

# **Demystifying Special Operations Forces**

*An evaluation of Special Operations Forces (SOF) theory's ability to capture SOF's nature and strategic value*

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# Demystifying Special Operations Forces

## 1 Introduction

Both George W. Bush and Barack Obama have relied heavily on special operations forces (SOF) to combat irregular and asymmetric threats such as terrorist organizations. From September 11, 2001, to 2017, US SOF's total personnel was increased from 38.000 to 70.000.<sup>1</sup> At first glance, when considering counterterrorism strategy, this increase makes sense. Whereas conventional troops have a limited global reach, SOF does not. Because of its ability to operate in small teams, clandestinely, and independent of support, SOF leaves a much lighter footprint in the areas they enter.<sup>2</sup> This allows them to operate in a wide range of countries, which is necessary given the spread-out and global nature of 21<sup>st</sup>-century terrorism.<sup>3</sup>

From a practical standpoint, SOF appears effective in this day and age. It seems tailored to the new and various challenges of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. As was mentioned by Alastair Finlan shortly after 9/11: "These units [SOF] are the logical military response to the threat posed by Al Qaeda in view of their expertise in unconventional warfare and traditional anti-terrorist role."<sup>4</sup> Policymakers realize this as well, as the increase in US SOF since 9/11 indicates. The fascination policymakers have shown appears closely connected to the fascination of SOF that has grasped the US public.<sup>5</sup> Hollywood blockbusters, videogames, and a steady stream of novels published over the years have painted an image of special operators as elite warriors: men that consistently push the boundaries of what is physically and mentally possible.<sup>6</sup> This nearly superhuman depiction of special operators in mainstream media highly obscures the essential characteristics of SOF. It is not that this skewed image has no merit whatsoever. On average, special operators are better trained and equipped than most military personnel. They have at times pulled off feats that defy imagination. The rescue of 102 hostages at Entebbe

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<sup>1</sup> Mark Moyar, *Oppose Any Foe: The Rise of America's Special Operations Forces* (New York: Basic Books, 2017), chap. 11, Kobo: 'Effectiveness'.

<sup>2</sup> Steven Lambakis, "Forty Selected Men Can Shake the World": The Contributions of Special Operations to Victory." *Comparative Strategy* 13, no. 2 (1994): 213-214.

<sup>3</sup> Alastair Finlan, "Warfare by other means: special forces, terrorism and grand strategy," *Small wars & insurgencies* 14, no. 1 (2003): 92-94.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, 92.

<sup>5</sup> Harry R. Yarger, *21st Century SOF: Toward an American Theory of Special Operations* (MacDill Air Force Base: The JSOU Press, 2013): 2.

<sup>6</sup> See for example: *Navy Seals*, directed by Lewis Teague (Los Angeles: Orion Pictures, 1990); and *Extraction*, directed by Sam Hargrave (Los Angeles: AGBO, 2020).

airport by Israeli SOF in 1976 is just one example of this.<sup>7</sup> However, subscribing to the belief that SOF can do anything conventional forces can, but better and with less personnel is misguided. Such a belief can put SOF in situations for which it is not designed.<sup>8</sup> Politicians acting upon a botched understanding of the capabilities of SOF can significantly harm the effectiveness of SOF and endanger the lives of the men serving in it.<sup>9</sup>

Thus, SOF needs to be thoroughly investigated. Only when SOF and its capabilities are correctly understood can it be employed effectively. A range of scholars has attempted to formulate theories that capture the nature of SOF. However, no attempt has been made to compare these different theories and evaluate which one is most effective at capturing SOF. This is what this thesis attempts to do. The question it attempts to answer is: “Which theories of Special Operations Forces (SOF) are most effective at capturing the nature and strategic value of Obama-era SOF?” By answering this question, this thesis attempts to fill a current knowledge gap by adding to the academic understanding of SOF.

This thesis firstly examines the academic literature on SOF theory. Secondly, the various theories developed over the years are divided into three categories. Thirdly, these categories are compared and evaluated based on their ability to capture SOF’s role in operation Neptune’s Spear. Finally, this thesis answers its research question. It argues that those theories that explicitly analyze SOF from a strategic point of view are most effective at capturing the nature and strategic value of Obama-era SOF.

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<sup>7</sup> Jonathan Freedland, “We thought this would be the end of us: the raid on Entebbe, 40 years on,” Last modified June 25, 2016, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2016/jun/25/entebbe-raid-40-years-on-israel-palestine-binyamin-netanyahu-jonathan-freedland>.

<sup>8</sup> Moyer, *Oppose Any Foe*, chap. 11.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*; Linda Robinson, *The Future of U.S. Special Operations Forces* (New York: Council on Foreign Relations, 2013): 13-14.

## 2 Literature Review

The academic debate surrounding SOF – and specifically SOF theory – is in a nascent stage. Although SOF has gained prominence amongst policymakers and in popular media over the past decades, the academic literature on the topic has lagged. In the instances where scholars did write about SOF, these writings were scattered across various academic fields, which has hindered a focused discussion on SOF.<sup>10</sup>

The past decade has witnessed a change, however. SOF has acquired its own space for academic discussion. In 2015, an academic journal – the *Special Operations Journal* – focusing specifically on SOF was published for the first time. It is “dedicated to promoting research across academia, the military, and the SOF community, both in the United States and abroad, on the nature, conduct, and sources of success of special operations.”<sup>11</sup> This journal and articles published by the Joint Special Operations University (JSOU) have delineated a clear space in which SOF can be discussed.

The following section discusses the evolution of SOF theory and analyzes the main points of debate between scholars historically and at present regarding these theories. Before discussing the various theories on SOF, a discussion on the nature of military strategic theory – under which SOF theory falls – is warranted. Strategic theory differs starkly from theory used in related academic fields such as political science and international relations. Understanding what strategic theory – such as SOF theory – attempts to do is crucial to understand how effective a theory is in accomplishing it.

### 2.1 Strategic Theory

Strategic theory is not predictive. It cannot be used to predict what the outcomes of an engagement between two military forces will be. Not even the probable outcome. Rather, it helps policymakers and strategists understand the reality of military forces, conflict, and war. As is mentioned by Harry R. Yarger in his *Little Book on Big Strategy*: “Strategy assumes that while the future cannot be predicted, the strategic environment can be studied, assessed, and, to varying degrees, anticipated and manipulated.”<sup>12</sup> Strategy helps military planners and

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<sup>10</sup> Christopher Marsh, James Kiras, and Patricia Blocksome, “Special Operations Research: Out of the Shadows,” *Special Operations Journal* 1, no. 1 (2015): 1-2.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, 2.

<sup>12</sup> Harry R. Yarger, *Strategic Theory for the 21st Century: The Little Book on Big Strategy* (Carlisle PA: Strategic Studies Institute, 2006): 17.

policymakers understand conflict, but it does not tell them how they should act. It does not provide them with clear-cut advice on what type of military unit with which specific tactics can accomplish a goal. Instead, strategic theory informs strategists of the realities of conflict and war and helps one understand what might work and what might not. This way of thinking goes back to the ideas proposed by Carl von Clausewitz – a perennial figure in the field of strategic studies. Clausewitz argued that in the study of war, “a positive teaching is unattainable.”<sup>13</sup> War is too complex to create fixed courses of action for a strategist to navigate it positively. Rather:

Theory will have fulfilled its main task when it is used to analyze the constituent elements of war, to distinguish precisely what at first seems fused, to explain in full the properties of the means employed and to show their probable effects, to define clearly the nature of the ends in view, and to illuminate all phases of war through critical inquiry. Theory then becomes a guide to anyone who wants to learn about war from books; it will light his way, ease his progress, train his judgment, and help him avoid pitfalls.<sup>14</sup>

Theory helps distinguish what is essential in conflict and war. What may work and what may not. It helps categorize the landscape of war, allowing strategists to make better-informed decisions. Nevertheless, these decisions they still must make themselves.

Strategic theory can be compared to analytical frameworks in academic fields such as political science and international relations. As is argued by Liam Stanley: “An analytical framework does not *aim* to reflect political reality, and should not be assessed on its ability to do so.”<sup>15</sup> Instead, analytical frameworks should be evaluated on their ability to categorize reality in a way that makes it possible “to *generate* or *construct* explanations or theories.”<sup>16</sup> Analytical frameworks contain ontological claims but not explanatory claims about political realities. Strategic theory must be perceived in this light. Strategic theory attempts to categorize war in a way that helps strategists identify what to take into account when deciding on how to reach the goals they have set for themselves. Strategic theory also simplifies communication between strategists and military planners. As is mentioned by Yarger: “It serves as a common frame of

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<sup>13</sup> Harold R. Winton, “An Imperfect Jewel: Military Theory and the Military Profession,” *Journal of Strategic Studies* 34, no. 6 (2011): 858.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, 859.

<sup>15</sup> Liam Stanley, “The Difference Between an Analytical Framework and a Theoretical Claim: A Reply to Martin Carstensen,” *Political Studies* 60 (2012): 476.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, 476.

reference for the development and evaluation of an appropriate strategy and the communication of it to those who must implement it.”<sup>17</sup>

## 2.2 SOF Theory

The academic debate surrounding SOF currently knows two main issues. The first issue regards whether SOF warrants theory or not. This discussion is still ongoing, with one strain of scholars arguing that SOF-specific theory is crucial for the academic field and policymakers who employ SOF. Another strain of scholars stresses the inherent dangers that come with SOF-specific theory. The second area of discussion is amongst that first strain of scholars that do perceive a need for SOF-specific theory but disagree on what such a theory of SOF should look like and which characteristics of SOF it should accentuate. The following section examines these discussions in more detail.

### 2.2.1 *SOF should not have theory*

In his book *Special Operations and Strategy: From World War II to the War on Terrorism*, James D. Kiras situated SOF theory within broader strategic theory. He examined how SOF can successfully add to military campaigns instead of proving the intrinsic value of SOF. Kiras criticized SOF-specific theory – i.e., theory that places SOF in a military vacuum of a sort, asserting that SOF can attain strategic effects by itself (without the support of other military forces). According to Kiras, SOF does not warrant theory. Instead, it can – and should – be analyzed through the prism of broader strategic theory. He wrote: “[A] special operations theory is unnecessary because existing theories on war, military operations, and conflict, including those in the wheelhouse of SOF, such as revolution, terrorism, insurgency, and coup d’état, are already sufficient to describe the role of special operations within them.”<sup>18</sup> Instead of creating a new theory for SOF, theorists should recognize how SOF fits into existing theory. SOF can improve the strategic performance of the military in general, but it is not an instrument that can inherently bring about strategic effects.<sup>19</sup> Instead, it should be employed in tandem with conventional military forces to be optimally effective. Kiras argued – perhaps counterintuitively

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<sup>17</sup> Yarger, “The Little Book,” 2.

<sup>18</sup> James D. Kiras, “A Theory of Special Operations: “These Ideas Are Dangerous,” *Special Operations Journal* 1, no. 2 (2014): 84.

<sup>19</sup> James D. Kiras, *Special Operations and Strategy: From World War II to the War on Terrorism*, (New York: Routledge, 2006): 112-115.

– that special operations are closely linked to the strategy of attrition. Although special operations are mostly known for their ability to create massive effects relative to their often small size, these acts are strategically insignificant if they are not placed within a broader military campaign.<sup>20</sup> Thus, while SOF appears to create effects akin to ‘annihilating the enemy’ through decisive strikes, this is far from what they actually can.<sup>21</sup> SOF becomes most effective when they consistently erode an adversary’s moral and material resources and do so in tandem with conventional forces.<sup>22</sup> As stated by Kiras: “The unique training, skills, and equipment of special operators should be used in unanticipated ways to inflict damage on key physical and psychological vulnerabilities to weaken enemy resolve and capabilities and further enhance strategic performance [attrition].”<sup>23</sup>

In an article over a decade later, Kiras reemphasized that SOF does not warrant theory. He went further by claiming that SOF-specific theory is inherently dangerous.<sup>24</sup> He provided two arguments to support this claim. Firstly, he argued that the institutional layout of SOF makes it difficult for theorists to gain a proper understanding of SOF. The strength of SOF lies in their secretive nature and their ability to strike their adversary unexpectedly. Therefore, the missions in which SOF takes part and their *modus operandi* are kept classified. Theorists from outside of SOF can never gain a full view of the workings of SOF. Creating a theory based on incomplete information is dangerous since it may lead to misinterpretation and misuse.<sup>25</sup> Simultaneously, it can be highly problematic for an author to gain a complete understanding of SOF culture. Special operators have to go through rigorous and demanding selections before gaining access to SOF. After their acceptance, they are introduced to the “language, norms [...], culture, values [...], and totems (unit symbols and specific badges, headgear, weapons, or platforms) of their particular community.”<sup>26</sup> SOF is unlikely to give an outsider unrestricted access to this community, nor are they likely to accept a theory proposed by such an outsider.<sup>27</sup>

Alastair Finlan disputed the claims put forward by Kiras. He identified a theory-knowledge gap surrounding SOF, which the academic community should address. Finlan argued that the phenomenon of SOF – its uses and capabilities – cannot be appropriately

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<sup>20</sup> Kiras, *Special Operations and Strategy*, 112-115.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, 80.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, 113.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, 115.

<sup>24</sup> Kiras, “Theory of Special Operations,” 75-88.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, 79.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, 80.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*

understood “without the development of a theoretical lens.”<sup>28</sup> Finlan distinguished between SOF and Special Forces ‘SF,’ in opposition to many other scholars in the field. His reasons for making this distinction resemble arguments proposed by other scholars regarding the difference between *elite* and *special* forces.<sup>29</sup> Finlan claimed that SOF “equates to high-quality, usually battalion-size, infantry units of the shock variety such as the US Rangers or the British Parachute Regiment.”<sup>30</sup> SF instead “are truly unconventional *non-confluent warfare* units that are fundamentally different in size, organization, culture, character, outlook, and mission orientation.”<sup>31</sup> Examples include the US Army’s Delta Force and the British Special Air Service (SAS).

According to Finlan, SF is inherently different from conventional forces and challenges the traditional military strategies of annihilation and attrition. SF can bring about strategic effects that do not correspond to either of these two models, and thus, it makes sense to develop a new model. Finlan proposed a possible new model of war specifically tailored to SF: the model of anaphylaxis. SF has – or should have – the capability to strike a state at core political, economic, and societal nodes and thereby to disrupt “powerful political momentum to go to war and to disrupt what Clausewitz described as the trinity between the government, people, and the armed forces that is vital for war to occur.”<sup>32</sup>

Although Kiras and Finlan oppose each other, their theories share one core characteristic. They both attempted to understand SOF through the lens of broader strategic military theory. For Kiras, SOF is not seen as an object of study that warrants theory. Instead, its strategic value can – and should – be examined through the lens of existing strategic theory. SOF may differ from conventional forces on the tactical level, but it does not differ on the strategic level. Claiming that SOF can generate strategic effects that cannot be explained through existing strategic theory only leads to misinterpretation and misuse of SOF. Finlan disagreed with Kiras. However, similar to Kiras, he did analyze SOF from a strategic perspective.

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<sup>28</sup> Alistair Finlan, “A dangerous pathway? Toward a theory of special forces,” *Comparative Strategy* 38, no. 4 (2019): 255.

<sup>29</sup> See for example: Tom Searle, *Outside the Box: A New General Theory of Special Operations* (MacDill Air Force Base: Joint Special Operations University, 2017); and Robert G. Spulak Jr., *A Theory of Special Operations: The Origin, Qualities, and Use of SOF* (Hurlburt Field: The JSOU Press, 2007).

<sup>30</sup> Finlan, “A dangerous pathway?,” 262.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, 265.

### 2.2.2 *SOF should have theory*

The other scholars that – similar to Finlan – argue that SOF should have theory can be subdivided into two categories. The first category is represented by Thomas Searle, who focused on how special operations should be understood in relation to conventional forces. According to Searle, SOF should be understood as the force that does what conventional forces cannot. Searle argued that SOF are not ‘elite’ forces or ‘elite’ warriors.<sup>33</sup> ‘Elite’ implies that SOF should be able to do what conventional forces do, only better. Looking at the characteristics of SOF, the label ‘elite’ does not apply to them. A SOF unit such as the Army Special Forces cannot do what a conventional infantry battalion can. Special Forces personnel is not equipped, nor has it enough personnel for holding large stretches of territory. It also cannot take large enemy forces ‘head-on’. The Army Special Forces is not an ‘elite’ infantry force. It is designed to perform special tasks, which conventional forces cannot do, Searle argued. The same goes for all other SOF within the United States military.

According to Searle, one should not understand SOF as performing specific unchangeable designated tasks.<sup>34</sup> A unit capable of performing direct action (DA; a mission commonly associated with SOF) is not necessarily a SOF unit. Instead, Searle argued that it all depends on the military context. SOF contains forces that perform tasks that are part of the responsibilities of the Department of Defense (DoD) but that fall outside the portfolio of conventional forces. Whereas nowadays, DA is a task for SOF, this could change in the future. If the portfolio of conventional forces expands, the SOF portfolio shrinks, and vice versa. Searle called this the “Outside the Box” theory.<sup>35</sup> The ‘Box’ contains all tasks that are performed by conventional forces. Thus, according to Searle, SOF theory should not attempt to capture SOF’s nature by identifying its fixed aspects. Instead, it should analyze the relationship between SOF and conventional forces and examine what this relationship says about SOF’s nature and strategic value.

The second category consists of scholars who attempt to explain SOF’s nature and strategic value based on characteristics that are limited to SOF. SOF is analyzed independently of conventional forces. Although the various scholars differ in which premises and characteristics of SOF they identify, all – at least – try to identify such fixed elements. Their starting point for analysis is the layout of SOF itself and not the military and political contexts

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<sup>33</sup> Searle, *Outside the Box*, 11-13.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*, 17-18.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*, 17.

in which SOF is employed. All scholars perceive SOF as a distinct object with its own distinctive and fixed characteristics that can be analyzed.

Admiral (ret.) William H. McRaven started this strain of discussion. In his seminal work on SOF, *Spec Ops: Case Studies in Special Operations and Warfare: Theory and Practice*, McRaven took SOF out of the broader conventional military context and analyzed what specifically made SOF valuable and successful.<sup>36</sup> Instead of focusing on all different varieties of special operations, McRaven chose to focus on direct action (DA) – one of the core missions of most SOF. Direct action is described by the US Special Operations Command (USSOCOM) as: “[s]hort-duration strikes and other small-scale offensive actions employing specialized military capabilities to seize, destroy, capture, exploit, recover, or damage designated targets.”<sup>37</sup> McRaven examined why DAs – which are always offensive – can be highly successful, while in most military-strategic theory, the defense is seen as superior to the offense.<sup>38</sup> In his book, McRaven distinguished six principles that affect a DA’s results: “simplicity, security, repetition, surprise, speed, and purpose.”<sup>39</sup> If these principles are successfully taken into account, Clausewitzian ‘friction’ can be overcome, and a DA is more likely to succeed.<sup>40</sup> McRaven’s theory is not predictive. It merely indicates which factors influence SOF’s success, but incorporating these principles does not guarantee success. Although McRaven’s theory is valuable for planning and executing DAs, it does not say anything about a wide range of other special operations, such as counterinsurgency, surveillance, and intelligence gathering.

McRaven’s work invited further debate on SOF. He had distinguished Special operations (and SOF) as a distinctive element within military theory that warranted academic investigation and theory. Whereas McRaven had focused on one type of military operation and how to make such operation a success, other theorists in the years following theorized about the broader portfolio of SOF.

Shortly after McRaven published his thesis, Steven Lambakis proposed such a broader theory of SOF. Instead of focusing solely on one type of special operations, Lambakis analyzed SOF in general. In his theory, Lambakis attempted to distinguish what separates SOF from conventional forces. According to Lambakis, for SOF to be employed effectively, it should be understood correctly. Lambakis claimed that SOF’s small size was its defining characteristic.

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<sup>36</sup> William H. McRaven, *Spec Ops – Case Studies in Special Operations Warfare Theory and Practice* (New York: Presidio Press, 1996): 4. McRaven’s thesis was originally published in 1993.

<sup>37</sup> “Core Activities,” USSOCOM, accessed May 20<sup>th</sup>, 2021, <https://www.socom.mil/about/core-activities>.

<sup>38</sup> McRaven, *Spec Ops*, 4.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*, 8.

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*, 1-2.

He stated: “A relatively small group of men is capable of applying a force beyond their apparent power and accomplishing military objectives otherwise deemed impossible by less imaginative planners.”<sup>41</sup> This is what makes SOF useful. It can be used in unexpected ways, allowing a small group of people to create effects that are out of proportion compared to its size. Crucial to Lambakis’ understanding of SOF is the element of imagination. SOF allows military leaders to imagine new and unexpected ways in which to strike the enemy. In this sense, the types of operations and capabilities of SOF are endless. Lambakis did not go this far, however. He argued instead that SOF’s limited size burdens it with limits. To illustrate this point, Lambakis discussed a siege operation. Because of its small size, SOF cannot lay siege to a city or fortress. It lacks the appropriate number of men and the necessary equipment to do so. As Lambakis stated: “special operations forces are intended to perform *special* operations. They are not simply elite infantry possessing above-average skills and endurance levels.”<sup>42</sup> In the end, all SOF units share the same characteristics. They can all “be identified by their flexibility, versatility, adaptability, responsiveness, durability, ingenuity, and capacity to act independently of other military forces.”<sup>43</sup> These characteristics of SOF are also informing the type of operations it undertakes. According to Lambakis, special operations should be considered as “tailored” operations: “[t]hey are “tailored” above all by policy and strategy.”<sup>44</sup> How well the operations are tailored to the capabilities of SOF directly impacts the strategic impact SOF will have on a conflict.

Colin S. Gray subsequently added to the discussion McRaven and Lambakis had started by focusing further on the strategic utility of SOF. The general claim of Gray’s article *Handfuls of Heroes on Desperate Ventures: When do Special Operations Succeed?* was: “special operations forces (SOF) offer the prospect of a favorably disproportionate return on military investment.”<sup>45</sup> His article examined in-depth whether SOF could fulfill this strategic promise. Gray did so by listing a variety of conditions for success. These conditions are sometimes interdependent, and their relevance varies on a case-by-case basis.<sup>46</sup> Gray affirmed many of the points already made by Lambakis. For SOF to be successful, it needs to have leaders who understand its strategic value and use it properly based on the prevailing political and historical

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<sup>41</sup> Steven Lambakis, “Forty Selected Men Can Shake the World”: The Contributions of Special Operations to Victory,” *Comparative Strategy* 13, no. 2 (1994): 212.

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*, 213.

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*, 214.

<sup>45</sup> Colin S. Gray, “Handfuls of Heroes on Desperate Ventures: When Do Special Operations Succeed?” *Parameters* 29, no. 1 (1999): 1.

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*

context. Furthermore, SOF needs to display tactical excellence, but it should also be assigned objectives that it can, in all probability, accomplish. SOF is not capable of doing everything.<sup>47</sup> Gray differs from Lambakis in that Gray offers specific policy recommendations. By doing so, he elaborated on the definition of SOF and special operations that Lambakis provided. He provided tangible handles for policymakers and military leaders to employ SOF more successfully.

Robert G. Spulak, Jr. built upon the ideas proposed by McRaven but – similar to Lambakis and Gray – attempted to formulate a theory that comprised all of SOF – i.e., all of its characteristics and its missions. Similar to McRaven, Spulak examined SOF’s ability to overcome Clausewitzian ‘friction.’ He claimed that “special operations are missions to accomplish strategic objectives where the use of conventional forces would create unacceptable risks due to Clausewitzian friction. Overcoming these risks requires special operations forces that directly address the ultimate sources of friction through qualities that are the result of the distribution of the attributes of SOF personnel.”<sup>48</sup> Spulak reached this conclusion by distinguishing the three primary sources of friction and by subsequently outlining how SOF is specifically tailored to overcome these sources of friction.

According to Spulak, what divides SOF from other military organizations is “that SOF are elite warriors, creative, and flexible.”<sup>49</sup> These three elements allow SOF to overcome the ultimate sources of friction. Each characteristic is specifically tailored to overcome one of the sources.<sup>50</sup> A crucial component of Spulak’s theory is the amount of military personnel that has – or can attain – the characteristics necessary for becoming a SOF operator. According to Spulak, historically, only a tiny percentage of the total military population has displayed SOF abilities. Thus, one can only increase the SOF population by increasing the total military population.<sup>51</sup>

Harry R. Yarger built further upon the ideas proposed by McRaven and Spulak Jr. However, instead of focusing on SOF in general, Yarger formulated a theory of SOF specific for American SOF. Yarger states: “American values, strategic culture, and experience make the practice of military special operations by the United States distinctive, and these differences have given rise to a particular school of thought and set of constructs.”<sup>52</sup> By examining the

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<sup>47</sup> Gray, “Handfuls of Heroes,” 13.

<sup>48</sup> Spulak, Jr., *A Theory of Special Operations*, 41.

<sup>49</sup> *Ibid.*, 14.

<sup>50</sup> *Ibid.*, 19-21.

<sup>51</sup> *Ibid.*, 10-13.

<sup>52</sup> Yarger, *21st Century SOF*, 45.

American experience with SOF and what has been written about it before, Yarger formulated five definitions, 26 premises, and 14 principles that together “represent a unified theory that explain American special operations and SOF, and provided an intellectual framework for considering SOF’s evolution in the future.”<sup>53</sup> Core elements of Yarger’s unified theory include (I) SOF’s ability to undertake missions that conventional forces cannot, (II) the importance of the special operator, and (III) the need for SOF to be supported by non-SOF units.<sup>54</sup> Crucially, Yarger sees SOF as a distinct military instrument similar to the Army, Navy, Air Force, and the Marines. SOF offers a specific capability, and though it is housed within the various branches, it should not be perceived as merely an element of these respective branches. SOF overcomes the friction of war in a distinctly different way than conventional forces do. To highlight this, Yarger directly utilizes the works of McRaven and Spulak. Whereas conventional forces attempt to overcome the friction of war by bureaucratization – in an attempt “to control the large numbers of people and resources necessary to achieve mass to overcome the enemy”<sup>55</sup> – SOF employs small and self-sufficient teams made up of individuals specifically selected for their ability to overcome friction as a team.

### **2.3 Where the Field Stands Today**

The discussion surrounding SOF theory is still in the beginning stage. Although some theories have been published over the last few decades, a thorough study comparing these various theories has not been undertaken yet. The academic literature can benefit from such a comparison. All theories aim to capture the nature and strategic value of SOF, which should help policymakers and strategists better use SOF. By evaluating the explanatory value of the theories in comparison to each other – instead of examining each theory in a theoretical vacuum – new insights can be created. This is where this thesis is of value. It analyzes which theory – or what type of theory if any – can most effectively provide an understanding of SOF’s nature and strategic value. Subsequently, this can stimulate further debate within the field.

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<sup>53</sup> Yarger, *21<sup>st</sup> Century SOF*, 45.

<sup>54</sup> *Ibid.*, 45-47.

<sup>55</sup> *Ibid.*, 34.

### **3 Methodology**

This thesis examines which theory of SOF – if any – is most effective at capturing the nature and strategic value of SOF. As was stated earlier, SOF theory falls under strategic theory. Similar to strategic theory, SOF theory attempts to map the reality of war and conflict. Specifically, it focuses on the role of SOF in war and conflict. Strategic theory seeks to uncover the true nature of the elements that constitute war and conflict and how these elements relate to each other. An ‘effective’ strategic theory is that theory that gets the nature of conflict and war right. Such an ‘effective’ theory creates a coherent picture of conflict and war, upon which policymakers and strategists can act. Thus, an ‘effective’ SOF theory distinguishes the core elements that constitute SOF and outlines how these elements relate to each other. Subsequently, an ‘effective’ SOF theory allows policymakers and strategists to make better-informed decisions about SOF and its use.

The following section sets out the method this thesis employs to evaluate existing SOF theories and answer the research question. Firstly, it introduces the conceptual framework that is used to analyze the various SOF theories. Secondly, it introduces the case that is examined to test the validity of the different SOF theories. Finally, it addresses the type of sources this thesis employs.

#### **3.1 Conceptual Framework**

It is impossible to individually analyze and test the validity of each of the theories presented in the literature review. There is not enough space to do so. Therefore, this thesis groups the various theories into three distinct categories. These categories subsequently guide the analysis. This grouping has been created based on the core premises of the respective theories. As was shown in the literature review, the academic debate surrounding SOF can be divided into three categories. Although they often disagree with each other on the details, the theories within these categories share fundamental similarities. Namely, their core ‘elements of explanation’ are similar. These ‘elements of explanation’ are the essential components of SOF that, when combined, provide a coherent image of the nature and strategic value of SOF. These elements of explanation – and not the specific details of the theories – are analyzed and evaluated by this thesis. By looking at the elements of explanation, this thesis can evaluate a broad range of theories instead of just one or two. A downside to this method is that this thesis cannot go in-depth into the details of the theories. However, given the current state of the academic debate

on SOF, it is much more valuable to make new claims regarding the core elements of SOF theory. The academic debate is not yet focused on the details of SOF theory but rather on its ontological underpinnings.

Given the theories' elements of explanation, they can be divided into three categories: (I) relational theory, (II) intrinsic theory, and (III) strategic theory. The first category includes the 'Out of the box' theory proposed by Searle.<sup>56</sup> According to this theory, the aspects that make SOF unique and distinguish it from conventional forces are not intrinsic to SOF. Instead, SOF is what conventional forces are not. What makes SOF special today may be very different in the future. The core elements of explanation of relational theory are (I) the responsibilities of the Department of Defense, (II) the capabilities of conventional forces, and (III) the capabilities of SOF.

The second category – intrinsic theory – includes those theories that attempt to explain SOF effectiveness based on SOF characteristics limited to SOF. SOF and its tactical and strategic effectiveness are thus analyzed independently of conventional forces. The theorists that belong to this category are Lambakis, McRaven, Gray, Spulak Jr., and Yarger.<sup>57</sup> Although their theories differ in what premises and characteristics of SOF they identify, all of these theorists try to identify fixed elements of SOF. Their starting point for analysis is SOF's layout, not the military and political contexts in which SOF is employed. All theories perceive SOF as a distinct object with its own distinctive and fixed characteristics that can be analyzed. The core elements of explanation of intrinsic theory are (I) SOF's human capital, (II) the size of SOF's operational units, and (III) the tactics employed by SOF.

The third category – strategic theory – includes the theories that claim SOF should be understood through the lens of broader strategic military theory. Kiras and Finlan are both placed within this category.<sup>58</sup> Both claim that SOF's nature and strategic value can – and should – be examined through the lens of strategic theory. The core elements of explanation of strategic theory are (I) the strategy employed by policymakers & strategists, (II) the capabilities of SOF, and (III) the strategic effects of SOF use over the long run. The category's name might lead to some confusion. How does this 'strategic theory' differ from strategic theory discussed in chapter 2? However, this is precisely the point: it does not differ from it. The point made by

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<sup>56</sup> Searle, *Out of the Box*.

<sup>57</sup> Lambakis, "Forty Selected Men," 211-221; McRaven, *Spec Ops*; Gray, "Handfuls of Heroes," 2-24; Spulak Jr., *A Theory of Special Operations*; and Yarger, *21st Century SOF*.

<sup>58</sup> Kiras, *Special Operations and Strategy*; and Finlan, "A dangerous pathway?," 255-275.

Kiras and Finlan is that SOF should be analyzed from the strategic level. Kiras even specifically claims that existing strategic theory is enough to understand SOF's strategic value.

The categories of theories and the authors placed in them are shown below in figures 1 and 2.

Category	Authors
Relational theory	Tom Searle
Intrinsic theory	Steven Lambakis Colin Gray William McRaven Harry Yarger Robert Spulak Jr.
Strategic theory	James D. Kiras Alastair Finlan

*Fig. 1: Authors divided between categories.*

Category	Elements of explanation
Relational theory	I. The responsibilities of the DoD. II. The capabilities of the conventional forces. III. The capabilities of SOF.
Intrinsic theory	I. SOF's human capital. II. The size of SOF's operational units. III. The tactics employed by SOF.
Strategic theory	I. The strategy employed by policymakers & strategists. II. The capabilities of SOF. III. The strategic effects of SOF use over the long run.

*Fig. 2: Elements of explanation per category*

### 3.2 The Case Study: Operation Neptune's Spear

This thesis examines one case where the Obama administration has employed SOF. This examination is conducted from the perspectives of relational theory, intrinsic theory, and strategic theory. By analyzing one specific case from these three perspectives, this thesis can

evaluate which type of theory provides the most coherent image of SOF and thus is most effective at capturing the nature and strategic value of SOF.

The case under examination is operation Neptune's Spear. This operation was conducted on May 2<sup>nd</sup>, 2011, and led to the death of Osama bin Laden. A US SOF unit conducted the operation.<sup>59</sup> This operation was selected for one main reason: compared to other SOF operations, much has been publicized about Neptune's Spear. Details about special operations, especially those conducted over the last twenty years, are often classified.<sup>60</sup> Details about operation Neptune's Spear deviate from this norm. In the direct aftermath of the operation – and in the years following it – detailed accounts of the operation, the SOF unit conducting it, and the decision-making process preceding it have been published.<sup>61</sup> This vast amount of information enables a thorough academic analysis of the operation.

Analyzing operation Neptune's Spear from the perspectives of the three categories of theories yields three distinct narratives. Each category contains different elements of explanation and thus focuses on different aspects of the operation to uncover the strategic value of SOF in the operation. This thesis constructs these three narratives. After these narratives are established, this thesis evaluates which narratives provide the most complete and coherent picture of SOF. Every theory – and every category of theories – claims to offer a complete image of SOF and its strategic value. Subsequently, this would mean that – when Neptune's Spear is analyzed from these various perspectives – each narrative should be without any logical flaws or missing elements. Each narrative should provide a clear explanation of SOF's strategic value. If this is not the case, then this thesis can conclude that the category of theories – and the theories in it – lack strength and are thus not effective. Comparing the three narratives is crucial to finding logical flaws. Suppose one narrative persuasively demonstrates the importance of some elements to understanding SOF's nature, but the other narratives do not incorporate these elements. In that case, this thesis can safely assume that these latter narratives have omitted crucial elements of explanation. The comparison allows the narratives – and thus the categories of theories – to point out flaws amongst each other. These flaws might go unnoticed when the categories are evaluated by themselves.

This thesis is exploratory. It examines only one case, which displays only one type of operation conducted by SOF. This is done for brevity. Suppose this thesis wants to provide a

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<sup>59</sup> Peter L. Bergen, *Manhunt: The ten-year search for Bin Laden from 9/11 to Abbottabad* (New York: Broadway Paperbacks, 2012): 211-230.

<sup>60</sup> Kiras, "Theory of Special Operations," 79.

<sup>61</sup> See for example: Bergen, *Manhunt*; and Mark Owen and Kevin Maurer, *No Easy Day: The Autobiography of a Navy SEAL* (New York: Dutton, 2012).

conclusive answer to which theory – or type of theory – is most effective in capturing the nature of SOF. In that case, it should analyze more cases in which different types of special operations are conducted. It lacks the space to do so, which is a limitation. However, this thesis does provide a new way of ordering and evaluating SOF theories. It thus provides a new way of looking at SOF theory, and by doing so, adds to the current academic debate surrounding SOF.

### **3.3 Identification of Sources**

The three narratives are constructed by analyzing a wide variety of documents and articles. These range from government and think tank reports to journal and newspaper articles. The author has no access to classified government reports, which are inherent to special operations. Furthermore, as mentioned by James D. Kiras, it is challenging for outsiders to gain insight into the culture of SOF and thus learn their full mode of operations.<sup>62</sup> Therefore, the narratives might not be complete since certain crucial information might not be available to the author. This is another limitation of this research. However, even though not all information about Neptune's Spear and the SOF unit conducting it is available to the author, it is still worthwhile to attempt an analysis. As has been mentioned before, this research is exploratory. It introduces a new way of analyzing SOF theories. Even though the outcome of this analysis might not be entirely satisfactory – due to a lack of information and a minimal amount of cases – the method of analyzing SOF theories can still be of value.

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<sup>62</sup> Kiras, "Theory of Special Operations," 79-80.

## 4 Operation Neptune's Spear

On May 2<sup>nd</sup>, 2011, US Navy SEALs shot and killed fugitive Al-Qaeda leader Osama bin Laden in Abbottabad, Pakistan. Operation Neptune's Spear – the official codename of this operation – ended the manhunt for bin Laden. This manhunt had been going on since the 1990s when bin Laden and Al Qaeda had started targeting the US.<sup>63</sup> Bin Laden had escaped the grasp of the US for over twenty years. However, he was eventually tracked by the CIA to a compound in Pakistan in August of 2010.

When CIA analysts first discovered the mysterious compound linked to Al-Qaeda in Abbottabad, they were unsure whether bin Laden resided there. Although the CIA used various ploys to uncover who was living in the compound, a hundred percent certainty that it was bin Laden was never reached.<sup>64</sup> Senior analysts and close advisors to Obama offered wide-ranging estimations of the probability that Bin Laden was there, from as low as 40 to as high as 90 percent.<sup>65</sup> President Obama was forced to make a decision based on probabilities, not on certainty. Despite the uncertainty surrounding the Abbottabad compound, Obama decided to act on the intelligence. A SOF team consisting of US Navy SEALs was selected to strike the compound and capture or kill Bin Laden – should he be residing there.

The following section provides an analysis of the use of SOF during operation Neptune's Spear. This analysis is conducted from three different perspectives: that of relational theory, intrinsic theory, and strategic theory.

### 4.1 Relational Theory

The core elements of explanation of relational theory are: (I) the responsibilities of the DoD, (II) the capabilities of conventional forces, and (III) the capabilities of SOF. Relational theory posits that these three elements combined represent the nature of SOF and allow one to understand its strategic value. Therefore, when analyzing operation Neptune's Spear through these three elements, a coherent and complete picture of SOF's strategic value to the operation should become apparent to the reader.

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<sup>63</sup> Michael Scheuer, *Osama Bin Laden* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011): 117-122; Stephen Walt, "Beyond bin Laden: Reshaping U.S. Foreign Policy," *International Security* 26, no. 3 (Winter 2001/02): 58-59.

<sup>64</sup> Bergen, *Manhunt*, 124-132.

<sup>65</sup> *Ibid.*, 132-134 & 194-195; John A. Gans Jr., "This is 50-50: Behind Obama's Decision to Kill Bin Laden," *The Atlantic*, October 10, 2012, <https://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2012/10/this-is-50-50-behind-obamas-decision-to-kill-bin-laden/263449/>.

#### 4.1.1 *The responsibilities of the DoD*

Relational theory creates a representation of SOF's nature by conceptualizing SOF's relationship to conventional forces. When given all responsibilities of the DoD, SOF performs those responsibilities that are not performed by conventional forces and vice versa. Relational theory thus correctly represents reality if those forces designated as SOF indeed (I) conduct an operation that falls under the responsibility of the DoD and (II) conduct a type of operation that conventional forces would not conduct. To validate relational theory – in the case of Neptune's Spear – one needs to examine first whether the US SEAL team conducted an operation that fell under the responsibility of the military. After all, if SOF would conduct an operation that fell outside of the scope of responsibilities of the DoD, relational theory would not account for this.

In the case of Neptune's Spear, it is clear that striking the mysterious compound belonged to the responsibilities of the DoD. Even before President Obama had decided to engage the compound, military planners had already been tasked with creating various plans of engagement. The DoD eventually drafted four main plans: dropping a heavy bomb from a B-2 bomber, striking the compound with a drone, engaging in a bilateral operation with Pakistani security forces, and a covert raid on the compound.<sup>66</sup> Given these plans, it is clear that the Obama administration believed that the DoD had the capability to strike the compound. A raid was part of the DoD's responsibility. Out of all options presented to the President, a covert military raid was chosen as the preferred course of action. A raiding team could confirm bin Laden's identity on-site. It could also extract valuable intelligence from the compound.<sup>67</sup>

#### 4.1.2 *The capabilities of conventional forces and SOF*

Attacking Bin Laden's compound thus fell under the responsibility of the DoD. When such is clear, a relational analysis continues by examining which part of the military – conventional forces or SOF – had the capability to perform the specific task. In the case of Neptune's Spear, it then becomes clear that conventional forces did not possess the skill to clandestinely infiltrate Pakistani airspace and strike the compound with a raiding force.

First of all, what precisely are conventional forces? The US DoD Dictionary of Military and Associated Terms defines conventional forces as “1. Those forces capable of conducting operations using nonnuclear weapons. 2. Those forces other than designated special operations

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<sup>66</sup> Bergen, *Manhunt*, 174.

<sup>67</sup> *Ibid.*, 213-216.

forces.”<sup>68</sup> This definition appears to confirm the assumptions of relational theory, namely: conventional forces are that which SOF is not, and vice versa.

The DoD does not go into detail about the core activities of conventional forces. It does go into detail about the core activities of SOF, however. Since it is clear that conventional forces are what SOF is not – which means that conventional forces do what SOF does not – one can be confident that conventional forces do not perform the core activities performed by SOF. The raid on Bin Laden’s compound was a clear example of direct action. Since direct action consists of “[s]hort-duration strikes and other small-scale offensive actions employing specialized military capabilities to seize, destroy, capture, exploit, recover, or damage designated targets.”<sup>69</sup> Neptune’s Spear was indeed a small-scale offensive and employed specialized military capabilities to destroy or capture a designated target (i.e., Bin Laden). Two Black Hawk helicopters – which were modified for stealth purposes – carried two small teams of military personnel from an airfield in Jalalabad, Afghanistan, to Bin Laden’s compound in Pakistan. These teams methodically cleared the compound, killing Bin Laden’s courier and his brother, Bin Laden’s son, and Bin Laden in the process. After the compound was cleared, the teams collected an abundance of intelligence scattered throughout the compound.<sup>70</sup> The teams stayed on the ground for no longer than thirty-eight minutes, after which they were flown back to Jalalabad.<sup>71</sup> The operation checks the boxes of direct action.

USSOCOM indicates that such direct action is part of the core activities of SOF.<sup>72</sup> Consequently, conventional forces do not possess this direct action capability and thus would not have executed operation Neptune’s Spear. This corresponds with reality.

#### 4.1.3 *Relational theory’s correspondence to reality*

Based on the case of operation Neptune’s Spear, the relationship between conventional forces and SOF portrayed by relational theory appears to closely resemble the actual relationship between US conventional forces and US SOF. In this case, the Obama administration expected the US military to be able to strike Bin Laden’s compound through a military raid. A designated SOF unit performed this responsibility of the DoD. Based on this narrative, SOF can thus be understood as performing a specific range of DoD responsibilities, specifically those that

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<sup>68</sup> Office of the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, *DOD Dictionary of Military and Associated Terms* (Washington DC: The Joint Staff, 2021): 49.

<sup>69</sup> USSOCOM, “Core Activities.”

<sup>70</sup> Naylor, *Relentless strike*, 400.

<sup>71</sup> *Ibid.*, 398-400.

<sup>72</sup> USSOCOM, “Core Activities.”

conventional forces do not perform. SOF should thus not be understood and defined based on its fixed characteristics. Instead, conventional forces and SOF are fluidly connected, together performing all responsibilities of the DoD, but not the same responsibilities.

## 4.2 Intrinsic Theory

The core elements of explanation of intrinsic theory are (I) SOF's human capital, (II) the size of SOF's operational units, and (III) the tactics employed by SOF. Similar to relational theory, these elements combined should display SOF's nature and strategic value. An analysis of Neptune's Spear through the prism of intrinsic theory should confirm that the theory's claims correspond to reality. The following section sets out this narrative.

### 4.2.1 *SOF's human capital*

Intrinsic theory contends that an essential part of why operation Neptune's Spear was tactically successful was because of the people who conducted it. Not every military unit – and soldier – can conduct operations such as Neptune's Spear. The human capital of SOF must be taken into account. This contention of intrinsic theory appears to be underwritten by USSOCOM, which lists 5 'SOF Truths.' One of which being: "Humans are more important than hardware,"<sup>73</sup> with the description of this truth stating: "People – not equipment – make the critical difference. The right people, highly trained and working as a team, will accomplish the mission with the equipment available. On the other hand, the best equipment in the world cannot compensate for a lack of the right people."<sup>74</sup> Hence, knowing where the men who conducted Neptune's Spear come from should be crucial for understanding its success.

The Obama administration selected Vice-Admiral William McRaven – the Joint Special Operations Command (JSOC) commander – to oversee the planning and execution of the military raid on the compound.<sup>75</sup> McRaven had been active within the US Navy SEALs since 1978. He authored the book *Spec Ops*, which has been discussed previously. He was well-versed in the world and tactics of SOF. McRaven tasked a Navy SMU (Special Mission Unit) with the operation. This SMU – better known as the Naval Special Warfare Development Group – is the US Navy SEALs' premier counterterrorism force. The SMU is popularly and inside the

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<sup>73</sup> "SOF Truths," USSOCOM, accessed May 20<sup>th</sup>, 2021, <https://www.socom.mil/about/sof-truths>.

<sup>74</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>75</sup> Bergen, *Manhunt*, 165-169.

military known as ‘DevGru’ and ‘Seal Team Six.’<sup>76</sup> The operators conducting the operations were handpicked from the different existing DevGru squadrons.<sup>77</sup>

The origins of the US Navy SEALs can be traced to the Underwater Demolition Teams (UDT) formed by the US Navy during World War II. During the battles in the Pacific, American landing craft had encountered difficulties with reaching land. Coral reefs, shallow waters, and enemy obstacles around the islands in the Pacific obstructed swift and efficient landing operations. The Navy’s UDTs were trained to identify and map possible landing grounds and destroy coral or other obstacles.<sup>78</sup> Two decades later, under the Kennedy administration, the Navy created a SOF out of the UDTs: the Navy Sea, Air, Land (SEAL) teams. Instead of only operating in the water around the coasts, SEAL teams also operated inland.<sup>79</sup>

Becoming a Navy SEAL is no easy feat. Candidates have to complete Basic Underwater Demolition/Seal (BUD/S) training. During this training, candidates are pushed to their limits; mentally, physically, and emotionally. In the past years, 80-93% have not made the cut.<sup>80</sup> The most challenging part of BUD/S is dubbed ‘Hell Week,’ described by McRaven as “[s]ix days of no sleep and constant physical and mental harassment.”<sup>81</sup> After gaining experience in one of the SEAL teams, Navy SEALs can try out for DevGru. Only the best of the SEAL enlisted and officers are picked to join DevGru.<sup>82</sup>

BUD/S and later DevGru selection aim to weed out those who are not resilient enough to conduct operations in high-stress environments. These skills were necessary during operation Neptune’s Spear. Although the Black Hawks carrying the SEAL team had no difficulty getting to bin Laden’s compound, the insertion of operators into the compound did not go as planned. The plan was for one Black Hawk to drop the operators it carried directly into the compound’s courtyard. The other Black Hawk’s operators would be dropped on top of the roof of the main building. However, the first Black Hawk lost its lift above the courtyard due to a phenomenon later determined as “vortex ring state,”<sup>83</sup> when the helicopter’s rotors can no longer get the required lift due to turbulent wind created by its rotors. Normal Black Hawks seldomly suffer this issue, but this did not include the stealth variants.<sup>84</sup> The pilot managed to ‘safely’ crash-

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<sup>76</sup> Bergen, *Manhunt*, 159.

<sup>77</sup> Naylor, *Relentless Strike*, 393-394.

<sup>78</sup> Moyar, *Oppose Any Foe*, chap. 2.

<sup>79</sup> *Ibid.*, chap. 3.

<sup>80</sup> Eric N. Smith, Michael D. Young, and Alia J. Crum, “Stress, Mindsets, and Success in Navy SEALs Special Warfare Training,” *Frontiers in Psychology* 10 (January, 2020): 2-3.

<sup>81</sup> William H. McRaven, *Sea Stories: My Life in Special Operations* (New York: Grand Central Publishing, 2019): 37.

<sup>82</sup> Naylor, *Relentless Strike*, 42-43.

<sup>83</sup> *Ibid.*, 399.

<sup>84</sup> *Ibid.*

land the helicopter, although it was severely damaged in the process. Seeing the first Black Hawk crash, the second Black Hawk pilot decided to land outside the compound. In a split second, the DevGru operators had to change their plan of attack. Arguably, they managed to do so successfully because of their ability to make quick decisions under pressure.

#### 4.2.2 *The size of SOF's operational units*

Intrinsic theory posits that a second crucial component of SOF is the size in which it operates. Because SOF operates in small units, it has access to areas that are unreachable for conventional forces, is more discrete, and can function for extended periods disconnected from supply lines.<sup>85</sup> If intrinsic theory demonstrates the nature of SOF correctly, the SOF unit selected to undertake Neptune's Spear should indeed have been small, and the success of operation Neptune's Spear should have been partly dependent on the size of this raiding unit.

The DevGru unit selected to conduct operation Neptune's Spear consisted of twenty-three operators and one interpreter.<sup>86</sup> McRaven had been crucial in determining this size. During the process of planning the operation, McRaven drew heavily from his work *Spec Ops*.<sup>87</sup> According to McRaven, for a special operation to be successful, surprise and speed are crucial. The enemy has to be caught off-guard, and the operation is supposed to be over before the enemy can scramble its defenses. To have these elements of surprise and speed, SOF usually has to be small in size and lightly armed.<sup>88</sup> McRaven advocated this for operation Neptune's Spear. For the operation to be successful, the unit conducting it needed to be small. President Obama accepted this reasoning. However, he did require McRaven to have a quick reaction force (QRF) stationed nearby the compound to assist the raiding force should they be caught in a firefight.<sup>89</sup>

#### 4.2.3 *The tactics employed by SOF*

According to intrinsic theory, some tactics are employed exclusively by SOF and are therefore an inherent element of SOF. These SOF tactics are closely related to the human capital of SOF and the size of SOF's operational units. As was mentioned in the relational theory narrative,

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<sup>85</sup> Office of the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, *Joint Publication 3-05: Special operations* (Washington DC: The Joint Staff, 2011): II-3.

<sup>86</sup> Bergen, *Manhunt*, 214-215.

<sup>87</sup> *Ibid.*, 168-169.

<sup>88</sup> McRaven, *Spec Ops*, 1-23.

<sup>89</sup> Bergen, *Manhunt*, 181-182 & 213.

Neptune's Spear was a direct action operation. Direct action is tailored to the layout and personnel of SOF and is exclusively conducted by SOF.<sup>90</sup>

For units such as DevGru, the raid on bin Laden's compound was not out of the ordinary. Since 2001, SMUs – both from the Army and Navy – had conducted thousands of similar raids in Afghanistan and Iraq. As part of the US counterterrorism strategy in these countries, JSOC had set up a hyper-efficient network of SMUs targeting insurgents and terrorists day and night.<sup>91</sup> General Stanley McChrystal played a pivotal role in setting up this network. Before McChrystal took command of the JSOC in 2003, SMUs were not used widely. Instead, they were reserved for national-level missions, to which hunting terrorists and insurgents in Iraq and Afghanistan did not belong.<sup>92</sup> An essential element of McChrystal's policy was a specific focus on the 'middlemen' of terrorist and insurgent operations. As McChrystal stated: "instead of trying to solely decapitate the top echelon of leaders, we would disembowel the organization by targeting its midlevel commanders.... By hollowing out its midsection, we believed we could get the organization to collapse in on itself."<sup>93</sup> To keep the pressure on these organizations, SMUs would need to be engaging the enemy almost continuously. Hence, instead of being reserved for national-level missions, seeing little to no actual combat, SMUs gained experience in snatching or killing high-value targets daily. SOF's experience in conducting DA explains why SOF was – out of all US military forces – most likely to conduct operation Neptune's Spear successfully. Subsequently, this explains why the operation was given to a SOF unit.

#### 4.2.4 *The intrinsic narrative*

The narrative constructed by intrinsic theory appears to correspond to reality. Intrinsic theory places a premium on SOF's human capital. The skills of special operators are crucial to mission success – and subsequently to the strategic value of SOF. Operation Neptune's Spear confirms this. The ability to quickly change the plan after the Black Hawk crashed – this under high levels of stress – shows the importance of who – i.e., what type of individual – is conducting the operation. Secondly, intrinsic theory presupposes that having a small operational unit is a core element of SOF and that this directly influences the strategic value of SOF. This was the case with operation Neptune's Spear. The unit conducting the operation was deliberately kept small to maintain the elements of surprise and speed.

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<sup>90</sup> USSOCOM, "Core Activities."

<sup>91</sup> Tucker and Lamb, *United States Special Operations Forces*, 155-162.

<sup>92</sup> *Ibid.*, 154.

<sup>93</sup> *Ibid.*, 155.

Finally, intrinsic theory posits that SOF's specific set of tactics are a crucial element of its nature. When it comes to direct action, this is indeed the case. Direct action is tailored to SOF's operational size and the skills of its personnel. Because of this, DA is exclusively performed by SOF. When it was decided that operation Neptune's Spear would be a DA operation, this logically meant that SOF would conduct it.

### 4.3 Strategic Theory

According to strategic theory, the interplay between three elements combined should display SOF's nature and its strategic value. These three elements are (I) the strategy employed by policymakers & strategists, (II) the capabilities of SOF, (III) and the strategic effects of SOF use over the long run.

#### 4.3.1 *The strategy employed by policymakers & strategists*

An analysis of SOF's strategic value based on the case of Neptune's Spear starts at the strategic intent of policymakers. One needs to uncover the aims of the policymakers sanctioning the operation. Only when this intent is clear can one infer the role SOF played in achieving this strategic intent. In the case of Neptune's Spear, one thus needs to examine the intent of President Obama and his closest advisors for sanctioning the operation. Based on details about the decision-making process that preceded operation Neptune's Spear and Obama's general stance on counterterrorism, three reasons for why Obama decided to authorize Neptune's Spear can be identified.

First of all, while in office and the years before it, Obama had shown that he was willing to be tough on terrorism. As he stated during a speech in 2002:

After September 11, after witnessing the carnage and destruction, the dust and the tears, I supported this Administration's pledge to hunt down and root out those who would slaughter innocents in the name of intolerance, and I would willingly take up arms myself to prevent such a tragedy from happening again.<sup>94</sup>

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<sup>94</sup> Trevor McCrisken, "Ten years on: Obama's war on terrorism in rhetoric and practice," *International Affairs* 87, no. 4 (July 2011): 786.

Threats against national security should be handled effectively and decisively, and if that means using force, then Obama vowed to use it.<sup>95</sup> Terrorism was a core problem, and Obama had no intention to retract the US from its fight against it. Given Obama's vow to use every means necessary to combat terrorism, a lack to act on a possible lead on bin Laden would have been damaging to Obama's political reputation. On the other hand, getting bin Laden would certainly boost his reputation. If the lead on bin Laden proved to be inaccurate, then Obama could at least claim that he had acted on his promises to the American people.

Secondly, a strike aimed at neutralizing bin Laden fitted the US its general strategy against Al-Qaeda. Since 9/11, the US had pursued a strategy of targeting the top leadership of terrorist organizations – such as Al Qaeda – in the belief that this would crumble the whole organization.<sup>96</sup> This strategy was based on the fact that Al-Qaeda was – and is – a highly decentralized organization. It had various hubs across the world – each with different degrees of allegiance to Osama bin Laden. Many not even directly took orders from the core leadership of Al-Qaeda, but only shared its ideology.<sup>97</sup> Engaging all individuals who pledged their support to Al-Qaeda or who shared Al-Qaeda's ideology would be an enormous task. It appeared to be more efficient to strike at the leadership of Al-Qaeda than addressing all individual nodes in the international Al-Qaeda network. By hitting important Al Qaeda training camps and by disallowing the Al Qaeda leadership any rest to recuperate or communicate amongst each other, the US attempted to disable the organization.<sup>98</sup> Bin Laden, who stood at the top of the Al-Qaeda pyramid of leadership, became a top priority. By neutralizing him, US officials believed they could dismantle – or at least severely damage – Al-Qaeda as a whole. President Obama admitted this rationale after operation Neptune's Spear: “And I said to myself that if we have a good chance of not completely defeating, but badly disabling al-Qaeda, then it [Operation Neptune's Spear] was worth both the political risks as well as the risks to our men.”<sup>99</sup>

Thirdly, in the American psyche, Osama bin Laden represented the man who had been able to strike the US mainland, who had killed thousands of American citizens and had – so far – gotten away with it. Because of this image, capturing and killing Osama bin Laden was not just

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<sup>95</sup> Erika G. King, *Obama, the Media, and Framing the U.S. Exit From Iraq and Afghanistan* (New York: Routledge, 2016), 45-47.

<sup>96</sup> James Ciment, *Encyclopedia of Conflicts Since World War II* (New York: Routledge, 2014): 505-507.

<sup>97</sup> Michael W. Ryan, *Decoding Al-Qaeda's Strategy: The Deep Battle Against America* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2013); 19-21.

<sup>98</sup> Stephen van Evera, "Assessing U.S. Strategy in the War on Terror," *The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 607, no. 1 (2006): 12; Linda Robinson, "The Future of Special Operations: Beyond Kill and Capture," *Foreign Affairs* 91 no. 6 (November/December 2012): 110-112.

<sup>99</sup> Bergen, *Manhunt*, 205.

practical; it also had a symbolic dimension. It would show US enemies and US citizens that the US – and specifically the Obama administration – would not give up on getting retribution.<sup>100</sup>

The response to bin Laden's demise confirms this symbolic value. After President Obama presented the news of bin Laden's death, thousands of Americans took to the streets to celebrate the event. The streets surrounding the White House and Ground Zero in New York were packed with jubilant people celebrating bin Laden's death.<sup>101</sup> A poll conducted by Gallup in the days after the death of bin Laden indicated that "[m]ore than 9 in 10 Americans approve of the US military action that killed Osama bin Laden on Sunday, and 79% say his killing is "extremely" or "very important" to the US."<sup>102</sup> Thus, it is likely that the symbolic importance of 9/11 and retaliating against Bin Laden influenced the decision-making process of the Obama administration.

#### 4.3.2 *The capabilities of SOF*

A strategic examination continues with an analysis of SOF's specific capabilities. When one knows what SOF can do on the tactical level, one can subsequently determine its possible value on the strategic level.

For Neptune's Spear, strategic theory examines the capabilities of the unit chosen for the operation: Navy's DevGru. The narrative of intrinsic theory already goes into detail about the capabilities of DevGru. This section thus only briefly mentions those components of SOF capabilities that strategic theory would also examine. A core difference between the analyses of intrinsic and strategic theories is that intrinsic theory focuses on why SOF has specific capabilities. It thus examines the human capital of SOF (i.e., the personnel of SOF and their selection and training) and how this human capital influences SOF's capabilities. Strategic theory is much more concerned with the output of SOF. For strategic theory, two things matter: (I) what military tactics is SOF able to perform, and (II) with what frequency?

In Neptune's Spear, strategic theory zooms in on SOF's ability to perform direct action. SOF – and specifically Navy's DevGru – had been conducting countless direct action operations since 9/11.<sup>103</sup> Their proficiency in quickly striking targets in challenging areas had been extensively tested. Under the command of Stanley McChrystal, JSOC – with all of SOF

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<sup>100</sup> Lloyd Cox and Steve Wood, "Got him: Revenge, emotions, and the killing of Osama bin Laden," *Review of International Studies* 43, no. 1 (2016): 112-113.

<sup>101</sup> Alan Taylor, "Osama Bin Laden Killed: Worldwide Reactions," *The Atlantic*, May 2, 2011, <https://www.theatlantic.com/photo/2011/05/osama-bin-laden-killed-worldwide-reactions/100058/>.

<sup>102</sup> Frank Newport, "Americans Back Bin Laden Mission; Credit Military, CIA Most," *Gallup*, May 3, 2011, <https://news.gallup.com/poll/147395/americans-back-bin-laden-mission-credit-military-cia.aspx>, para. 1.

<sup>103</sup> Tucker and Lamb, *United States Special Operations Force*, 154-160.

under its control – had been transformed from a command that conducted operations only sparsely to one that conducted operations almost constantly.<sup>104</sup> This increase in JSOC’s output had its downsides. The unrelenting string of deployments worldwide had worn SOF down. The burden of the War on Terror mainly fell onto the shoulders of the – relatively – small group of special operators.<sup>105</sup> This affected special operators both mentally and physically. A study published in 2012 in the *Journal of Special Operations Medicine* indicated “that a representative sample of SOF personnel screened positive for post-traumatic stress disorder at roughly double the rate – between 16 and 20 percent – of their GPF [General Purpose Forces] counterparts, and the rate of positive screenings for combat-arms SOF was even higher.”<sup>106</sup> Studies such as these indicate that SOF is not a strategic instrument that can be employed without end.

SOF is capable of effectively executing direct actions, and it can do so often. However, SOF has its limits. An examination from the perspective of strategic theory takes this into account. Only when it is clear what SOF can achieve on the tactical level can inferences be made about how these tactical effects translate to the strategic level.

#### 4.3.3 *Strategic effects of the use of SOF*

At 11:35 p.m. EDT on May 1, President Obama delivered the news about bin Laden’s death to the world.<sup>107</sup> Although the operation was perceived as an absolute success by the US public, its long-term and strategic effects were not immediately apparent.<sup>108</sup> From the perspective of strategic theory, these long-term effects are crucial for gaining a complete understanding of SOF’s strategic value. By comparing the desired strategic results of Neptune’s Spear with the actual strategic results, one can determine SOF’s strategic value.

First of all, what were the effects of bin Laden’s death on the functioning of Al-Qaeda? Bin Laden had remained Al Qaeda’s leader until his death. The intelligence recovered from the compound indicates that bin Laden was still planning attacks on the Western world and directing the Al Qaeda network.<sup>109</sup> However, since the transportation bombings in London on

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<sup>104</sup> Bergen, *Manhunt*, 156.

<sup>105</sup> Moyar, *Oppose Any Foe*, Chpt. 10.

<sup>106</sup> Jim Thomas and Chris Dougherty, *Beyond the Ramparts: The Future of U.S. Special Operations Forces* (Washington D.C.: Center for Strategic and Budgetary Assessments, 2013): 40.

<sup>107</sup> Macon Phillips, “Osama bin Laden Dead,” accessed October 10, 2020, <https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/blog/2011/05/02/osama-bin-laden-dead>.

<sup>108</sup> Bergen, *Manhunt*, 239-240; Jeffrey M. Jones, “Obama Approval Rallies Six Point to 52% After Bin Laden Death,” *Gallup*, May 5, 2011, <https://news.gallup.com/poll/147437/obama-approval-rallies-six-points-bin-laden-death.aspx>.

<sup>109</sup> Bergen, *Manhunt*, 250, 255-259.

July 7, 2005, Al Qaeda had not engaged in any successful attack on the West anymore.<sup>110</sup> Despite bin Laden's restless planning, none of his plans had come to fruition. It can be questioned whether – if bin Laden had not been killed – any of his plans would have been executed in the years following 2011. Because bin Laden insisted on communicating through letters – which meant that “he had to wait up to two or three months for responses to his queries”<sup>111</sup> – he could in no way efficiently direct the Al Qaeda network. Thus, it is doubtful whether Al Qaeda functioned worse without bin Laden.

However, the operation did take away bin Laden as a direct inspirational source for other potential terrorists and insurgents. Although bin Laden's ideology will always be out in the open, he cannot propagate any new ideas or comment on current events. New leadership has attempted to follow bin Laden's footsteps, but Al Qaeda seems to have nonetheless lost much of its effectiveness. According to Bergen, Ayman Al-Zawahiri, who took control over Al Qaeda after bin Laden's death, lacks much of the charisma bin Laden possessed.<sup>112</sup> He has not launched any meaningful attacks on the West since he came to power in 2011.<sup>113</sup> Still, although Al Qaeda is not effective, it remains an essential source of inspiration to other affiliated terrorist and insurgent networks, such as Al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP), the Al-Nusrah Front, and al-Shabaab.<sup>114</sup>

Operation Neptune's Spear directly impacted the US its ability to conduct the War on Terror because of its impact on the relationship between the US and Pakistan. This relationship suffered from the raid. In the decade before the raid, the US had worked closely with the Pakistani military to address terrorist and insurgent networks on Pakistani soil, such as the Taliban.<sup>115</sup> Pakistan had allowed the US to conduct drone strikes on targets in Pakistan.<sup>116</sup> Furthermore, the CIA had been able to place large numbers of CIA operatives in Pakistan without much resistance from the Pakistani government.<sup>117</sup> This changed after Neptune's Spear. The fact that the US had engaged in a covert military operation on Pakistani soil without notifying the Pakistani government beforehand was not taken lightly. The Pakistani military

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<sup>110</sup> Bergen, *Manhunt*, 258.

<sup>111</sup> *Ibid.*, 257.

<sup>112</sup> *Ibid.*, 259.

<sup>113</sup> “Country Reports on Terrorism 2019,” U.S. Department of State, accessed November 3, 2020, <https://www.state.gov/reports/country-reports-on-terrorism-2019/#AQ>.

<sup>114</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>115</sup> Laurie R. Blank and Benjamin R. Farley, “Characterizing US Operations in Pakistan: Is the United States Engaged In An Armed Conflict?” *Fordham International Law Journal* 34, no. 2 (2011): 157-159; Mark Mazetti, “How a Single Spy Helped Turn Pakistan Against the United States,” *The New York Times Magazine*, April 9, 2013, <https://www.nytimes.com/2013/04/14/magazine/raymond-davis-pakistan.html>.

<sup>116</sup> Blank and Farley, “Characterizing US Operations in Pakistan,” 157-159.

<sup>117</sup> Mazetti, “a Single Spy.”

was embarrassed by the events. It had failed to stop the US incursion, which made segments of the Pakistani population question its capabilities.<sup>118</sup> Adding to this embarrassment came the fact that Pakistani General Ashfaq Parvez Kayani – arguably the most powerful man in Pakistan at that time – had been attempting to strengthen the relationship with the US. The unilateral raid became a clear sign that he had failed in doing so. According to Peter Bergen, Kayani “told his closest colleagues that this was the worst week of his life.”<sup>119</sup>

Similarly, Lieutenant General Ahmad Shuja Pasha, the head of the Pakistani military intelligence service, felt left out. As mentioned by Bergen, Pasha “had requested of his American counterpart, Panetta, that if the CIA didn’t trust the Pakistani government or military with some matter of great import, to tell at least him or Kayani or President Zardari.”<sup>120</sup> This way, they could have shown the Pakistani public that they had been aware of the operation. Since this did not happen, “Pasha felt that the relationship with the United States was broken beyond repair.”<sup>121</sup>

Obama had indicated that he wanted to be tough on terrorism. Neptune’s Spear showed that Obama lived up to his promise. However, in the long run, because of the damaged US-Pakistani relationship, Neptune’s Spear negatively impacted Obama’s ability to be tough on terrorism.

#### 4.3.4 *The strategic narrative*

Strategic theory constructs a much broader narrative than relational and intrinsic theory. It focuses much less on SOF’s details and instead concentrates on the role SOF plays within broader political and strategic goals. The nature of SOF and its strategic value as depicted by strategic theory corresponds closely to reality. The core idea of strategic theory is that the strategic value of SOF cannot be determined based on SOF itself. Only when SOF is situated in a strategic context can one determine what SOF’s strategic value is. Neptune’s Spear confirms this. Even though the operation was a tactical success, the strategic success of the operation can be questioned. The success of Neptune’s Spear was without a doubt a symbolic victory. However, when situated within the US its broader struggle against terrorism, Neptune’s Spear did little to diminish the overall terrorist threat. Instead, it made it more challenging to pursue terrorists in Pakistan.

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<sup>118</sup> Bergen, *Manhunt*, 244-245.

<sup>119</sup> *Ibid.*, 245.

<sup>120</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>121</sup> *Ibid.*

## 5 Comparing the Categories of Theories

At first sight, relational, intrinsic, and strategic theories all seem to correspond to reality. None of the core elements of explanation of the respective categories of theories directly contradicts reality. However, when these categories are compared to each other, weaknesses start to show. Each category in itself appears to offer a coherent account of SOF's nature and its strategic value, but this is misleading. A comparison of the categories shows which crucial elements some categories omit. An analysis of the categories by themselves does not do so.

The following section provides a comparison of the three categories. It highlights where the categories overlap and where they differ. Most importantly, this section highlights how the categories highlight flaws amongst each other.

### 5.1 Relational Theory

When analyzing Neptune's Spear from a relational perspective, the focus shifts onto the responsibilities of the DoD and how these responsibilities are divided between conventional forces and SOF. To a certain extent, the relational lens examines the same elements as the intrinsic lens. Both evaluate the specific capabilities of SOF and its tactics. However, where intrinsic theories perceive the capabilities of SOF as unchanging (to a certain degree), relational theory does not. Relational theory argues that the only reason DA belongs exclusively to the portfolio of SOF is that DA is rare. Should policymakers feel that there is a need for more DA operations, then the capability to perform DA can be expanded. By doing so, this capability would become conventional and thus become a conventional force capability.

Thus, according to relational theory, operations such as Neptune's Spear do not necessarily belong to the portfolio of SOF. Instead, a distributional logic dictates which operations are 'special' and which 'conventional.' Conventional forces conduct the operations that take place often. SOF conducts rare operations. Relational theory thus perceives SOF's nature as fluid.

When planning for future conflicts and military threats, relational theory helps policymakers solve distributional issues and devise long-term strategies. Policymakers need to estimate possible threats. Based on this estimation, they can allocate funds to the military units with the capabilities those policymakers require. For example, suppose policymakers expect a need for more DA operations in the future and fewer large-scale battles fought on the ground.

In that case, they can opt to expand DA-capable units (e.g., the Navy SEALs and the Army Special Forces) and scale back regular army infantry.

However, relational theory contains a fundamental flaw: it does not account for the limits to human resources. Intrinsic theory uncovers this flaw. As intrinsic theory shows, the men serving in DevGru had all gone through meticulous selection. They were chosen for their intelligence, physical capacity, endurance, and ability to withstand high stress levels. DevGru is staffed with individuals specifically selected for their ability to conduct operations such as Neptune's Spear. They are trained to conduct such operations in small teams, clandestinely and far from friendly territory. Their aptitude for problem-solving in stressful situations makes them capable of finishing operations even when their initial plan fails to materialize. Not everyone possesses the skills and capabilities needed to make it through selection and subsequently perform such DAs.

The relationship between conventional forces and SOF that relational theory proposes is thus inherently flawed. Operations – such as DA – currently performed by SOF cannot simply move into the realm of conventional force capability. It is not possible to simply train more people to conduct DAs. The number of people who have the potential to conduct such operations is limited, and policymakers need to consider this. Boundless expansion of the DA capability – even though it might be desirable strategically – inadvertently leads to a decline in the quality of the execution of DA.

## **5.2 Intrinsic Theory**

Although intrinsic theory – in the opinion of this thesis – provides a detailed account of what SOF can achieve on the tactical level, it cannot provide policymakers with a proper understanding of SOF's strategic value. Intrinsic theory allows one to understand why SOF can be tactically successful on operations where conventional forces often cannot. The analysis stops there. It does not provide policymakers with the handles to grasp the effects of these tactical successes on the strategic level. Operation Neptune's Spear is a clear example of this. The operation was complex and daring. Despite its complexity, DevGru brought it to tactical success. Intrinsic theory helps one understand why this happened. However – as strategic theory in its turn indicates – whether Neptune's Spear was a strategic success remains highly debatable. Bin Laden's death had a smaller impact on the functioning of Al-Qaeda than policymakers perhaps had hoped. Furthermore, the operation soured the US relationship with Pakistan. Intrinsic theory offers no guidance to policymakers who try to navigate this strategic realm and try to anticipate the effects of tactical operations in the long run. Intrinsic theory

succinctly opens policymakers' eyes to SOF's tactical possibilities, but its long-term strategic effects are left undiscussed.

### **5.3 Strategic Theory**

Strategic theory acknowledges that tactical successes do not mean much when they do not produce strategic results. Furthermore, strategic theory shows that the value of SOF is not directly dependent on what it achieves on the tactical level. Operation Neptune's Spear demonstrates this. The operation was an evident tactical success. Bin Laden was taken out, and valuable information about Al-Qaeda was recovered from his compound. This all happened without any American casualties. However, the strategic value of the operation – as has been demonstrated – is far from clear-cut.

The understanding of SOF from a strategic perspective thus differs vastly from that of the tactical perspective. The strategic perspective urges policymakers to look beyond the – often remarkable – capabilities of SOF. It shows that the feats performed by SOF mean little when not incorporated into a broader strategy. Strategic theory thereby shows that the value of SOF is inherently linked to how policymakers employ SOF.

### **5.4 The Future of SOF Theory**

Both intrinsic and strategic theories offer valuable insights into the nature of SOF. However, intrinsic theory has thus far not been able to outline the strategic value of SOF credibly. It provides interesting insights into SOF on the tactical level but seems unable to transcend this. Strategic theory, on the other hand, reveals the strategic value of SOF. By widening the lens from SOF to military strategy in general – with a focus on SOF's role within such strategy – strategic theory offers an image of SOF that helps one understand the overarching and strategic value of SOF. Thus, strategic theory is most effective at capturing the nature and strategic value of SOF. It invites policymakers and strategists to transcend the tactical level – i.e., operation Neptune's Spear – and to focus on the broader strategic implications of such operations and the units that conducted them. Only by taking this perspective can one appreciate the strategic value of SOF and subsequently employ SOF in a strategically sound manner. Too often, policymakers are lost in awe of what SOF can do on the tactical level and lose sight of SOF's impact on the strategic level.

This thesis does not claim that intrinsic theory should be discarded. Although it cannot truthfully capture SOF's strategic value, it still offers interesting insights into SOF, albeit on

the tactical level. Intrinsic theory has identified elements of SOF that this thesis believes are unchanging – e.g., the importance of operating in small groups. When one understands the capabilities and tactical excellence of SOF, it is subsequently easier for one to employ SOF strategically. SOF should therefore be studied from two perspectives. Firstly, its character should be investigated. This is where intrinsic theory can add value. Secondly, SOF's place within strategy should be identified. Future work on SOF theory should focus on how intrinsic theory can be incorporated into strategic theory. In such integration, strategic theory should always remain leading.

## 6 Discussion and Limitations

This research has been exploratory. It has attempted to demonstrate the value of comparing existing SOF theories. Such comparisons advance the general understanding of SOF's nature and its strategic value. Only by having theories interact with each other can it be uncovered which theories contain gaps and where theories can complement each other. A better understanding of SOF, in its turn, helps policymakers and strategists employ SOF correctly.

This theory has shown that – when comparing theories – it makes sense to group theories. Within the current academic literature on SOF theory, three categories of theories can be distinguished, all informed by different ontological systems. Having these categories guide the comparison is fruitful because it prevents scholars from being bogged down in the specific details of theories and instead encourages scholars to examine which fundamental elements SOF theory should possess. This thesis argues that ontological disagreements should be resolved before the debate can focus on the details of SOF.

This thesis has had two main limitations, which both have to do with the scope of its research. The first limitation concerns the accuracy of the categories of theories. This thesis has decided to narrow the core elements of explanation of each category to three. This has been done due to constraints in the word count. If there had been more elements per category, the analysis would have been too long since more elements should have been examined. Because each theory only has three core elements, a critique can be made that some theories included in a category are better represented by the core elements than others. Although this thesis maintains that the core elements of the categories represent the essence of all theories, it does concur that some categories could benefit from additional specifying elements. Future research in this area could attempt to specify the three categories identified by this thesis. Doing so should correct the current situation where categories might represent one of its theories better than the others.

The second limitation concerns the conclusions this thesis has drawn from its comparison of the categories of theories. Due to constraints in word count, this thesis has only used one case study to compare the theories. Although this single case study has been able to identify gaps and overlaps in the theories, a future comparison would benefit from a study of multiple cases. As has been mentioned before, SOF has more capabilities besides DA. SOF theory similarly discusses these various SOF capabilities. A thorough comparison of the theories on SOF should include cases where the various SOF capabilities are displayed. Because

of the constraint in word count and this research's exploratory nature, this thesis has not been able to.

## 7 Conclusion

The reliance of US administrations on SOF has grown substantially over the last two decades. Given this increased reliance on SOF, the academic discussion on SOF must not lag. Only when SOF's nature and strategic value are correctly understood can policymakers correctly employ them. History is rife with examples of SOF misuse.<sup>122</sup> The list of SOF misuse will only grow if policymakers continue to misunderstand SOF. The academic discussion on SOF over the years has added to the understanding of SOF. Nonetheless, it is still pervaded by disagreements about the fundamental nature of SOF. This thesis has sought to break through these disagreements.

First of all, this thesis has shown that strategic theory is most effective at capturing SOF's nature and strategic value. Relational and intrinsic theories also offer interesting insights into SOF. However, relational theory is inherently flawed because it does not account for the importance of human capital in special operations. Intrinsic theory crafts a convincing argument as to why SOF can be highly successful tactically, but it does not demonstrate how this tactical excellence translates to the strategic level.

Secondly, this thesis has demonstrated the value of using the core assumptions of theories as a starting point for examination. The academic debate surrounding SOF is mainly preoccupied with discussing which ontological assumptions should underpin SOF theory. This thesis has provided a new method of resolving this ontological debate. It has demonstrated the value of comparing different categories of theories, which share ontological assumptions. Only when these categories – and their underlying ontological assumptions – are compared to each other can flaws within the categories be identified.

Since this thesis has only analyzed one case, future research should examine whether this thesis' conclusions still hold when additional cases are analyzed. Perhaps relational and intrinsic theories are better suited to capture the strategic value of other SOF-specific capabilities such as unconventional warfare, special reconnaissance, and counterinsurgency.<sup>123</sup> Future research should – by using the method introduced in this thesis – indicate whether this is the case.

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<sup>122</sup> Moyar, *Oppose Any Foe*, Chpt. 11.

<sup>123</sup> "Core Activities," USSOCOM.

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