

# The Limits of Special Operations Forces

BY AUSTIN LONG

In the early 1980s, the future of U.S. special operations forces (SOF) looked decidedly grim. The Vietnam-era boom in SOF had long since expired and the 1970s ended with the debacle of the attempted SOF-led rescue of U.S. hostages in Iran. After two decades of rebuilding, SOF were much more capable on the eve of the September 11, 2001 attacks, but were still only used sparingly and in the shadows.<sup>1</sup>

Now, nearly two more decades later, the SOF pendulum has fully swung in the opposite direction of the nadir of the early 1980s. SOF are routinely deployed in a variety of missions globally, from direct action missions against terrorists to training and advising both conventional and unconventional allied forces (often termed the “indirect approach”). The U.S. SOF community has expanded greatly in both size and missions and has become, along with remotely piloted aircraft (aka drones), the weapon of choice for small footprint counterterrorism and counterinsurgency operations as well as the projection of discrete and discriminate force.<sup>2</sup>

Yet, despite the current enthusiasm, special operations are not a panacea for all security challenges. Policymakers and analysts must remain cognizant of the limits of SOF while developing military strategy lest too much be asked of the force. This is particularly important as the security environment changes—a SOF-centric strategy might be appropriate for some challenges but inappropriate for others.

This article describes the limits of SOF and proceeds in four parts. The first describes some limitations common to all special operations. The second describes limitations on the direct approach for the employment of SOF (e.g. direct action and special reconnaissance), while the third describes limitations on the indirect approach (e.g. unconventional warfare and foreign internal defense). It concludes with recommendations to policymakers.

It is worth noting upfront that while this article will necessarily focus on the shortcomings of special operations it is not intended to denigrate the importance of special operations or SOF.

*Austin Long is an Associate Professor in the School of International and Public Affairs at Columbia University.*