

# The Use of Special Operations in Conflict Resolution: Assessing the Value of Peace Warriors

*by Spencer B. Meredith, III*

Special Operations Forces (SOF) can serve as conflict resolution experts in places civilian peace practitioners cannot go. While to some this may seem like a controversial claim given the potential recourse to violence as SOF engage in an area, several factors show an important similarity to traditional peace efforts. One of these factors is the methods by which each group approaches its tasks. Comparisons indicate that SOF can perform peacemaking functions that seek to remove the longer-term causes of conflict and, thus, operate in ways beyond more traditional, military peacekeeping aimed primarily at the cessation of hostilities. This article offers a general overview of SOF and how their conflict resolution methods are similar to traditional peace efforts. It concludes with an assessment of the effectiveness of using SOF in peace operations.

## Special Operations

Militaries use SOF for a variety of purposes, not least of which is increasing offensive capabilities for themselves and allied nations. Many countries develop these units for counterterrorism operations, often in conjunction with and through training from the U.S. As one of the primary founders of these “special” soldiers and missions, the U.S. trains and conducts joint operations with partner nations around the world. That breadth does not depend on a singular focus for those missions, however, as SOF have a diverse portfolio, something also taught to allied special units.

In particular, the U.S. military has several branch commands under a unified Special Operations Command (USSOCOM), the largest of which is the U.S. Army Special Operations Command (USASOC). USASOC’s main efforts rest on small groups, averaging 6–12 personnel who conduct irregular warfare. This type of warfare is a hallmark of Army special operations forces (ARSOF), as it focuses on asymmetrical contests between state and non-state actors; the range of operations breaks down further as a function of regime change and/or stabilization. Special Forces (SF), commonly known as the Green Berets, form the basis for ARSOF’s small unit missions, and while the command has unofficial direct action options by specialized teams (so called “capture/kill”

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strategic strikes), the primary purpose of SF is to conduct operations with indigenous forces either in opposition to what the U.S. government labels a “hostile” regime or occupying force or to aid a regime supported by the U.S. As such, SF missions run the gambit of local conflict resolution and training and security development, to joint operations against enemy targets.

In addition to the SF, USASOC houses Military Information Support Operations (MISO), commonly referred to as psychological operations (PSYOP), and civil affairs (CA) commands. These two commands have distinct areas of operation that focus primarily on engaging locals regarding, 1) perceptions of the host nation/rival forces/U.S.; and 2) infrastructural needs such as access to water, school/road/bridge construction, medical care, and disaster relief. These typically grassroots-based U.S. policy assessment and humanitarian missions make up a significant portion of the goals for MISO and CA units, and as such, they can stand on their own in host nations. They also show the long-term potential for peacemaking operations through the pursuit of positive peace by meeting basic human needs, restoring infrastructures to provide those in the future, and promoting reconciliation between disputants with the goal of preventing future conflict.

MISO and CA also support the warfighting capabilities of the SF when combat operations occur; this includes missions to overcome enemy forces, as well as through the establishment of negative peace, whereby hostilities cease, even if temporarily, for negotiations to begin. Accordingly, whether through propaganda or alliance-building, one central goal of these units remains identifying enemy combatants in and around friendly areas. This takes the form of building trust with village elders so they point out new arrivals without connections in the community. This does not inherently foster xenophobia, but more practically identifies potential insurgents who take up residence

in abandoned homes or on the outskirts of the village. It can also include information campaigns designed to show local populations the “real” side of groups opposing the U.S. and its allies.

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The U.S.-led Global War on Terrorism (GWOT) brought these SOF missions to the forefront of U.S. policymaking abroad. Operations in Afghanistan and Iraq showcased the potential to change hearts and minds through village stabilization operations and coordination with local militias and national security forces, but it also revealed some inherent limits to those efforts. In particular, the Sons of Iraq represent a complex case of classic, unconventional warfare (working “with and through” a local resistance movement) to achieve tactical success, but also one in which the longer-term goals of reintegration and reconciliation did not occur. More so, the resurgence of the Taliban, the rise of the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) amidst growing sectarian divisions in Iraq, lingering cross-border conflicts around the Afghan-Pakistan border, fracturing political settlements between federal centers and local power brokers, and the ever-present corruption in governments all show the weakness of SOF—their small size. SOF have enormous potential to change specific aspects of the security environment, but as neither an occupying force, nor with missions that can be easily handed over to regular military units or non-governmental organizations, SOF cannot sustain themselves for long periods of time without support, both in terms of warfighting capabilities and logistics.

Neither can they endure without the support of host nations and/or local populations. Yet this mutual dependence is also one of their greatest strengths in conflict resolution in general and countering and preventing violent extremist narratives specifically.

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SOF are by nature joint operators requiring effective communication, coordination, and cooperation among allied and host nation counterparts. Equally importantly is their reliance on U.S. government agencies, notably the Department of State (State) for input on where to operate in-country and how those operations should mesh with larger political goals and the United States Agency for International Development (USAID) for long-term project support once SOF leave. That jointness can obviously hinder efficiency given the expected bureaucratic infighting over budget resources and policy priorities, but it can also make SOF effective cultural experts, analysts, and project managers. Inherent to those attributes are conflict resolution skills that are part of the “human domain,” a key element of USSOCOM Crisis Response and Limited Contingency Operations and USASOC’s Campaign of Learning, which emphasizes the need for awareness of cultural norms, historical relationships, power dynamics across social levels, and language proficiency as central to success. Understanding the human domain requires many of the same skills found in more traditional conflict resolution efforts.

## **Commonalities in Conflict Resolution**

Across common conflict analysis tools, ranging from basic contradiction-attitude-behavior approaches, through escalation/de-escalation curves, to greed-grievance models of conflict transformation, two core elements remain: 1) mapping the causes and courses of problems, and 2) reconciling people, interests, and values at multiple levels using multiple disciplines. This multitrack focus on statism (“top-down”) through grassroots (“bottom-up”) efforts offers more insight into complex systems of conflict than do single-level approaches that can easily turn into methodological conflicts themselves. However, analytical richness also adds to the perennial banes of limited research resources and pressing time constraints in either preventing or containing a conflict. Making matters more challenging, disputants can initially welcome conflict resolvers as activists for peace, advocates for their side, or even just as referees helping cooler heads to prevail. However, that can quickly change if either side begins to see them as biased, unsympathetic, or having their own agenda.

Interventions complicate this problem by introducing additional actors, interests, methods, and underlying norms that either support nonviolent conflict resolution markers among the disputants or harden positions preventing resolution. Compounding this, even with the horrendous potential increase in genocide, decisive military victory may produce longer-lasting peace than negotiated settlements, including those after intervention.<sup>1</sup> Obviously, different types of action and the timing of the intervention, as well as the makeup of the interveners (multinational, regional, local; UN, African Union [AU], NATO, etc.) affect these outcomes by shaping the perception of the legitimacy of the intervention among different groups. Humanitarian relief generally gets more support from all sides than does more

controversial regime change. In addition, these are deeply political decisions. Introducing the intervention along the timeline of **conflict prevention**, through the phases of **negative peace/cessation of violence**, all the way to **positive peace building and reconciliation** adds additional complexity to the conflict resolution endeavor.

SOF share these analytical hurdles when assessing, implementing, evaluating, and reorienting their mission goals and methods. David Maxwell describes this process in the area of unconventional warfare (UW), the SF mission of working with groups to bring about regime change or remove hostile occupying forces in a host nation.<sup>2</sup> He emphasizes the continuous process of assessment before, during, and after missions. In addition to U.S. assets, those assessments include the potential for friendly, local forces to defend themselves, engage the population with a message that communicates legitimacy, and partner with the U.S. to bring down the opposing power. From a methodological standpoint, because of these rigorous procedures, SOF have more in common with the traditional, nonviolent, conflict resolution field than they do with multilateral, conventional peacekeepers. *ARSOF 2022* makes this clear by stating that expanded opportunities for military personnel to pursue graduate degrees at both military and civilian institutions are essential for gaining more than the content knowledge of the areas of operation. SOF must learn the tools of scholarly analysis to handle the complex uncertainties present in conflict environments.<sup>3</sup>

SOF unconventional warfare also shares an essential conceptual element with traditional conflict resolution. SOF base their actions on a breakdown of trust between the state and its people. This lack of trust in the state can stem from overt hostility, abuse, negligence, or the failure to provide basic protection to the populace in the face of other predatory forces.

In addition, a critical element of UW focuses on keeping “fence-sitters” out of the conflict. This strategy involves conflict prevention measures such as strengthening civil society and rule of law, mechanisms that highlight SOF efforts to resolve structural injustices by assisting business start-ups,<sup>4</sup> and working with U.S. government agencies and international organizations on aid packages.

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Yet despite some meaningful commonalities, comparatively little has been written about the potential for SOF to engage in the “peace and justice” field. This may be a result of a lack of awareness of what SOF bring or an understandable reticence among civilians to engage with the practitioners of war when working with vulnerable, violated, and victimized populations. This article seeks to challenge that lack of information and the perception of incompatibility by showing several examples of what SOF have done in what can be considered traditional areas for nonviolent conflict resolution and analyzing several cases and the implications—both positive and negative—of using SOF in conflict resolution, specifically to counter violent extremist narratives.

## **Peace Warriors**

Twenty years ago peacekeeping literature dealt with the fallout of the end of the Cold War and the proliferation of intrastate conflicts. Debates about international relations theories of realism, liberalism, and constructivism attempted to define and justify intervention in sovereign states for human rights’ needs, while placing

limits on unilateral action whenever possible. Multilateralism became the name of the game, which cut both ways in Yugoslavia and Rwanda by showing the weaknesses of UN peacekeeping and the self-serving nature of NATO interests outside of Europe. Writing from the military community at that time, David Last examined long-standing peacekeeping operations in Cyprus. He outlined several intervention models used by the multinational force:

- “Constabulary intervention” to set boundaries between the disputants.
- “Tactical arbitration” to investigate cease-fire violations and attempt to show that such violations often resulted from security fears rather than intentions to cheat at the other’s expense.
- “Go-between mediation” to collect information from both sides about troop movements, communicate it to all parties, and develop joint security procedures such as floodlights on buffer zones.
- “Conciliation” to reinforce common goals, even if they were only negative peace.<sup>5</sup>

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Last correctly identified the need for outside military forces to act neutrally in mediation and assist with building common ground between the parties. He also identified one of the lingering problems facing these kinds of operations—the absence of international and national **strategic** goals that filter down to the country-wide **operational** and on the street **tactical** levels. The *ad hoc* nature of some of the Cyprus missions and decisions on the ground minimized the

benefits of lasting peacekeeping forces and led to myopic mistakes by commanders doing their best with limited big-picture knowledge. Anthony Marley picked up that point as it relates to SOF specifically, arguing that U.S. Department of Defense (DoD) planners and policy advisors in the 1990s generally opposed peacekeeping operations. During an era of budgetary contractions, they resisted spending resources on non-vital security interests or tying down DoD personnel and assets in a bottomless pit of funding that other aid providers would assume upon and host nations would require indefinitely.<sup>6</sup> Marley proposed SOF as an alternative to large force operations as in Bosnia, although he prefaced that with the need for clear strategic goals that translated down to the tactical level.

He suggested that if that condition could be met, PSYOP teams could be effective in selling the peace process and settlement terms to local populations, while SF could assist in disarming and retraining former combatants to participate in local and national defense forces. Humanitarian assistance, in coordination and cooperation with local and international NGOs, would fall to the CA personnel, who would focus on medical care and repairs and construction of utilities and transportation systems, and the development of governance norms at the local level. While Marley did not mention it explicitly, these efforts also have application at the national level as a function of connections senior SOF have with host nation government officials.

Unfortunately, the requirement of a strategic vision for SOF conflict resolution has eluded U.S. planners, a point Linda Robinson raised,<sup>7</sup> although in different terms than Marley. While the latter focused on a general lack of awareness of what SOF could do, in large part due to the conventional forces holding sway during the Cold War, current misunderstanding of SOF tends to overestimate their capabilities. Rather than having to force their way into the planning

sessions, SOF now gets called upon for missions that require a longer political will and deeper budgetary pockets than the U.S. government is usually willing to devote. As a result, Marley's accurate identification of concern within the DoD that resources will be overused and misallocated now applies to SOF. What then can SOF do in the wake of costly wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, while still facing long-term threats from quasi-state groups like ISIS—to say nothing of the continued presence of al-Qaeda and affiliates—and increasing challenges from rival nations?

Forman and Danan picked up that thread by reviewing phases of military conflict resolution operations after the Cold War, concluding that the prevalence and nature of current conflicts require something more nuanced than previous peacekeeping operations and something longer-term than the stabilization efforts of the past decade.<sup>8</sup> Their premise that greater complexity requires greater U.S. interagency coordination and cooperation, combined with greater understanding of the conflict participants, their interests, norms, and goals, point to the use of SOF as leading agents for U.S. presence in conflict zones. Their recommendations include:

- Strategic planning around available resources compared to foreseeable mission requirements.
- U.S. government institutional development with the goals of conflict prevention and reconstruction.
- Expanding international partnerships to emerging powers facing regional threats (even if they also ignore localized ones in their own countries).
- Developing and implementing greater coordination with private and public sector investments to decrease fragility in host nations' social, economic, and ultimately, governmental structures.

Such a model takes the same “human domain” approach fostered by USSOCOM and USASOC in particular; it also resonates with complex, interdependent, holistic peace practitioner models, as can be seen in three anecdotal but generalizable examples from the SOF community.

## Case Studies

During the mid-1990s conflict between Ecuador and Peru, U.S. SOF participated in a confidence-building operation under the auspices of the Organization of American States, whose members served as the guarantors of a previous treaty demarcating borders and ceasing hostilities 50 years earlier. A military-observer mission deployed to the contested region and established its value in preventing further conflict and when incidents occurred, preventing escalation and the resumption of fighting. SOF performed strategic reconnaissance in two key incidents that could easily have brought the belligerents back to war. The first occurred when Peruvian air defense batteries mistakenly targeted an Ecuadorian helicopter on a routine and mutually-approved observation flight over the buffer zone; the second occurred when Peruvian naval vessels moved toward an Ecuadorian port.<sup>9</sup> In both instances, U.S. intelligence gathering and dissemination of that information to both sides helped calm nerves and reassure both parties that compliance with the ceasefire had not been violated. Search and rescue missions for both sides added to the perception of SOF neutrality.

SOF also performed extensive humanitarian services to the local inhabitants that included dental exams; inoculations against yellow fever and rabies; constructing housing and sewage systems with, primarily, local labor; and in-kind and monetary support for the local orphanage. PSYOPs played a role in local and international relations as well, with local grievance sessions and media coverage of peace projects in the region. These latter missions correspond with

a key aspect of SOF missions—to engage with civil centers of gravity in a community, what could also be called social networks, and their key actors. Comparable to terms found in theories of social network analysis (e.g., hubs, bridges, cliques, cohesion, and density), centers of gravity look across several factors in the political, economic, military, and social arenas, as well as within each to find vulnerabilities.<sup>10</sup> Those vulnerabilities range from practical concerns about safe drinking water, to normative aspects of identity formation.<sup>11</sup>

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More recent civil affairs missions in the Oruzgon region of Afghanistan addressed many of those vulnerabilities through daily interactions with community leaders and members.<sup>12</sup> One particular team had responsibility for projects in the province and coordinated with multinational provincial reconstruction teams as well as local NGOs to assist with critical infrastructure development and governance training. Efforts centered on the power system for the local bazaar in a central village. Working with local elders and laborers, the CA team and its non-military partners replaced the dilapidated, car-powered generators with sustainable ones that ran off existing irrigation canals. The project also included new power lines, a building to house the generators, and a new learning center. Throughout the project, local input shaped more than the goals for the project, as consultation and elder decision making reinforced community norms. The CA personnel were able to parlay the

success of the local project into goodwill toward conciliation across villages as well as within them. Medical, dental, and veterinary assistance added legitimacy to SOF efforts in those areas, thereby reinforcing norms of cooperation.

Civil affairs also engaged in security assistance as part of the state building phase of postwar reconstruction. Addressing part of the challenge of building legitimacy during transitions from civil war,<sup>13</sup> SF teams in the Wardak province of Afghanistan recruited and trained military-age men for local defense units to link the local community and the Afghan National Army and Police forces, while also filling geographic gaps in the defenses of the region.<sup>14</sup> The supporting CA team liaised with the corresponding Turkish provincial reconstruction team and district government officials, as well as village elders, to increase integration of security goals, methods, and responsibilities. This kind of focus on centers of gravity at the local level, with efforts nested in the larger regional and national conflict resolution work in Afghanistan, is also a part of what SF call “phase 0” operations—relationship-building over the long term and with long-term goals in mind.

Such missions have been used in many countries as part of regular engagements with host-nation special operations units. U.S. SF teams conduct Joint Combined Exchange Training (JCET) exercises, as well as classroom instruction to reinforce key civil-military norms, such as respect for civilian leadership, protection of civilian populations, interagency cooperation, and conflict resolution.<sup>15</sup> While these kinds of engagements are not a guarantee that host nation forces will follow those norms, they occur predictably and thus allow for expectations of a continued relationship not only between U.S. and host nation SOF, but also as part of ongoing dialogue about norms, security needs, and government capacity. The annual Flintlock Operation in North Africa does this by focusing on counterterrorism in the region and bringing

together multinational forces to train and fight against groups like Boko Haram.<sup>16</sup>

The similarities between peace practitioners and SOF was most evident in the village stabilization operations in Southern Afghanistan. SOF missions sought to prevent and counter violent extremist narratives in rural communities. SOF planners and units approached the villages as both vulnerable and resilient: vulnerable in terms of security and resilient in terms of ideological disconnects to Taliban interpretations of Islam. Whether the result of tribal identity overriding religious doctrine or simple pragmatism, SOF experiences found that rural communities would align themselves with those who, 1) provided security, 2) respected their identity and norms of behavior, and 3) enabled them to meet their basic needs for food and water.<sup>17</sup> Thus, in order to counter Taliban extremist narratives, SOF did not wage a “war of ideas” directly. Rather, SOF prepared the ground for inculcating international human rights norms and proto-democratic governance procedures by meeting the villagers where they were, listening to their concerns, replicating their values whenever possible, participating in community security, and helping their daily livelihoods improve. In essence, they lived among them to close the “self-other” gap. As with the methodological rigor found in SOF conflict assessments, these efforts have important similarities to traditional conflict resolution practices.

## Conclusion

Conflict resolution studies break down efforts into multiple phases, actors, and methods but generally contain common norms undergirding practice in the field. SOF share many of those same norms and practices, albeit with complications resulting from the inherent presence of violence in their operations and the use of U.S. government funds that can enable larger projects than civilian NGO programs, but which also carry the challenges of politicization

of methods and goals. This article has argued for a closer look at SOF conflict resolution in order to assess its costs and benefits. Accordingly, the **promise** of SOF conflict resolution can be summed up as, 1) access to hostile environments where traditional peace practitioners cannot usually go without their own security forces, which can be costly and highly politicized in their own right; 2) access to greater resources compared to non-military conflict resolution; and 3) access to a wide range of parties involved in the conflict resolution process making them akin to social network hubs (centers of influence) and bridges (connectors between networks).

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The **pitfalls** of SOF conflict resolution can also be summarized as politicized intervention that can sacrifice local needs for U.S. interests, unsustainable missions without U.S. political will that is easily subject to the winds of popular discontent, and stigma, as warriors whose inherent potential recourse to force may give disputants an easy out rather than sticking to the negotiating table.

As a result, the assessment of SOF conflict resolution remains as conditioned on factors outside their areas of responsibilities as it does for their civilian counterparts. Yet SOF retain the ability to use many of the tools found in traditional peace practices in places where only they can go. That gives them opportunities to assist vulnerable people for their betterment, work across the three tracks of conflict resolution simultaneously, and shape U.S. policymaking through interagency cooperation “down range” and in DC. While some may dismiss the notion of Peace Warriors, SOF see themselves as soldier

diplomats, a union of the best of American military and political culture. That may sound like a cliché, but in the end, SOF have proven their value to more than U.S. interests—they have helped hurting people and trained others to help them as well. In the end, that is a lasting legacy beyond the political reasons that sent them there, one that will continue to develop as SOF conflict resolution efforts become more clearly designed and more broadly implemented. **IAJ**

## NOTES

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