercion will change considerably. The ability to coerce adversaries will continue to be critical to prevent as well as to win the conflicts of tomorrow. The underlying coercive logics and associated capabilities will require adaptation to fit emergent strategic challenges.<sup>17</sup> The ingredients of successful coercion at the higher end of the spectrum – robust capabilities, credible and costly threatening, and clear communication – are not easily obtained in today's asymmetric security environment. While investments in conventional force postures may effectively signal states' willingness to engage in confrontation, actual actions are likely to occur at the lower and non-kinetic end of the force spectrum. For a variety of reasons, competition

Competition has been pushed into the *grey zone* where states are employing a mixture of clandestine, covert and ambiguous military and non-military activities.

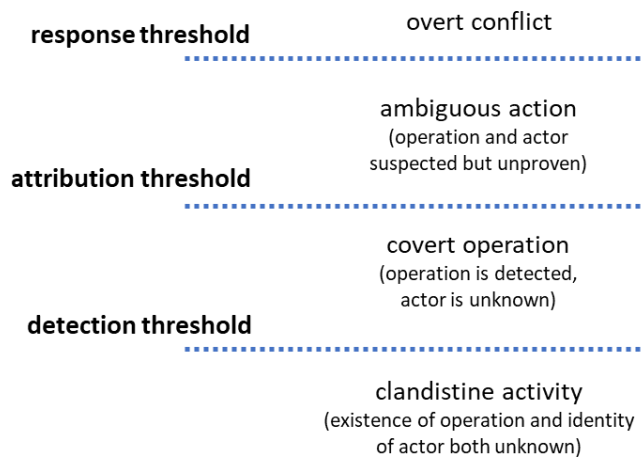
has been pushed into the *grey zone* between peace and (overt) war. To remain below the threshold of an armed attack, states are employing a mixture of clandestine, covert and ambiguous military and non-military activities to attain their military objectives (see Figure 5). Through these hybrid activities states seek to coerce, disrupt or overthrow the adversary without engaging in open hostilities.<sup>18</sup>

<sup>15</sup> Tim Sweijs and Hugo van Manen, *Military Competition in Perspective: Trends in Major Powers' Postures and Perceptions*, 2019.

<sup>16</sup> Kimberly Amerson and Spencer Meredith, *The Future Operating Environment 2050: Chaos, Complexity and Competition*, *Small Wars Journal*, 2016.

<sup>17</sup> John Borrie et al., *Perspectives on Nuclear Deterrence in the 21st Century*, April 2020, p2.

<sup>18</sup> Donald J. Reed, *Beyond the War on Terror: Into the Fifth Generation of War and Conflict*, *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism* 31 no. 8, (2008): p691; Frank Bekkers, Rick Meessen, and Deborah Lassche, [Hybrid Conflicts: The New Normal?](#), 2018, p7.



**Figure 5: Levels of transparency in (special) operations<sup>19</sup>**

While remaining below the adversary's military response threshold, such activities may have decisive and transformative effect.<sup>20</sup> This type of attacks often creates, either intended or accidental, *faits accomplis* that place the adversary between the unsatisfactory alternatives of acquiescence or escalation. Russia's actions in Crimea are a case in point, forcing Ukraine and NATO to concede to Russia's influence or to escalate.<sup>21</sup> Engaging in activity between the detection and response thresholds is especially powerful against democratic states with predictable thresholds constrained by domestic opinion, alliances, and international norms that require consensus before initiating response.<sup>22</sup> Authoritarian states can play the game by more lenient rules. Russia, for instance, engages in hostile activities that push the boundaries of permissible behavior and walks the tight rope between attribution and response with some sophistication. This begs the question when norm bending turns into norm breaking beyond repair to become the new normal. Warfare in the grey zone between "peacetime preparedness and provocation" renders traditional dichotomies between victor and defeated less relevant.<sup>23</sup>

**When does norm bending turn into norm breaking beyond repair?**

States' ability to act below formal response thresholds depends on their ability to exploit (among others) three instruments of influence: proxy forces, technology, and narrative. We provide a short description of these three.

<sup>19</sup> After David Kilcullen, *The Dragons and the Snakes How the Rest Learned to Fight the West*, 2020.

<sup>20</sup> United States Army Special Operations Command, *USASOC Strategy-2035*, 2016.

<sup>21</sup> Wesley K. Clark, *Rethinking Deterrence*, Georgetown Journal of International Affairs, 2019.

<sup>22</sup> David Kilcullen, *The Evolution of Unconventional Warfare*, p69.

<sup>23</sup> Meessen, Torossian, Bekkers, *A Horizon Scan of Trends and Developments in Hybrid Conflicts Set to Shape 2020 and Beyond*, p14.





Figure 6: The annexation of Crimea; the signing of the Treaty on the adoption of the Republic of Crimea and Sevastopol to Russia. Photo: [Kremlin.ru](https://kremlin.ru)

### 2.2.1 War by proxy

This is an age of war by proxy. Proxy wars are expected to persist in the decade to come. While great powers prop up conventional force postures, geopolitical competition today and going forward has a “distinctly unconventional flavor”.<sup>24</sup> States seek to influence conflict trajectories in the pursuit of their strategic objectives through the employment of proxy actors to carry out hostile activities on their behalf. The number of internationalized intrastate conflicts has already increased substantially from the lower single digits to double digits over the past two decades.<sup>25</sup> Conflicts involving proxy dynamics include Afghanistan, Burkina Faso, Libya, Kashmir, Syria, Ukraine, and Yemen.<sup>26</sup>

Proxy warfare is attractive for states that are “willing to wound, and yet afraid to strike” to disrupt adversaries or change the political dimension of a conflict.<sup>27</sup> Some consider war by proxy to be cost-effective (because it takes up fewer financial, material and human resources) and more politically palatable (compared to the employment of national forces), while it reduces the risk of attribution.<sup>28</sup> Patron-surrogate proxy warfare is

<sup>24</sup> Shannon Culbertson, *Special Obfuscations: The Strategic Uses of Special Operations Forces*, 2020.

<sup>25</sup> Sweijis and Van Manen, *Military Competition in Perspective: Trends in Major Powers’ Postures and Perceptions*, 2019.

<sup>26</sup> Robert Malley, *10 Conflicts to Watch in 2020*, 2019.

<sup>27</sup> Vladimir Rauta, *Proxy Warfare and the Future of Conflict: Take Two*, *The RUSI Journal*, 2020, p4.

<sup>28</sup> Andreas Krieg and Jean-Marc Rickli, *Surrogate Warfare: The Art of War in the 21st Century?*, *Defence Studies* 18, no. 2, 2018, p113.



certainly not new. During the Second World War, the American and British forces collaborated with resistance movements in Nazi-occupied Europe. Proxy agents' local identity and established local networks enables them to penetrate more deeply into the target environment while concealing attribution. Proxies allow states to cross 'red lines' of international norms without incurring political costs.<sup>29</sup>

Engaging adversaries through proxies also presents strategic dilemmas. Proxy warfare comes with tensions between patrons and surrogates. This includes contradictory agendas, competing objectives, divergence between levels of ambition, and practical implementation of control.<sup>30</sup> Proxy warfare is the product of bargaining and trade-offs between surrogates and adversaries that may require the former to accept disadvantageous concessions. It is not uncommon for proxies to pursue diverging agendas that surrogates are unable to mitigate and control. Providing support to proxies may simultaneously serve or undermine surrogates' strategic objectives. Proxy wars are shaped by great power competition but also envelop a dynamic of their own that make great power competition a messy business.

An important question is whether new non-state entities could lead to the emergence of new security challenges. An example is virtual nations that pose unique challenges to the future of governance and the role of the nation as the sole grantor of identity and citizenship. A virtual nation is defined as an individual, group, or corporate entity that derives power from high capital resources or high data resources, allowing for the influence and successful massing of decentralized digital power to achieve physical effects at the state, national, or regional level. Virtual nations may be self, state, or nonstate sponsored or self-assembling entities. Examples include high-net-worth individuals like Elon Musk; alternative governance entities like Bitnation and eCitizens of Estonia; corporate entities, including Facebook, Google, and Alibaba; and certain self-assembling groups with specific shared goals, such as the hacker collective Anonymous. These entities pursue specific goals to influence or shape key events, drive change, or, in a worst-case scenario, seek to cause chaos or decision paralysis to limit the effectiveness of traditional governance structures and tools.

### 2.2.2 Technology: a double-edged sword

Technology is pivotal in contemporary and future warfare. It presents a double-edged sword. On the one hand it makes remote proxy warfare possible, and on the other challenges the ability to control the form and direction of wars.<sup>31</sup> Technological developments enable patron states to engage through and with surrogates without physical presence in regions controlled by adversary forces. Global network connectivity links

<sup>29</sup> LTC Winston S. Williams and LTC Christopher M. Ford, *Complex Battlespaces: The Law of Armed Conflict and the Dynamics of Modern Warfare*, 2018, p199.

<sup>30</sup> Vladimir Rauta, *Proxy Warfare and the Future of Conflict: Take Two*, *The RUSI Journal*, 2020, p6.

<sup>31</sup> Andreas Krieg and Jean-Marc Rickli, *Surrogate Warfare: The Art of War in the 21st Century?*, *Defence Studies* 18, no. 2, 2018, p127.

actors positioned in geographically dispersed regions. Every location becomes a virtual area of operations and support base for warfare campaigns elsewhere. Peering further into the future, AI-based capabilities may replace human-centered core functions and allow campaigns to be executed autonomously at a distance without physical command nodes. At the same time, other technology developments – in communications systems, autonomous and unmanned systems, synthetic and extended reality – are not trivial. These developments challenge the prevailing paradigm of how we think about security, defense, and warfighting.<sup>32</sup> The pace and extent in which technology will replace humans to execute missions are uncertain but defining developments of future warfare.

The proliferation of technology complicates the ability to maintain calculated strategic balance and curb unintended escalation. Far from the state-centric Cold War logic in which proxies were mere chess pieces in the “great game” moved by patrons, surrogates of today and the future are more than puppets of patron states.<sup>33</sup> Surrogates empowered by advanced technologies hold outsized agency to coerce conventionally larger and pursue previously unimagined and often revolutionary objectives that may be at odds with patrons’ intended objectives. Conflicts in Syria, Libya, and Yemen illustrate surrogates’ potential role in shaping conflict borders, transforming alliances, and testing the rules of the 21<sup>st</sup> century wargame.

The race to obtain the technological edge is emerging as the new frontier for great power rivalry.

But the proliferation of technology has broader implications. The race to obtain the technological edge is emerging as the new frontier for great power rivalry. On the other hand it offers technology opportunities for enhancing stability, for instance through strengthening capacity and capabilities of militaries in fragile states. Embarking on this road requires development of a new and shared legal, political, and military grammar to understand the significance of deploying novel technologies. The ambiguous role of technology heightens risk of miscalculated threat perceptions raising the prospect of unintentional escalation. The impact of technology will depend as much on its raw characteristics as on the way these technologies are exploited.<sup>34</sup> Technological development will determine the direction and outcome of conflicts but is not a silver bullet and unlikely to trump the importance of population support.<sup>35</sup>

<sup>32</sup> Stephan De Spiegeleire, Matthijs Maas, and Tim Sweijts, [Artificial Intelligence and the Future of Defense](#), 2017, p66.

<sup>33</sup> Candace Rondeaux and David Stermann, *Twenty-First Century Proxy Warfare: Confronting Strategic Innovation in a Multipolar World*, 2019, p4.

<sup>34</sup> Michael Horowitz, *Artificial Intelligence, International Competition, and the Balance of Power*, 2018.

<sup>35</sup> Mike Pietrucha, *The Search for the Technological Silver Bullet to Win Wars*, War on the Rocks, August 26, 2015; Jamie Collier, *Cyber Reserves Are Not a Silver Bullet*, War on the Rocks, May 22, 2020.



Figure 7: The advances in surveillance technology. Photo: [Unsplash](#)

### 2.2.3 Winning the battle of narratives

The population stands at the center of hybrid warfare. Successful exploitation of proxies and technology will depend on the extent to which these are deeply intertwined in all aspects of the population's daily lives. The population is not only a victim of the competition between states but increasingly the central actor in shaping that competition. Actors use narratives to create or expand existing cleavages in society, to attack values, upset alliances, and undermine populations' confidence in the states and its institutions of the adversary.

**The population is not only a victim of the competition between states but increasingly the central actor in shaping that competition.**

Psychological campaigns have always been part of warfare. In a wired world with little spatial and temporal constraints on the spread of information, the 'battle of the narrative' is becoming even more important. The proliferation of and access to simple communication technologies with potentially global impact enables individuals to influence perception in previously unseen ways. Spread of 'deep-fakes' and other information manipulating tools complicate what is perceived as 'truth', affecting the legitimacy of states' competing narratives. These developments are especially influential when seen in the context of global migration patterns. The increasing urbanization has brought warfare into the cities. The movement of populations has resulted in the growth of 'megacities' of more than 10 million people that is projected to rise from 33 in 2018 to

43 in 2030.<sup>36</sup> Amidst growing urbanization, kinetic operations take the backseat while propaganda, misinformation, and subversion enabled by advances in technology drive strategies.

### 2.3 Synergy in all domain operations

Creating facts on the ground requires integration of proxy forces, technology, and narratives in a progressively more complicated security environment.<sup>37</sup> These forms of influence are important independently, but it is in their interaction and combination that each gains strength. Proxies are strengthened by the force of technology. Technology is crucial for controlling and manipulating narratives. This, in turn, is essential for proxies to operate effectively. The expanding domains of warfare add another layer of complexity. States must exploit proxies, technology, and narratives across land, air, sea, space, cyber, and information domains simultaneously and smoothly. Their disparate logics and thresholds of escalation make achieving synchronized effects a wicked challenge.

So far, a successful strategy for the synchronization of effects across operations remains nascent

The appetite for the tactical integration of land, air, sea, cyber, space and information domains is evident in the myriad military doctrines, literature, and discussions on the topic. Strengthening tactical-level capacity across domains is unlikely to suffice as a response to the challenges that lie ahead, however. This may require a substantial reshuffle of contemporary military paradigms

and force structures. Novel warfighting concepts come and go. Some produce long-lasting reforms while others are unceremoniously cast off, shelved, or simply forgotten.<sup>38</sup> The fate of today's fashionable all- or cross-domain operations, in which various military relevant spaces operate in conjunction, remains undecided. So far, a successful strategy for the synchronization of effects across operations remains nascent and a wicked hard challenge for states' ability to achieve political objectives going forward.<sup>39</sup> Even so, in the view of many observers all-domain operations form the backbone of future military operations. Its central tenet and challenge is to achieve convergence of operations across time, space and capabilities to seize and maintain strategic initiative. This entails creating integrated effects across domains that transcend the purview of individual domain capacities.<sup>40</sup> This presents a herculean task today and going forward. Each domain has a distinct logic, type, and level of force that is not easily integrated to achieve a single clear and credible effect. To maintain strategic initiative and mitigate escalation control demands the two-pronged ability to integrate activities into the escalation ladder and ensure the adversary understands perpetrators' intended significance of these

<sup>36</sup> United Nations, *The World's Cities in 2018*, p2.

<sup>37</sup> John D. Winkler et al., *Reflections on the Future of Warfare and Implications for Personal Policies*, 2019, p4.

<sup>38</sup> Will Spears, *A Sailor's Take on Multi-Domain Operations*, War on the Rocks, May 21, 2019.

<sup>39</sup> Venable and Donnelly, *Scaling the Levels of War: The Strategic Major and the Future of Multi-Domain Operations*; Robert H. Scales, *Tactical Art in Future Wars*, War on the Rocks, March 14, 2019.

<sup>40</sup> Tom Greenwood and Pat Savage, *In Search of a 21st-Century Joint Warfighting Concept*, War on the Rocks, September 12, 2019.

activities.<sup>41</sup> These developments challenge the parameters of warfare that seem sensible today but may require sizeable adjustment and updating to fit the future.

## 2.4 Sub-conclusion

The changing security environment requires today's tactics, concepts, and doctrine to be critically re-evaluated, updated, and potentially discarded. The logic that defined the conflict landscape of the 2000s no longer applies. Hardnosed great power competition, rapid technological and societal change, and considerable military-strategic innovation is fundamentally changing the character of contemporary war. The embrace of all domain concepts; the use of conventional and unconventional means; the prevalence of coercive practices both outside and inside war, below but also above traditional thresholds; the resurgence of war by proxy; and the importance of shaping operations on the battlefield and in the grey zone.<sup>42</sup> These developments necessitate a reorientation of the roles and tasks of SOF.

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<sup>41</sup> James A. Lewis, *Cross-Domain Deterrence and Credible Threats*, 2010, p4.

<sup>42</sup> Sweijs et al., *Conclusion: Assessing Change and Continuity in the Character of War*, in Rob Johnson et al. (eds.), *The Conduct of War in the 21st Century Kinetic, Connected and Synthetic*, (Routledge: 2021).

### 3 Evolving SOF Tasks and Activities

#### 3.1 Recent history of SOF deployments and SOF doctrine<sup>43</sup>

Thinking about SOF has never been static. In the 1970s SOF were deployed domestically in the UK against the IRA and in West-Germany against the *Rote Armee Fraktion*. During the Cold War, SOF were used to bolster conventional troops. For example, SOF played an important role in preparing the battlefield with Special Reconnaissance and pinpointing close air support assets to their targets whilst avoiding fratricide. With the rise of peace support operations in the 1990s, SOF's utility changed. In that period, the distinction between peacekeeping and peace enforcement was widely debated. To remain impartial and maintain support and consent of all parties involved, force could only be used for self-defense in peacekeeping. The role of SOF was the collection of intelligence, force protection and reaching out to the local population. Initially, this was considered a low-risk undertaking, questioning the role and utility of SOF.

Thinking about SOF  
has never been static.

This changed with the rise of the concept of peace enforcement, conducted without the consent of at least one of the conflicting parties. Peace enforcement could, for instance, involve operations against terrorists and insurgents. As the distinction between peacekeeping and peace enforcement tended to blur in practice, new concepts blending the two were introduced, such as wider peacekeeping and peace support. SOF started to play an increasingly important enabling role with Direct Action, Special Reconnaissance, and Military Assistance (§3.3 defines these SOF core tasks). Moreover, as peace support operations were considered part of a political process, reaching out to the local population and friendly (or at least not openly hostile) armed factions – known as the indirect approach – became more important. The indirect approach contributed to intelligence gathering and the safety of deployed troops. In some theater of operations, this led to Special Reconnaissance and Military Assistance merging.

After 9/11, counter terrorism became a key self-contained activity. But the distinction between terrorists and insurgents is often blurry. In the case of the Taliban in Afghanistan, the duality was barely recognized by the US political leadership, causing all kinds of conceptual and practical problems. In terms of organization and command, the distinction between the US-led counter terror operation Enduring Freedom and the stabilization mission ISAF was clear. However, the counter terrorism mission effectively muddled the distinction between the direct and indirect approach. SOF were tasked to fight small wars in an increasingly complex, high-risk environment. Next to having merit in its own right, Military Assistance became a function of Special Reconnaissance, sometimes enabling Direct Action.

<sup>43</sup> A more comprehensive overview is given in Funs Titulaer, [Special operations \(forces\) explained. On the nature of Western special operations and the forces that conduct them](#), Militaire Spectator, 12 February 2021, section 'A short history'.



Over time, and particularly during the eight years of the Obama administration, declining defense budgets, rising war-weariness and disappointing results with peace support operations led to increased domestic resistance to troops on the ground. The US and most of the European NATO-members shifted emphasis to SOF in support of proxies and airpower. SOF grew into enablers to confront terrorist threats. SOF and airpower became central instruments of choice in the conflicts in Afghanistan and the Middle East. Due to the Russian annexation and the subsequent deterioration of the relations with the West hybrid threats became another focus of SOF.

The cumulation of these developments and experiences are codified in contemporary SOF doctrine that expresses how SOF roles are translated into concrete tasks and activities. Military doctrine is a guide to action. It is an established set of rules that expresses *present* thinking on how to conduct military operations, very much based on experience. As counterinsurgency, counterterrorism and other operations in complex, hostile environments have similarities with elements of colonial warfare during the 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> century, historic approaches from that epoch are incorporated in modern doctrines as well.

### 3.2 Our approach for defining SOF tasks and activities

#### 3.2.1 Use existing terminology, even if the substance changes

Doctrine is not static but changes over time. Lessons learned and technological developments are important drivers for doctrinal change. Due to the NATO standardization process, in general the doctrines of member states diverge only on minor points (although the adaptation time for incorporating new doctrinal developments may vary across national doctrines). For special operations in a NATO context, *AJP-3.5, Allied Joint Doctrine for special operations* (latest edition: August 2019) is leading. Most countries also use this doctrine for non-NATO operations, lacking a national SOF-doctrine. Some countries, like the US, France, the UK, and Belgium, have national doctrines that deviate in varying degrees from the NATO doctrine. Notably, US SOF use *Special Operations, Joint Publication 3-05* (latest edition: September 2020).

To describe the various tasks SOF may carry out and activities SOF may engage in, we take the current NATO and US doctrines as our point of departure. The US doctrine is updated more regularly and reflects American thought leadership in the SOF domain. It has, for instance, recently introduced unconventional warfare as a SOF activity, thereby broadening the spectrum of operations considerably. The lists of tasks and activities presented §3.3 and §3.4 are derived from both doctrines.



We look upon the SOF core tasks and activities as generic classes of action applicable to special operations largely independent of the specific context in which they are executed.

We have opted to use as much as possible existing terms for SOF core tasks and activities, even if their implementation evolves in an ever-changing security environment. We thus describe this evolution primarily as dynamics *within* existing tasks, rather than introducing new tasks and new terminology. In

other words, we look upon the SOF core tasks and activities as generic classes of action applicable to special operations largely independent of the specific context in which they are executed, taking on different incarnations as the geopolitical context changes with the evolving global security landscape and the operational context with the deployment scenario. This is much like a person may exhibit different traits and behavior in different circumstances or in comparison with the same person 20 years ago, while remaining the same person.

This approach provides the foundation for the prime objective of this study, namely to shed light on the future functional requirements for SOF. It should be noted, however, that this foundation is not as solid as we would like it to be. Conceptual and doctrinal thinking about SOF has a relatively short history. This is reflected in SOF doctrines that are not as well-defined and consistent as more established military doctrines.

### 3.2.2 Three main tasks of Defense as an overall framework

To assess the roles, tasks and activities of SOF in various strategic and operational contexts, we take the three main tasks of the Netherlands Armed Forces as reference. These main tasks determine the area of operations, as well as the societal, legal and moral frameworks by which the precise roles and activities of SOF are defined and judged.

1. **Collective Defense.** We consider the first main task of Defense, Protection of Dutch and NATO territory, exclusively in the context of collective defense, with the provision that the task is not only aimed at defending frontline allies but should also be considered as forward defense of the Netherlands itself.
2. **Promotion of the international legal order.** This has been the overriding main task for SOF deployment over the past three decades, usually involving operations outside the NATO area. Although relatively declining in importance, this remains a main task to consider.
3. **Contributions to domestic security.** The third main task, Support of civil authorities, includes a wide range of potential support activities, many of which have little or no bearing to international security issues (such as military support in the Corona crisis). In the context of this Study, however, we focus this task on contributions to domestic security vis-à-vis all threats directly aimed at the territory, population and infrastructure of the Netherlands.

### 3.2.3 Phases of conflict

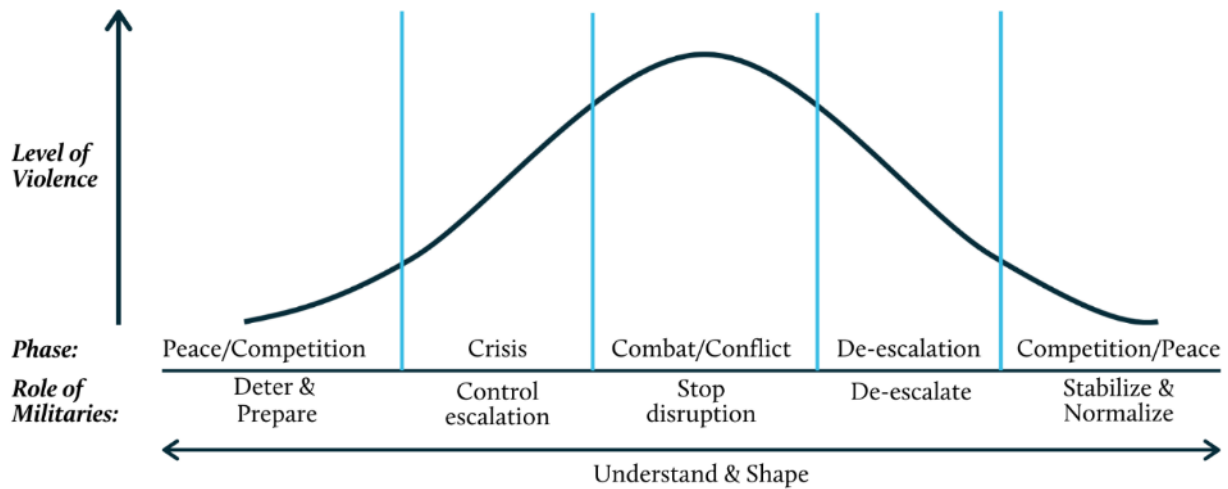


Figure 8: Our representation of the conflict continuum and its phases

SOF deployment must consider the different *phases* of an unfolding conflict. These phases also define the *role* of armed forces and of SOF. We discern the following phases:

- **Competition** is defined as a phase where state and non-state actors predominantly carry out non-military hostile activities such as information operations aimed at influencing the political process.
- **Crisis** is the disruption of the status quo through small-scale, possibly covert, military actions and other activities aimed at weakening the adversary before the actual conflict starts. These activities below the threshold of war include hybrid threats / grey zone confrontations.
- **Combat / Conflict** refers to the phase in which armed forces or (non-state) armed groups of opposing sides meet in combat, with casualties as a result. Depending on the context, this phase can also be referred to as (interstate) war, (intrastate) civil war or major disruption / out-of-control crisis (within a society). Although physical force-on-force engagements usually define this phase, confrontations in the cyber and information domain are usually – and in the current era almost invariably – part and parcel of the sphere of combat / conflict.
- **De-escalation** is usually the result of peace talks aimed at the return to the status quo *ante bellum*.
- **Peace** is the desired outcome of any violent confrontation involving state and non-state actors.
- **Understand & Shape** is the permanent undercurrent of activities **throughout all phases** to understand and to influence the behavior of the opponent(s) towards one's own objectives (such as de-escalation).

### 3.2.4 The importance of Understand & Shape

With the relative decline of Western power, including military power, and the geopolitical landscape more and more characterized by constant competition between major powers, what we call Understand & Shape becomes critically important. This includes all activities

*Understand & Shape includes all activities to create situational awareness and understanding, and influence conflict actors to prevent a potential conflict from emerging.*

to create situational awareness and understanding, and (pre-emptively) influence conflict actors to prevent a potential conflict from emerging or an existing crisis or conflict from escalating; not only preceding a crisis or conflict, but throughout all phases of the conflict continuum – as Figure 8 implies.

Emphasis on Understand & Shape came with the [2006 Quadrennial Defense Review](#). That document coined the term ‘Phase Zero’ as the merger of diplomatic and other shaping activities designed to ameliorate troubling trends before they reached a crisis. As part of Phase Zero, the US military should expand training of foreign security forces and cooperate with US civilian agencies in engaging developing countries. When, despite these efforts, the situation deteriorates, Phase Zero activities had to give way to more traditional crisis management and military operations involving the use of force. In subsequent discussions, however, understanding and shaping as only relevant in the pre-conflict phase was seen as too limited. Building the understanding of the dynamics that lead to and feed the conflict as the basis for effectively shaping the environment remains critically important during the crisis and conflict phases. This broader appreciation of Understand & Shape as relevant throughout all phases of conflict is used in this Study.

*SOF play a crucial role in Understand & Shape by gathering intelligence and building and nurturing networks with local groups and authorities.*

SOF play a crucial role in Understand & Shape by gathering intelligence and building and nurturing networks with local groups and authorities. This role is traditionally associated with the second main task of Defense, but also applies for the first and third main task, as will be explored in the subsequent Chapters. Understand & Shape is not only about preparing the battlefield, but also about building networks that serve as source for gauging the effects of ongoing operations and analyze the potential impact of possible future operations, and as a lever for influencing the behavior of leadership as well as the population (and, through public opinion, again leadership). These activities typically have a (much) more enduring time scope than military operations.

This framework puts traditional SOF core tasks in a new, and different, perspective. One notable element of this is that SOF may be used for more pervasive purposive efforts that may not be easily classified as ‘operations’, as part of long-term efforts to understand and shape the behavior of opponents (and other actors) throughout all phases of competition and conflict. As an example, Special Reconnaissance may provide input for a comprehensive, analytical framework at the operational and strategic levels, next to the

current principal function of providing tactical and operational support for deployed troops. Influencing operations are very much part of the effort to shape the environment during all conflict phases, focusing on effects in what is called the cognitive dimension, see Figure 9.

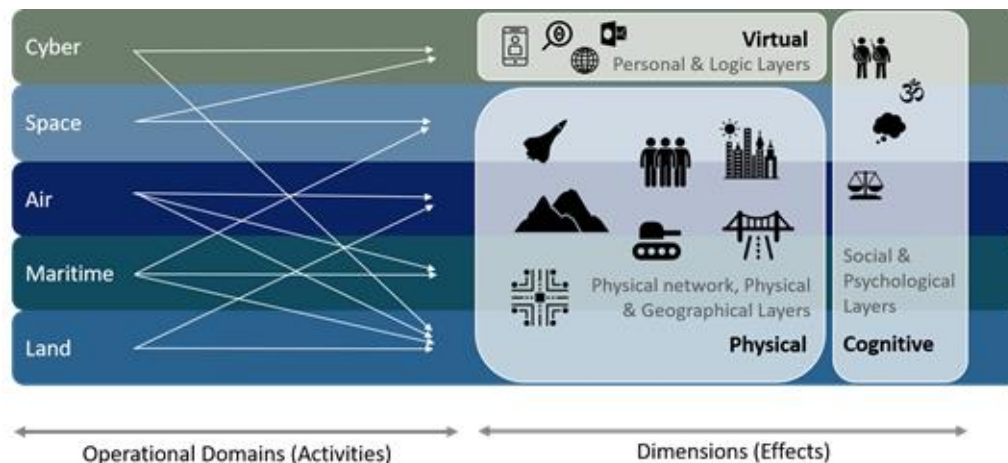


Figure 9: 'Domains' and 'dimensions' model<sup>44</sup>

Winning the hearts and minds of the population has always been an example of trying to influence the behavior of the population. New digital and behavior techniques complement traditional instruments for doing so. As understanding and influencing the opponent is a prerequisite for success, all tasks and activities should be information driven.

### 3.3 SOF core tasks

Regardless of the evolution in SOF roles and tasks that form the central discussion of this Study, the classic three broad categories, described below, remain valid as the core tasks of SOF. Even the activities associated with the more futuristic SOF silhouettes discussed in Chapter 7 largely fit these categories, albeit often with a twist.<sup>45</sup>

- **Military Assistance (MA):** broad measures and activities that support and influence critical friendly assets. MA includes training, advising, mentoring, capability building of friendly security forces; partnering with local, regional, and national leadership or organizations; civic actions supporting and influencing the local population; and the conduct of combined operations.
- **Direct Action (DA):** short duration strikes such as precision destruction, raids, ambushes, assaults, terminal guidance operations such as forward air control, and other small-scale offensive actions conducted with specialized military capabilities to

<sup>44</sup> See Klaudia Klonowska and Frank Bekkers, *Behavior-Oriented Operations in the Military Context. Enhancing Capabilities to Understand and Anticipate Human Behavior*, February 2021.

<sup>45</sup> The exception, possibly warranting an additional core task, is the silhouette that depicts future SOF as the 'experimentation sharp end' of the Armed Forces. The associated task could be labeled as 'New Concepts Experimentation' and is inward-oriented rather than towards outside effects. This is further elaborated in §8.2.1.

seize, destroy, capture, exploit, recover, or damage designated targets in hostile, denied, or diplomatically and/or politically sensitive environments.

- **Special Reconnaissance (SR):** reconnaissance and surveillance actions typically conducted in a covert manner to collect or verify threat assessments, target assessments and post action assessments, as well as other strategic information.<sup>46</sup>

### 3.4 SOF activities

The SOF core tasks can be conducted in a number of activities, as listed below. The critical reader will find that some definitions are not fully apt, and the full set of activities somewhat arbitrary, inconsistent and overlapping. As explained in §3.2.1, the definitions are taken from the current NATO and US SOF doctrine documents to root our subsequent analysis in known terminology, even if that terminology is far from perfect. Flawed as it is, the list *does* provide a good overview of the range of activities SOF may engage in, implementing the three core tasks in a wide range of manifestations.

- **Counter Terrorism (CT)** is defined as activities and operations taken to defeat an insurgency and to address any core grievances to render them incapable of using unlawful violence to instill fear and coerce governments or societies to achieve their goals. **Counter Violent Extremists (CVE)** can be seen as a variation of CT.
- **Counter Insurgency (COIN)** is a comprehensive civilian and military effort designed to simultaneously defeat and contain insurgency and address its root causes.
- **Counter Criminality (CC)** is about preventing organized criminal groups from escalating their activities to the point where they become a threat to national security.
- **Unconventional Warfare (UW)** is defined as operations and activities that are conducted to enable a resistance movement or insurgency to coerce, disrupt, or overthrow a government or occupying power by operating through or with an underground, auxiliary, and guerrilla force in a denied area.
- **Counter Hybrid Threats (CHT)** are politically sensitive operations below the threshold of military conflict or Article 5 of the NATO-treaty and to enhance national resilience to hybrid campaigns.
- **Faction Liaison (FL)** involves close cooperation with factions in the operational area to gain a better understanding of the operational environment, situational awareness and to collect information.
- **Countering Proliferation (CP)** of weapons of mass destruction (WMD) and chemical, biological, radiological and nuclear (CBRN) materials. Activities aim at disablement or destruction of the weapons or materials. This includes the adversary's ability to research, test, produce and stockpile these weapons.
- **Countering Weapons of Mass Destruction (CWMD)** are conducted to ensure that states are neither coerced nor attacked by nuclear weapons.

<sup>46</sup> Note that SOF can also covertly place a sensor, allowing intel to be gathered over a longer period without being present.

- **Psychological Operations (PsyOps)** are planned to convey selected information and indicators to foreign audiences to influence their emotions, motives.
- **Foreign Humanitarian Assistance (FHA)** is a range of humanitarian activities conducted to relieve or reduce human suffering, disease, hunger, or deprivation.
- **Security Force Assistance (SFA)** supports the development of the capacity and capability of foreign security forces and their supporting institutions.
- **Security Sector Reform (SSR)** supports the process of transforming the security sector of a host nation to strengthen accountability, effectiveness, and respect for human rights and the rule of law. 'Security sector' is a broad term used to describe the structures, institutions and personnel responsible for the management, provision and oversight of security in a country.
- **Hostage Rescue and Recovery (HRR)** operations are sensitive crisis response missions in response to terrorist threats and incidents. Offensive operations in support of hostage rescue and recovery can include the recapture of facilities, installations, and sensitive material overseas.
- **Personnel Recovery (PR)** is the sum of military, diplomatic and civil efforts to affect the recovery and reintegration of isolated personnel.

### 3.5 Special operations in all domains

Special operations can take place in various domains. Most operations take place on land, potentially enabled and supported from the sea or from the air with mobility, intelligence and fire power.



Figure 10: The modern battlefield. Photo: [NLD SOCOM](#)



Special operations in coastal, riverine and maritime environments can be conducted by dedicated maritime special units. These can be deployed from surface vessels and submarines to execute their missions. Important activities are route preparations in support of amphibious operations, coastal raids and ambushes, the recovery of ships and boarding operations. Maritime SOF currently also focus on developing Understand & Shape activities in densely populated areas close to sea, which is called the Urban Littoral. The maritime domain offers unique solutions by making use of the *mare liberum* and of the sub-surface domain to provide stealthy access.

Air special operations are usually conducted at great distances from operating bases in all operational environments. Dedicated airmobile special units conduct covert and low visibility operations with small teams in a distributed manner in hostile and politically sensitive areas to create conditions favorable for political and military-strategic goals through special reconnaissance and direct action. They can also be used for small scale military information operations, for example by dropping leaflets and conducting other influencing operations in remote areas. Other activities could involve the preparation of the operational environment, air traffic control, fire support, personnel and equipment recovery and medical aid.

Operations in the cyber domain to achieve effects in the cognitive dimension are not yet well developed. In this study we propose that influencing human behavior becomes an integral part of SOF thinking. This implies that the *modus operandi* of SOF will change considerably. For example, influencing operations could shape the battlefield in a completely different way by changing the behavior of the population or the adversary through operations in the cognitive dimension.

The *modus operandi* of SOF will change considerably.

### 3.6 Sub-conclusion

Contemporary SOF doctrine reflects current thinking on operations in complex environments outside of NATO's area of operation. In terms of the main tasks of Defense, current NATO SOF-doctrine still bears the remnants of a focus on the second main task, promotion of the international legal order and maintaining stability. Furthermore, SOF is mainly active in the traditional domains land, sea and air. The rising geopolitical tensions and interstate rivalry, however, puts emphasis on the use of SOF for collective defense. Similarly, the rise of hybrid threats aimed at societies, the role of SOF in the third main task, support to civil authorities in domestic security, also requires new attention. The same holds true for technical developments that allows SOF to operate in the cognitive dimension to influence human behavior. This constitutes a paradigm shift with important implications for SOF doctrine and the future requirements for and design of SOF. In the next Chapters, we will explore the impact of this paradigm shift for the three main tasks of Defense, and consequently for (NLD) SOF.



Main tasks of Defense	Evolution in the current and future security landscape
Collective Defense	Becomes more important because of interstate strategic competition and heightened risk of escalation to interstate armed conflict.
Promotion of the International Legal Order	Traditional peace support operations are losing prominence because of the deadlock in the UNSC. It will feature contestation from more external actors, become more explicitly strategic in nature, and more directly tied to direct interests. However, since the strategic importance of global stability remains intact, the number of unmandated interventions requiring combat operations in contested environments is likely to rise.
Domestic Security	Gains in importance in the context of global connectedness, the fusion of external and internal security, and hybrid conflict and hybrid warfare.

**Table 2: The three main tasks of Defense for NLD SOF towards 2030-35**

## 4 SOF and Promotion of the International Legal Order<sup>47</sup>

In this Chapter, we discuss the evolution of thinking regarding military operations in support of the legal order and global stability in a country or region; and the role of SOF therein. Over the last three decades, SOF were mainly deployed in such operations. This included a broad range of activities, including peace support operations, stability operations and combat operations against terrorists and insurgents. Because of this variety, operations in support of the legal order are quite intricate, but ample recent experiences have generated a good conceptual and practical understanding of them. Due to ongoing global power shifts, future incarnations of these operations will take place in a drastically changed geopolitical and legal environment. This may diminish the political appetite to deploy SOF in these types of operations, requiring a different approach.

### 4.1 Asymmetric conflict

The biggest challenge is that special operations often take place in a complex environment in which the adversary uses asymmetric tactics. Insurgents, terrorists and criminal gangs consider foreign troops as ‘occupying forces’. Their combat power is usually quite limited, and they have to rely on asymmetric tactics to offset the – real or perceived – military

superiority of the foreign crisis response forces.<sup>48</sup> Building upon asymmetries in interests and capabilities, the insurgents will try to deny the coercer his strategic objectives by targeting weak spots and affect the coercer’s limited appetite for incurring costs, for instance through hit-and-run tactics and terrorist attacks.<sup>49</sup> This is the classic strategy of the guerilla warrior.

Military operations in support of the legal order and global stability will take place in a drastically changed geopolitical and legal environment.

When the intervening forces conform to accepted conventions and to traditional maneuver warfare, ‘winning’ in a classical military sense, forcing the opponent into capitulation, is difficult or even impossible. Winning *is* possible when a strategy of destruction is applied, as Russia showed in the case of Grozny during the second Chechen war. As such a strategy violates the laws of war, it is not viable for Western forces. It follows that, in practice, crisis response operations are not about winning, but about prevailing. The objective is not about achieving a desired end-state, but about creating a situation in which acts of violence, destabilization and human right violations are kept within acceptable limits and create of form of stability that, ultimately, will allow Western forces to leave.

<sup>47</sup> Note that the sequence of Chapters 4 through 6 deviates from the usual sequence of the three main tasks of Defense (see §3.2.2). The current arrangement of Chapters better reflects historical developments. We come from an era in which the second main defense task was imperative. This Chapter therefore starts with describing that main task from a SOF perspective. We have now entered an era in which the first and third main defense tasks have (and will further) become more prominent. The main drivers for change in thinking about future SOF are in the context of these two main tasks, as described in the subsequent two Chapters.

<sup>48</sup> See for instance Qiao Liang & Wang Xiangsui, *Unrestricted Warfare*, Beijing: PLA Literature and Arts Publishing House, 1999

<sup>49</sup> See also Col. T.X. Hammes, USMC, *The Sling and the Stone: On War in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century*, (St.Paul, MN: Zenith Press, 2004)

UNSC resolutions and mandates, the law of war and Rules of Engagement constitute the legal framework for all Western interventions. As crisis response operations in support of the international order are part of a political process, winning the hearts and minds is essential to drive a wedge between the insurgents and the population. A successful intervention is virtually impossible if the friendly troops lack the support of the local police, the law enforcement authorities, intelligence services, internal security forces, para-military units, and remaining armed forces. If existing local support is waived, all preceding successes could be nullified. Intervention forces then become occupying forces. This will unleash political dynamisms that pose a direct threat to any nation-building process.

Counter Terrorism (CT), Counter Criminality (CC), and Counter Insurgency (COIN) are activities to counter irregular forces (with typically a considerable overlap between them). Strategies include direct and indirect methods. The direct approach seeks to neutralize or degrade the capability of the opponent to operate. This can be done through the neutralization or dismantlement of his social networks and physical and financial assets. The indirect approach attempts to influence the opponent's operating environment by denying the use of specific areas as a sanctuary or by isolating the opposing forces from their support bases, thus preventing them from continuously re-emerging after a seemingly defeat. Societal support is often the foundation for logistical and financial support as well. Winning the hearts and minds of the population is thus an essential element of both the direct and indirect approach.

#### 4.2 The impact of global power shifts

Although the promotion of international legal order will remain important to the Netherlands, the context in which operations must be executed will change considerably. First, it will be increasingly difficult to obtain UNSC mandates for interventions. Second, due to the involvement of other nations, the complexity and consequently the escalatory risks of conflict will increase. Third, interests instead of values are more likely to trigger interventions. As a result, the number of crisis response operations in support of the international legal order is likely to diminish, while the number of unmandated, self-contained CT, CC, and COIN activities is likely to increase. Global power shifts may well lead to more unmandated interventions requiring combat operations. This would constitute a radical departure from the recent past.

**The number of crisis response operations in support of the international legal order is likely to diminish.**

Over the past decades, an important reason for Western interventions has been the violation of human rights; although some interventions were carried out to defend interests. The most notable cases of the latter were the intervention in Afghanistan in response to the terror attack of 9/11 and the US-led war against Iraq in response to the

Iraqi raid in Kuwait. UNSC resolutions and mandates, and derived Rules of Engagement, constitute the legal framework for such operations. However, reaching consensus in the UNSC on a resolution or mandate has become more difficult over the past years, and will continue to do so. This also holds for interventions in case of gross violations of humanity, such as genocide.

The decline of mandated interventions can be explained by a rising China that is putting its mark on the international (legal) order. Like the UK and the US after the end of the Second World War, Beijing seeks to adapt the present rules-based order to reflect its interests, positions and values. Due to the relative decline of the West, China has the power to question Western values and its interpretation of international law. For example, China sees human rights in terms of collective rights such as security and prosperity. It rejects Western concepts of individual liberties and the right to intervene in other countries for humanitarian reasons. China supports a strict interpretation of sovereignty. This has important implications for humanitarian interventions, and (legal) concepts such as the Responsibility to Protect (R2P) and the Genocide Treaty which allow the international community to carry out interventions in other states.



**Figure 11: China's rise and willingness to promote its version of sovereignty and non-intervention visualised with frequent intrusions of Taiwanese airspace. Photo [mnd.gov.tw](http://mnd.gov.tw)**

In addition, anti-Western feelings and mistrust, rooted in perceived double standards, colonialism, imperialism, and interventionism, are important obstacles for obtaining mandates. The intervention in Libya is a case in point. In 2010 and 2011, NATO member states decided to stop Ghaddafi terrorizing the Libyan people. The resulting intervention

was supported by UN Security Council resolution 1973 (2011) that authorized the international community to bring violence, abuse, and attacks against civilians to an end. NATO member states explicitly ruled out regime change in Libya as an objective of the intervention. When nevertheless the Libyan leader Gadhafi was killed, Russia and China not only protested the then case but also blocked subsequent mandates for Western involvement.

The Libya case added to the mistrust caused by the first ‘humanitarian war’, the 1999 Kosovo war. A coalition of NATO countries intervened without a UN Security Council resolution. NATO justified the intervention as a response to the atrocities taking place in the then Serbian province. Moreover, a substantial *group* of countries decided to intervene, used by NATO leaders to justify action in the absence of a UN mandate. Thus, the legality of military action became a function of the size of the coalition. Given the current global power balance, however, this practice is no longer sustainable.

China is still willing to support UN mandates for traditional peacekeeping operations reflecting three interrelated and mutually reinforcing principles: consent of the parties; impartiality of the peacekeepers; and the non-use of force except in self-defense and in defense of the mandate. China is likely to reject unmandated interventions for humanitarian purposes or for defending interests. Russia’s position on non-interference is similar. Only under rare circumstances may these countries support Western military actions other than peacekeeping in the UN Security Council.

China and Russia will not only block UN Security Council resolutions but are also increasingly willing to take military action themselves in support of a friendly regime or of an insurgency that might play into their hands. In the new geopolitical landscape, regional powers will be less constrained in their foreign policies as well. This will restrict the freedom to maneuver for Western powers and complicates the calculus for military action. The war in Syria is a case in point. In 2015, President Assad of Syria invited Russia to support his struggle with insurgents and, as the legal head of government, justified Russia’s intervention. Both Syria and Russia argued that the US-led coalition in support of Assad opposing parties was illegal. The changed balance of forces and the legal arguments thus confronted the anti-Assad coalition with important political, ethical, and military dilemmas.

**In the new geopolitical landscape, regional powers will be less constrained in their foreign policies**

The case of Syria demonstrates that geopolitical shifts and increased assertiveness of regional powers put their mark on future deployments of NATO and of individual countries. First, the number of traditional peace support missions is set to further decrease and is likely to give way to interventions to defend interests. The cause may be, for instance, the denial of access to raw materials, the blocking of trade flows or severe threats to compatriots abroad. Such an intervention is likely to be a combat operation

that may or may not be followed by a stabilization operation. Note that this increased likelihood of unmandated interventions is an upward trend, and not a breach of trend: the defense of interests has never been ruled out as a mission. Although most expeditionary operations over the past decades were aimed at peacekeeping and stabilization, some missions, such as the interventions in Afghanistan and Iraq, had broader goals. Other examples are the anti-piracy operations by NATO and the EU of the coast of Somalia. In those two cases, there was consensus within the international community to counter the threat; indeed, countries like China and India took part in the operations.

Second, although legitimate in the Western (moral) perspective, these interventions will be unlawful when China and/ or Russia block a UNSC mandate. Without a widely backed mandate or resolution, they also tend to be more complex because other major powers will get involved in the struggle and choose opposing sides.

Third, great power competition will often take the form of proxy warfare. Iran's support to Hezbollah and US support to the Kurds in Syria and Iraq are examples of state actors supporting local militia, insurgents, or other violent groups, including terror organizations. Groups like that not only use violence in the traditional way, but also apply hybrid strategies, including psychological warfare and cyberattacks. As great powers are likely to stay away from direct confrontations and the opportunity costs for using proxies are low,

proxy warfare will become the norm.<sup>50</sup> Due to the rise of great power competition, the Netherlands could get involved in struggles it would ideally like to avoid. Those struggles could take the form of unmandated involvement in conflicts outside the NATO area.

The Netherlands could get involved in struggles it would ideally like to avoid.

To illustrate the shifting landscape, consider the following example. In 2010, the Davids Committee commissioned by the Dutch government concluded that there had been no adequate legal basis for the invasion of Iraq in 2003. In response, the government explicitly confirmed that the requirement of an adequate legal basis also applied to situations in which the Netherlands offers political support to other states undertaking military action. Despite this statement, in 2018, the Dutch government – albeit halfheartedly – politically supported the retaliatory attacks by UK, France and the US after the Syrian leader President Assad had (presumably) used chemical weapons against his own citizens. In 2019, an expert group commissioned by the Minister of Foreign Affairs concluded that strong legal and political reasons exist for exercising caution before supporting a military operation which the Netherlands regards as unlawful. But, after having taken the legal and political risks and consequences into account, the group

<sup>50</sup> Dr. Spencer Meredith II (ed.), [SOF Paradigm in Great Power Competition](#), 2019, p7.



concluded that “the government may nonetheless find that there are compelling reasons to offer political support to an intervention even though they regard it as unlawful.”<sup>51</sup>



**Figure 12: NLD SOF operational in Afghanistan.** Photo [Wiki Commons](#)

In conclusion, forceful, unlawful or unmandated interventions are a radical departure for the interventions which had formed the context of the bulk of SOF deployments since the end of the Cold War. Depending on the interests at stake and the dynamics of great power competition, future interventions are likely to take the form of small wars with or without the use of proxies. Complexity will be added if the opposing forces are supported by different state actors and a host of competing non-state actors is present. Therefore, it is likely that state actors will rely even more on proxies on the ground to minimize their own casualties. Covert and overt SOF operations, in conjunction with the use of air power and psychological, cyber, and information operations, will then be the preferred mode of operation. This implies that the traditional SOF tasks of DA, SR, and MA will be executed in a higher-risk environment that is characterized by asymmetric or unconventional warfare, possibly mixed with conventional warfare depending on the parties involved. Faction Liaison (FL) and Security Force Assistance (SFA) will become more important. SOF can either support the local government forces or proxies that are opposing the government with train and equip programs or by operating side by side.

<sup>51</sup> Report of the Expert Group Established by the Minister of Foreign Affairs of the Netherlands, [Humanitarian Intervention and Political Support for Interstate Use of Force](#), 2019, pX.

### 4.3 Conflict dynamics along the competition-crisis-conflict continuum

Successful SOF planning in the various conflict phases – particularly where it pertains to the continuous Understand & Shape activities – requires deep understanding of the conflict dynamics. Especially when SOF employ influencing techniques to affect the behavior of adversaries or populations, intimate knowledge of the conflict dynamics is needed. Without recognizing the conflict dynamics, any operation (in the context of all three main tasks of Defense) is doomed to fail.

Such understanding is rooted in a recognition of our own vulnerabilities. Too often technological superiority and superiority in training and doctrine are considered a guarantee for mission success. In practice however, tactics employed by terrorists and insurgents have demonstrated that asymmetry is the great equalizer with which seemingly superior forces can be deterred and defeated. We can learn from terrorists and insurgents that a broad approach combining kinetic, societal, psychological and economic elements can be extremely successful. Even if winning in the classical sense is impossible, prevailing over a superior adversary that lacks the stamina to continue the fight over a long period of time *is* possible. Crucially, interests are a key factor for success. Perceived interests determine the resolve of all parties involved in the conflict. During the conflict, the perception of interests at stake may change, resulting in a new cost-benefit calculus for the coercer. This could occur in the case of a half-hearted or unsuccessful intervention. Lack of success could lead to a situation where the credibility of the coercer is at risk; the interests thereby increase. In this case *not losing* becomes a vital interest.

**To win the war one  
needs to win the  
information war first.**

In other words, the analytical framework, continuously fed and updated by Understand & Shape activities, should consider the predicted dynamics of the conflict, the interests at stake and the strengths and weaknesses of both the adversary and us. A weak spot is that we usually overestimate our own capabilities. Bruce Berkowitz argued that to win the war one needs to win the information war first.<sup>52</sup> The questions that need to be answered to do so are nothing new: how do we know we are prepared for what might come next; how do we measure our capabilities and those of the adversaries; and how do we develop a strategy that enables us to prevail?

Assessing the conflict dynamics can be done by using three generic mechanisms. Combined, these three determine the strategic efficacy of power instruments. Derived from many cases studies, these mechanisms apply to both coercer and opponent. They are intentionally formulated broadly, as they relate to the preparation of a demanding and risky regime change operation as well as a to a relatively easy and risk-free peacekeeping operation, and everything in between. These mechanisms can be applied

<sup>52</sup> Bruce Berkowitz, *The New Face of War: How War will be fought in the 21st century*, 2007.

when facing state and/or non-state actors. In all instances a solid balance between means and objectives, and between costs and benefits is required.

#### 4.3.1 Mechanism 1: use of power instruments matches our interests at stake

***Coercive mechanism 1: The intensity with which the coercer is prepared to use power instruments is proportional to the interests at stake.***

Case studies reveal that the interests of the coercer ( $I^{\text{Coercer}}$  in the equations below) are directly related to the intensity with which the coercer is prepared to use his power instruments (identified by the letter  $p$ ). The interests at stake for the coercer (or coercers) are translated into a willingness to use military force – the ultimate powerbroker in coercion – and a willingness to incur costs in the process. If the interests at stake are high or vital, a coercer will be more inclined to turn to military means, display greater resolve and accept higher costs. These costs are generally defined in terms of the financial burden, materiel and assets destroyed and human casualties. If the interests at stake are low or non-vital, the willingness to use force is low with little acceptance for casualties and other costs. In that case, the coercer will generally turn to diplomatic or economic power instruments, which are relatively risk-free. The intensity with which power instruments are employed by the coercer is thereby a product of the willingness to use force and the willingness to incur costs. Schematically this can be captured in the following coercion-function:

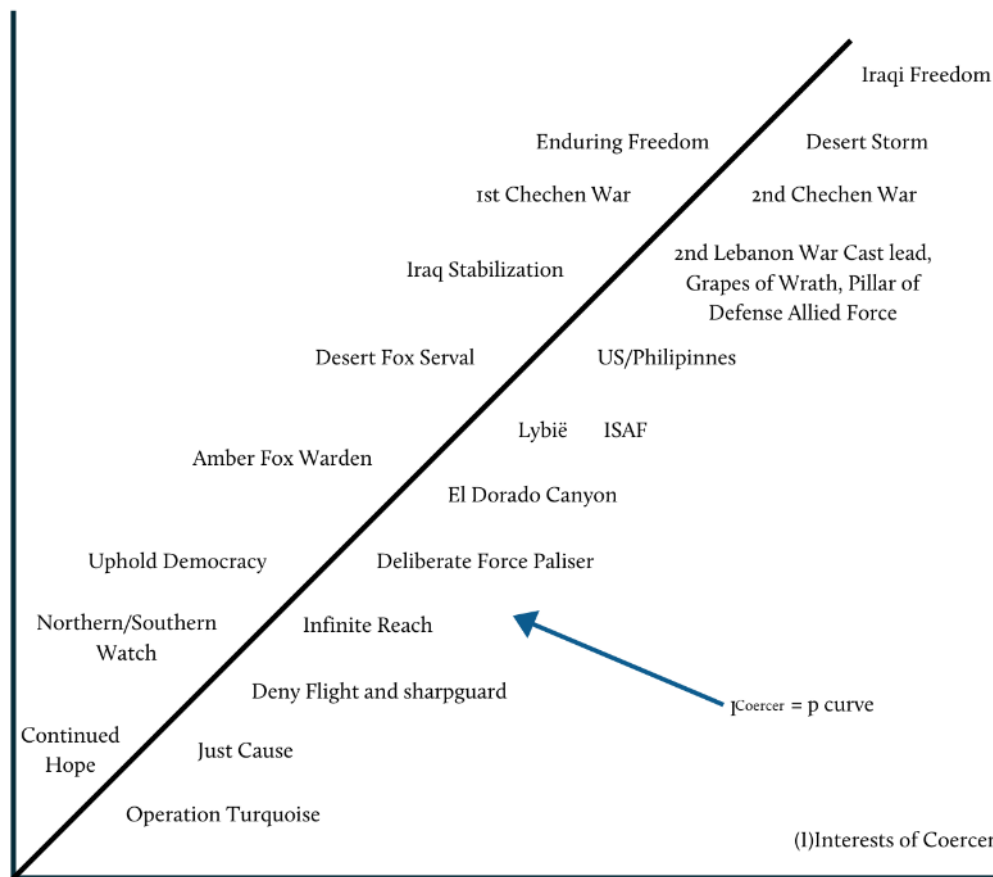
$I^{\text{Coercer}} = p$ : the intensity with which power instruments are used is related to the interests at stake and;

$I^{\text{Coercer}} = F + C$ : the interests at stake determine the coercer's willingness to use force ( $F$ ) and incur costs ( $C$ ).

Therefore:

$p = F + C$ : the intensity of the use of power instruments is determined by the willingness to use force and incur costs.

Figure 13 demonstrates this mechanism by plotting several interventions by Western states, mapping the intensity of the use of force (vertical axis) against the level of interest of the coercer (horizontal axis).



**Figure 13: Assessment of use of force against interest at stake for interventions by Western states**

For the US, the threat posed by the Taliban Regime in 2001 was considered a vital interest. The attacks of 9/11 shook America. It hence mobilized significant military resources to remove the Taliban from power and ensure that Afghanistan would no longer be a terrorist sanctuary. At the other end of the scale, we find operation *Continued Hope* in Somalia in 1993, where the US withdrew its forces following the loss of eighteen Rangers. No vital interests were at stake and the US were not willing to bear the human cost. A similar dynamic has been at play regarding a possible Western intervention in the humanitarian crisis in Darfur province in Sudan. While human rights were violated, they were not perceived to constitute a threat to vital interests warranting a decisive employment of power instruments.

Had Syria constituted a vital interest, the deployment of ground forces would have been unavoidable.

Syria is an interesting case. Escalation control was exercised to prevent refugees and the spreading of the conflict to NATO territory (Turkey). But war-weariness, disappointment with the results of previous interventions, the lack of support for ground troops and the interference of other major powers severely limited the military options available to SOF, proxies and air power. Had Syria constituted a vital interest, the deployment of ground forces would have been unavoidable. Because of the limited

interests at stake, the willingness to employ military power decisively was absent. This is important because *escalation dominance* is necessary to prevail. When vital interests are threatened and the coercer is willing to apply power-instruments decisively, usually interests are at stake related to the security or survival of the state.

However, for Western states these interests are seldom at risk. In that case, governments are not willing to pay a high price to coerce others. In the model,  $p$  is small. Still, political leaders may feel forced to 'do something' because the domestic political price of doing nothing could be too high. This poses a dilemma. The chances of success of 'doing something' are low because the opponent will not be impressed by the coercive measures. If force is not applied decisively the role of inducements becomes important. Alexander George and William Simons have argued that inducements, combined with more traditional forms of coercion, make resolution of a conflict more likely.<sup>53</sup> The most used inducement is economic aid or the lifting of sanctions as a reward for compliance.

If interests at stake increase, and thus the willingness to use force and to incur costs, this likely leads to a greater intensity in the use of power instruments. This situation can occur when the opponent's motivation, opportunities to resist and willingness to take blows is underestimated or misunderstood. Therefore, the second essential coercive mechanism focuses on the opponent.

#### 4.3.2 Mechanism 2: opponent's willingness to incur cost matches his interests

***Coercive mechanism 2: The opponent willingness to incur costs following from the intervention are directly proportional to his interests at stake.***

The same calculus holds for the opponent as for the coercer. Interests at stake determine his motivation to resist the coercer and his willingness to incur costs in the process.<sup>54</sup> Economic sanctions can threaten his economic safety, a military intervention his territorial integrity. A combination of both can undermine the political and social stability in his territory and compromise his regime. In the ultimate case, an intervention can threaten the very existence of the opponent.

If a government feels that its continuation or existence is threatened, it will be inclined to accept higher costs than if the objective of the intervention of the coercer is limited.<sup>55</sup> A 'regime change' intervention directly targets the government and leaves little room to maneuver. The reaction of the opponent, in particular dictators or autocratic leaders, is likely to be a 'nothing to lose' or 'scorched earth' strategy. Such a strategy can only be

<sup>53</sup> George and Simons, *The Limits of Coercive Diplomacy*, pp28–29.

<sup>54</sup> This is a variant to Robert Pape's model presented in *Bombing to Win*, p16 which reads:  $R + Bp(B) - Cp(C)$ , with  $R$  = value of resistance,  $B$  = potential benefits,  $p(B)$  = probability of attaining benefits by continued resistance,  $C$  = potential costs of resistance,  $p(C)$  = probability of suffering costs.

<sup>55</sup> See also Jeffrey Record, *The Limits and Temptations of America's Conventional Military Primacy in Survival*, vol. 97, no. 1 (Spring 2005), pp36-37.



pursued when the coercer's interests are high, so that he is willing to use force decisively and pursue regime change vigorously; and/or when the target is substantially weaker and has lost control over the state's power instruments – as was the case with Noriega in Panama and Cedras in Haiti.

**In most interventions there is an asymmetry of interests, with the interests at stake for the opponent outweighing those of the coercer.**

It should come as no surprise that in most interventions there is an asymmetry of interests, with the interests at stake for the opponent outweighing those of the coercer. If for the opponent vital interests are at stake, but not for the coercer, caution is advised. The opponent is then willing to make larger sacrifices than the coercer, which diminishes the likelihood of quick success. An intervention will then proceed tediously or fail.<sup>56</sup> When the asymmetries of interest are in favor of the opponent, the coercer should be aware because the opponent will be willing to employ his power instruments with greater intensity and tenacity than the coercer. Ignoring the opponent's interests is even more dangerous when the opponent's tactics are ignored as well. The failed humanitarian intervention in Somalia provides an excellent example.

The key is to accurately assess the calculus of the opponent. The logic of coercion ensures that the calculus of the coercer and the opponent are intimately connected. The coercer shapes his actions based on perceived interests at stake. For the coercer, the interests at stake – caused by the opponent's actions – are the starting point. The coercer perceives the world around him and identifies threats to his interests. These affect his willingness to incur costs and determine the intensity with which he is willing to use power instruments to defend or promote those interests. The opponent's willingness to incur costs is similarly dependent on his interests at stake, which are derived from the course of action the coercer adopts. The logic of action and reaction ensues. If the opponent feels that vital interests are threatened, he is willing to accept higher costs and will be more resilient. The interests and cost calculus of the opponent is dependent on the action taken by the coercer.

This is an aspect that is not well understood by policymakers. Western leaders rarely take the interests of the opponent into account or do so only marginally. In addition, the cultural context in which coercion occurs is often neglected. This applies to understanding the interests of the opponent as well as his ensuing behavior. Assuming irrationality because he does not behave conform to Western assumptions of rationality is a recipe for disaster.<sup>57</sup> For example, Arab ethics revolve around self-esteem and mutual respect. The

<sup>56</sup> Exceptions are the intervention in Haiti and Panama where military operations removed leaders that had become isolated and were unable to mount significant opposition against US coercion.

<sup>57</sup> Kenneth Pollack in *The Threatening Storm: The Case for invading Iraq* (2002) concluded that Saddam Hussein was irrational or a "serial miscalculator" and therefore could not be deterred, necessitating an intervention.



concepts of ‘honor’ and ‘pride’ are of crucial importance. This can easily be misunderstood for irrationality.



**Figure 14: Armed rebels and civilian onlookers in Ajdabiya (Libya); understanding the principles of asymmetric warfare. Photo: [Al Jazeera Creative Commons Repository](#)**

In short, the assumption that interventions in all circumstances will succeed due to overmatching conventional military power ignores the logic of coercion. The US could make demands of any state, but is it able and willing to follow up on these demands if military coercion is required? Besides, as §4.3.3 will demonstrate, it fails to take asymmetric warfare into account.

#### **4.3.3 Mechanism 3: asymmetric interests lead to asymmetric reactions**

***Coercive mechanism 3: Asymmetry in interests or military capabilities lead to asymmetrical reactions.***

This brings us to the role of military capabilities translated into coercive power. A key factor essential to understand coercion is the relationship between the coercer’s capabilities and those of the opponent. By operating asymmetrically, opponents can discount the advantage of Western militaries partially or entirely. Asymmetric reactions offset the advantage of superior conventional capabilities by increasing the impact of power instruments. If the opponent’s vital interests are at stake, his full military response will be

**Targets of coercion will exploit asymmetries in the coercer’s willingness to incur costs by confronting him non-conventionally.**

mobilized to obtain the maximum effect of its power instruments. However, given the military superiority of the West, targets of coercion are unlikely to respond through conventional forces. They will exploit asymmetries in the coercer's willingness to incur costs by confronting him non-conventionally, thereby increasing the effects of his power instruments.<sup>58</sup>

To be successful in achieving an asymmetric response and upgrade the efficacy of its military capabilities, the opponent must try to deny the coercer his strategic objectives by targeting weak spots and affect the coercer's willingness to incur costs. Key weak spots of the West are:

- Zero tolerance to friendly casualties if no or limited interests are at stake;
- The short time horizons of Western policymakers and the desire to reach quick solutions;
- A preference for the use of airpower and conventional maneuver warfare;
- The wish to minimize collateral damage;
- The necessity to abide by the law of war and other internationally accepted norms;
- The desire to keep a coalition together;
- An emphasis on technological solutions;
- A conceptual division between the military and the civilian realm;
- The tendency to be very confident of one's own capabilities while underestimating the opponent's motivations and opportunities of resistance;
- The economic and social vulnerability of open Western societies; and
- Intensive media coverage.

**Influencing the behavior of the population might raise dilemmas because using the population for military purposes is legally and morally controversial.**

An effective opponent will design his response based on these characteristics. This response, in turn, can be leveled off or neutralized using novel techniques to assess and influence the behavior of the population.<sup>59</sup> Modern age warfare cannot do without societal data collection and influencing techniques. The specific techniques used may be new,<sup>60</sup> but the objective – influencing the behavior of the

population – is not. As part of Understand & Shape, influencing behavior might prove crucial to prevent hostilities and shape the battlefield. This might raise dilemmas because using the population for military purposes is legally and morally controversial. But together with an insightful application of the conflict mechanisms mentioned, this might improve the military's efficacy substantially.

<sup>58</sup> See for instance Qiao Liang & Wang Xiangsui, *Unrestricted Warfare*, Beijing: PLA Literature and Arts Publishing House, 1999

<sup>59</sup> See Klaudia Klonowska and Frank Bekkers, [Behavior-Oriented Operations in the Military Context. Enhancing Capabilities to Understand and Anticipate Human Behavior](#), February 2021.

<sup>60</sup> And not so new in the commercial world, where the use of data collection to influence or 'nudge' consumers is standard procedure.

#### 4.4 Roles, tasks and activities of SOF

Thus, although the conflict dynamics have remained essentially the same, the way operations in support of the international legal order and global stability are executed *has* changed and will further change. The roles of SOF differ in the various phases of the conflict.

- In the **competition phase**, SOF may contribute to **shaping the security environment** by supporting local authorities assessing the situation through intelligence operations and other information activities, building up the force, building networks of trusted entities in the theater of operations to gain advantage in case of a transition to the next phase.
- In the **crisis phase**, operations are aimed at **maintaining or restoring peace** by stabilizing the situation and preventing further escalation. During this phase, SOF may support decision-making by providing intelligence and establishing communications, enable other entities by providing liaison nodes. SOF may also create the conditions for the (possible) subsequent deployment of a joint force and for joint force integration, e.g. through setting up command and control systems.
- In the **conflict phase**, operations are aimed at **neutralizing the aggressor** through direct engagement, sabotage, support to deployed forces, contributing to counter insurgency operations, and supporting friendly entities to enable resistance and enhance resilience. Creating strategic dilemma's is an important role for SOF as well. This could imply, for instance, hearts and minds campaigns, cutting the adversaries logistical supply lines or revealing the adversary's intentions.
- In **peacetime** military engagement is intended to **shape the security environment** to prevent relapse to either competition or crisis.
- Throughout **all phases**, SOF contribute to **Understand & Shape** activities.

Direct Action can be part of operations aimed at killing or capturing adversaries, or at separating them from their base by attacking or sabotaging their command & control modes, logistics, storage sites etc. Direct Action can also be used to protect or support deployed forces, including proxies. This could include Hostage Rescue and Recovery and Personnel Recovery. Military Assistance comprises support of and advise to non-state actors including proxies inside or outside the theater, and support of the host nation. Special Reconnaissance supports proxies, the host nation and friendly forces. Understand & Shape includes Special Reconnaissance, Psychological Operations, and Faction Liaison.

The specifics change with the precise type of operation. Below, reflecting the discussions in §4.1 through §4.3, operations in support of the international legal order are split in four distinct subtypes: peacekeeping operations, stabilization operations, expeditionary combat operations and expeditionary support operations.

#### 4.4.1 Peacekeeping operations

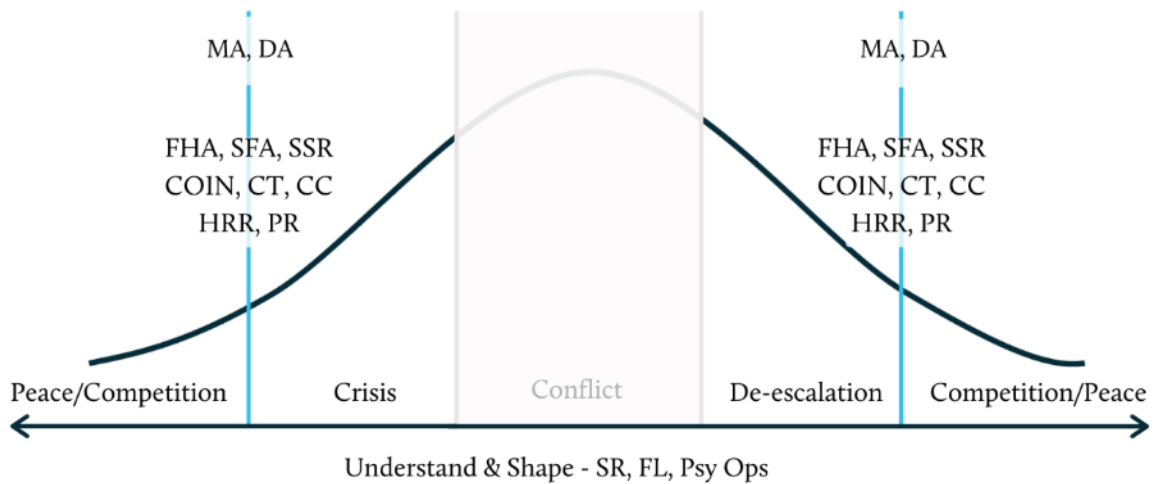


**Figure 15: SOF tasks and activities in peacekeeping operations**

Traditional peacekeeping is the least controversial type of operations and a relatively risk-free undertaking. It focusses on the competition phase to prevent escalation into a crisis or on de-escalation following major conflict. As escalation control is the main objective, the emphasis is on Military Assistance. Depending on the mandate, Direct Action may be deemed necessary, but this will run the risk of losing impartiality. Support to friendly governments or other friendly parties may require Foreign Humanitarian Assistance, Security Force Assistance, and Security Sector Reform. In very rare cases, Hostage Rescue and Recovery and Personnel Recovery could require SOF. Finally, SOF could assist peacekeepers to terminate the mission in case of escalation or help them moving to the next phase.

Although sustained combat operations should be avoided at all costs, the mandate could contain provisions for incidental and limited enforcement actions for achieving the objectives set. This implies that the peacekeepers will be withdrawn in case of escalation to large scale confrontations. If the international community is not willing to withdraw the peacekeepers in case of an escalating conflict, the force must be adapted to the new circumstances. This will completely change the nature of the force. It will be turned into either a stabilization force or a fighting force suited for expeditionary combat operations. This could of course require a new mandate or an unmandated deployment by a coalition or the willing and able.

#### 4.4.2 Stabilization operations

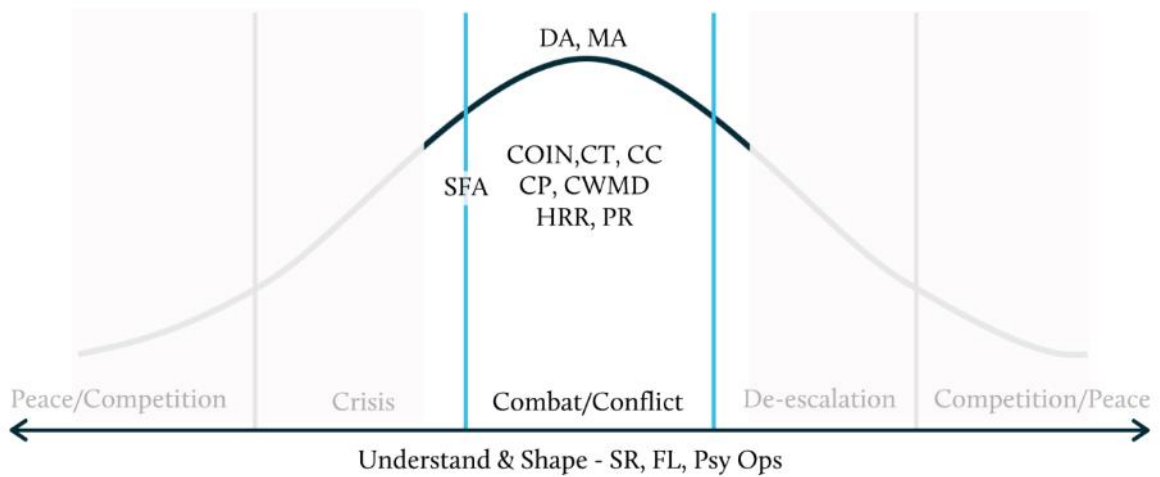


**Figure 16: SOF tasks and activities in stabilization operations**

Stabilization operations aim to stabilize the area and prevent further escalation. This requires the stabilization force to carry out the mandate in an impartial way. The force can be used against spoilers or other perpetrators trying to derail the peace process. This, however, could go at the expense of impartiality as perceived by the conflicting parties. Stabilization operations could be carried out in all phases of the conflict continuum except for the combat phase. Next to Military Assistance, Direct Action directed at the spoilers of the peace process may get more prominence. This SOF core task could be executed in support of various activities, including Counter Insurgency, Counter Terror and Counter Criminality. As the well-being of the people is a prerequisite for success, SOF could contribute to Foreign Humanitarian Assistance. To enhance the stability and increase the legitimacy of the legal authorities, SOF might contribute to Security Force Assistance and Security Sector Reform. As spoilers might try to derail the peace process, Hostage Rescue and Recovery and Personnel Recovery might also be relevant.

If the peace is lost and major combat operations break out, the stabilization force will either withdraw or move to the next phase. In those situations, SOF must either help terminate the mission or assist the stabilization force to transform into a force for expeditionary combat operations or expedition air support operations. This could require a new mandate or a political decision that the new mission is legitimate.

#### 4.4.3 Expeditionary combat operations



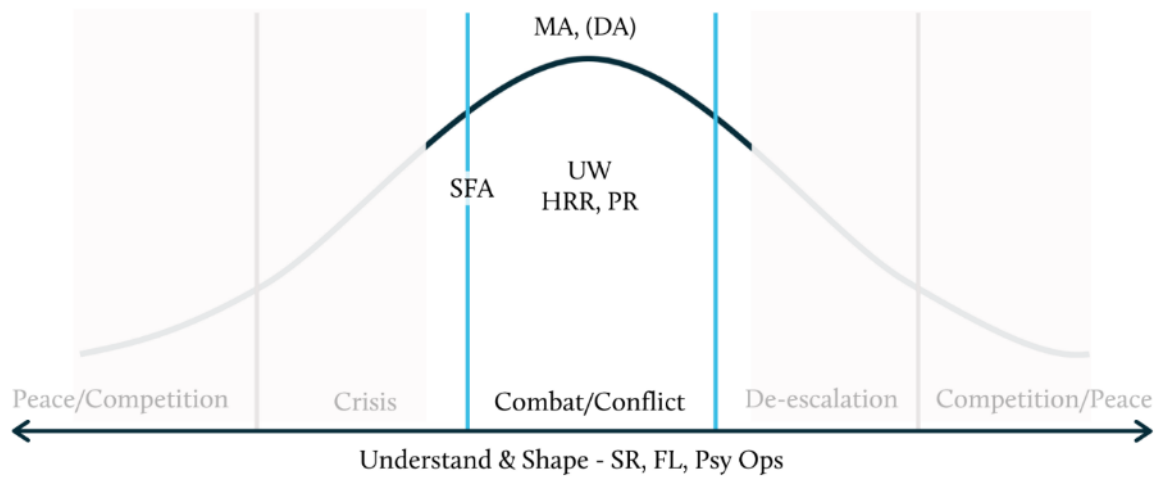
**Figure 17: SOF tasks and activities in expeditionary combat operations**

Expeditionary combat operations are carried out in a high-risk environment with the possibility of confrontation with a major power choosing the side of the opponent. Expeditionary combat operations may be necessary to enforce the peace, stabilize a conflict or defend interests. The objective is to de-escalate and / or to pave the way for a stabilization or peacekeeping force. As obtaining situational awareness and influencing the behavior of the population are crucial, in the ideal situation Understand & Shape activities have started long before the actual conflict breaks. Anticipation requires ongoing risk analyses of countries and regions. For the same reason, Security Force Assistance might be part of the effort preceding the actual deployment aimed at putting the local authorities in a better position to deal with the situation.

Expeditionary combat operations take place during the combat/conflict phase. Crucially, the conflict might take the form of either insurgency, terrorism or unconventional warfare aimed at creating chaos and manipulating the populace. SOF will execute all core tasks in support of Counter Insurgency, Counter Terror, Counter Criminality, and in specific circumstances of Countering Proliferation and Countering Weapons of Mass Destruction. Under those circumstances, SOF could also support proxies. Finally, SOF could assist the intervention force or other entities with Hostage Rescue and Recovery and Personnel Recovery.



#### 4.4.4 Expeditionary support operations



**Figure 18: SOF tasks and activities in expeditionary support operations**

Expeditionary support operations are about supporting proxies, and thereby conceptually different from expeditionary combat operations. The objective, however, is similar, i.e., to enforce the peace, stabilize a conflict or defend interests and return to stable conditions. Operations are carried out in a high-risk environment with the possibility of confrontation with a major power choosing the side of the opponent.

**Expeditionary support operations require Security Force Assistance to support local authorities and friendly entities in a hostile environment.**

Expeditionary support operations are demanding but less risky. They require Understand & Shape operations similar to expeditionary combat operations, but now mostly in support of proxies. During the conflict phase, SOF are engaged in Unconventional Warfare to support proxies. Expeditionary support operations further require Military Assistance in the form of Security Force Assistance to support local authorities and friendly entities in a hostile environment preceding, during and after the conflict phase. To protect deployed personnel and friendly entities, Hostage Rescue and Recovery and Personnel Recovery might be required. If stability is reinstated, SOF could contribute to preparing the withdrawal of all troops and/or prepare for a peacekeeping or stabilization mission.

#### 4.5 Sub-conclusion

Due to the global power shift, in the foreseeable future China and Russia will likely only support UN Security Council mandates for traditional peacekeeping missions. Other interventions within the purview of the second main task of Defense are unlikely to be covered by UN mandates. At the same time, China and Russia are more willing to carry out interventions themselves. Syria is a case in point where forces of NATO member states

confronted Russian forces. East-West confrontations could therefore occur outside the Article V context of the NATO-treaty or collective defense. This will put considerable political constraints on interventions. It is likely that intervention to promote the international rule of law to defend national interests will only take place if all other options are exhausted. Thus, it is likely that new crisis response operations will more often take place in a high-risk and complex environment. As the West will try to avoid friendly casualties and risky confrontations with adversaries, it will most likely opt for proxy-wars supported by SOF and air power.<sup>61</sup> Covert and clandestine operations could be the norm. SOF contributions to Understand & Shape operations will be crucial and should anticipate the dynamics of the conflict. Table 3 summarizes the anticipated evolution in the SOF core tasks for operations in support of the legal order towards 2030-35.

SOF Core tasks	Evolution in the current and future security landscape
Military Assistance	MA remains a crucial element of most operations in support of the legal order. The 'build and foster networks' functions within MA gain in importance as part of mature Understand & Shape activities. MA in support of proxies as part of expeditionary support operations, possibly transitioning into UW supporting proxies, gains in relative weight.
Direct Action	In stabilization operations, DA directed at spoilers of peace processes may become more salient as part of Counter Insurgency, Counter Terror and Counter Criminality activities. In expeditionary combat operations, DA may be required in the form of either Counter Insurgency or Unconventional Warfare.
Special Reconnaissance	SR is and will be crucial as part of Understand & Shape activities in all subtypes of operations in support of the legal order.

**Table 3: Evolution of SOF core tasks in operations in support of the legal order towards 2030-35**

<sup>61</sup> The US and the UK, drawing the same conclusion, have established the Security Force Assistance Brigades and the Specialised Infantry Group respectively. These are conventional units designed for partnering with host-nation forces.

## 5 SOF and Collective Defense

Since the annexation of the Crimea in 2014, the first main task of Defense, collective defense to protect NATO territory, is back on the agenda. After the Cold War ended in 1989 and the Soviet-Union collapsed in 1991, Europe has largely neglected NATO's collective defense task, despite nearly three decades of evidence that Russia was (and is) willing to use force to restore its sphere of influence. The First and Second Chechen wars (1994-96 and 1999–2009); the war in Dagestan (1999); and the interventions in Abkhazia (199–93), Transnistria (1992), Georgia (2008), Ukraine (2014–present) and Syria (2015–present) are cases in point. These have all resulted in frozen conflicts at the periphery of NATO territory, carrying the possibility of erupting at some point into 'hot' territorial conflicts.

Collective defense to protect NATO territory is back on the agenda.

### 5.1 Russia's concept of strategic deterrence

#### 5.1.1 A comprehensive approach to coercion

The Russia-Georgia war of 2008 demonstrated that Russia lacked the capabilities to quickly deal with a small and inferior adversary. In reaction, a modernization program for the Russian Armed Forces was launched. Part of the efforts was enhancing the Anti Access and Area Denial (A2/AD) capabilities aimed at preventing NATO to freely move troops through Europe and reinforce its eastern member states. In addition, A2/AD threatens *mare liberum* in the Baltic Seas, the Black Sea and the eastern Mediterranean, thus constituting a threat to Western vital interests.

How Russia thinks about dealing with NATO is explained in Russian military doctrine. The key innovation in Russian thinking is the broad concept of 'strategic deterrence', which reflects doubts about nuclear deterrence and stresses the need of a more comprehensive concept which offers more than tactical nuclear options.<sup>62</sup> Doctrinal innovations were also aimed at finding a solution for non-military warfare, such as sanctions and other threats to the Russian economic base, cyber and disinformation campaigns by foreign powers, and the consequences of the Color Revolutions in Ukraine and Georgia which could trigger similar reactions in Russia. For those reasons, the new Russian concept of strategic deterrence now includes offensive and defensive, military and non-military deterrent tools.

The Russian concept of strategic deterrence includes offensive and defensive, military and non-military deterrent tools.

The Russian National Security Strategy of December 2015 defines the concept of strategic deterrence as "interrelated political, military, military-technical, diplomatic, economic, informational, and other measures are being developed and implemented to ensure strategic deterrence and the prevention of armed conflicts. These measures are intended to prevent the use of armed force against Russia, and to protect its sovereignty and

<sup>62</sup> Kristin Ven Bruusgaard, [Russian Strategic Deterrence](#), 2016, p10.

territorial integrity. Strategic deterrence and the prevention of armed conflicts are achieved by maintaining the capacity for nuclear deterrence at a sufficient level, and the Russian Federation Armed Forces, other troops, and military formations and bodies at the requisite level of combat readiness.”<sup>63</sup>

Strategic deterrence is nothing less than a comprehensive approach to multi- and cross-domain coercion, one that combines all instruments of power in a single concept. The concept of strategic deterrence has greatly enhanced the policy options for Russian leaders. It involves proactive measures including disinformation campaigns, cyberattacks and the prepositioning of illegals and covert units. In a speech in 2019, General Gerazimov, Russia’s highest ranking military officer, argued that military force is still important, but that the role of non-military activities has become more important; and that he has directed military scientific research organizations to continue to improve these strategy concepts.<sup>64</sup>

The concept of strategic deterrence reflects the centralized and autocratic nature of the Russian political system in two facets. First, it displays the fact that Russia is ruled by an autocratic and partially kleptocratic elite, which is increasingly dependent on emphasizing international tensions and conflicts as an instrument of maintaining its domestic legitimacy. Second, it allows the Russian leadership to develop doctrines aimed at achieving unity in an effort that cannot be achieved in democracies. Strategic deterrence merges coercion with deterrence and can be applied in times of peace and war. In this context, the main task of Defense is ‘to ensure strategic deterrence, including the prevention of military conflicts’.<sup>65</sup> Alongside military power, other important factors allowing states to influence international politics take center stage, including economic, legal, technological, and IT capabilities. Using these capabilities to pursue geopolitical interests is detrimental to efforts to find ways to settle disputes and resolve existing international issues by peaceful means based on the norms of international law. The concept of strategic deterrence was labeled ‘hybrid warfare’ by analysts in the West. It is generally seen as the most pressing contemporary threat in both peacetime and wartime.

Nuclear weapons still play an important role in this thinking.<sup>66</sup> Reflecting its military weakness after the collapse of the Soviet Union, the Russian Federation was forced to increasingly rely on nuclear deterrence. Russia’s military weakness and worries about the threat NATO’s Ballistic Missile Defense could pose to its deterrence capability greatly influenced the debate among Russian analysts. During the latter half of the 2000s, failure to agree on the new counting rules and verification regime of the Strategic Offensive Reductions Treaty accelerated the debate on both sides. After the annexation of the

<sup>63</sup> *Russian National Security Strategy*, December 2015. Citation taken from [Translation of the Russian National Security Strategy](#).

<sup>64</sup> Dara Massicot, [Anticipating a new Russian Military doctrine in 2020](#), War on the Rocks, 2019.

<sup>65</sup> [Military Doctrine of the Russian Federation](#), 2014.

<sup>66</sup> Amy F. Woolf, *Nonstrategic Nuclear Weapons*, Washington: Congressional Research Service, 2017.

Crimea, President Putin made clear that nuclear weapons were a vital part of Russian deterrence. On August 14, 2014, he declared: “Our partners, regardless of the situations in their countries or their foreign policies, should always keep in mind that Russia is not to be messed with. I want to remind you that Russia is one of the largest nuclear powers. This is reality, not just words; moreover, we are strengthening our nuclear deterrence forces.”<sup>67</sup> The incorporation of nuclear weapons in Russian military doctrine makes the use of nuclear weapons on the battlefield more likely than during the Cold War. The termination of the INF-treaty in 2019 has lifted the ban on new delivery systems and nuclear weapons in Europe. NATO must take a nuclear battlefield into account. At the very least it requires the hardening of Western command, control, communications, intelligence and surveillance and reconnaissance (C4ISR) assets. A problem, however, is that few political and military leaders remember nuclear doctrine.

**The incorporation of nuclear weapons in Russian military doctrine makes their use on the battlefield more likely than during the Cold War.**



Figure 19: The RS-24 Yars claimed to be in violation of the START treaty. Photo: [Flickr](#) and [Wiki Commons](#)

### 5.1.2 The use of force

How does Russia envision the use of force if deterrence fails? There are two possibilities. This first is that Russia will embark on an all-out offensive. Although this option cannot be ruled out, it is highly unlikely. Huge maneuvers such as Russia’s Vostok 2018 war games involving 297,000 personnel, 36,000 pieces of heavy equipment and over 1,000 fixed wing

<sup>67</sup> Quoted by Alexey Arbatov, in *Understanding the US-Russian Nuclear Schism*, Survival Vol. 59 no. 2, April – May 2017, p33.

and rotary wing aircraft and 80 warships, appear to be a preparation of an attack from NATO rather than a preparation for all-out war against NATO. The main reason why all-out war is unlikely is the risk of nuclear war, the lack of Russian capabilities and a missing motivation. Nevertheless, all-out war could be the result of miscalculation and misperception. As the OSCE-conflict management mechanisms are no longer in place and arms control treaties such as the INF-agreement are either severely weakened or abolished, those risks are higher than during the Cold War.

**The more likely option is a strategy of limited action, with the bulk of the Russian armed forces as a deterrent and escalation control.**

The more likely option is a strategy of limited action, with the bulk of the Russian armed forces as a deterrent and escalation control. This limited option could involve cutting off sea trade routes. The main challenge here is sea mines together with anti-submarine warfare, submarines and other anti-access capabilities such as cruise missiles. Covert operations that cannot be easily attributed, such as the sabotage of undersea cables, are another possibility. As those cables transmit 97% of global communications and about \$10 trillion in daily financial transactions, the economies of NATO member states could be hit catastrophically. For this reason, Air Chief Marshall Sir Steward Peach, the Chief of the British Defense Staff, said that NATO should prioritize protecting the lines of communication.<sup>68</sup> Depending on the disruption of economies, the attack on undersea cables might constitute a NATO Article 5 situation, one that could ultimately require a very strong response.

Operations like these are relatively easy to execute and could be conducted jointly with a disinformation campaign. A strategy of limited action has the advantage that it may not trigger all-out war. This requires Russia to construct a narrative that justifies its military action. The Crimea scenario is a case in point. Russia could justify its aggression by arguing that fellow Russians abroad are bullied and threatened. In this case, pro-Russian politicians and organizations can be expected to protest a NATO-response.

A strategy of limited action can also be conducted against the territory of NATO and EU members but limited to strictly defined territories and targets. The Baltic States and Finland are the most likely targets. A series of war games by the RAND Corporation between summer 2014 and spring 2015 revealed that NATO cannot successfully defend the Baltic States: “using a wide range of expert participants in and out of uniform playing both sides, the longest it has taken Russian forces to reach the outskirts of the Estonian and/or Latvian capitals of Tallinn and Riga, respectively, is 60 hours.”<sup>69</sup> Such a rapid defeat leaves NATO with limited options, “all bad”. With 22 battalions deployed in its Western Military District (WMD), the correlation of forces is overwhelmingly in favor of Russia.

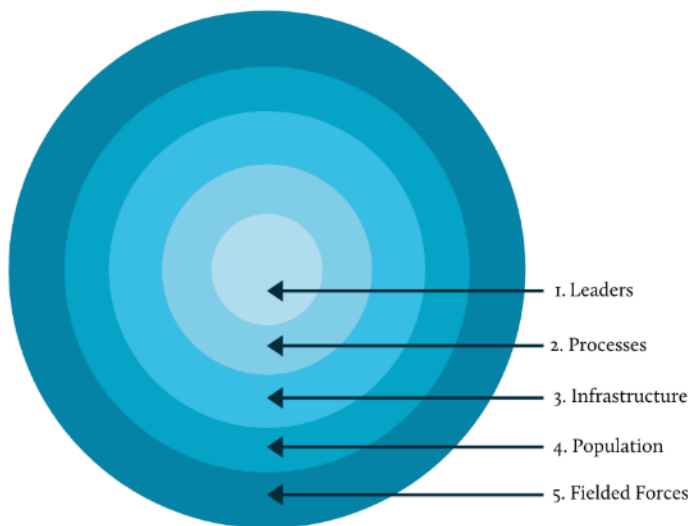
<sup>68</sup> [Russia a “risk” to undersea cables, defense chief warns](#), BBC, 15 December 2017.

<sup>69</sup> David A. Shlapak and Michael W. Johnson, [Reinforcing Deterrence on NATO’s Eastern Flank: Wargaming the Defense of the Baltics](#), Rand Corporation, 2016.



RAND concluded that a force of about seven brigades, including three heavy brigades and supported by air power might change Moscow's cost-benefit calculus.

Indeed, such a force could be perceived as a trip wire escalation to nuclear war, a risk that Russia is probably not willing to take over the Baltics. Moreover, when deterrence fails, trip wire forces might create time for negotiations about the return to the status quo *ante bellum*. This seems to be the most likely warfighting scenario for NATO to prepare for. How such a war could unfold is difficult to predict. Russia's military thinking sees the adversary as a system much like John Warden's five rings theory, see Figure 20. Each ring represented one of the enemy's centers of gravity which should be engaged simultaneously to create paralyses. Attacking the leadership, at the center of the system, should create total paralyses.



**Figure 20: Warden's view on the adversary as a layered system**

Consistent with new ideas about 'active defense', preemption and prevention are critical to seize the initiative. In the initial phase of the intervention, Russia must deflect and absorb NATO attacks with precision weapons and must conduct offensive strikes to paralyze NATO. The latter requires A2/AD operations to prevent reinforcement of the Baltic States, the attrition of deployed forces to create disorganization, attacks on critical military and economic targets that are vital for the adversary to function as an integrated system, and the destruction of C4ISR assets. The actual intervention will be preceded by disinformation campaigns, cyberattacks and the use of illegals and covert units in the NATO member states.

The actual intervention will be preceded by disinformation campaigns, cyberattacks and the use of illegals and covert units in the NATO member states.

The bulk of the Russian forces will be used as reinforcements, escalation control and intra war deterrence.<sup>70</sup> Escalation could take the form of preventing reinforcements from arriving in the theater of operations. This will involve the use of the growing arsenal of theater strike weapons, including cruise missiles, aero ballistic missiles, air launched missiles and new intermediate-range missiles which were until recently banned by the INF-treaty. The objective is not only to destroy reinforcements, but also disaggregating strikes on NATO's C4ISR assets, airfields and nuclear facilities. The objective is to paralyze NATO and to consolidate the limited gains.



**Figure 21: One of the newest “invincible weapons”, the Kh-47M2 hypersonic (Mach 10) conventional and nuclear armed missile. Photo: [Mil.ru](http://mil.ru)**

### 5.1.3 Challenges for NATO

In the kind of scenarios sketched above, NATO faces several structural problems in confronting Russia. The first is *maldeployment*, a Cold War term that referred to the imbalance of troops between NATO and the Warsaw Pact. Unfortunately, maldeployment is a more urgent challenge today than during the Cold War when Soviet numerical superiority was balanced by better quality of NATO's conventional forces and more nuclear flexibility. In those days, NATO had a layered defense along the inner German border and a nuclear strategy of deliberate escalation. But as today's military mobility in Europe is severely hindered because troops cannot be moved freely and the strategic depth of the Baltic States is very limited, the current 'correlation of forces'<sup>71</sup> in the Baltic area is

<sup>70</sup> Intra war deterrence refers to deterrence once a war has broken out to prevent further escalation of the war, possibly into the nuclear realm.

<sup>71</sup> Another Cold War term primarily used by Soviet analysts, as a sort of metric made up of everything that determined relative power: military might, economic power, public opinion, internal divisions, political allegiance, and diplomatic relations.

very unfavorable. Militarily, NATO's forward deployed troops plus the armed forces of the Baltic States are no match for the forces stationed in the Russian Western Military District.

A related problem is *readiness*. The state of NATO's readiness was revealed in the war games by RAND mentioned above. Another study found that only Britain, France and Germany could each deploy and sustain a heavy brigade.<sup>72</sup> Britain and France would be able to deploy and sustain a battalion sized combined arms battle group within a few weeks. It would take a few weeks for France to deploy a brigade and possibly more than a month for the Brits and the Germans. A positive development is NATO's decision at the 2014 Wales Summit to incorporate a Very High Readiness Joint Task Force (VJTF) within the overall NRF structure. Simultaneously, the NRF was increased to 40,000 providing NATO with flexible air, land, maritime and Special Forces packages. Nevertheless, the number of high readiness forces remains limited. Reinforcing the Baltic States raises important questions on crisis stability. For example, waiting to reinforce the Baltic States until an escalating crisis mounts will most likely trigger preventive or preemptive attacks by Russia and will thus weaken crisis stability and lower the nuclear threshold.

The third challenge is *deployability*, the ability to move troops in Europe. In times of crises, member states are likely to remove all hurdles such as border controls and infrastructure issues to be able to quickly move troops to the Baltic States. But removing such blocks during an escalating crisis will weaken crisis stability. Thus, NATO needs a military Schengen Zone; one that allows the free movement of troops in Europe to ensure that units and equipment arrive in the right time and at the right place. Military mobility will be dealt with in the new EU-program on Permanent Structured Cooperation (PESCO).

*Access* is a related and final challenge. Enhanced military mobility is useless if NATO does not have access. NATO is seriously challenged by Russian A2/AD capabilities that could affect NATO's response in both Article 5 and sub-Article 5 situations. A2/AD consists of a vast array of Russian offensive and defensive military capabilities against the enemy's ground, naval and air forces, including capabilities for electronic warfare, that together constitute 'bubbles', 'bastions' or exclusion zones around the Kola peninsula, Kaliningrad, the Crimea and western Syria. Effective A2/AD prevents NATO from deploying forces in the Scandinavian waters and the Baltic States and will deny NATO air superiority.<sup>73</sup> Consequently, both classical deterrence and collective defense can only be strengthened when NATO decides to modernize counter-A2/AD abilities.

<sup>72</sup> Michael Shurkin, *The Abilities of the British, French, and German Armies to Generate and Sustain Armored Brigades in the Baltics*, (Rand Corporation), 2016.

<sup>73</sup> Much has been written about the A2/AD challenge. A good overview is Stephan Fruhling and Guillaume Lasconjarias, *NATO, A2/AD and the Kaliningrad Challenge*, *Survival*, vol. 58, no. 2, April – May 2016, pp95–116.

There are strong indications that NATO cannot cope with cross-domain coercion and strategic deterrence, which can be summarized as war via the 5Ds: de-stabilization, disinformation, strategic deception, disruption and destruction.

In sum: there are strong indications that NATO cannot cope with cross-domain coercion and strategic deterrence, which can be summarized as war via the 5Ds: de-stabilization, disinformation, strategic deception, disruption and destruction.<sup>74</sup> Understanding cross-domain coercion requires the kind of doctrinal thinking and 'Understand & Shape' planning that is largely absent in NATO. And as counter hybrid warfare requires the concerted use of all instruments of power, the EU is better equipped. Consequently, Understand & Shape activities should be executed by NATO, the EU, individual member states and fielded forces.



Figure 22: NATO Secretary General Stoltenberg attends NATO's annual nuclear exercise at Volkel airbase alongside Dutch Defence Minister Bijleveld. Photo: [NATO.int](https://www.nato.int)

## 5.2 How can Russia be deterred?

How to deter possible Russian aggression as described above? Deterrence theory in the West is primarily seen as a military strategy for conflict prevention and escalation control if conflicts break out. It is about symmetric responses during crises and war in a clearly defined theater of operations and largely ignores non-military aspects of power. An

<sup>74</sup> Globsec, *NATO Adaptation Initiative, Future War NATO? From Hybrid War to Hyper War via Cyber War*, 2017, p11.



additional weakness that will be exploited by an adversary lies in the political sphere and is linked to Alliance solidarity. Addressing these two vulnerabilities requires ‘Understand & Shape’-thinking in the context of collective defense.

The key question is what to deter. A limited military attack on the Baltic States is a remote possibility, but one which military planners must consider. This requires classical, straightforward deterrence with strong conventional forces backed up by nuclear weapons. But what about the fabricated unrest in the Baltic States or in one of the frozen conflicts in Russia’s sphere of influence, as part of a broader plan to establish a neutral buffer zone between Russia and NATO? This will not necessarily trigger Article 5 of the NATO treaty, and requires a completely different approach. The same holds true for subversion aimed at weakening Transatlantic and European solidarity. This latter scenario could precede the first two scenarios or could play out simultaneously

**What to deter: A limited military attack on the Baltic States, fabricated unrest to create a neutral buffer zone between Russia and NATO, subversion aimed at weakening Transatlantic and European solidarity?**

To deter Russia, NATO has three theoretical options:

- **Conventional deterrence** is NATO’s preferred option. It is, however, difficult to understand how deterrence by denial can be credible if insufficient numbers of troops are available to defend the Baltic States. To credibly deter by denial, European NATO member states need to address the four challenges mentioned in §5.1. In addition, the US will need to deploy an additional division in Poland. In the future, elements of the US Prompt Global Strike concept could provide extra flexibility.<sup>75</sup> The same holds for conventionally armed ballistic missiles and cruise missiles deployed in Europe.
- **Nuclear response.** If conventional deterrence is not credible, the nuclear threshold will be lowered. In addition, the vulnerability of European and American dual capable aircraft for A2/AD might lower the threshold for a strategic nuclear response. As this is an unattractive prospect, renewed interests in intermediate range nuclear and conventional missiles in Europe can be expected. Another trigger for such a debate is the deployment by Russia of dual capable missiles in Kaliningrad and the development of new intermediate range, nuclear capable cruise missiles that could violate the INF treaty.
- **Asymmetric deterrence.** In case of aggression against the Baltic States, NATO could refrain from fighting Russia in the Baltic States but respond asymmetrically with all power instruments available. This could also involve deterrence by punishment, i.e. military and non-military attacks on the opponent’s C4ISR assets, military

<sup>75</sup> Prompt Global Strike is a concept the US military has been developing since the start of the 21<sup>st</sup> Century. Its goal is to create the capability to attack targets anywhere in the world at very short notice. The weapons most able to do this, include intercontinental ballistic missiles (ICBMs) and sea-launched ballistic missiles (SLBMs).

installations, decision-making procedures, but also limited nuclear strikes to convince Russia to terminate hostilities.

Part of the effort to retain the integrity of the NATO territory are forward deployed forces. However, the current size is limited and cannot cope with the forces deployed at the other side of the border. As deterrence by denial is impossible and reinforcements are unlikely to arrive in time or arrive at all, forward deployed forces serve as trip wires. They should be strong enough to create time and opportunities for negotiations and a return to the status quo *ante bellum* and restore deterrence.

### 5.3 The military rise of China

NATO's collective defense efforts are designed with Russia in mind. However, with the rise of China its military capabilities should be considered as well. Due to the major global power shifts, it can be expected that China will become a military worry for NATO too. This will certainly be the case if NATO member states become involved in US-activities to counter China's influence in Asia. Conceptually, the threat of China is partly like the threat posed by a resurgent Russia. Hybrid warfare and A2/AD also figure prominently in China's military thinking. At the same time, China is building much stronger maritime capabilities than Russia. This already is a serious threat for the US in the Indo-Pacific region. Chinese naval vessels are also regularly taking part in Russian exercises in the Mediterranean and the Baltic Sea. However, since a direct military confrontation with China in NATO's area of responsibility – Europe and Europe's periphery – is unlikely in the period up to 2030-35, we do not elaborate here on China as a direct military threat for NATO.

#### Through the Belt and Road Initiative China is gaining economic and political influence in Europe.

More importantly, through the Belt and Road Initiative China is gaining economic and political influence in Europe. As an example, the impact of China's debt trap policy should not be underestimated. As Sri Lanka could not pay back its debt its government was forced to make available naval facilities to China. Sri Lanka is just one example of a country that is being used to enhance China's military footprint. The same could happen to European countries joining the BRI.

Considerable risks for Europe's security over time stem from China's heavy involvement in Africa. As Foreign Affairs concludes, "far from being a distraction from great-power competition, Africa promises to become one of its important theaters."<sup>76</sup> A scramble for Africa is underway, with Russia and China in particular ramping up economic and military activity on the continent at the same time as the US is scaling back. China established its first overseas military base in Djibouti in 2017 and spends vast sums on infrastructure projects to secure access to resources and to buy goodwill and votes in international organizations such as the United Nations. China is now Africa's biggest trade partner, with

<sup>76</sup> Marcus Hicks, Kyle Atwell, and Dan Collini, [Great-Power Competition Is Coming to Africa](#), Foreign Affairs, March 4, 2021.



Sino-African trade topping \$200 billion per year.<sup>77</sup> According to McKinsey, over 10,000 Chinese-owned firms are currently operating throughout the African continent, and the value of Chinese business there since 2005 amounts to more than \$2 trillion.<sup>78</sup> In the long run, these investments will constitute interests that China needs to protect. Ultimately, this could justify the use of force. Conflicting interests could result in clashes between Chinese and Western armed forces. For that reason and to reduce risk for its deployed forces China might also start supporting proxies for the defense of its interests.

#### 5.4 Roles, tasks and activities of SOF

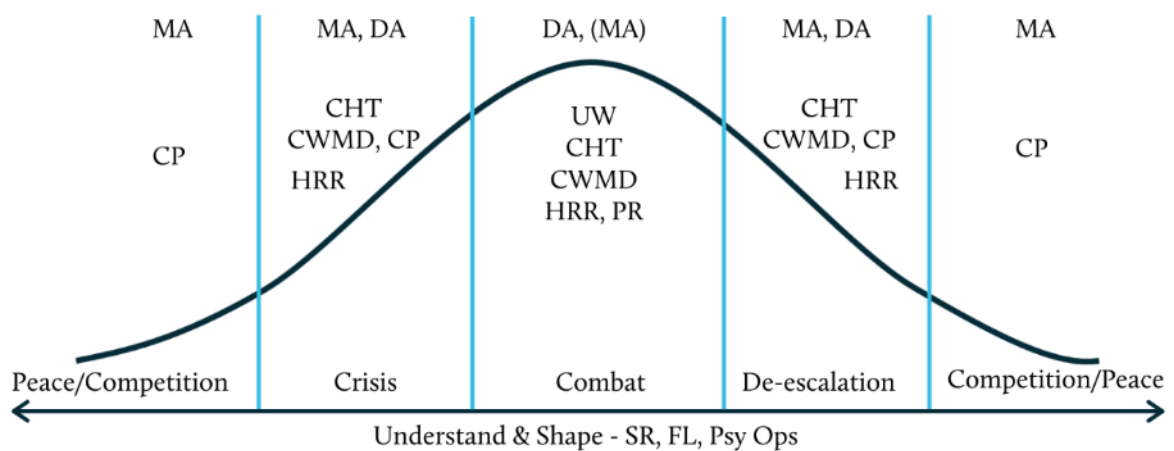


Figure 23: SOF-tasks and activities in collective defense / interstate war

SOF will play an important part in both defense and deterrence, as depicted in Figure 23. The following roles are applicable for SOF.

- In the **competition phase**, SOF contributes to **deterrence and resilience** by shaping the potential conflict environment, enhancing readiness and deployability, increasing situational awareness by gathering intelligence, and influencing the opponent's behavior and building networks of allies.
- In the **crisis phase**, SOF contributes to **deterrence aimed at escalation control** and enhancing resilience, set conditions of the main force and enable force integration, e.g., by providing the first Command & Control backbone.
- In the **combat phase**, SOF should enable deployed troops and **engage strategically** by conducting deep operations, enabling resistance, weakening the opponent's unity in command so that he cannot achieve unity in effort and influence the behavior of the opponent's population.
- In the **de-escalation phase**, SOF contributes to **restoring deterrence** and weakening the adversary's ability to escalate.

<sup>77</sup> <https://www.sais-cari.org/data-china-africa-trade>

<sup>78</sup> <https://www.mckinsey.com/featured-insights/middle-east-and-africa/the-closest-look-yet-at-chinese-economic-engagement-in-africa>

- In **peacetime**, SOF should again contribute to **deterrence**.
- Throughout all phases, SOF contribute to enhancing situational awareness and influencing the behavior of the population and the perpetrators (Understand & Shape).

The classic SOF tasks Direct Action, Military Assistance, and Special Reconnaissance remain as important as ever. The activities Counter Hybrid Threats, Counter WMD, and particularly Unconventional Warfare will gain weight. Much like Understand & Shape pervades all conflict phases, hybrid threats are likely to occur throughout the conflict curve.

SOF tasks will be performed in support of deployed troops with traditional SR and DA against opposing forces. This remains important and should not be put into question. We suggest that these tasks should be complemented by operations aimed at the opponent's state as a system as depicted in Warden's 'rings' (Figure 20). This requires a hybrid strategy for engaging all centers of gravity simultaneously. The objective is to paralyze the system. This requires a new doctrinal approach.

DA could play an immensely important role in all rings of the system, involving operations in support of deployed troops.

DA could play an immensely important role in all rings of the system, involving operations in support of deployed troops such as guiding close air support to its target, sabotage, countering the threat of weapons of mass destruction and force protection.

- Hybrid threats by a resurgent Russia requires SOF to emphasize non-kinetic operations aimed at enhancing resilience at home and weakening the opponent's morale by creating disorder in the opponent's territory. SOF should do what the Russian leadership fears most, namely exploit its weak spots by creating disorder or chaos. Autocracies need support from the population that can only be obtained by providing security and prosperity. An important objective of SOF operations is to contribute to the image that the regime is not capable of fulfilling these basic needs. Creating chaos requires a range of activities including targeted killings, psychological operations, sabotage, subversion, cyber operations, information campaigns and the use of anti-regime proxies. SOF may also directly contribute to derailing economic and societal processes by attacking critical parts of the economy and society as a whole. The Behavior Dynamics Methodology mentioned could be instrumental in creating unrest behind lines. Most of the activities can be labeled as UW through CHT.
- As part of their collective defense efforts, several NATO allies are developing a Resistance Operating Concept to counter a Russian intervention. This could include SOF to contribute to UW efforts on NATO territory to fight a foreign threat.
- Degrading enemy forces requires SOF activities behind enemy lines (both within and outside the actual theater of war), including precision destruction and sabotage of C4-nodes, intel nodes, logistics, key infrastructure needed for troop movement,

integrated air defenses, A2/AD assets. Other activities are Counter WMD and targeted killings of enemy combatants. All these activities partly aim to shape the battlefield. More important is the weakening of the adversary on his own territory. These activities can be labeled as UW, CP and CWMD.

- SOF could support major combat operations in support of the joint force commander. This could include offensive sabotage activities versus, as an example, hypersonic weapons in support of asymmetric deterrence.
- All operations must take electronic warfare in combination with cyber operations (called Cyber and electromagnetic activities or CEMA) into account. EW has long been a cornerstone of Russian doctrine, and cyber operations are increasingly part of warfighting. With an increasingly assertive Russia, countering CEMA will become an increasingly important SOF-activity to protect friendly C4ISR assets and the destruction of opponents. Countering CEMA could include the protection of undersea cables.

Special Reconnaissance will remain important for the support of deployed troops but is indispensable for engaging Russia as a system and deterrence. SR activities are:

- Mapping the enemy system as part of Understand & Shape;
- Preparing for asymmetric deterrence by gathering information regarding C4ISR assets, military installations, decision-making procedures;
- Providing intel for proxies.

Finally, Military Assistance will also get a new meaning:

- Support and / or advise to proxies inside or outside the opponent's territory.

In all cases, the legal (and political) basis is the right for self-defense as codified in Article 5 of the NATO-treaty and article 42.7 TEU.

The doctrinal challenge is to spell out how the political-strategic choices of Russia can be manipulated with a broad range of instruments of power, including political, diplomatic military, economic, legal, informational, and other instruments. This approach is the Western equivalent of the Russian concept of strategic deterrence and cross-domain coercion. The concept must explain how Western forces could defend against Russian cross-domain coercion or hybrid threats through asymmetric response as well.

Asymmetric responses are not only about military responses, but also about NATO cross-domain coercion with other instruments of power. In case of an Article 5 contingency, maldeployment, the lack of readiness and deployability, as well as the desire to minimize destruction on a NATO member state's territory, an answer could be found through an asymmetric attack on high value targets. For example, intervention in the Baltic States can be answered by attacks on Russia's military bases in the Crimea with standoff weapons, devastating economic sanctions and cyberattacks, electronic warfare aimed at destroying

the adversary's capabilities for C4ISR and ultimately the demonstrative use of nuclear weapons. A devastating Russian attack on undersea cables could trigger a similar asymmetric response.

In sub-Article 5 situations, the number of options is larger. Attacking or blocking its lifelines or interconnectivities will damage or even destroy the Russian economy and is likely to change the strategic calculus of its leadership. Coercion requires the concerted use of 'instruments of disruption' for blocking Russia's free flow of forces, goods, data, and economic and financial transactions. This could require the use of force, sanctions, boycotts, cyberattacks, the banning of foreign direct investments and state-owned enterprises, the disruption of financial networks, denying imports and exports of raw materials and energy, the blocking of physical transport links, restricting the movement of people and information operations.

### 5.5 Sub-conclusion

SOF will have to prepare for traditional tasks and activities in support of a joint force commander and major combat operations. At the same time, they must adapt to the new security situation and the strategy and tactics of the adversary. This requires the execution of completely new concepts such as asymmetric deterrence. In practice, asymmetric deterrence means that economic sanctions can be answered by cyberattacks; fake news and propaganda by targeted cyber strikes and blocking of the Internet; and political interference by targeted sanctions. This, however, requires a degree of strategic thinking that is absent in the Western world. The same holds true for collective defense. SOF must facilitate trip-wire forces, collect damage and weaken the adversary. This could

**Asymmetric deterrence requires a degree of strategic thinking that is absent in the Western world.**

require highly risky and politically highly controversial covert operations behind enemy lines such as sabotage, creating unrest and collecting intelligence.

The classic SOF tasks MA, DA and SR remain as important as ever. Within the palette of underlying activities, Counter Hybrid Threats, Counter WMD and particularly Unconventional Warfare will gain weight. Much like Understand & Shape pervades all conflict phases, hybrid threats are likely to occur in all phases of the conflict. Traditional SR and DA against opposing forces, may have to be complemented by operations aimed at the opposite state as a system, requiring a hybrid strategy for engaging all centers of gravity simultaneously. The objective is to paralyze the system as a whole. Table 4 summarizes the anticipated evolution in the SOF core tasks for collective defense towards 2030-35.

SOF Core tasks	Evolution in the current and future security landscape
Military Assistance	MA is likely to increasingly encompass advisory and support activities to proxies inside or outside the opponent's territory.
Direct Action	DA in support of deployed troops becomes even more important in the context of cluttered and contested conflict theatres with sabotage of adversarial A2/AD assets and counter-CEMA as key activities. DA will shift in shape and substance as part of Counter Hybrid Threats and particularly Unconventional Warfare to exploit weak spots and create disorder in adversarial systems throughout all conflict phases including in support of deterrence.
Special Reconnaissance	SR in support of deployed troops remains critically important for engaging adversaries' systems by mapping capabilities including C4ISR assets, military installations, decision-making procedures as part of Understand & Shape; and providing that intel both to own NATO forces and possibly to proxy actors.

**Table 4: Evolution of SOF core tasks in collective defense towards 2030-35**

## 6 SOF and Contributions to Domestic Security

In this Chapter, the possible future role of SOF in national scenarios is discussed. Special operators take part in the Special Intervention Service (*Dienst Speciale Interventies*, DSI), which resides under the National Police and operates under Police Law. The DSI is called upon in case of acts of terror and other violent incidents that require law enforcement for which regular police units are inadequately equipped. But with internal (national) and external (international) security merging, visible in hybrid threats against national targets, the role of SOF in domestic security may expand. This would constitute a clear paradigm shift, even if it is historically far from unprecedented.

### 6.1 The fusion of internal and external security

During the Cold War, Host Nation Support constituted an import role for Defense. In the case of a conflict with the Warsaw Pact, national forces were to support the disembarkment and safe movement of North-American NATO reinforcements from Rotterdam harbor towards Germany. Aerial attacks to disrupt the reinforcement of forward deployed troops required air defenses. The possibility of illegals and Spetsnaz (Russian special forces units) carrying out sabotage and intelligence operations was also considered. But after the end of the Cold War, in the absence of a strategic threat to the NATO-area, Host Nation Support and other protective measures against possible subversive activities on national soil were no longer deemed necessary. For SOF, activities in the context of the third main task of Defense were limited to operations in the Caribbean part of the Kingdom and to the DSI contribution in countering acts of terror and hostage situations.

Similarly, the role of the Armed Forces in national critical infrastructure protection, traditionally considered part of the first main task of Defense, dwindled in the absence of a clear threat. During the 1990s, peace support operations led to short-lived discussions on asymmetric threats to the homeland. It was expected that crisis management operations outside the NATO area could inflict threats to the troop sending countries. But this notion did not result in drastic measures. Consequently, the national role of the Armed Forces narrowed to the support of civil authorities when disaster relief or crisis management required surplus capacity. As an example, during the 2010s we saw increased focus on terrorism, especially on the use of chemical, biological and radiological weapons, with specialized units of the Dutch Armed Forces playing a crucial part in the aftermath of a chemical or bacteriological attack. In practice, this threat did not materialize.

But with the distinction between the first and the third main task of Defense blurring, we now see a paradigm shift. Support to civil authorities for disaster relief and crisis management is still important, but due to hybrid treats / grey zone operations, both the defense of the Netherlands and the support to civil authorities will change fundamentally. As has

Due to hybrid treats / grey zone operations, the defense of the Netherlands and the support to civil authorities will change fundamentally.



been argued before, Russia's concept of strategic deterrence – or hybrid warfare in Western parlance – is about interrelated political, military, military-technical, diplomatic, economic, informational, and other measures to prevent all-out armed conflict. Strategic deterrence is implemented in peacetime (or in the competition phase, in the terminology of the conflict continuum of Figure 8) in the form of disinformation campaigns, cyberattacks and the deployment of illegals and covert units on NATO's soil. Economic, legal, technological and ICT capabilities are employed alongside military power. Analysts in the West have concluded that hybrid warfare currently is the most pressing threat, both in peacetime and during crisis and conflict.

In addition to traditional methods of diplomacy, the concept of soft power has become an integral part of Russia's efforts to achieve foreign policy objectives. Soft power is aimed at the civil societies of the West and could be strengthened by (dis)information and communication. The concept was introduced in the Russian Foreign Policy Concept of 2013 as a complement to diplomatic methods. However, attempts to enhance Russia's soft power with medical aid to Italy and other countries during the Corona crisis failed miserably, largely because the spread of fake news and conspiracy theories undermined Russian attempts to enhance its soft power. The reason was that in Russian thinking the concept of soft power was linked to views on 'controlled chaos'. President Putin first used that term in 2012 when he argued that the West was using various methods for destabilizing Russia. Controlled chaos adequately describes the nature of modern coercion as an ongoing effort to destabilize the opponent through subversion, information operations and economic means in peacetime and a combination of traditional or regular and irregular warfare operations in wartime by regular forces alongside rebels, criminal gangs, terrorists and secret operations with SOF and Spetsnaz.

**The spread of fake news and conspiracy theories undermined Russian attempts to enhance its soft power.**

Nevertheless, this episode raises questions about NATO member states' ability to deter and defend against cross-domain coercion – a conclusion also drawn in the context of collective defense in §5.1.3. In peacetime, destabilization activities as part of ongoing efforts to weaken NATO politically are a fact of life. Non-political crises, such as the outbreak of Covid-19, are used to step up the efforts to destabilize and paralyze. The aid provided to Italy during the Corona crisis demonstrated that Russia was indeed trying to enhance its soft power. The increase of information operations is another example. During the Corona crisis, a remarkable increase of the spreading of fake news and disinformation was observed by <https://euvsdisinfo.eu/>. The GRU, the Russian intelligence agency, is linked to assassinations of Russian nationals in NATO countries. This provides a message not only to enemies of the Russian state, but also to NATO member states. Russia ignores their territorial integrity and is even willing to carry out operations with the use of biological weapons. The same holds true for different forms of

cyberattacks. All these incidents reinforce expert conclusions that new doctrinal thinking in response to strategic deterrence, soft power and controlled chaos is urgently required.



**Figure 24: The poisoning of Sergei and Yulia Skripal in Salisbury (UK). Photo: [Flickr](#)**

If tensions between Russia and NATO mount, a further increase of undermining activities is to be expected. Illegals and undercover agents or Spetsnaz, deployed as sleeper cells, may increase their activities. Their first focus would be intelligence gathering, but direct action cannot be ruled out. The goal is to weaken the political system and to create distrust between the government and the population. This should influence decision making, result in weakening resistance and, ultimately, in a crumbling resolve of NATO. When the tensions turn into an actual crisis or conflict, a marked increase of subversive

**Hybrid tactics aimed at the Netherlands effectively blur the distinction between the first and the third main task of Defense.**

activities is likely, including the sabotage of critical infrastructure. If troops and equipment arriving in the harbor of Rotterdam or from storage sites are moved eastwards, one could expect attacks with intermediate range forces to prevent their movement.

Hybrid tactics aimed at the Netherlands effectively blur the distinction between the first and the third main task of Defense. During a crisis with Russia, only a small portion of the land forces will be deployed in the Baltic States as tripwires for collective defense and deterrence. Indeed, most forces will be available for domestic security. In various realistic scenarios these forces will indeed be deployed domestically, not only as a backup for civil authorities, but also for Host Nation Support and to counter possible subversive actions and attacks against critical infrastructure.

Improving defensive measures requires societal resilience, the ability to withstand and recover quickly from any plausible shock and stress, and to maintain continuity of

services. An EU study called for enhancing resilience by strengthening “critical infrastructure networks (e.g. energy, transportation, space), protecting public health and food security, enhancing cybersecurity, tackling radicalization and violent extremism, strengthening strategic communication, developing relevant defense capabilities, and improving relations with third countries.”<sup>79</sup> Enhancing resilience requires close cooperation between the public and private sectors to protect, for example, cyber infrastructure. Critical national command & control networks and nodes should be hardened, as the use of nuclear weapons in a conflict with Russia cannot be ruled out.

A final note on China. Like Russia, China uses hybrid tactics for achieving its political goals. Chinese defense intellectuals also wrote extensively about hybrid tactics. In 1999, the study *Unrestricted Warfare*, written by two Chinese colonels, appeared.<sup>80</sup> They argued that the US and their allies are unquestionably superior following the end of the Cold War, which implies that they can use military force at their own convenience. Consequently, China must try to deny the interventionist his strategic objectives by targeting the weak spots mentioned in §4.3. Thus, the Chinese colonels concluded that different forms of warfare should be applied against the West, including economic warfare and subversion. Without denying the possibility that China could become a significant hybrid threat in the period up to 2030-35, mirroring what has been argued in §5.3, in our analysis here we concentrate on Russia as the more near, clear and present threat.

## 6.2 The Special Interventions Service

In the Netherlands, the Special Interventions Service DSI is the designated unit for domestic counter terror and hostage rescue operations. The DSI consists of four subunits. The Unit Arrest Teams is deployed for the arrest of armed suspects and in other life-threatening situations. The Unit Intervention is deployed for arresting terror suspects and neutralizing ongoing terrorist attacks. The Unit Intervention Marines specializes, among others, in countering large-scale, offensive and complex terrorist operations, and is called upon if the capacity of the Unit Intervention is insufficient. Finally, the unit Expertise and Support carries out sniper operations, police negotiations and support with drones.

The DSI’s integration of military and police units goes further than it does in other Western countries. In the DSI, military and police special operators operate together daily in the streets of Dutch cities. While the integration process has not been without challenges, both organizations contribute to the success of the joint venture with their unique institutional qualities. In this working concept, cross-fertilization is not theory but daily practice.<sup>81</sup>

**The DSI’s integration of military and police units goes further than it does in other Western countries.**

<sup>79</sup> Patryk Pawlak, *Countering Hybrid Threats: EU-NATO Cooperation*, 2017.

<sup>80</sup> Q. Liang en W. Xiangsui, *Unrestricted Warfare*, February 1999.

<sup>81</sup> *What Special Operations Forces Might Learn from the Police: Three Observations*, CTX Vol. 10, No. 2, September 2020.

NLD SOF contribute to all four subunits. The Unit Intervention Marines of the DSI is the M-squadron of NL MARSOF. The operators of the M-squadron wear military uniforms at their base, but police uniforms during operations. They have identification cards for both organizations and are fully integrated with police officers in small teams for everyday operations. The Special Security Missions Brigade (*Brigade Speciale Beveiligingsopdrachten*, BSB) of the Royal Netherlands Marechaussee operates as the Arrest Teams within the DSI framework. The BSB operates both domestically and abroad. Domestically, the BSB also provides personal security and security advice, observation capacity for law enforcement and intelligence services. Abroad, the BSB is tasked by the ministry of Foreign Affairs to secure embassy posts and to protect VIPs. The BSB is also tasked by various ministries to protect VIPs on foreign visits. Lastly, the BSB performs information gathering operations and situational assessments in support of all other BSB tasks.

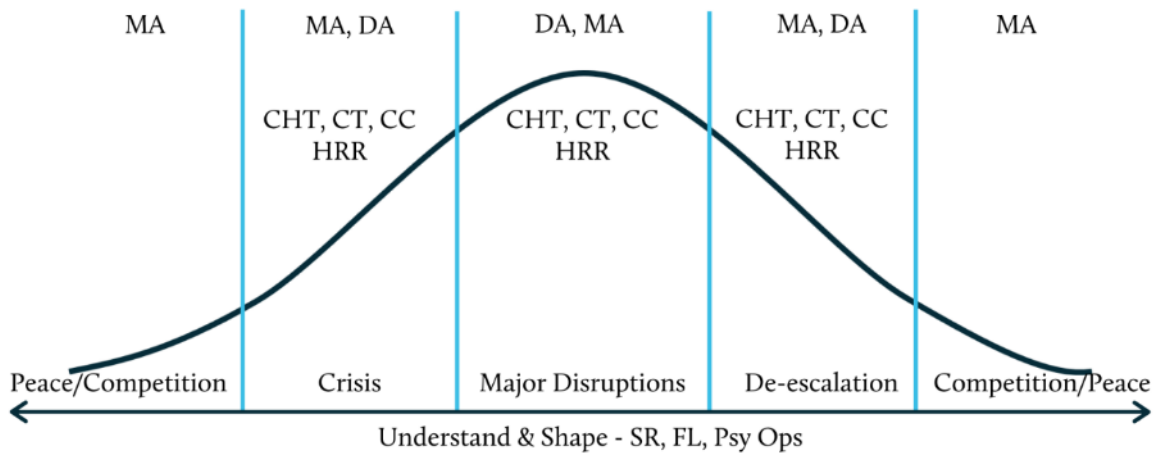
At present, the BSB's international presence and information position is not structurally used to support NLD SOF operations abroad. Furthermore, the DSI assigned tasks do not cover countering hybrid threats. As these threats are likely to increase, there is a potential vacuum that needs to be addressed. These issues are further elaborated in §8.1.4.



Figure 25: BSB training on the Waal. Photo: [Wiki Commons](#)



### 6.3 Roles, tasks and activities of SOF



**Figure 26: SOF-tasks and activities in domestic security**

The role of SOF in domestic security can be defined as follows (see Figure 26):

- In the **competition phase**, SOF mostly contribute to situational awareness by supporting intelligence operations and other information activities, as well as enhancing societal resilience in support of national authorities. Preparations in peacetime should also involve the creating of networks with units under civil control. During this phase SOF could also contribute to deterring hybrid threats by conducting counter hybrid operations.
- In the **crisis phase**, SOF intelligence and other information activities could support national decision making. During this phase, SOF could contribute to national resilience through providing Military Assistance to national authorities. SOF could also contribute to combatting hybrid threats by conducting Counter Hybrid Threats. Finally, SOF may contribute to Host Nation Support.
- In the **major disruptions phase**, SOF will focus on threat reduction and de-escalation through counter hybrid warfare. This could require Direct Action, Military Assistance, Special Reconnaissance and other activities. Also, in this phase SOF could support the joint force through Host Nation Support and other activities.
- In **peacetime**, the role of SOF is limited to Military Assistance to civil authorities and its activities as part of the DSI.
- SOF contribute to Understand & Shape in **all phases** with the core task Special Reconnaissance and the activities Psychological Operations and Faction Liaison tailored to the domestic environment.
- In **all phases**, SOF contribute to Hostage Rescue and Recovery.

Counter Hybrid Threats will be an important activity in the context of Military Assistance. Under normal circumstances, MA requires partnering with local units and civil authorities, necessary to conduct SOF operations during an escalating crisis. Direct Action involves the arrest or targeted killing of illegals and other foreign agents. This could be part of ongoing MA and/or could take the form of an ongoing Counter Terrorism campaign or a campaign

**Counter Hybrid Threats will be an important activity in the context of Military Assistance.**

to Counter Violent Extremists (CVE). Another option is red teaming for national security forces. Special Reconnaissance is aimed at finding and tracking perpetrators.

Although a discussion on the legal implications is beyond the scope of this paper, we note that domestic deployment of SOF under the DSI framework is limited to interventions. All other SOF activities – such as intel gathering, detection, cyber activities, influencing operations, as well as all preparations preceding possible SOF activities – are fully confined to support of the national police services, i.e. reactive rather than pro-active. This implies a very narrow use of SOF's strengths, with a more comprehensive use requiring new legislation.<sup>82</sup>

In Chapter 8 we further discuss possible implications and choices for military SOF traditionally focused on operations abroad, and the potential division of labor with domestic specialized units for counter terrorism and other activities that can also be conducted by SOF.

## 6.4 Sub-conclusion

Due to the changing nature of the threat, the distinction between the first and third main task of Defense has become blurred. Traditional fears of large scale, strategic attacks on NATO territory are complemented and indeed partly replaced by hybrid threats against individual member states, both as a challenge and in combination with more conventional military threats. Sub-Article V hybrid threats are aimed at weakening NATO's collective resolve. Hybrid threats may involve a military, usually covert, component. Moreover, in the more serious scenarios adversarial nuclear threats should be considered, especially those aimed at creating black outs of military C4ISR assets and national civil C3 structures. Thus, SOF will play an increasingly important role in the domestic security of the Netherlands, both for intelligence gathering and direct action against hostile elements.

In general, the idea of SOF contributing through its core tasks to domestic security is likely to gain in prominence. The link with collective defense in a sub-Article 5 situation is crucial. Table 5 summarizes the anticipated evolution in the SOF core tasks for domestic security towards 2030-35.

<sup>82</sup> Note that during a crisis that affects Dutch vital interests, emergency legislation with special responsibilities for the Minister of Defense may become active, opening up wider possibilities for military – including SOF – deployment.



SOF Core tasks	Evolution in the current and future security landscape
Military Assistance	Demands for MA are set to increase, particular in the context of countering hybrid threats. This entails working in close partnership with local units and civil authorities in the Netherlands in order conduct SOF operations during an escalating crisis.
Direct Action	SOF may be called upon for DA, which may involve the arrest or even the targeted killing of foreign agents illegally operating on national soil as well as terrorist organizations. This could be part of ongoing MA and/or of a Counter Terrorism campaign.
Special Reconnaissance	The need for SR aimed at finding and tracking perpetrators on national soil is likely to materialize.

**Table 5: Evolution of SOF core tasks in domestic security towards 2030-35**

## 7 Future SOF Silhouettes

In the previous Chapters, we have discussed the major changes taking place in the security environment. We concluded that these changes have major implications for the way SOF execute their core tasks and activities, even if these tasks and activities in essence remain largely valid. In this Chapter, however, we discuss future SOF rationale by using an unorthodox approach which may preclude a radical departure from (some of the) existing roles and tasks. Many reflections on defense policy or capability changes follow a temporal logic that starts from the recent past and present and then projects what could or should be improved into ‘the’ anticipated future. This Chapter sets out to ideate some truly different ‘right-to-left’ (see Figure 4) ‘silhouettes’ for possible future layouts of SOF and to discuss some of their implications.<sup>83</sup> In doing so, the Chapter complements the Chapters 4 through 6 that represent a more evolutionary ‘left-to-right’ (as per Figure 3) approach.

### 7.1 From SOF to SPEX

A temptation in foresight that is often underestimated is that we tend to project current conceptual and definitional boundaries onto the future. An historical analogy might illustrate this point. A representative of the Dutch cavalry forces around 1900, when thinking about the future of his military community, would undoubtedly have given the horse the central place in his definition of ‘cavalry’. He would almost certainly have been aware of many of the ominous changes taking place at that time in military affairs in general and in horse-centric warfare in specific. The changes in the offense-defense balance with the advent of the breech-loading gun and the ensuing dramatically increased vulnerability of horses, for instance, would mean that better forms of horse protection would certainly have been one of the design elements into which he would want to put creative thinking. But his future cavalry forces would in all likelihood still remain marginal permutations of the horse-centric cavalry units he was so deeply familiar with. The only way to break out of these presentist shackles, would have been to widen his analytical aperture way beyond his mental comfort zone.

Most extant definitions of SOF in the literature and in official documents associate their ‘specialness’ with different aspects: the specific *units* that are categorized as such; the types of *operations* they conduct; their *tasks*; their *targets*; the *political license* they may receive; their *risk appetite/tolerance*; and various special attributes of their *operators* – their selection, training, skillset, equipment, versatility, etc. But all of these aspects imply design choices that may seem sensible today but could still benefit from being stress-tested against a number of quite different futures. The focus on special *operations* as the main (or even only) activity of SOF precludes possible other types of maybe more pervasive purposive efforts that may not be as easily classified as ‘operations’. The term

<sup>83</sup> The authors thank Ben Zweibelson (US Army), Angela O’Mahony, Tom Szayna and Bill Welser (RAND), and Bill Jakola (NATO ACT) for useful comments on previous drafts of this Chapter. The responsibility for any errors of omission or commission lies solely with the authors.

*forces* (at least today) still implies a primarily human composition of SOF. But could we envisage special forces that are primarily algorithmic? The definition is also typically embedded in a military context – a term that, today, has a still overwhelmingly industrial-age connotation. But how broadly whole-of-government or even whole-of-society could SOF be?

The idiosyncratic definition we propose for this Chapter therefore tries to open the conceptual and definitional aperture more widely by leaving open many of the currently applied design elements. We define SPecial Effectors-X or ‘SPEX’, as *“capability bundles that are able to apply concentrated doses of force with the aim of generating outsized strategic defense and security effects”*. Instead of starting a discussion about SOF futures with who or what SOF are, what they do, and how that can be improved, our definition starts from the defense and security effects our political leaders (and the societies behind them) expect and then tries to ideate new exceptionally effective capability bundles. A possibly useful – non-defense – analogy to bear in mind might be [Alphabet’s X](#), formerly known as Google X, which aims to generate 10x the impact on the world’s most intractable problems, not just 10% improvement.

The only way to break out of presentist shackles is to widen our analytical aperture way beyond our mental comfort zone: Could we envisage special forces that are primarily algorithmic?

## 7.2 The main design parameters

Our next task is to identify a method to derive multiple future incarnations of SPEX that would align with the essence of our definition: the ability to generate outsized effects. We start by identifying the main aspects of special forces that may be susceptible to change in the future. These can also be thought of as design elements – a set of design ‘knobs’ that decision-makers can turn in whatever direction they find promising. That list is potentially quite long. In our view, the following 17 design elements capture quite a few of the most important parameters. Each parameter is described in such a way that its possible values can be ordered on a 1–5-point scale.

1. **Center of gravity.** The degree to which SPEX primarily focus on ‘the enemy’ (his government, his forces) or on ‘the people’ (society): [1] almost entirely the enemy’s forces / [3] both in parallel / [5] almost entirely other countries’ societies.
2. **Cultural specialization.** The degree to which SPEX are primarily specialized in certain parts or cultures of the world: [1] flexibility first / [5] specialization first.
3. **Direct or indirect.** The degree to which SPEX engage their target (broadly speaking) directly or through others: [1] overwhelmingly direct / [5] overwhelmingly indirect.
4. **Embedding.** The way in which SPEX are embedded within the defense and security efforts of their political guidance-providers: [1] separate stovepipe within a national defense organization / [5] catalyst of a broader defense and security ecosystem (beyond the ‘military’).

5. **Exploration(/design) vs exploitation.** The degree to which SPEX are real life experimenters vs real life executors of already true and tested Courses of Action: [1] mostly exploitation / [5] mostly exploration (e.g. Special design forces (//Google X)).
6. **Functional specialization.** The degree to which SPEX are primarily specialized in predefined tasks or are generalized specialists:<sup>84</sup> [1] flexibility first / [5] specialization first.
7. **Legality.** The legal framework within which they execute these tasks: [1] “what legal edge?” – rogue SPEX / [5] strictly and unambiguously within the law.
8. **Man vs machine.** The degree to which still atom-based SPEX (see also design element 11) consist of humans or robots: [1] only human/ [5] only robots.
9. **Operational autonomy.** The degree to which SPEX plan and deploy their defense and security efforts autonomously or not: [1] they are only employed in support of conventional forces / [5] they can be employed independently.
10. **Overt vs covert.** The degree to which SPEX efforts are intended to be fully open (e.g. to the internationally community) or fully closed: [1] overwhelmingly covert / [5] overwhelmingly overt.
11. **Physicality.** The degree to which SPEX consist of primarily ‘atoms’ (physical matter – whether human or non-human – see also design element 8) or primarily of bits:<sup>85</sup> [1] overwhelmingly atoms / [5] overwhelmingly bits.
12. **Risk appetite/tolerance.** The degree to which SPEX are eager or willing to seek/accept risk in their efforts: [1] very high / [5] very low.
13. **Risk focus.** The degree to which SPEX are primarily focused on warding of downside risks vs boosting upside risks/opportunity: [1] overwhelmingly threats/risks – [5] overwhelmingly opportunities.
14. **Tasks.** The tasks that SPEX are entrusted with: [1] industrial-kinetic tasks / [5] post-industrial tasks (e.g. influencing, etc.).
15. **Timing of employment.** The part of the conflict cycle in which SPEX are primarily active: [1] almost entirely just in conflict / [3] 24/7 / [5] almost entirely pre-conflict.
16. **Type of conflict.** The degree to which SPEX are intended to be used in certain types of conflict: [1] mostly inter-state / [3] mostly intra-state (broad) / [5] mostly domestic.
17. **Westphalianness.** The degree to which SPEX remain a capability that is umbilically tied to the nation state: [1] only nation states / [3] nation states and non-state actors / [5] only non-state actors (private companies, transnational networks of various sorts, etc. that have developed and started using similar ‘SOF’-like’ defense and/or security capability bundles).

<sup>84</sup> Shamir, & Ben-Ari, [\*The Rise of Special Operations Forces: Generalized Specialization, Boundary Spanning and Military Autonomy\*](#), 2018.

<sup>85</sup> The difference between atoms (physical things like humans or machines etc.) and bits (digital things like data, algorithms, software) is often used to indicate the slow speed at which the former are changing compared to the latter.

Figure 27 is our attempt to ‘score’ the design elements for current SOF as they are typically portrayed in the current debate.

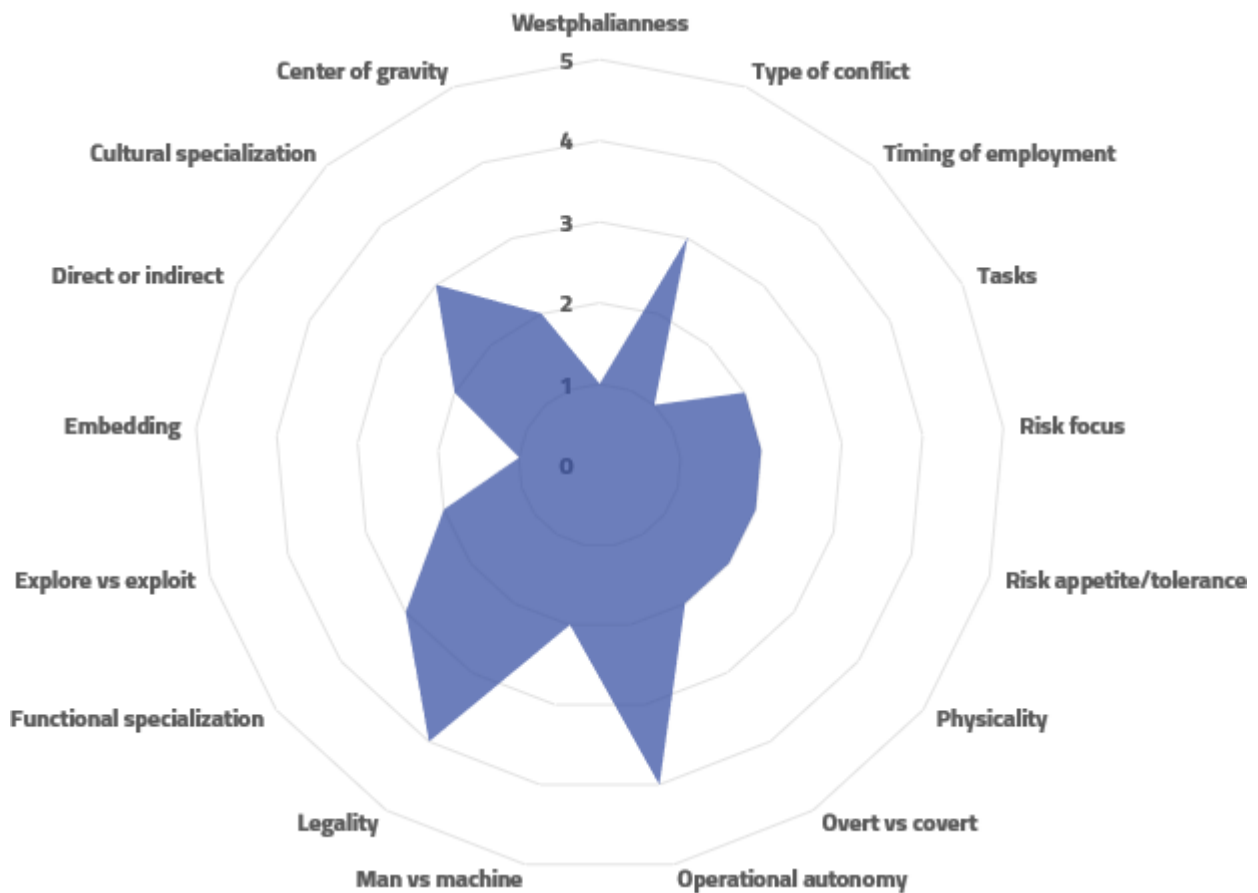


Figure 27: Current SOF scaled along 17 design elements

### 7.3 Ten SPEX silhouettes

By combining different values for the design elements, the HCSS team has developed a number of interesting ‘silhouettes’ of Future SOF, nominally placed in the 2030-35 timeframe. This section lists ten such silhouettes. They were hand-picked from all possible combinations to make sure that each of them would be plausible and stimulating, but also that, as a group, they would cover different areas of the multidimensional option space. We kept the description of the silhouettes purposefully succinct, as they are intended to be suggestive and not definitive.

**Rambo on steroids.** The SOF community is a uniquely powerful command within a country’s armed forces. It is accountable only to the top military and/or political leadership. Unexpected unilateral breakthroughs in (industrial-)technical capabilities have created new options to obtain large-scale effects from the small applications of (special) kinetic force with unprecedented effectiveness. These capabilities enable small, specially-equipped, highly-networked and distributed SOF units to obtain decisive military and/or political effects in ways that were previously reserved for large-scale ‘mass’ armies

or effectors. Used only in very rare and extreme circumstances, SOF have the authority (delegated from the highest national authority) to bypass existing laws and regulations to achieve a nation's intended goals.

**AlphaRambo** (the term is based on [Deepmind's 2015 Alphago](#)). The world is increasingly driven by AI. There are special 'national' algorithms through which the American, Chinese, European, Indian, Japanese and Russian governments compete. One unique area of competition is in what are called 'special' AI (SAI) capabilities. SAI is a uniquely powerful command within a country's armed forces. It is accountable only to the top political leadership. Unexpected unilateral breakthroughs in (post-industrial) technical capabilities have created new options to obtain large-scale effects from the small applications of SAI capabilities with unprecedented effectiveness. These capabilities enable highly-networked and mostly algorithmic SOF 'units' to obtain decisive military and/or political effects in ways that were previously reserved for large-scale human armies or effectors. Used only in very rare and extreme circumstances, SAI have the authority (delegated from the highest national authority) to autonomously ignore existing laws and regulations to achieve a nation's intended goals.

**RoboSf** (the term is based on the movie Robocop) are no more purely human SOF. Special means robotic. Experiments with the use of cyborgs for special operations have given way to a varied array of fully robotic special effectors, that have still been mostly programmed by humans. The range of tasks that RoboSf have been entrusted with has widened considerably since 2020, and smaller- and medium-sized force providers tend to specialize in 'niche' functionalities within that wider spectrum. The mainstream armed forces are still responsible for a variety of conventional and unconventional military missions, but all truly special missions are carried exclusively by RoboSf.

**Special Effectors-X (SEFX)** are a special entity within the Armed Forces that is no longer primarily focused on operations, which are mostly left to other parts of the Armed Forces or to the Dutch defense and security ecosystem. Instead, SEFX have a razor-sharp focus on experimenting with small-scale moonshot ideas and/or technologies that might offer a tenfold increase in the defense and security effects that the political leadership demands from its armed forces. Every day they run and evaluate hundreds of real-life A/B experiments<sup>86</sup> across our design parameters – bits and atoms, overt and covert, direct and indirect – and across a wide range of other ones. Once a small-scale experiment shows promising results, SEFX can scale up the experiment somewhat, but relatively quickly in the scaling-up effort, the experiment is handed over to other parts of the Armed Forces, the public sector or the private sector. SEFX play a critical role in training these other actors who will further scale up and then also execute successful SEFX-experiments; and

<sup>86</sup> Also known as split-run testing, A/B testing consist of a randomized experiment with two variants, A and B, as a way to compare two versions of a single variable and determining which of the two variants is more effective.



they will remain intimately involved in the further validation efforts of these upscaled experiments.

**White Special Attractors** (the term attractors is based on the concept of strange attractors in Chaos theory and the term white on White-hat hackers) are open special attractors that try to identify emerging security opportunities (technological breakthroughs, political/generational changes in certain parts of the world, ...) and then use AI and design thinking to attract others to design more sustainable security solutions that are of direct benefit to our national interests.

**NATO(/EU) Brotherhood of SOF.** The SOF community has abandoned industrial-kinetic tasks for an exclusively non-kinetic, post-industrial capability bundle. Multinational cooperation between kinetic-heavy SOF had always proved extraordinarily difficult. But in this new post-industrial-kinetic environment, SOF units of various like-minded countries find themselves much more easily. They are also more easily tasked by their political leaders. The tasks they fulfill have become much broader – like finding ways to remove inaccurate incendiary material from national history books, working with social network providers to prevent and/or control similarly incendiary spirals on the internet, incentivizing educators to develop curricula that mitigate conflict potential, finding and empowering new agents of societal resilience, enabling conflict forensics to gather potential war crime evidence for international trials, etc.

**United Custodians Special Effector Force (UC-SEF).** The ‘United Custodians’ (the successor to the United Nations which now includes both governments and major private and other non-governmental organizations) as an organization has acquired a certain degree of international legitimacy as a new, more authoritative *and* more effective representative of the international community than the UN ever was. Just like the UN, after the disappointing experiences of the League of Nations, gave itself ‘Chapter 7’ authority to enforce international peace under certain well-specified circumstances, so too can (and does) this new body authorize itself to mandate its own special effectors to intervene in critical situations on behalf of the international community. National special forces come together with their equivalents from the private and the broader non-governmental sector to constitute this always-on-call United Custodians’ Special Effector Force. They focus mostly on post-industrial non-kinetic tasks and position themselves primarily as enablers of a broader global defense and security ecosystem. But they also retain some kinetic ‘exploitation’ capabilities.

**SEF for Hire.** Repeated economic, security, environmental, medical (a series of incrementally more lethal pandemic waves) blows to the international system have greatly weakened the Westphalian state-based system. Rather than a total descent into international anarchy, however, a variety of powerful non-state actors have started taking security challenges primarily into their own hands. These actors include many of the

world's leading cities, leading private companies, families, various non-governmental international organizations and a number global solution 'networks' with a major stake in preventing global chaos. They are faced with quite affluent global crime syndicates and remnants of former non-status quo states who are intent on wreaking havoc. In this radically new world, 'white' private security companies (PSCs) offer their full-spectrum special services to provide far superior – so they claim – solutions to existing security challenges at much lower cost. Many former SOF operators now work for these PSCs, who also have access to the world's most cutting-edge datasets and technologies. Many European enfeebled (and largely discredited – also domestically) countries are struggling with rebuilding their economic, educational, health care systems in the aftermath of successive crises – mostly also with the help of these non-state actors. With slashed defense budgets, a few of them have started outsourcing special efforts to these PSCs.

**National special defender.** These SOF keep NLD free of outside intruders by being the special executive of AIVD, FIOD and police for dealing with other countries' military deployed in the Netherlands. They infiltrate in international criminal networks, action groups, etc. – akin to, but going far beyond the IRT-affair.<sup>87</sup>

**SF Never Again.** End of story. SOF goes the way of the horse-mounted cavalry – something we used to do, but do not do anymore.

Figure 28 showing all values for all silhouettes suggests that our effort managed to capture significant parts of the entire futurespace.

<sup>87</sup> The *Interregionaal Recherche Team* (IRT) Noord-Holland/Utrecht was an interregional partnership of local police forces, including Amsterdam and Utrecht. The team used a controversial method of investigation by allowing drug dealing under the direction of the police and judicial authorities. After a newly appointed team leader decided that he did not wish to bear responsibility for this method, he reported everything to the Amsterdam police force and after much consultation (and arguments) between the police forces involved in the IRT, the Public Prosecution Service and other parties involved, dissolved the IRT.

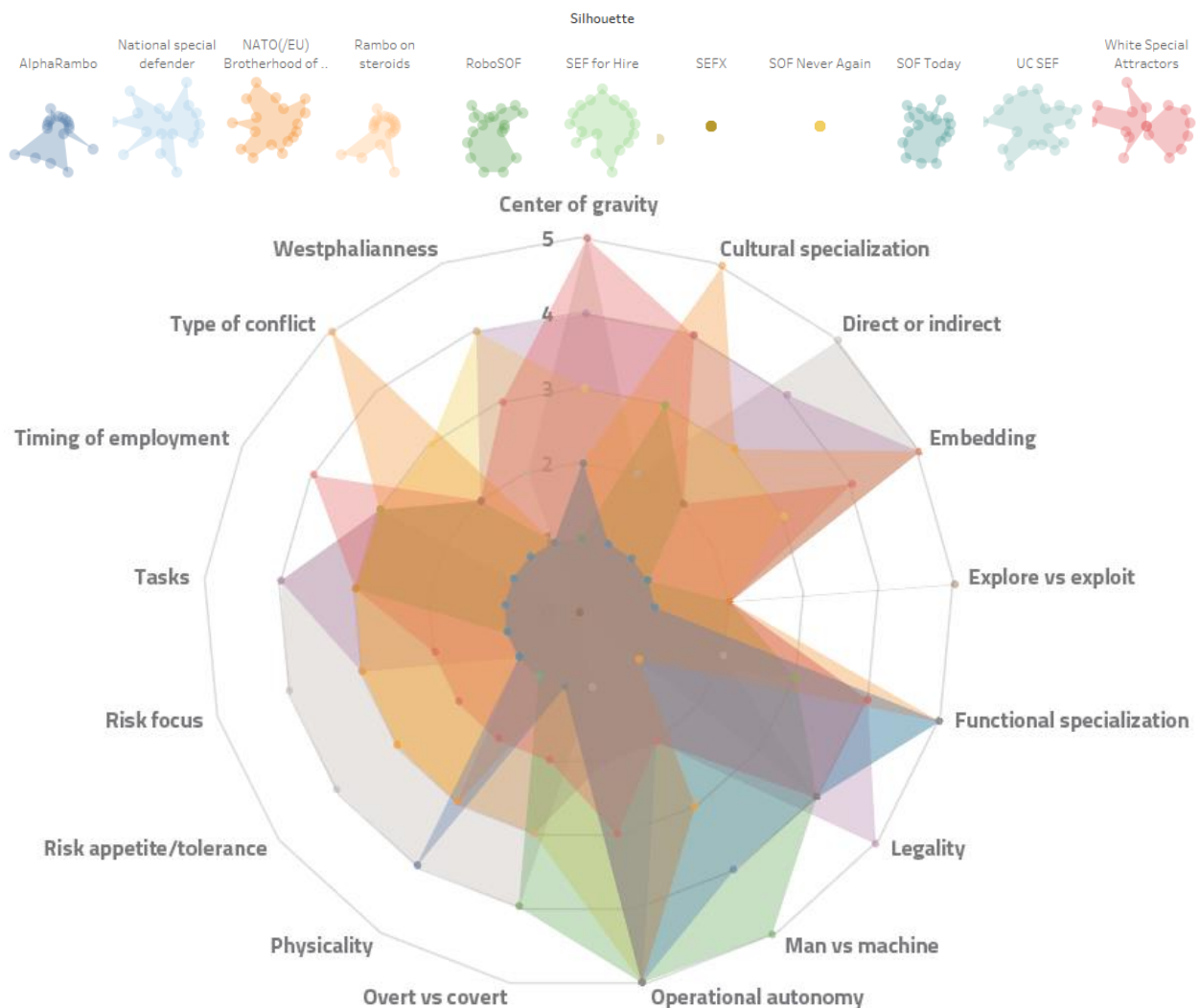


Figure 28: 10 SPEX silhouettes scaled along 17 design elements

## 7.4 Assessing SPEX silhouettes

The diverse set of silhouettes of future SPEX in §7.3 gives us the portfolio of amoebae-like strategic options that we referred to in Figure 4. This options portfolio can serve different purposes. An important one is to stimulate debates about which of these options are viewed as attractive, palatable, etc. (or not) by different communities. To kick off this debate, HCSS canvassed a small group of 13 NLD SOCOM representatives to explore their assessments of which of these silhouettes appeal to them or not and for what reasons. These participants were hand-picked by the NLD SOCOM leadership to reflect different points of view across their community. We also decided to compare their assessments with those of 8 senior HCSS staff members.

The method we used for this was an online, anonymous survey which took place in three consecutive steps. The first step aimed at generating a prioritized list of criteria (e.g. effectiveness, political support, etc.) against which each silhouette could be scored. Out of a long list of 11 criteria that had emerged from previous HCSS strategic design efforts,

the following 6 were withheld – they are presented here with the most ‘popular’ ones on top:

- **Effectiveness.** The promise this future NLSPEX holds in generating desired effects – across all time-horizons.
- **Alliance ‘credit’** (e.g. EU, NATO, UN). The extent to which this future NLSPEX would increase NL’s leverage within its alliances.
- **Future-robustness** against a set of scenarios – for this we used the 4 scenarios from the Dutch 2010 bottom-up defense review known as the *Future Policy Survey* (Strategische Verkenningen) that remains a widely known (and debated) point of reference across the Dutch defense community.<sup>88</sup>
- **Value added to the first main task** of Defense: to what extent would this future NLSPEX add value to the first task of collective defense.
- **Value added to the second main task** of Defense: to what extent would this future NLSPEX add value to the second task of supporting and strengthening international law/stability.
- **Political support at home.** Would Dutch population be sustainably supportive of this future NLSPEX.

In the second step, we gave the NLD SOF community a chance to absorb and provide feedback on the 10 silhouettes. And in the third and final step, all respondents were asked to score every silhouette on every criterion – not based on their own point of view but based on what they thought would be best for the Netherlands as a whole.

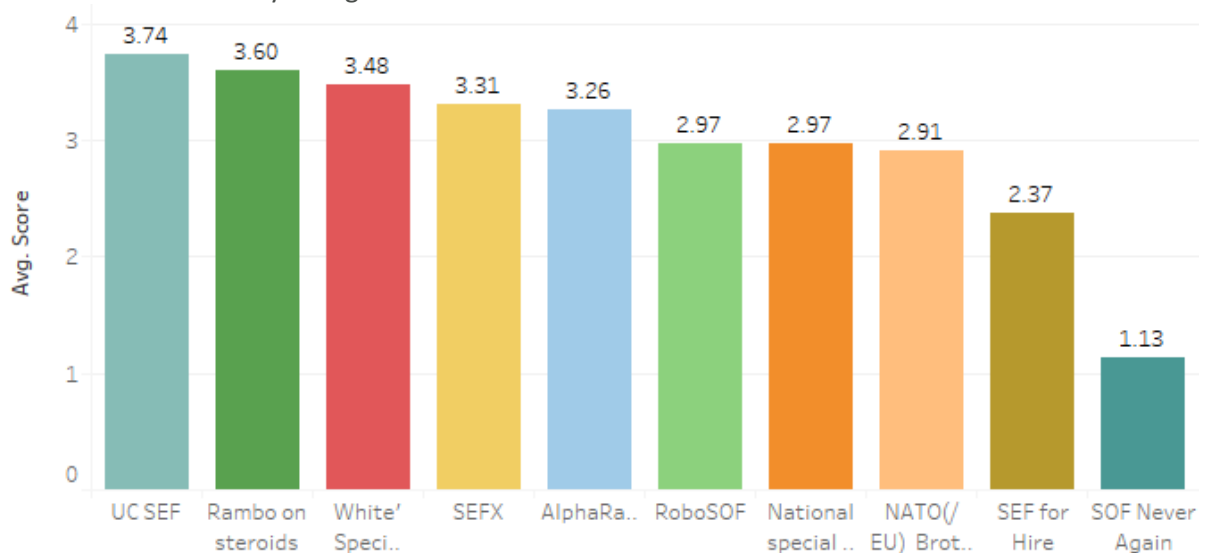


Figure 29: Average score of Silhouettes (whole group)

<sup>88</sup> Ministry of Defence, [Future Policy Survey: summary and conclusions](#), 2011.

Figure 29 presents for every silhouette the simple mathematical average of all scores from all respondents across all (unweighted) criteria. Based on that average, the *United Custodians' Special Effector Force* ended up being the single most desirable silhouette and *SOF Never Again* (not surprisingly) the least desirable one. Our modest, but still quite suggestive survey in which we asked two different Dutch communities – representatives from the Dutch NLD SOCOM community and from the Dutch think tank community – to score ten interestingly different silhouettes of future SOF (/SPEX) against a set of 'policy' criteria that they themselves hand-picked out of a larger list of criteria. This group thought that the single most 'attractive' SPEX silhouette, across all criteria, was one in which future (national *and* private) 'Special Effector Forces' would work on behalf of a new and improved follow-on organization to the United Nations – which we dubbed the United Custodians – in which private and non-governmental actors joined national public actors in becoming the custodians of the 'international community'. These *UC SEF* would be more focused on potentially disruptive opponents' societies than on their armed forces, they would operate mostly by jumping on both security risks *and* opportunities to empower other actors to generate more sustainable security solutions using man *and* machine, atoms *and* bits in mostly post-industrial-kinetic ways.

*The United Custodians' Special Effector Force ended up being the single most desirable silhouette and SOF Never Again the least desirable.*

The second most attractive silhouette that came out of the survey was the almost opposite. 'Rambo on steroids' is a silhouette that models future SOF after the image of Rambo from the movie franchise but leverages new technologies to make them even more hyperkinetic. The third, fourth and fifth 'favorites' were again very different from the Special Forces' current 'public' (or at least media) image. The number of respondents in this survey was admittedly quite low (11 SOF operators and 6 think tankers), which means that these results are more suggestive than authoritative. But they still provide, in our assessment, a quite intriguing 'proof of concept' that such strategic design explorations are possible and can lead to stimulating findings. We wonder whether such an effort would be possible with participants from across the NATO Special Operations Headquarters (or from selected EU and/or non-NATO SOF communities – e.g. Australia, Singapore, South Korea, etc.). Or – in a more national Dutch context – with a broader representative sample from across the Dutch defense and security ecosystem, including in its more 'political' manifestations. We also observe a relatively even spread with no real outliers other than the *SOF Never Again*. Across this future option space, this particular group found a number of also quite different silhouettes – different from today AND from each other – to be fairly appealing, which was certainly not a foregone conclusion. At the same time, however, none of the silhouettes received an average above 3.75 (on a scale from 1 to 5). We would still submit, however, that scores above 3 are quite positive given the fact that these are averages and because the value of '5' was typically defined very ambitiously ('extremely' effective; 'extremely' useful; etc.).

## 7.5 Thinking about change

The main ambition of this Chapter is to spark a broader strategic discussion within the SOF community and beyond about various possible / plausible / desirable futures of SOF. Special Forces are a ‘special’ community in many meanings of that word. But just like most other communities, they too often extrapolate their future(s) from their own recent and current experiences. Furthermore, most ongoing discussions about also their near-to-mid-term future tend to revolve around allocation of resources, bureaucratic politics, politics and ideology and the like. Although our silhouettes inevitably also flirt with some of these issues, this is not what they are primarily about.

Our silhouettes are about creating a conceptual futurespace that may provide a broader truly strategic thinking zone in which all stakeholders can engage.

Instead, they are about creating a conceptual futurespace that may provide a broader truly strategic thinking zone in which all stakeholders can engage in more open, creative *and* nuanced discussions about the essential design features of future SOF. Discussions that are not primarily driven by urgent operational requirements, ongoing investment debates, the next budget, the upcoming new high-level policy document, the most recent

media-boostered success or scandal or changing political currents. This Chapter unapologetically asks some tough – but important and potentially fruitful – questions about our today. Is what is ‘special’ about SOF just what makes them special today or does ‘special’ refer to anything that may give them an edge over others in the future? Are entirely non-industrial-kinetic SOF conceivable? Can we envisage SOF that shed the more recent (and broader) task set in favor of an even more overwhelmingly ‘kinetic’ toolset? Can forces still be ‘special’ in a world where covert operations may become technologically impossible or illegal? Should SOF always be about eliminating risks; or could they also be about turbo-boosting opportunities? This Chapter does not provide answers to these questions but gives some handles for thinking about potential promises and pitfalls across the available option space.

## 7.6 Sub-conclusion

In a period of unrelenting change, it is becoming ever more imperative to not only think about changes in our security environment, but also about changes in ourselves.

In a period of unrelenting change, it is becoming ever more imperative to not only think about changes in our security environment, but also about changes in ourselves. Most strategic foresight is about the ‘outside’, and not about the ‘inside’. The new strategic flux forces us to embrace discussions about changes – including radical ones – in ourselves: in who we are, what we do, how we do it, and with whom we do it.

In this context, it is extremely dangerous to think about *the* (singular) future. The future is not singular but decidedly plural. And so we must train ourselves to constantly think in multiple futures. Embracing plural futures is not an easy task, but we hope that our



visualizations of multiple SPEX silhouettes may be of some utility here. We purposefully shied away from assigning probabilities to these different silhouettes, and we strongly caution decision makers against such a temptation. If history teaches us anything about foresight, it is that our human abilities to predict are feeble at best.<sup>89</sup> Prudent forward planning therefore requires modesty; and analytical (and political) attention for well-considered and robust ‘least regret’ options across a broad futurespace. Exercises in developing and stretching such a futurespace representative of various plausible futures is necessary to ensure that ‘we get there early’. The SOF community itself, but also the broader decision-making community around it should (1) train itself to constantly have (*and update!*) a creative and rich futurespace in mind, and (2) instill and incentivize in our Special Forces the ability and agility to ‘morph’ into any of these silhouettes – especially those that are considered, based on a more systemic and forward-leaning analysis, to be the more strategically promising ones at any given moment in time. Those SOF who will be able to hone their ability to do this will, we suspect, prove to be the ones more likely to maneuver themselves in a position where they have a chance to truly ‘get there early’. If anybody can meet this daunting challenge, it may very well be this very special community. The key take-aways of this overview therefore concern the roles of SOF and the ways in which SOF can fulfill that role rather than the tasks (see Table 6).

SOF Role	Evolution in the current and future security landscape
Innovator	SOF will be a key actor in driving and pushing innovation for the larger defense organization by actively trying out new means and ways in rapidly changing environments.
Shaper	SOF will play a more central role in creating, maintaining, shaping, leveraging and exploiting ecosystems throughout all phases of conflict.
Synergizer	SOF’s ability to serve as connector, translator, and synergizer in all domain operations in both the military and civil military domain will grow in strategic importance.

**Table 6: SOF roles expected to increase in importance towards 2030-35**

<sup>89</sup> Nassim NicolasTaleb, *The Black Swan: The Impact of the Highly Improbable*, 2007; Phillip Tetlock, *Expert political judgment: How good is it? How can we know?*, 2005.

## 8 Synthesis, Conclusions and Recommendations

The previous Chapters offer important insights for the design of future NLD SOF. SOF will continue to be employed in politically sensitive and military risky environments to achieve strategic objectives. In the period up to 2030-35, SOF has important roles to play throughout the competition-crisis-conflict continuum, through overt, covert and clandestine activities that for a substantial part fit in continuous efforts (so not limited to ad hoc, one-off operations). SOF will be pivotal in crisis prevention and crisis containment, trying to prevent limited confrontations escalating to interstate war in which the risk of nuclear weapons deployment is real. SOF will also come to play a more prominent role in collective defense and domestic security, deterring and defending against enemies

**SOF will continue to be employed in politically sensitive and military risky environments to achieve strategic objectives.**

outside but also inside our borders. SOF's role in promoting the international legal order and maintaining or restoring stability remains relevant, even if the activities associated with that role are projected to become less frequent in the next decade compared to recent times.

### 8.1 NLD SOF tasks and activities in the three main tasks of Defense

The discussions on the three main tasks of Defense in the Chapters 4 through 6 result in different NLD SOF mission profiles, each representing different levels of political ambition and different institutional, legal, and financial frameworks for SOF to operate in. At the generic level, there is considerable overlap in the SOF core tasks and activities for the three main tasks of Defense, reflected in the fact that we use the same terms across the three main tasks. Yet, the actual execution of the SOF core tasks and activities differs considerably across the various mission profiles.

All SOF tasks and activities discussed below may be of relevance to NLD SOF. However, whether and to what extent they are actually part of the (future) task portfolio of NLD SOF is a policy matter. In §8.3, we will look more closely at possible prioritization of tasks and activities.

#### 8.1.1 SOF and Understand & Shape

A key conclusion for the period up to 2030-35 is that (NLD) SOF must increasingly contribute to better situational awareness and understanding of the (potential) conflict environment to inform influencing campaigns across the competition-crisis-conflict continuum. Such activities should merge with the traditional support offered by SOF to operational commanders for the execution of military operations (or to other government sponsors). Although carried out separately if required, Special Reconnaissance, Faction Liaison and Psychological Operations are therefore in essence continuous activities embedded in wider efforts as part of Understand & Shape and applicable, albeit in different guises, to all three main tasks of Defense. Understand & Shape is therefore a

vital task for NLD SOF that permeates and complements all tasks and activities described below.<sup>90</sup>

### 8.1.2 SOF in the promotion of the international legal order

With the global power shifts and increased great power competition, interventions to promote the international legal order are likely to decrease in saliency. New crisis response operations will take place in higher-risk environments. The Netherlands has no binding obligation to contribute to mandated or unmandated peacekeeping or stabilization operations outside of the NATO territory. Participation in such operations can be motivated by political reasons – to enhance our standing as a reliable ally, to gain international influence, to relieve humanitarian suffering – or to promote or safeguard our interests in a more direct sense – to ensure access to resources, stop the flow of refugees and migrants, protect trade routes. This involves the risk of confrontation with major powers if a UN mandate is blocked and other actors support the opponent(s). Our analysis distinguishes four distinct categories of operations in support of the international legal order with different tasks and activities for (NLD) SOF in the period up to 2030-35.

The first category of operations is relatively low risk, mandated contributions to peacekeeping, such as the MINUSMA mission in Mali. Success will depend on the core task Military Assistance, as applied to the activities Foreign Humanitarian Assistance, Security Force Assistance and Security Sector Reform. Despite the relatively – if uncertain – permissive environment, Hostage Rescue and Recovery and Personnel Recovery might still be necessary. In specific cases, Direct Action as part of pro-actively engaging clear and present dangers might be permitted. (See Figure 15.)

The second category consists of the more demanding stabilization operations. These operations rely heavily on Military Assistance within the activities Foreign Humanitarian Assistance, Security Force Assistance and Security Sector Reform. If spoilers try to derail the peace process, Direct Action is necessary in support of the activities Counter Insurgency, Counter Terror and Counter Criminality, Hostage Rescue and Recovery and Personnel Recovery. (See Figure 16.)

The third category is unmandated interventions with high risk of escalation. Examples are the regime change missions in Afghanistan (2001) and Iraq (2003). These typically include major combat operations. Direct Action is the most important core task, but Military Assistance is also required. Interventions could include Counter Insurgency, Counter Terror and Counter Criminality, as well as Hostage Rescue and Recovery and Personnel

<sup>90</sup> This is reminiscent to James Kiras' definition of special operations (in [Special Operations and Strategy: From World War II to the War on Terrorism](#), 2006) as "unconventional actions against enemy vulnerabilities in a sustained campaign, undertaken by specially designed units special operations forces, to enable military or other governmental operations and/or resolve economically politico military problems at the operational or strategic level that are difficult or impossible to accomplish with military or other governmental forces alone".

Recovery. In specific circumstances, SOF must also execute Countering Proliferation and Countering Weapons of Mass Destruction. (See Figure 17.)

The fourth category constitutes, possibly unmandated, expeditionary operations in support of foreign governments and/or proxies. The support to the Kurds during the conflicts in Syria and Iraq serves as an example. This category is all about Military Assistance in support of Unconventional Warfare, that is support to proxies that may perform the range of activities mentioned under unmandated interventions above. Shaping support to proxies requires Security Force Assistance. In specific cases, Direct Action may be required for Hostage Rescue and Recovery and Personnel Recovery– either in support of proxy forces or independently. (See Figure 18.)



Figure 30: KCT and the influencing of public opinion(s) during a mission (Hearts and Minds approach) Photo: [NLD SOCOM](#)

### 8.1.3 SOF in collective defense

Article 5 of the NATO treaty obliges the Netherlands to contribute to the defense of NATO territory. (NLD) SOF must play a role in support of deployed conventional forces and as a force in its own right to fight and weaken the adversary but also to deter it. The threat of

hybrid warfare requires more integrated deterrence postures against opponents. Direct Action and Special Reconnaissance will therefore remain as important as ever, their application in Counter Hybrid Threats, Countering Weapons of Mass Destruction and

**Direct Action and Special Reconnaissance will remain as important as ever.**

Unconventional Warfare gaining additional emphasis. Military Assistance will shift in shape.

Pervasive Command & Control and data/intelligence gathering assets will render future battlefields both incumbered and contested. SOF will therefore be called upon to provide Direct Action in support of deployed troops to counter adversarial A2/AD assets both in the physical and the cyber and electromagnetic spheres. SOF may also be asked to offer Direct Action in the support of Counter Hybrid Threats and Unconventional Warfare as part of attempts to exploit weak spots and create disorder in adversarial systems throughout all conflict phases. NLD SOF will conduct Military Assistance as part of Collective Defense by offering advisory and support activities to proxy actors inside or outside the adversary's territory. (See Figure 23.)

#### **8.1.4 SOF in domestic security**

Collective defense starts at home. With the traditional distinction between external and internal security blurring, activities in support of collective defense and of domestic security will merge to some degree as well. This is epitomized by the increasing salience of hybrid conflict in today's strategic environment. Each of the three SOF core tasks of Direct Action, Military Assistance and Special Reconnaissance, has a national manifestation. Military Assistance focusses on assisting national civil authorities and public and possibly private security operators, thereby creating awareness and building resilience. Direct Action in support of Counter Hybrid Threats, alongside Counter Terror, Counter Criminality and Hostage Rescue and Recovery, may e.g. involve the arrest or even the targeted killing of foreign agents illegally operating on national soil or terrorist groups. Special Reconnaissance consists of tracking down such actors. (See Figure 26.)

### **8.2 New roles for NLD SOF**

The silhouettes presented in the forward looking approach of Chapter 7 give more color and greater depth to specific trends described in the Chapters 4 through 6, while some point towards brand new SOF tasks or activities. We discern three novel roles and tasks: SOF as a forward innovator to keep pace with rapid change; SOF as an ecosystem shaper in support of Understand & Shape activities; and SOF as a synergizer of integrated in integrating strategic action across domains and levels of war.

#### **8.2.1 NLD SOF as forward innovator**

One of the truisms of the market economy is that the ability to learn faster than competitors may be the only sustainable competitive advantage. In the current technological age, in which private-sector innovators are accelerating innovation at scales and in ways previously believed to only be possible through government-funded megaprojects, this truism also applies to the geopolitical competition between states and the associated modernization of armed forces. As is said in the context of US SOF, "Nowhere is the need for rapid adaptation more urgent than in our special operations

forces (SOF), which serve as the touchpoint for so many of the nation's efforts to sense and cope with emerging threats and opportunities. Since their inception, special operations forces have been the nation's early adopters, leveraging curiosity, an unrelenting drive to experiment and improve, and tightly integrated teams of operators, acquirers, and technologists to lead the Department of Defense's transformation."<sup>91</sup>

In this context, NLD SOF could become a key actor in driving and pushing innovation for the larger defense organization by actively trying out new means and ways in rapidly changing environments. The Special Effectors-X (SEFX) silhouette in §7.3 introduces a new key role for SOF – one that is oriented to achieve armed forces' internal effects as opposed to all other SOF tasks and activities that aim for effects in the environment. SEFX units, in line with the unique features of SOF, serve as 'rapid prototypers'. They continuously conduct many small-scale experiments in real life. Promising results are handed over to other units for upscaling. The SEFX laboratory serve the development not only of SOF-specific capabilities but also of more wide-ranging capabilities that can be scaled up to the general-purpose forces.<sup>92</sup> We call this role *New Concepts Experimentation* (NCE) and advertise it as a new core task for SOF. The sort of concepts that are experimented with may range from operational concepts (i.e. alternative ways to do things) via technical concepts and capabilities (new tools) to organizational concepts (different structures and processes). Where and when possible, NCE should be embedded in actual operations, thereby providing the most relevant feedback on the merits of the concepts under consideration. The activities under this heading are continuous; and can be well classified as an integral part of Understand & Shape, with the shaping focused on the own (SOF/armed forces) organization, and the understanding on the crossroads between the environment and SOF's own capabilities.

Why are (NLD) SOF so attractive for the rapid prototyping of innovative solutions? First, the agility and versatility of SOF makes the incorporation of innovative concepts or technologies quite possible. In addition, the diverse environments within which SOF systems of relatively small size perform their wide range of tasks contribute to the innovative capability of SOF. These two points contribute, third, to the quick turnaround time with which SOF can provide feedback from operational practice. SOF are especially suitable for developing and experimenting with innovative (operational) concepts in combination with related technical and socio-cultural innovation. Experimentation generally requires approaching the challenge at hand with a different mindset, something that SOF operators can do relatively easily.

<sup>91</sup> Zachary S. Davis, Frank Gac, Christopher Rager, Philip Reiner, and Jennifer Snow (editors), *Strategic Latency Unleashed. The Role of Technology in a Revisionist Global Order and the Implications for Special Operations Forces*, January 2021, p2.

<sup>92</sup> <https://warontherocks.com/2020/02/special-operations-as-an-innovation-laboratory/>



### 8.2.2 NLD SOF as an ecosystem shaper

NLD SOF may play a more central role in creating, maintaining, shaping, leveraging and exploiting actors throughout the competition-crisis-conflict continuum. Several silhouettes in §7.3 present SOF embedded in a larger system of public and private (or hybrid) parties that – structurally or case by case, explicitly or implicitly – join efforts to achieve desired effects. In this perspective, it is the ‘special’ *effects* that define special operations, more than the ‘special’ *actors* poised to deliver those effects. Of course, also today SOF act both as an enabler for conventional forces and is enabled by them. Military Assistance is, by definition, in support of other parties, and the effects of SOF activities often contribute to more broadly defined strategic goals. Yet, in current thinking, clearly delineated SOF deliver clearly outlined special effects in the context of largely one-on-one relationships. But future SOF may become more inclusive, routinely acting as a hub in networks that are more than the sum of their parts; SOF as ‘coalitions of the able’ for the tasks at hand, rather than a specifically defined part of the nation’s Armed Forces.

Future SOF may become more inclusive, routinely acting as a hub in networks that are more than the sum of their parts.

NLD SOF will then become more of a networking entity, open for inclusive ways of achieving effects in collaborative efforts. It is increasingly hard to unite the high-quality, multidisciplinary capabilities required to achieve strategic effects in complex environments in nimble and small special forces units. Connectedness, an important characteristic of our time, will increasingly be the mantra of NLD SOF too. Next to operators for those activities that are uniquely accredited to armed forces, NLD SOF will act as a hub that gives guidance to, coordinates and integrates efforts by other parties in a network to achieve ‘special’ effects as the net result of all those efforts combined.<sup>93</sup>

### 8.2.3 NLD SOF as synergizer

NLD SOF may also take on the role of connector, translator, and synergizer in linking the various military domains within joint operations, as well as the military and civil domains in whole of government approaches. In an era of strategic compression and ever closer integration between actions across the different domains of war, SOF are uniquely qualified as ‘specialized generalists’ to help bridge these gaps and ensure seamless action

<sup>93</sup> Currently, NLD SOCOM has authority over the ‘ends’ and ‘ways’ of SOF deployment, but not over the ‘means’. There is an ongoing discussion within the NLD SOF community whether NLD SOCOM should further develop into a full operational command, with responsibility for the readiness of the special units KCT (currently subordinate to the land forces command) and NL MARSOF (currently subordinate to the naval forces command). The development of the hub function of NLD SOF seems to support NLD SOCOM to become a full command, for two reasons. One, to act as a solid hub within a network requires internal cohesion and a clear sense of purpose, which would be facilitated by this. Second, the network is much broader than land and naval forces, to include whole of government and whole of society partners. A full SOF command would position SOF much clearer in such an extended network. These arguments must be set against the argument that SOCOM’s strength is the “joint” flavor of it; or as US Admiral William McRaven puts it: “You get diversity of thought, you get diversity of background, and there’s nothing better to creating a good decision than having diversity.”

in all-domain operations.<sup>94</sup> One illustration is the close link between Direct Action in the physical and cyber domains. Direct Action refers to short, highly targeted, offensive operations that focus on concrete security objectives. NATO distinguishes a whole range of Direct Action activities, from conducting raids and laying ambushes to taking out enemy targets with precision. In the dominant current understanding, these actions are typically highly physical in nature, using kinetic means. What some of the silhouettes in §7.3 portray, and what we also observe in the evolution of SOF tasks in the Chapters 4 through 6, is that many strategic effects can be achieved through combinations of kinetic and non-kinetic measures. It is precisely at the juncture of these different domains that NLD SOF may claim an important role in the period up to 2030-35.

### 8.3 SOF diversification and priorities

Achieving the desired effects on the future (virtual) battlefield requires a host of traditional kinetic and innovative, mostly non-kinetic, instruments and techniques for cyber and influencing operations. NLD SOF must incorporate new methods and techniques into its existing set of *modi operandi*. This is needed in conjunction with the development of new key activities and a new interpretation of existing ones. In this widening spectrum, it is increasingly impossible to cover the required skills and capabilities with a single set of SOF. For a variety of reasons, SOF teams will remain small (typically 6-12 operators) but will become more multidisciplinary and therefore less uniform than before. SOF must be more open to collaboration in all-domain and whole of government operational concepts; increasingly technology-enabled (possibly technology

**SOF teams will remain small (typically 6-12 operators) but will become more multidisciplinary and therefore less uniform than before.**

closely attached to or incorporated in the human body); and have remote team members for activities in the cyber domain and the cognitive dimension. At the macro-level, the palette of possible SOF teams becomes more diverse to cover all domains and the entire spectrum of activities.

The aspirations for NLD SOF set out in this Study likely require – possibly substantially – more operators and budget. The availability of both in the period up to 2030-35 is not a given. If hard choices must be made, the following priorities are conceivable:

- Understand & Shape is more and more a prerequisite for effective SOF (and forces-wide)<sup>95</sup> action. Strengthening NLD SOF to conduct and support Special Reconnaissance, Faction Liaison and Psychological and Information Operations in the context of Understand & Shape should take precedence.
- Regarding the protection of the international legal order, priority should be given to Special Reconnaissance in the context of Understand & Shape activities.

<sup>94</sup> Eitan Shamir & Eyal Ben-Ari, *The Rise of Special Operations Forces: Generalized Specialization, Boundary Spanning and Military Autonomy*, Journal of Strategic Studies, 2018, p337.

<sup>95</sup> Cf. *Information-driven in organization and operation* as one of the three key characteristics of the future defense organization in the Dutch [Defence Vision 2035](#).

- Military Assistance in support of proxies should be prioritized over Direct Action against hostile actors.
- Priority should be given to Military Assistance to national authorities and Direct Action in support of Counter Hybrid Threats in domestic scenarios.<sup>96</sup>
- Regarding collective defense, priority should be given to Direct Action in support of deployed troops over Direct Action in support of counter hybrid warfare.

In short, prioritization is given to Special Reconnaissance, Military Assistance, and the facilitation of Unconventional Warfare by proxies. Limited to these priorities, a single set of NLD SOF is feasible for a restricted set of scenarios and activities, with NLD SOF no longer able to carry out covert or clandestine operations on enemy territory, except for remote cyber and influencing operations.

Such a limited SOF capability, however, goes against the grain of the developments in the contemporary security environment. We therefore advocate a more potent NLD SOF that pursues the lines of development as elaborated in the next section.



**Figure 31: Major Gijs Tuinman, recipient of the Military William Order for his actions in Afghanistan during the period between August and December 2009, as the Commander of Task Force 55's Combined Team Operations. Photo: [Defensiekrant](#)**

<sup>96</sup> See §8.4.4 for a discussion on how to organize this.

## 8.4 Lines of development for NLD SOF

### 8.4.1 Six mission profiles

Due to the changing security environment, NLD SOF tasks and therefore the layout of NLD SOF will evolve. The main shift is from contributions to operations outside the NATO area, which have constituted the core business of SOF for the past three decades, to collective defense and domestic security. This requires adaptation in doctrine, skills, equipment, cooperation and embedding, and (thus) mindset. From the analysis presented in this study, six different (NLD) SOF mission profiles emerge; complemented with Understand & Shape as a 'permanent mission' profile. For each profile, a different arrangement arises of SOF core tasks and activities in which these core tasks are opportune, see Table 7. For all mission profiles, Understand & Shape activities (including the suggested new SOF core task *New Concepts Experimentation* or NCE, as described in §8.2.1) are required. We introduce the notion of 'critical activity' in Table 7, defined as an activity which defines the nature of the mission.

Mission profiles		Core tasks	Critical activity	Activities	Remarks
Understand & Shape		SR, NCE		FL, PsyOps	Throughout all conflict phases and in all types of environments, underpinning all mission profiles below
Promoting the international legal order	Peacekeeping	MA, (DA)		FHA, SFA, SSR HRR, PR	Low risk, permissive environment
	Stabilization operations	MA, DA	COIN	CT, CC FHA SFA, SSR HRR, PR	Relatively low-risk, partly permissive environment
	Expeditionary combat operations	DA, MA	COIN	CT, CC, CP, CWMD SFA HRR, PR	Defense of interests in a high-risk environment. COIN carried out by SOF together with proxies and other actors
	Expeditionary support operations	MA, (DA)	UW	HRR, PR	Risk mitigation by the facilitation of UW executed by proxies
Collective defense		MA, DA	UW, CHT	CP, CWMD HRR, PR	(Very) high-risk environment. UW and CHT largely executed by SOF
Domestic security		MA, DA	CHT	CT, CC HRR	Medium-risk environment. Operations in support of civil authorities

**Table 7: SOF tasks and activities in distinct SOF mission profiles**

This Study's dual track approach to assess future requirements for NLD SOF points towards some key developments to pursue in the period up to 2030-35.

#### 8.4.2 Engage in Understand & Shape

Understand & Shape operations are a key supporting stand-alone activity for all mission profiles. Special Reconnaissance must be considered in the context of broad intelligence gathering activities aimed at improving situational awareness and situational understanding in support of decision-making at the military and political strategic levels.

In addition, as hybrid threats and support of proxies become a major concern for SOF, Military Assistance requires building networks with a wide range of actors, including e.g. allied operators and friendly hackers, in potential future operations theaters. To be effective, SOF should contribute in defining possible future theaters of operations where Dutch vital interests could be affected. Preparations should focus on knowledge building and setting up networks for future counter hybrid warfare operations and the support of proxies. For the period up to 2030-35, Russia, the Middle East and Northern Africa are the most likely areas where NLD SOF could prepare the future battleground.

**Russia, the Middle East and Northern Africa are the most likely areas where NLD SOF could prepare the future battleground.**

#### 8.4.3 Create effects in the cognitive dimension

Adaptation to the new security situation, emerging technologies and societal and political acceptability of the use of force require a future NLD SOF offering a new balance between kinetic and non-kinetic force instruments. Kinetic solutions will be complemented by behavior-oriented (influencing) techniques and offensive cyber operations. NLD SOF should increasingly aim for effects in the virtual and cognitive dimensions (see Figure 9) to influence human behavior. To do so, SOF must take advantage of insights from social and cognitive psychology, marketing, social media, and the arts of influence and persuasion; as both commercial and enemy entities have done. They may employ technological capabilities that shape and manipulate hardware and software infrastructures, e.g. to improve access to denied areas and marginalized populations.

**Adaptation to the new security situation requires a future NLD SOF offering a new balance between kinetic and non-kinetic force instruments.**

This requires new expertise to be developed, but forward deployed personnel do not necessarily need to be specialists themselves. Instead, they could carry out operations instructed by a back-office of specialists deployed in headquarters.

#### 8.4.4 Develop counter hybrid threats capabilities

Countering hybrid threats requires complex, unorthodox and creative solutions. SOF can be deployed for supporting deployed conventional forces, while at the same time traditional direct action with kinetic force and cyber-attacks can be carried out behind enemy lines, making use of robotic systems as intelligence collectors and force providers. This requires truly integrated forces with seamless transitions between intelligence gathering, offensive cyber operations, influencing campaigns, and conventional battles.



In addition, Counter Hybrid Threats should be developed as a new area of expertise for SOF operating in domestic scenarios.<sup>97</sup>

Hybrid threats are likely to increase the demand for special units while further blurring distinctions between international and domestic security.

International mandates are lacking for counter-hybrid SOF activities. NATO recognizes the role for SOF in grey zone operations but places the responsibility for sanctioning such operations with the member states. Since Dutch political decision makers traditionally link military deployment to international mandates, NLD SOF's engagement in Counter Hybrid Threats (with no clear mandates) presents a political issue that needs to be addressed.

The importance of Counter Hybrid Threats for SOF in domestic security deserves greater attention. Hybrid threats are likely to increase the demand for special units while further blurring distinctions between international and domestic security. CHT is currently not part of the task portfolio of the special unit for domestic operations, the DSI. This looming capability gap can be addressed in three ways:

1. Strengthen the DSI to include CHT activities domestically. This will require the DSI to further develop capabilities for dealing with Counter Terrorism, Hostage Rescue and Recovery and CHT. In this option, NLD SOF may still have a backup role for domestic contingencies, timing and circumstances permitting.
2. Rely on NLD SOF because it already needs to structurally strengthen its CHT capabilities in the international context and tune these capabilities also for domestic use.
3. Combine (the future incarnations of) NLD SOF and DSI into a single structure, effectively pooling all SOF capabilities for both domestic operations and deployments abroad.

The first option has the disadvantage of duplicating scarce expertise and capacity. The issue with the second option is that, as hybrid threats tend to be part of a bigger threat scheme, in times of mounting tensions NLD SOF is likely to be required in a collective defense role outside the Netherlands, leaving a vacuum at home. Arguing in favor of the third option is the fact that a broad pool of capabilities would allow for the development of new specializations, e.g. for operations in the cyber domain to influence human behavior. In addition, the benefits of joint training, human resources management, procurement, operations and the effective use of good practices and lessons learned also argue against a division of labor between SOF for internal and external use. We therefore prefer the third option, as elaborated in a wider context in §8.4.7.

One concern with the third option, however, pertains to the question how to embed this new combination within government structures. Who will determine priorities for SOF

<sup>97</sup> Given the merging of internal and external security, note that domestic scenarios likely include upstream activities abroad,



deployment, particularly in times when SOF assets are required both at home and abroad? The Netherlands currently has no structure with executive power for such decisions. Drawing up a cross-domain National Response Framework (*Rijksbreed Responskader*, RBRK) to map out active action perspectives against state threats below the threshold of an armed conflict for decision-makers within the national government is a good step,<sup>98</sup> but insufficient if there is no decision-making body with the power to set priorities in and across the various domains.

#### 8.4.5 Explore and experiment with new technology

NLD SOF should play a central role in identifying emerging security opportunities that can be countered by technological breakthroughs. SOF should build innovation and forecasting into special operations from the team level up to the headquarters staff. Future NLD SOF will need to give priority to experimentation with new ideas and technologies aimed at increasing the effects of deployed SOF.

We recommended setting up a special SOF unit for concept development and experimentation. Such a ‘Special Effectors-X’ (SEFX, see §7.3) unit should be engaged in integrating cyber, robotics and influencing methods into the traditional *modus operandi* of SOF units and develop new operational concepts putting less emphasis on kinetic force. For this reason, non-traditional experts should be incorporated into future discussions, strategy designs and plans to understand and exploit the new possibilities.

‘Special Effectors-X’ (SEFX)  
should develop new  
operational concepts putting  
less emphasis on kinetic force.

#### 8.4.6 Build a SOF Air capability

While both the Royal Netherlands Army and the Royal Netherlands Navy have dedicated special units, the Royal Netherlands Air Force does not. The lack of a standing SOF Air capacity – not only as an enabler but as an integral part of SOF concepts, tasks and activities<sup>99</sup> – introduces risk and reduces effectivity across the spectrum of special operations. Experience with SOF deployments with and without dedicated SOF Air have moved NATO and many nations to intensify and accelerate the build-up of SOF Air. Several nations have developed dedicated SOF Air capabilities and integrated them successfully into their SOF structures over the past years.

The lack of a standing SOF Air  
introduces risk and reduces  
effectivity across the spectrum  
of special operations.

<sup>98</sup> See [Midterm review 2021 Nationale Veiligheid Strategie](#) (Parliamentary Paper), 2021, p10.

<sup>99</sup> NATO SOF Doctrine AJP3.5 (p12) describes SOF Air as: “SOF Air Operations, like land and maritime special operations, are not only defined by the equipment utilized, but provide commanders with the capability to reach specific objectives that may not be achievable through conventional air capabilities and may require dedicated, specially-equipped aircraft and specially trained crews who may use nonstandard procedures (e.g. unique operational techniques).” Hence SOF Air, like their maritime and land counterparts, are characterized by the designation within the organization, the required special (additional) personnel selection criteria, the application of non-conventional training elements, and the frequent use of uncommon equipment and techniques.

The Netherlands Armed Forces have also indicated to develop a dedicated SOF Air capability over the coming years as soon as budgetary constraints allow. A future Dutch SOF Air capability would probably focus on mobility support, backed-up by sensor capacity and possibly fire support. But SOF Air could complement NLD SOF in various other ways and create effects in all phases and activities. Examples range from orchestrating (even contracted) air capabilities in austere environments to dealing with the air side of Military Assistance or Faction Liaison in a team of SOF. The precise layout requires further study and discussion as, also internationally, a thorough understanding of SOF Air as a concept and how to fully implement that concept within the constraints of the standing organization and organizational culture is lacking. Indeed, the most prominent challenge in implementing a Dutch SOF Air capability is, in addition to the allocation of funds, likely to be related to the required organizational and cultural change.

An implementation scenario can look as follows: following the Defense White Paper of 2022, funds are allocated to develop a dedicated SOF Air capability that should be operational by 2026. While the Air Force is tasked as the single service manager, the development is carefully supervised by NLD SOCOM and executed by an integrated task force that prominently features NL MARSOF and KCT. The main development trajectory is to transform one Helicopter Squadron into a dedicated SOF Air unit. The transformation should include the following processes in parallel: (1) develop the right operator profiles for the unit, as well as the personnel selection process to obtain and develop these operators; (2) build a habitual relationship with the SOF partner units; and (3) strengthen the combat support and combat service support functions to optimize reaction times, SOF C4I integration and logistical independency.

#### **8.4.7 Pool military and police special units**

With the field of activity of SOF expanding from the present focus on the promotion of the international legal order to include collective defense and domestic security, the distinction between special units operating internationally (NLD SOF) and domestically (DSI) becomes less relevant, effective, and efficient. At the same time, the future availability of SOF constitutes a critical challenge. For example, if deployed abroad, a severe crisis within the Netherlands might demand SOF to be redeployed for domestic security, e.g., to counter hybrid threats. This, of course, would draw upon the contribution to NATO's collective defense and to other operations in support of defending national vital interests. As it cannot be predicted where and how SOF will be deployed, this Study suggests pooling the special units from the military and the police into a single structure that can be deployed for the three main tasks of Defense as well as in support of national authorities in the broader national security context.

Effectiveness and efficiency gains can be expected to cut both ways. Take, for example, the international presence and information position of the BSB of the Royal Netherlands Marechaussee which could greatly contribute to NLD SOF operations in the same locale.

Currently, there is no structural information sharing between the BSB and NLD SOF. This could and should be better arranged for in the future. The BSB, given its role, expertise, and experience (including daily operational deployments) could provide a contribution to international SOF operations. In addition, the BSB's legitimate reasons for being deployed in the field may contribute to SOF activities staying under the radar.

Bringing the various special units under a single structure does not mean that the constituent parts should give up their distinct characteristics. Differences in tools, tactics, techniques, and procedures often exist for a reason. As an example, domestic deployment of security units usually requires a bottom-up approach whilst deployment of SOF abroad requires a top-down approach. Cross-fertilization between different special units and teaming-up of special operators with different specializations creates synergy; creating a uniform blend does not.

Cross-fertilization between different special units and teaming-up of special operators with different specializations creates synergy.

## 8.5 Final thoughts: towards an all-domain NLD SOF capability

In sum, we envisage future NLD SOF to be an all domain, integrated and integrating force that acts as a forward innovator. The focus shifts from purely physical operations to cyber operations, influencing techniques, network management, and force multiplication through the application of advanced AI techniques, robotics and autonomous systems while making use of relevant insights drawn from the social sciences and humanities. This will result in a transformed SOF: innovator for the larger defense organization, shaper of the environment, and integrator of different lines of military and civilian means and actions. This includes SOF as a facilitator for proxies, including private security companies; and SOF at the center of networked, highly distributed operations in support of counter hybrid warfare.

SOF have the right properties —adaptable, small, and capable of sensitive operations—and possess ample historical experience in shaping the environment to achieve political and military goals to fulfill these important hub-functions. NLD SOF can realistically transform into such an effective and affordable force with niche tasks aimed at attaining strategic effects. In this age of all domain conflict, NLD SOF must develop the concepts and capabilities to act as the synergizer of different lines of action carried out by different actors.

However, NLD SOF intrinsically remains a relatively small force, with its quantitative limitations also putting a cap on what it can qualitatively achieve. Senior political and military leadership must decide what priorities to set in balancing the role of NLD SOF in domestic security, collective defense and the promotion of the international legal to maximize NLD SOF's utility in pursuing and

NLD SOF intrinsically remains a relatively small force, with its quantitative limitations also putting a cap on what it can qualitatively achieve.

The coming character of conflict demands a transformed NLD SOF.

defending national strategic interests. Whatever the outcome of priority choices, in the emerging security environment it seems very likely that the role of NLD SOF becomes more prominent. The coming character of conflict demands a transformed NLD SOF – one that strikes a new balance between traditional activities in the land, air and maritime domains, and can execute an assortment of new lines of action in the information and cyber domains. SOF's capability to continuously re-invent itself will lead to an all-domain future SOF that continues to remain 'special' in its ability to create strategic military and political effects or to craft the conditions for other force elements to do so.





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