



ROYAL DANISH DEFENCE COLLEGE

BRIEF

Special operations - myths and facts

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Introduction

Denmark is facing cutbacks of up to DKK 3 billion on defence. Cutbacks of that size demand extensive reorganization and innovative thinking. The Ministry of Defence has asked Centre for Military Studies (CMS) at University of Copenhagen to analyse the conditions which will inform the political decisions about cutbacks and reorganization. In a report from 2012, CMS analyses Denmark's situation in terms of security policy and points out that Denmark is facing decisive strategic choices in its defence policy.¹ The report will undoubtedly play a key role in the process, just as the Bruun report (2003) did.² CMS indicates that the complexity of the unpredictable, unexpected, irregular and asymmetrical threats and risks will continue to be large.³ As the conditions for security policy change, the overall focus for defence planning expands.⁴ Successful crisis management and prevention of conflicts and wars require that defence planning is functionally expanded to integrate all foreign and security policy instruments into a more holistic approach.⁵

CMS points to special operations as one viable instrument in Denmark's future defence.⁶ However, numerous myths⁷ about special operations are blocking the understanding of which possibilities special operations offer Denmark. A better understanding of special operations' factual content is a precondition for assessing whether Denmark should focus more on special operations in the future.

This brief will contribute to providing a broader foundation for decision making about concrete strategic application of special operations than the CMS report's very generic foundation. The brief is first in a series of briefs from the Royal Danish Defence College, which will combine unclassified, generally accessible knowledge about special operations, which is unprecedented in publications in Denmark.⁸ The purpose of these briefs is to spread knowledge about special operations, since knowledge about the topic is a precondition for using the tool – and using it effectively.

(1) Centre for Military Studies, University of Copenhagen (2012), An Analysis of conditions for Danish Defence Policy - Strategic Choices 2012. http://cms.polsci.ku.dk/cms/enanalyseafvilkaarfordanskforsvarspolitik/Danish_Defence_english.pdf

(2) Arbejdsgruppen vedrørende dansk sikkerhedspolitik (2003), *De sikkerhedspolitiske vilkår for dansk forsvarspolitik* (in Danish).

(3) CMS (2012).

(4) Ibid., p. 26.

(5) Ibid., p. 26

(6) Ibid., p. 4, 36, 37, 40 and 42.

(7) Myth: an idea or story that is believed by many people but that is not true (Merriam-Webster, www.merriam-webster.com).

(8) The series of briefs will only present knowledge that is available in unclassified, generally accessible sources. Foreign literature contains considerable unclassified empirical knowledge about special operations.

Special operations are a military instrument, which is highly suited for contributing to the holistic security approach emphasized by CMS. This and the following briefs are based on the thesis that special operations will fit into the part of the security policy continuum that lies between the two foreign policy extremes, namely diplomacy and deployment of conventional military power.⁹ It is in this area of the continuum that a crisis can escalate and ultimately end in war. This is where the combination of diplomacy and special operations can contribute to prevention of conflicts and deployment of conventional military power, for example by enabling negotiations with and between adversaries, intelligence gathering, trust building, verification of agreements and crisis management. Special operations can help reduce the risk that crises develop into conflicts; especially if they are executed in close coordination with the state's other instruments.

The next briefs will discuss other factors in special operations, e.g., the role of air power in special operations; their strategic effects; the status of Danish special operations forces; as well as the dilemma between the demand for operational safety in the special operations and the objective of a more transparent defence.

The purpose of this brief is to disprove the widespread myths about and erroneous perceptions of special operations. The brief will offer a more nuanced picture of what special operations are and how they can be used and – not the least – show that special operations are much more than direct attack and use of physical force. This is done via an overview of special operations' many non-violent applications, since the vast majority of special operations are non-violent.

(9) The idea about a gap between diplomacy and deployment of conventional forces stems from a theory developed by Admiral William H. McRaven based on Field Marshal Ferdinand Foch's thesis that the state in its strategy must balance two variables: Freedom of Action and Economy of Force. McRaven's theory is discussed in a subsequent brief about possible strategic effects of special operations. William H. McRaven (2004), 'Special Operations: The Perfect Grand Strategy?', in the book *Force of Choice, Perspectives on Special Operations*, edited by Bernd Horn, J. Paul de B. Taillon, and David Last, McGill-Queen's University Press, Kingston, p. 61-65.

Myths

Hollywood and the world of movies cultivate myth-making about special operations forces, because it sells tickets. However, this myth-making has created delusions about what special operations can do, and as a result many people assume that special operations are primarily used to kill and blow things up, and that they possess almost supernatural powers of destruction. This is completely out of proportion, when we compare what a special operations patrol can destroy or kill, and the damage a tank squadron, an artillery unit, a frigate, or just one F16 fighter can do. Special operators have to carry all their equipment, and pistols, guns and hand grenades can only do limited damage. Unfortunately, several individuals who have left the special operations forces have contributed to this distorted perception. Quite a few have written books, which they – of course – would like to sell. They have profited from the myth-making, and may even have had an interest in perpetuating it.

An example is the following headline from Ekstra Bladet, which describes the American special operation in Somalia on January 25, 2012, during which also a Danish hostage was freed: “Special operator: ‘Everything in the area is shot’”.¹⁰ The article continues: “When we save hostages, we shoot first and ask questions later, says the former Danish special operator”. The soldier no doubt has his reasons for making these *sensational claims*, but they are *factually wrong*. The fact is that special operations forces are used for this type of assignment, because this particular instrument is the best insurance against unintended collateral damage. Special operators are trained to identify and distinguish on the spot, and at any specific moment, between combatants, criminals, or innocent civilians. One of the most important means the international community has against terrorists, hostage takers, criminal rebels and transnational militarized crime networks is precisely to promote law and order. In this effort, special operations are an effective instrument which makes it possible to distinguish friend from enemy due to the physical presence during battle in the target area. *The former special operator is thus completely wrong: You do not shoot everything in the area.* On the contrary, it is a highly relevant future task for special operations forces to arrest militarized criminals and prosecute them in a court of law rather than killing them.

The Armed Forces’ own information activities also contribute to distorting the perception of special operations. When the special operations units demonstrate their capacities to the public and decision makers, they focus exclusively on dramatic elements.¹¹ The recurring theme in these demonstrations is usually a hostage release, which allows a brief and concentrated show of the forces’ skills, and not least the spectacular support from, e.g., planes and helicopters. Such demonstrations leave out the two other and much less dramatic main tasks: information gathering and military assistance.

(10) <http://ekstrabladet.dk/nyheder/krigogkatastrofer/article1697135.ece> (in Danish).

(11) See, e.g., *På pressetur med specialstyrkerne*, <http://www.information.dk/111982> (in Danish).

Due to the Armed Forces' own PR activities and the entertainment industry's fascination with offensive special operations, the public remains unaware of many other non-violent aspects of special operations. In my opinion, this is a problem in Denmark, because the limited knowledge means that Danish politicians, top civil servants and even leading officers will have a hard time using special operations forces for what they are established, educated and trained to do.

The following sections will discuss the concept of special operations, the definition of special operations forces and the specific tasks these forces can solve.

Vague definitions of special operations forces

Terms concerning special operations forces are generally vague and inconsistent. The forces that carry out special operations are often called *special operations forces*, *SOF*, *special forces* or *elite forces* without petty consideration for nomenclature and definitions. The result is general confusion outside the special operations forces about what special operations really are. The vagueness is reinforced by mix-ups of the concepts secrecy, legitimacy and legality. It is a widespread and erroneous assumption that secrecy must cover for something illegitimate or illegal.

The assumption that something illegal, illegitimate or simply objectionable is going on is reinforced when the media report about, for example, the conditions in Syria that "Syrian special forces" torture and shoot civilians in the streets.¹² This mix-up of the technical term special operations forces and reports about war crimes and other crimes also contribute to the distorted perception of special operations forces among decision makers and pundits. A clear and common understanding of technical terms and definitions is crucial for sober deliberation and debate, and I will briefly explain the most important technical terms.

This brief discusses special operations and special operations forces in accordance with NATO's definition. The NATO Doctrine AJP-3.5 defines special operations as follows:

"Special operations are military activities conducted by specially designated, organized, trained, and equipped forces, manned with selected personnel, using unconventional tactics, techniques, and modes of employment. These activities may be conducted across the full range of military operations, independently or with conventional forces, to help achieve the desired end-state. Politico-military considerations may require clandestine or covert techniques and the accep-

(12) See, e.g., the following press cutting: "Video dokumenterer systematisk tortur i Syrien" [Video documents systematic torture in Syria], excerpt of article "Skolelæreren Lowe Abdul Akhim Al-Mar bliver tortureret af syriske specialstyrker" [School teacher Lowe Abdul Akhim Al-Mar is tortured by Syrian special forces] (<http://www.dr.dk/Nyheder/Udland/2012/02/19/215235.htm>) (in Danish) or "Syriske specialstyrker myrder civile i gaderne" [Syrian special forces murder civilians in the streets] (<http://www.information.dk/288807>) (in Danish).

tance of a degree of political or military risk not associated with operations by conventional forces. Special Operations deliver strategic or operational-level results or are executed where significant political risk exists.”

In counterinsurgency wars after 2001, many conventional forces have “adopted” elements of special operations forces’ equipment and copied their methods and tactics, but that does not make them special operations forces. A key distinction between conventional forces and special operations forces is that the latter are specially selected, trained and equipped to carry out special operations, and they must be able to carry them out in an environment that entails a degree of physical and political risk, which is normally not associated with conventional operations.

A contributing cause of the confusion about special operations is that there is no internationally accepted definition. Several countries have national designations, and not all correspond with, e.g., NATO’s terminology. This and the following briefs use NATO terminology and disregard the previously mentioned national distinctions, which were only mentioned for the sake of comprehension.

Another cause of the conceptual confusion is that the media frequently use the terms special operations forces (SOF) and elite forces interchangeably. In his book *Special Operations and Strategy*, James D. Kiras explains these concepts in a useful way. According to Kiras, elite forces or “corps d’elite” are not necessarily special operations forces. Many countries have conventional units that undergo very demanding training and are subject to strict selection criteria, and this gives them an elite status within the conventional forces. *The most important differences between such elite forces and special operations forces are the size, status and designation of the units.* The previously mentioned elite forces are thus considerably larger than special operations forces (which are always small), in terms of status they are not defined as special operations forces, and they are not appointed (designated) to carry out special operations. Examples of elite forces that are not special operations forces are the American Marine Corps, certain British guard units and the French Foreign Legion. In comparison, all special operations forces are considered elite forces due to their selection and designation as special operations forces. This and the following briefs do not use the term elite forces, because the term is not based on an unambiguous definition and it is irrelevant for the specific military function, i.e., special operations.

Denmark has currently two special operations units, the Army Jaeger Corps and the Navy Frogman Corps, which can carry out special operations. In addition to these two specific units, Denmark possesses various military and non-military capacities, which *can participate directly in special operations* (e.g., planes and helicopters, planning and control units, vessels and light units from the army) or which *can support special operations* (e.g., diplomats, interpreters, ethnologists, IT specialists, psychologists, legal experts, medical doctors, intelligence capacities and many other specialist capacities). The only limit to the use of such so-called enablers is the imagination. I should mention that many countries have established

actual special operations units in their air forces, which consist of, e.g., aircraft and operations planners. Special operations may thus include other assets besides special operations forces.

The purpose of this brief is to disseminate knowledge about the military function, so in the following sections the brief will therefore focus on the concept “special operations” and less on the units “special operations forces”.

Special operations

Special operations are a military space of activity or domain like land operations, air operations and maritime operations. Special operations are an operational “mind-set”; a distinguished way of solving tasks or waging war, just as for example the army, the air force and the navy have their own operational mind-sets. Below, I will describe what this distinct operations form is all about. As mentioned, special operations are not limited to the actual special operations units. All kinds of capacities may be included, provided that they can operate within the framework of the unconventional and unorthodox mindset that distinguishes special operations from conventional operations.

Before the special characteristics are described, I will list a summary of the primary types of tasks in special operations according to the NATO Doctrine AJP-3.5, which is the doctrine for special operations.¹³ There are three overall types of tasks:

1. **Special Reconnaissance and Surveillance** is a predominately human function that places “eyes on target” in hostile, denied, or politically sensitive territory. SOF can provide real time analysis by using their judgment and initiative in a way that technical assets cannot. In a political sensitive environment, where individual persons and their acts often are *the strategic center of gravity*, special operations are often one of the few assets capable of collecting the necessary strategic information. Specific task may include the following:
 - a. **Collecting and reporting** of environmental information, such as geographical, geological or meteorological conditions.
 - b. **Treat assessment for example**, if an actor or opponent factually possesses the capacities he indicates or may threaten with. Accurate information will be of crucial importance for the choice of an appropriate response.
 - c. **Detection, identification, and assessment** of a given targets nature in order to decide the appropriate way to eliminate it, including assessing the risk of collateral damage and civilian casualties.

(13) For a full view of all tasks, see NATO Allied Joint Publication (AJP) 3.5, December 2013.

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3. **Military Assistance** is a broad spectrum of measures in support of friendly forces in peace time, during tense or crisis times, or during armed conflict. The range of Military Assistance is thus considerable, and may vary from providing low-level military training as part of capacity building to the active employment of indigenous forces in the conduct of major operations.¹⁴ Military assistance activities may include the following:
- a. **Training** of a train host nation military individuals and units, thus enabling a nation to protect itself from threats, and to develop individual, leader, and organizational skills.
 - b. **Advising with focus on** strengthening population security by providing active participation in tactical operations conducted by host nation military units to neutralize and destroy insurgent threats, isolate insurgents from the civil population, and protect the civil population.

In addition to the three primary tasks special operations may also include the following tasks:

- **Support to Counter-Irregular Threat Activities.**
- **Countering Chemical, Biological, Radiological, and Nuclear Weapons.**
- **Hostage Release Operations.**
- **Faction Liaison.**
- **Irregular warfare.** Military assistance does often focus on support to a government's instruments of power, e.g. the armed forces or the police, but special operations may also include support to an insurgency.
- **Facilitation of political processes in hostile or unpredictable environments**, where special operations may support the diplomacy, information operations, and economical measures.

Obviously, the tasks listed above can be carried out within the framework of large conflicts, but the majority of the capacities are typically particularly relevant in connection with conflict prevention and crisis management. So far, Danish special operations forces have largely only been deployed when armed conflict had already

(14) During the conflict in Libya 2010-2011 SOF organized and supported the Libyan insurgents, so they de facto functioned as the land component of NATO's Joint Task Force, which consisted only of Air and Maritime components from NATO. Thus, the operation was in reality a truly joint operation and not only an air war, as many in the media assumed. Also, in Afghanistan, 2001-2003, some 300 special operators organized the land component (the Northern Alliance), and jointly with air power, they removed the Taliban from power in only 49 days, without any western ground troops, which may have been attractive targets for the Taliban.

broken out. This was the case in Bosnia (protection against snipers), and in Iraq and Afghanistan (reinforcement of conventional forces).

However, a few deployments of special operations forces demonstrate the possibilities of carrying out special operations as support to a non-military, major effort before an armed conflict breaks out. This was the case in Kosovo in 1999-2000 where special operations forces covered the time gap between the decision to deploy a UN peace force and the main force's arrival in the operations area. In 2003-2005 a special operation cleared the way for establishing a Danish embassy in war-torn Bagdad. Special operations forces secured and supported Ambassador Torben Gettermann's diplomatic activities with capacities that went far beyond pure personal protection, for example reconnaissance and surveillance and situation assessment. Since 2012, Danish special operations forces have been deployed in a military support operation in Afghanistan, where they train and advise an Afghan special police unit.

The unique character of special operations

What makes special operations different than other military operations?

Special operations often target elements that cannot be hit by conventional forces and which are strategically decisive for an aggressor. Such elements are well protected, and actions against them often imply a high political and physical risk. This means that the special operation must be carried out in an area, where the actor is numerically superior and knows that special operations forces may be deployed. Making an undetected entrance into the area is therefore very difficult and requires forces that are highly trained, effective, and dedicated. However, this is not enough for a successful operation: The operation must be completely unexpected, be carried out in an unexpected way, and be highly effective. This requires that the plan has been rehearsed in minute detail and that it often includes use of newly developed methods to achieve an element of surprise. *The crucial element of surprise* can be obtained for example as a function of time, method, direction, speed, and effectiveness.

Special operations forces are not only suited for physical exercise of power. They are highly applicable in the spectrum between the state's diplomatic instrument and the deployment of conventional military power. In this continuum, special operations forces can operate very discretely, they can secure and support politicians, diplomats and ministerial civil servants, they can gather information, they can train and advise insurgency forces or friendly states' forces, they can verify agreements between warring adversaries, etc.

Special operations are by nature unconventional and unorthodox. *Unconventional, unorthodox and independent thinking is therefore a must in special operations forces.* The selection therefore focuses on people with an unconventional and unorthodox mindset. With their distinct focus on always completing their task,

these units provide the state with a unique instrument to handle the unpredictable, irregular and asymmetrical risks and threats that characterize the security policy environment of the future. Careful selection of the right types of people ensures that only very few percent get through the eye of the needle, which again ensures units of very high quality. Contrary to common belief, mental qualities are prioritized over physical strength. The uncompromising selection and the subsequent training and education over several years produce units in which maturity, reflection, empathy, and common sense are important human qualities. Of course, people with such qualities exist many other places in society, but in the special operations forces they make up a very large share, which means a very high success rate in task completion.

Conclusion

Special operations forces have so far been shrouded in myths and lack of concrete knowledge. This brief has analyzed some of these widespread, but erroneous perceptions. These must be eradicated if Denmark wants to be able to make a strategic choice about using this instrument more frequently in the future, as CMS points out in its recent report.

A common, but erroneous perception is that special operations are exclusively about killing people and blowing up things. Like other military forces, special operations forces can use force, but this aspect creates a distorted image of special operations in the public and among decision makers, which is caused by the operative necessity of keeping special operations secret, until they have been executed. The erroneous perception is reinforced by action films, individual persons' interests in myth-making, and not least the Armed Forces' own PR activities, which largely only focus on Direct Action. These factors cloud the fact that special operations comprise two other important tasks, namely reconnaissance and surveillance and military assistance, which may have considerable effects during conflict prevention and crisis management and thus help prevent crises from developing into armed conflicts.