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## Resistance Operations : Challenges and Opportunities for Special Operations Forces

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**Abstract:** This article aims to discuss how a state could best use its resources in resisting an aggressor when joint operations have failed. Focusing on the potential role of special operations forces (SOF) in resistance operations, the article examines scenarios where small states are attacked by a superior opponent. Based on the example of Sweden, currently still a militarily non-aligned country that nevertheless has adopted a security policy based on cooperation with other states, we explore how a small state not belonging to NATO might plan and prepare for alternative scenarios. Not being covered by Article 5, Sweden needs to be prepared to fight the war on its own. A better, but less likely, scenario would be fighting together with partners, at home, or in the near abroad. Since Ukraine shares similarities with Sweden in terms of its status as an enhanced NATO-partner, it will serve as an additional, and highly relevant, point of reference in the discussion. The developments in this war indicates that for a non-NATO member the primary alternative will be to conduct the fight on its own. Based on the above, the article will go on to investigate a number of old truths from the late 20th century as well as flipped

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lessons learned from twenty years of counter insurgency, primarily in the Middle East, South Sahel and South East Asia. Small states tend to have very limited size SOF which indicates that mission prioritization will be a key factor for the utility of SOF in resistance operations. There are, however, ways of finding other relevant roles, than the traditional ones, for SOF in resistance operations.

**Keywords:** resistance operation, special forces, total defense, innovation

## Introduction

In the twenty-first century, Russia, the core of the former Soviet Union, reasserted its power and influence in and over several former Soviet Republics, notably seizing the Georgian provinces of Abkhazia and South Ossetia in 2008. In 2014, Russia continued by seizing the Crimea peninsula from Ukraine and supported separatist activities in Eastern Ukraine (Fiala and Pettersson, 2020). Russia has been hostile toward neighboring countries in the Baltic Sea region over the last decade. On 24 February 2022, Russia began a full-scale military invasion of Ukraine. The escalation of the Russia-Ukrainian conflict that had begun in 2014 has now transformed into the largest military conflict in Europe since the Second World War (WWII). Tension in international relations of the region have caused the concepts of resilience and resistance to resurface on the security agenda, which in turn has led to a reconsideration of national security policy and military strategies. For the first time since the end of the Cold War, many European nations have to consider military actions on their territory or in their strategic near abroad. However, resistance is far from a new concept in defense. Various ways to meet a superior aggressor have been used and documented extensively in military theory. The nature of the strategy has changed over time, from ancient China to modern conflicts (Sun Zi, 1997; Che Guevara, 2009; Kilcullen, 2009). What remains constant is the

fact that strategy needs to be adjusted to the particular challenges of any given war.

The Resistance Operating Concept (ROC) stresses that a Whole-of-Government approach will be of importance (ROC, 2019). According to Maskaliūnaitė, resistance and resilience constitute a Total Defense or Whole-of-Government approach. A number of individuals and institutions need to be included in various positions and roles for both military and civilian activities and actions (Maskaliūnaitė, 2021). In his study of the ROC, Stringer (2022) underlines that special operations forces should take on the role of a significant integrator. Furthermore, the authors of the ROC separate the concepts of resilience and resistance, arguing that the former should be the focus during peacetime while the latter is more relevant in times of crisis and war. During the Cold War, Sweden had, in all sectors of society, a high level of preparedness for a wartime situation. In a worst-case scenario, if the country or parts of its territory were to come under occupation by an adversary, the plan was to wage a war of attrition with all available resources. Well-developed concepts for Jaeger units to fight throughout the entire operational depth were institutionalized.

When the Cold War ended, most European armed forces switched from national defense to an expeditionary crisis management focus. Along with new missions and tasks, the size of armed forces was substantially reduced. After almost three decades of expeditionary counterinsurgency operations, the Swedish Armed Forces now face a new reality where they need to refocus on national defense. In the emerging security environment, with Ukraine in the spotlight, an armed conflict in Northern Europe is no longer a fantasy.

If Sweden would need to switch from *joint defense operations* to *resistance operations*, some old truths from the Cold War period are still valid but probably almost forgotten. There is also an amount of actual lessons learned, regarding resistance tactics, from, i.e., Afghanistan, Iraq, and Mali where Sweden, together with other nations, fought insurgents during the last decades. However, contemporary and future conflict environments show some

significant game-changing characteristics in terms of new challenges and threats. In relation to developing a trustworthy defense, two things seem to be critical. First, to analyze what has been learned (positive and negative) throughout history, especially in terms of what we have learned during the last decades from our former opponents, the insurgents. Based on that, we need to determine what is still valid today and in the near future.

Secondly, to accept and appreciate that contemporary warfare has changed into a wide spectrum of conventional and unconventional blurry fragments. This spectrum is broad and contains a number of diverse actors with unique competences and responsibilities. In this article, we will mainly focus on the potential role of SOF in a resistance operation.

### **Lessons Learned from Contemporary and Historic Conflicts**

SWESOF regularly participates in international engagements, which necessitates ongoing adaptability and innovation in new environments and situations. Rapid lessons learned process contributes to organizational learning; less mistakes and mishaps recur over time (Pettersson, 2013). The cognitive capacity to adapt is also a key factor for SOF. Being special does not count for much if you cannot adapt and outsmart an opposing force. For example, the US General McChrystal noted that the special operations task force (TF 714) he was running in Iraq was the most capable, well equipped, and highly trained warriors that existed. They could win every individual battle, but they could still lose the war (Fussell, 2017). This could also be the case for any aggressor that occupies a foreign country. There are several lessons learned that should be informative for small states as they prepare and develop concepts for future conflicts, especially considering the likelihood of these states having to transform from operating as counter-insurgency forces to organizing insurgencies themselves. In this article are some of the timeless lessons learned from history as well as some more current examples. Adapted to what evolution brings in the form of threats and challenges, they may serve as useful examples for developing future resistance concepts, including those

related to technological threats and opportunities, organizational and command principles, and preparations. These lessons learned are not SOF specific but they indicate, as will be discussed later, why SOF holds an important place in future resistance operations.

### **Opportunities and Challenges Identified**

Having access to technology presents opportunities, but it also presents challenges and threats. When TF 714 started to adapt to how the insurgents acted, they became very successful. The primary means for this was by conducting intelligence driven operations in a very high operational tempo (Collins, 2021). For instance, they developed ways to exploit and quickly act on all the info that was extracted from the insurgent's cell phones and computers (Fussell, 2017). The technological level in Western societies is a double-edged sword. In a resistance operation, technology will inevitably be a necessary resource, but it also poses threats. It is therefore necessary to develop procedures and measures to prevent that from becoming a weakness, while still using technology to our advantage.

Two decades of counterinsurgency have also taught us that hierarchical organizations are more vulnerable than networks, since it is easier to identify and eliminate key nodes in such organizations. In a phase during which one must fight a resistance battle, it is therefore essential to develop networks rather than relying on traditional military hierarchical organization models. Networks are by nature harder to disseminate and defeat than hierarchical organizations. A resistance network must consequently build on high levels of adaptability and empowerment all the way to the outer nodes of the network. The environment in which resistance operations are fought will be an environment where communications will be hard to uphold which presents challenges in terms of command and control. Maskaliūnaitė (2021) points to the risks in terms of an organization going rogue and the importance of leadership and vetted recruitment to reduce that risk (Maskaliūnaitė, 2021). The Swedish Armed Forces are utilizing mission command as its leadership

and command philosophy. The organizational culture that this philosophy creates is well suited to function in resistance operations as well.

The contemporary high level of technology provides numerous opportunities, but as previously stated, there are also everyday threats that the public pays little attention to during times of peace. One such dimension is the social media legacy footprint that most humans have innocently created. A stronger emphasis on the threats that pre-war social media exposure will pose in times of war is a factor that must be taken into consideration by a nation's Armed Forces. This digital legacy, in combination with AI and face recognition sensors, will make it much easier for an aggressor to identify and hunt down specific individuals and units (Watling, 2021).

Unmanned Aerial Vehicles (UAVs) and thermal imagery now pose high risks of detection for resistance movements (Watling, 2021) that did not exist during the Cold War. Contemporary conflicts have shown that communications are likely to be a weak dimension for all parties. In line with what we know from the war in Ukraine, cell phones may be one of the main ways of communication even during times of war. In addition to cell phones, people use smart watches and other gadgets that all emit signals and thereby become lethal threats to a resistance network (Watling, 2021). Being adaptive and finding ways to blend in with the environment; being trees in a forest is critical for survival.

TF 714 identified three main lessons learned in order to be efficient as counterinsurgents: 1) organizational reform is often required, 2) change need not be hard, 3) and irregular warfare missions should be allocated to units who are in charge of the mission from start to finish (Collins, 2021). From the standpoint of a resistance network, this may mean creating a culture that encourages a high level of adaptability in terms of *modus operandi*. A networked structure is absolutely necessary. Trying to harm the aggressor's command structure is equally important, which can be achieved through the application of both hard and soft methods. In the latter case, one can identify

strategic communication as an essential tool for a resistance network to achieve its objectives (Fiala, 2019).

A territory occupied by a foreign military force will inevitably become a geographical space that will be problematic to access. The term ‘access’ relates not only to physical access but also to cognitive and moral access. Consequently, the necessity of preparations in peace time is a key factor (Watling, 2021). This does not only relate to actors that are not involved in the conflict, still maintaining interests they discreetly want to protect, but also to domestic forces. When the German plans of invading the United Kingdom were discovered, Churchill decided to create a force that would be a complimentary secret structure to the Home Guard. It was called the Auxiliary Force. Preparations included recruitment and training, as well as constructing secret operational bases that contain all the necessities for a resistance fight (Rice, 2013).

As previously predicted by, e.g., Bērziņš (2014), the war in Ukraine has shown several examples of new types of capabilities that have developed during the conflict from rather unexpected sources. One such capability was formed by engineers, software designers, and drone enthusiasts. They created a unit that formed a network of sensors feeding into digital maps showing the Ukrainian military the movement of Russian forces. The unit also operated on quad bikes in the terrain where they actively conducted drone attacks on Russian armored vehicle columns (Borger, 2022) In line with Searle’s theory, one could say that these units are conducting special operations even if they are not labelled a SOF (Searle, 2017).

## **From Defense Operations to Resistance Operations**

In line with the ROC, we argue that there is a difference between joint defense and resistance operations. In this article, we have chosen to use the following definitions. Resistance operations are; “A nation’s organized, whole of society effort, encompassing the full range of activities from nonviolent to violent, led by a legally established government (potentially exiled/displaced or shadow)

to re-establish independence and autonomy within its sovereign territory that has been wholly or partially occupied by a foreign power” (ROC, 2019 p. 15).

Meanwhile, we define defense operations as characterized by combined arms operations under the command and control of a higher national authority such as a Joint Force Command. They could be conducted over the entire operational depth of an enemy controlled area but are mainly fought over terrain where the occupier is not in full control.

As the war in Ukraine has developed, one can follow the parallel development defense operations and resistance operations in different parts of the country. Seen from the authors’ perspective, the Ukrainian Armed Forces have hitherto (by mid- April 2022) mainly been conducting defense operations rather than resistance operations. However, in some areas where the Russians have taken control, it is the other way around; a shift from defense to resistance operations, all in relation to the progress of the Russian forces and their territorial control. Control over terrain will, as we have seen in this war, fluctuate over time. In the Ukrainian case, large parts of the territory are still under Ukrainian control while parts are under Russian control, viz. occupied (Figure 1). The transition from defense to resistance also includes moving from well-coordinated joint (defense) operations into more self-synchronized (resistance) operations while these may still be coordinated to some extent. The resistance concept could apply even to a government in exile with diminished C2 systems. The situation at hand therefore demands a clear vision of the operational objectives and the commander’s intent. A suitable standard C2 model for a seamless transition between different types of operations would be mission command (German *auftragstaktik*), rather than a centralized command model.

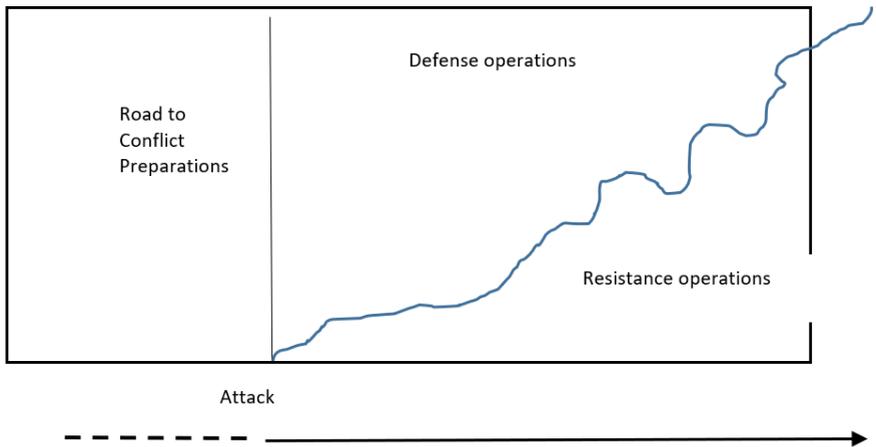


Figure 1. The proportionality between defense and resistance operations, in a situation where the aggressor is in control of increasingly more territory as the conflict develops over time. Note that in different parts of the territory different types of operations may be conducted related to the specific situation.

In the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, Kilcullen identifies that the resistance from the indigenous population was motivated primarily by a perception that the West had invaded their space (Kilcullen, 2009). Today, one can apply a similar logic to the situation in Ukraine. However, as the war has progressed and as atrocities committed by the Russians have become apparent to the Ukrainians, this perception has transformed into hatred toward the occupiers. One could say that the Russians initially tried the concept of *direct attack*, but they have now moved to what Arreguin-Toft (2001) has labelled as *barbarism* (Gyllensporre, 2017). Such a moral sentiment among the population can be used to the advantage of a resistance movement, which is highly reliant on civil society. The dependency from a resistance or guerrilla movement on civil society is undisputed (Che Guevara, 2009; ROC, 2019).



Figure 2. An example showing a nation, partly under occupation as illustrated in fig 1. Russia's attack and occupation in Ukraine, 23:00 GMT 2nd of March 2022. <https://www.understandingwar.org>.

Every nation is in a sense unique. Factors such as military force and structure, geography, societal preparedness, and security policy solutions differ between nations, even if they are neighbours. Sweden has a relatively small population in relation to its quite vast geography. Currently, Sweden is transforming its entire military defense from a focus on expeditionary warfare to national defense. In monetary terms, this means an increase of the defense budget to meet two percent of the GDP. However, after decades of downsizing, the Defense Force is quite modest in size, even if technologically quite advanced. The Swedish SOF is well developed, trained and equipped, but numerically quite limited. In relation to conventional forces, the SOF is by its nature a small but important tool in the strategic tool box. This is due to the fact that

the human dimension is the most important, which limits the number of potential candidates for SOF (Ilis-Alm, 2017).

Even if Sweden recently applied for NATO membership it is still formally a militarily non-aligned country. The political developments following the submission of the application implies that the road to membership could be both uncertain and long. Until Sweden's status may change, the current Swedish Military Strategic Doctrine in place, MSD 16, is still valid. Based on non-alignment MSD 16 defines two potential military strategic concepts for Defense operations. Both are grounded on a realistic analysis of what a small nation can achieve in a war against a regional aggressor who most likely is superior in numbers. The first consideration is one of fighting the war alone, which would have the strategic objective of avoiding defeat. The second concept suggests fighting the war with allies and partners (based on common interests) with the strategic objective of winning the war (Swedish Armed Forces, 2016). With developments in Ukraine fresh in mind, the most likely scenario for a militarily non-aligned nation, like Sweden, is that it will have to fight alone. This said in spite of the fact that Sweden is a member of the European Union (EU). The EU mutual defense clause, article 42 (7) of the Treaty of the European Union, contains rather strong wording concerning mutual obligations in terms of support to member states who are victims of armed aggression on their territory. However, it also states that NATO is the primary defense pillar for states with dual membership, this clause should take into consideration the specific status of some member states, i.e., Sweden and Finland (European Union, 2012). The dual nature of the wording has effectively led to an EU that does not have a real military capacity of its own, for operations than small scale crisis management. In this conceptual strategic scenario, a conflict will eventually turn into a protracted war of attrition. Gyllensporre states that small states can win by not losing, where the choice of strategy is a determining factor. (Gyllensporre, 2017).

Being a militarily non-aligned nation does not mean that other nations (that are not participants in the conflict) are without any strategic interests that they would strive to protect. For example, military geography implies that Swedish

territory would be of great strategic and operational importance to NATO and Russia in a conflict in the Baltic Sea Region (Klein, Lundqvist, Sumangil, Pettersson, 2019). Some of Sweden's peacetime partners could consequently chose to engage in different ways without being directly involved in the conflict. Something that one, by different means, can see happening in contemporary Ukraine.

### **Special Operations Forces and Territorial Defense Forces – a Win-Win Concept**

Building trust with partners is essential during peacetime. For instance, the US Special Forces are involved in the training of Swedish Home guard units on a regular basis (Lundqvist, 2021). While there are some obvious advantages for both countries, such as the development of the Swedish Home Guard's capabilities to interact with partners while US Special Forces are undertaking active preparations for a contingency that could develop in the Baltic Sea region there are also some less obvious ones. Such preparations are critical, not least because there are many less obvious dimensions in receiving and giving external aid during an open conflict (Fiala, 2019). Physical, cognitive, moral access are important factors that should be taken into consideration well ahead of a developing contingency (Harris, 2013). There are, of course, several possible ways to accomplish this, and SOF is only one option among others. However, because of the light footprint characteristics and the level of risk involved, SOF would be a viable option for peacetime partners if these partners would feel the need to engage in the conflict discreetly. Ukraine has demonstrated that small states should understand that any engagement, substantial or small, would be solely based on the national interests of a peacetime partner. Charles DeGaulle argued that nations do not have friends, only interests. This appears to be true for our times as well.

In term of the potential development of a conflict in which a small state is attacked by a superior aggressor, the war could play out in a similar way to what happened in Ukraine in 2022. Parts of the territory would be occupied

by an aggressor, with the fighting from the defending party is mainly in the form of resistance while, in parallel, defense operations are taking place in other parts of the territory where the aggressor is not in full control. As a result, it is highly likely that the Swedish Special Operations Forces (SWESOF), in the early stages of a war, would be used for specific strategic and operationally crucial missions that conventional forces cannot undertake. This implies that SWESOF would only play a marginal role, due to its limited size and strategic priorities, in a resistance concept. At the stage when coordinated joint defense operations eventually will devolve into disaggregated resistance operations, the most important parts of the Armed Forces would be the Home Guard units and local Territorial Defense forces. These units train and fight where they live, which gives them several advantages; they are well embedded in society, know the terrain, and are highly skilled to survive in the actual environment. In other words; they have physical, cognitive, and moral access.

## **The Way Ahead**

When defense operations have moved to a phase of resistance, it would arguably be the case that local defense units such as the Home Guard and Territorial Defense units would be key elements in the military dimension of resistance. We argue that SWESOF would mainly be involved in other strategic operations in the early phases of the war and would therefore probably be a quite diminished resource at this stage. We have also highlighted the necessity to create a resistance capability in the long term, starting already during peacetime. SWESOF could be an important part of Sweden's resistance operating capability by using the human capital in a new way. Former SWESOF operators, retired from active duty, could form the backbone of a reserve organization. It could possibly be run by the Swedish Special Operations Command (SWESOCOM) in close cooperation with the Home Guard. The task for these operators and teams would be to work with the local Home Guard and Territorial Units in the area in which they live, taking part of local resistance networks and providing their professional expertise in

a wide range of fields. The awareness that exists within the SOF community regarding the threats from too many digital footprints would also contribute to risk mitigation related to their individual history and exposure on social media.

International peacetime SOF partners could play a discreet but still prominent supportive role in a resistance phase, even if there is a low chance of their countries being actively involved in the conflict. They can provide moral support, as well as assist the local forces in different ways, especially regarding intelligence and support of strategic communications (STRATCOM) aimed at an external target audience. Their role is particularly essential in a pre-conflict phase when they can help the host nation build capabilities while at the same time increasing their own future access to, and preparation for, a potential contingency in the area.

New capabilities that play a prominent role in future conflicts would preferably need to be identified already in peacetime. It is also important to identify capabilities outside the traditional military toolbox that may be efficient. The Ukrainian example of computer enthusiasts on quadbikes is one example of non-traditional capabilities that have turned into a highly effective resource in the resistance fight. Sweden as a country has, in terms of computer proficiency and gaming, a high level of maturity in the population. In combination with civilian local hunting teams with extensive knowledge of the terrain and skilled in the use of weapons, lethal local resources could be developed. These would not be defined as special operations forces in traditional terms, but they would be capable of conducting special operations.

## **Conclusion**

Due to tensions in international relations and war in Europe, the concept of resilience and resistance has resurfaced on the security agenda. For the first time since WWII, nations in Europe have to reconsider their national security and military strategies. Several European nations have, in a common effort,

written and published a contemporary Resistance Operating Concept. Old truths are still valid in terms of seeing resilience and resistance as an integrated Whole-of-Government approach, where the military, including SOF, have natural roles to play. Two things appear to be crucial; the full utilization of regional Lessons Learned from WWII and the Cold War, as well as lessons from the insurgents fought over the last decades. Secondly, one needs to accept that contemporary warfare has changed into a wide spectrum of conventional and unconventional blurry fragments, which contain a number of divergent actors with unique non-conventional competences.

SWESOF is a limited resource compared to other services. We anticipate that the SOF will be conducting strategically important missions in an initial phase of a war. Consequently, it is difficult to build a resistance concept with an active-duty SOF as its backbone. We have argued that when joint defense operations eventually change into less coordinated resistance operations, the most important parts of the armed forces would be the Home Guard units and the local Territorial Defense Forces, operating in cooperation with civilian society. However, SOF could still be an important actor in strengthening the military dimension of Sweden's resistance capabilities. We argue that an efficient way of protecting the substantial taxpayer investment in selecting, training, and educating SOF operators could be further explored. Today, there are a number of SOF operators, retired from active duty, living all over the country. They all have extensive combat experience and knowledge in asymmetric warfare. These operators are most likely also not burdened with the heavy digital footprint that otherwise is the new normal in modern society. They would therefore be an ideal resource in local resistance networks throughout the country. In addition to their role as mentors they would serve as natural and vital link to SWESOF.

We can see from historical examples that planning and preparation for resistance needs to be undertaken already in peacetime. Times of war means constant change and old truths suddenly need to be reassessed as the situation is constantly evolving. However, we argue that a prepared resistance can more easily conduct the necessary adaptation to changes in the environment.

Furthermore, building a resistance capability should be seen as a multi-faceted, long-term project where many factors must be taken into consideration. For example, not only SOF operators should be aware of the potential consequences of their digital footprint. As we should have no illusions about what a foe that has been proved to resort to barbarism is willing to do in order to subdue a population, any precautionary measures will pay off.

Our defense plans must be innovative, just as Winston Churchill did when he directed the formation of the auxiliary force. However, the context today is different in terms of content, as well as the environment in which it exists. Contemporary society holds many useful capabilities that we do not necessarily consider military capabilities. In a situation where a nation needs to resist a superior adversary and occupier, they should at an early stage, preferably already in peacetime, identify and hone the skills of new useful capabilities – just as the Ukrainians have done with software experts and drone enthusiasts. It is time to think about special operations capabilities in a slightly new way, one that is more focused on what SOF do rather than who they are. By doing so, small nations will be better able to create the adaptable tools required to resist an occupier and eventually winning a war by not losing it.

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