

French Special Operations

What Is Their Role in the Context of Great-Power Competition?

Laurent BANSEPT

► Key Takeaways

- **Special operations are distinguished from covert and conventional operations by the specific nature of their mission, more than by the means used to carry it out.**
- **Built according to an indirect approach and under political-military control, French special operations can complement as well as support conventional operations or offer an alternative.**
- **While counter-network operations continue to be an important part of special forces' activities, the return of major engagement assumptions requires a return to their original practices and the integration of gray zone requirements.**
- **Increasing stealth and developing partnerships and the piloting capabilities of relay-actors are all avenues that will enable French special forces to adapt to the new constraints they face.**

Introduction

The year 2022 marks thirty years since the creation of the *Commandement des opérations spéciales* (COS, Special Operations Command). Those three decades have been dominated by missions carried out in volatile environments, most often against irregular adversaries, primarily terrorist groups. Thanks to the leading role they have played in this context, special forces and special operations have become an essential part of French military strategy. Special forces must, however, now adapt to the evolution of the contemporary geopolitical landscape, marked by the resurgence of great-power competition and the challenge of recurring relations of competition, contestation, and confrontation. These developments are creating a much more restrictive environment than the one they have been used to.¹

This new situation could make special operations even more important than in the previous strategic cycle, but for that to happen they will have to push forward with adaptations already underway and rediscover certain former skills, particularly in handling partnerships. This is how they will be able to contribute fully to the twofold objective set for the French armed forces: “to win the war before the war, while being capable of engaging in a high-intensity confrontation if necessary”.²

A French approach to special operations?

The origins of the concept

Like their counterparts in the UK, the French special forces originated in the Second World War, when they were formed, following the British model, with two principal missions in mind: first, the supervision of irregular or partisan forces behind enemy lines, as planned by the British Special Operations Executive (SOE) and put into practice, in France, by the *Bureau central de renseignement et d'action* (BCRA, Central Bureau of Information and Action); second, commando actions carried out by the French units of the Special Air Service (SAS) or the Marine commandos.³

Mostly disbanded in 1945, these units were later reestablished in different forms and played a major role in the wars of decolonization. The initial decoupling increased when the “commando spirit” spread to the conventional forces, sometimes creating a certain amount of confusion regarding shock or assault troops modeled on “elite units”. At the same time, “special action” in the strict sense became the prerogative of the SDECE

1. “Strategic vision of the CEMA”, État-major des Armées, Paris, 2021

2. Speech by the CEMA to the 29th cohort at the École de guerre, Paris, October 14, 2021.

3. É. Tenenbaum, *Partisans et centurions : Une histoire de la guerre irrégulière au XX^e siècle*, Paris: Perrin, 2018.

and then the DGSE⁴: the French foreign services were deemed “special” because they were also responsible for intelligence and covert operations, particularly through the *Service Action* (SA, Action Division).

At the end of the Cold War, several developments led to a revision of this distribution of roles. First, the “Rainbow Warrior” affair in 1985 severely damaged the SA’s image and called the suitability of its approach into question.⁵ In parallel, the creation in 1987 of the US Special Operations Command (USSOCOM)⁶ and its deployment during the Gulf War in 1991 showcased a new integrated model that only emphasized France’s lack of progress in this area. At the instigation of its minister of defense, Pierre Joxe, France acknowledged the unique nature of “special operations” and decided to place them into a strictly military chain of command.⁷ The COS, created for that purpose, was given operational responsibility for the “special forces”, whose designation as such fell under the remit of the chief of the defense staff (CEMA, *chef d’état-major des armées*).

It should be made clear at this point that the “special” character of these forces is based primarily on the missions they carry out. Indeed, the basic repertoire of “commando” techniques used by the special forces is broadly similar to that of the

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commandos in the conventional forces, particularly the *Commandos parachutistes* (Commando Parachute Group) or the *Commandos montagne de l’armée de Terre* (Army Mountain Commandos). However, the special forces have access to specific equipment, and they are the only forces trained in certain techniques, such as very high-altitude military parachuting or underwater operations, as well as missions like freeing hostages or maritime counterterrorism. But above all,

special operations are distinguished right from their conception by their capacity to have a strategic—or at least operational—impact despite being carried out by small groups, which would normally be limited to a tactical role.

This new concept of operations was gradually consolidated after 1992. On its creation, the COS was initially deployed in Africa, often on emergency missions.⁸ From 1995, it started to carry out more long-term campaigns, initially in the first operations to target and capture individuals for trial in the International Criminal Tribunal for the

4. SDECE: Service de documentation extérieure et de contre-espionnage [External Documentation and Counter-Espionage Service], created in 1945 and dissolved in 1982, to be replaced by the DGSE: *Direction Générale de la sécurité extérieure* [General Directorate for External Security].

5. C. Silberzahn, “Les mutations de la DGSE après la crise du Rainbow Warrior”, *Après-demain*, Vol. 37, No. 1, 2016, pp. 15–17.

6. P. Kukielski, “USSOCOM: The Astounding Story of Its Origin”, *Air Commando Journal*, Vol. 10, No. 1, 2021, pp. 45–49.

7. Decree of June 24, 1992, on the creation of the Commandement des opérations spéciales.

8. Particularly in Somalia, Rwanda, Comoros, the Republic of the Congo, the Central African Republic, and Côte d’Ivoire.

Former Yugoslavia (ICTY), and then in Côte d'Ivoire and Afghanistan with Task Force (TF) Ares from 2003 to 2006 and the Jehol unit and TF-32 from 2011 to 2013. A third phase began in 2013, characterized both by the priority given to direct counterterrorism actions and to “high-value targets” (HVTs)—particularly by TF Sabre in the Sahel—and by a revival of indirect action in the form of combat engagement alongside local forces, as illustrated by the close integration of TF Hydra with Kurdish militias in Iraq (Peshmerga) and Syria (YPG). The idea of an “integrating COS” began to take shape, with increasing emphasis on relationships with external actors and the ambition to impact non-physical domains. The COS is now entering a fourth phase, characterized by its ability to operate in the “gray zone” in a context of renewed strategic competition.

Defining French special operations

The continuous use of special operations has led to their definition being refined in a new decree,⁹ which specifies that special operations are *military operations*, and thus fall under the remit of the CEMA, and are normally placed under the command of the commanding general of special operations (GCOS, *général commandant des opérations spéciales*). They are conducted in strict compliance with the law of armed conflict, in contrast to covert operations, which may use illegal modes of action while masking the identity of the sponsoring state. Because of their strategic scope, special operations are under tight—sometimes even direct—political and military control thanks to a short chain of command. They are subject to a strong requirement for operational discretion and may remain unclaimed, but responsibility for them can be assumed in the event of revelation, whether deliberate or accidental.¹⁰

Using the “indirect approach”, which primarily targets centers of gravity rather than the enemy’s mass of maneuver, special operations aim to produce strategic effects using comparatively limited resources. They thus make it possible to “do things differently”,¹¹ offering an alternative to conventional operations, which they support and supplement, if necessary below the threshold of open conflict. Permanently interconnected at the inter-army, inter-ministerial, and inter-allied levels, they deploy specific modes of action, procedures, and techniques, in all physical environments and even in the non-physical domains. They are thus an integral part of the implementation of national military strategy, including at the lower end of the spectrum of conflict. Their missions are to improve anticipation by detecting and understanding enemy actions; to act below the threshold in order to identify, prevent, or even prohibit such actions; and if necessary to react with an intervention or a strike.

9. Decree of January 5, 2017, relating to the Commandement des opérations spéciales.

10. In contrast to covert actions. On this subject, see C. Wyrđ, “Renseignement et clandestinité”, *Revue Défense Nationale*, Vol. 842, No. 7, 2021, pp. 40-47.

11. Motto of the Commandement des opérations spéciales.

The special operations community

To carry out its missions successfully, the GCOS relies on the “special operations community” (SOC), which includes all special forces units. Other units deployed on special operations also become part of the community for the duration of their engagement. Unlike the American and British TFs,¹² the French model is based on a combination of basic tactical units (Task Units)¹³ from various branches (BFSA, CFST, FORFUSCO, 1st CSS-FS)¹⁴ as well as reinforcements from all branches of the conventional forces.¹⁵ Thus, like the Sabre or Hydra TFs, their total personnel of several hundred people comes from around fifty units on average. Guaranteeing long-term impact, they carry out one-time operations in order to accomplish the campaign plans devised by the COS. They have their own general staff for that purpose, enabling them to exercise tactical command (TACOM). The TFs also represent the “integrating” COS at the operational level, hosting intelligence officers from the services, diplomats, or allied liaison elements, and interacting with political and private actors. Their theater responsibilities require decentralized coordination—with sites located several hundred kilometers apart—and confer operational and political responsibilities, particularly in terms of managing local “liaison-actors”,¹⁶ on the colonel or captain commanding the TF.

12. The American and British TFs are formed from an organic core, Operational Detachment-Bravo (company level) or a battalion of the Special Forces Group, Seal Team, or Squadron (for SFOD-Delta, ST-6, the 22 SAS, and the SBS).

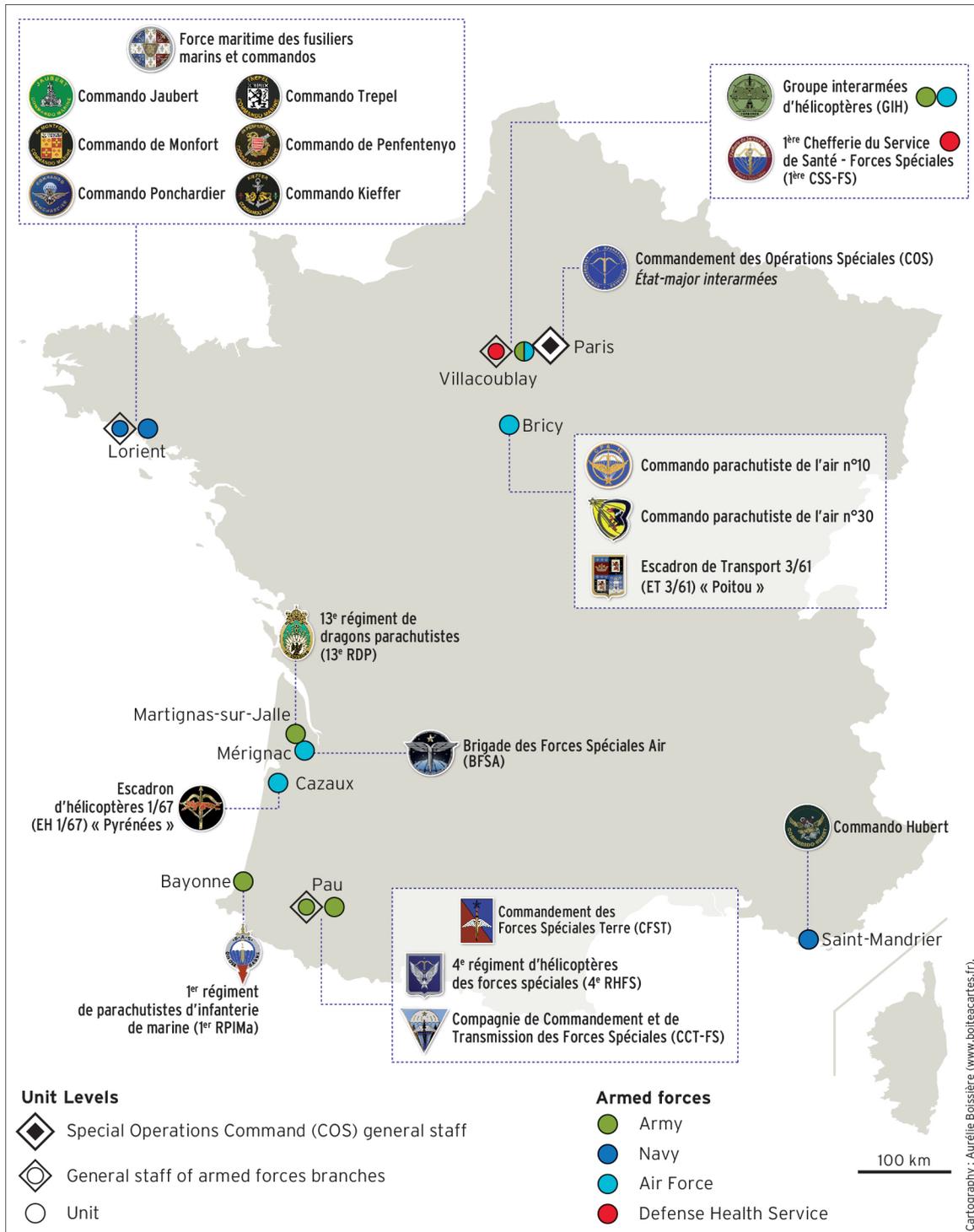
13. A Task Unit (TU) comprises three tactical elements: (1) an implementation cell (CelMo) commanded by a captain known as “operations officer”, assisted by a former sub-officer; (2) basic units: one or two action groups (of around ten men) and/or one to three research teams (of four to eight men), or, in the case of a 3D TU, one to four fixed-wing aircraft (cargo aircraft, ISR [drone or plane], or C2) or rotary-wing aircraft (two to five utility helicopters); (3) a support unit that can be adapted for each engagement (fire support, medics, engineering, logistics, intelligence, electronic warfare, cyber, psyops, etc.).

14. Brigade des forces spéciales Air; Commandement des forces spéciales Terre; Force maritime des fusiliers marins et des commandos; 1^{ère} Chefferie du service de santé des forces spéciales.

15. The concept of the “Second Circle”, which relied on reinforcement by commandos from the conventional forces, was abandoned by the COS in the early 2000s. In its force generation, the COS is autonomous when it comes to commandos. It does, however, call on experts in specific areas that it cannot retain on a permanent basis.

16. All effectors outside the armed forces.

Diagram 1: French special forces units



Sitting across all special forces and operations, the COS general staff exercises operational control (OPCON), conceiving, planning, and conducting operations. It handles the integration of external contributions on the ground, particularly in the field of intelligence. It also helps to ensure interoperability between the different branches, develop deployment doctrine, and draft operational contracts. Contributing significantly to international military relations, it maintains its international influence by mobilizing a large network of special operations liaison officers (ROLOS, *réseau d'officiers de liaison des opérations spéciales*) in Europe, the United States, Africa, the Middle East, NATO, and the EU.

Diagram 2: The special operations community (SOC)



Source: "Vaincre autrement", *Vision stratégique pour les opérations spéciales 2032*, COS, Paris, January 2022.

Engagement prospects

Since the Gulf War and the creation of the COS, the French special forces have been constantly engaged in open conflicts, often upstream or in support of the primary actions conducted by the conventional forces. Initially shaped by post-Cold War crisis management, they must now adapt to a world where the Western powers are being constantly confronted by their systemic rivals in varied but increasingly interconnected theaters. The absolute priority given to counterterrorism is thus being replaced by an expansion of mission scope that must capitalize on this experience to develop new forms of special operations.

Continuation of the fight against networks

Although the United States no longer sees terrorist groups as its main adversary,¹⁷ they continue to threaten the interests of France and Europe, which remain major targets.¹⁸ Still highly active and undergoing major reconfiguration after the loss of the Islamic State's sanctuary in Syria and Iraq, they are extending their influence and operations, particularly in Africa and Central Asia. In this context, counterterrorism should remain a fundamental mission of the French special forces in the years ahead. They will utilize their proven expertise, built up over the last fifteen years, in missions ranging from targeting HVTs with kinetic means to actions in the non-physical and cognitive domains.

Strategic competition also offers opportunities for states to approach or make use of infra-state groups, as shown by recent examples in Afghanistan, Iraq, and Syria. Going well beyond the question of jihadism, the phenomenon of the “militianization of war”,¹⁹ seen in most crises in Africa, is now a crucial factor in Ukraine and Libya. In this context, special operations must also improve our understanding of these actors, so we can counter them or, conversely, support those that might benefit our interests.

The continuation of these engagements with irregular adversaries—which may be stimulated by great-power competition—thus requires the maintenance of the high level of technical expertise acquired during the counterterrorism campaigns of the last two decades. This expertise can be further improved by continuous research aiming for innovation in equipment and methods and for greater control over the operational environment.

Gray zones and below-threshold operations: The future terrain of special forces

The recent crises in the Mediterranean, the Gulf, Central Africa, and North Africa offer examples of how strategic rivals are optimizing their gains and demonstrating their capacity to cause damage by circumventing the mechanisms of collective security. With no hesitation about taking high—albeit calculated—risks, they implement hybrid strategies that exist in a “militarized gray zone” and remain under the threshold of armed aggression as defined under international law. Their maneuvers may include non-kinetic destabilization operations (disinformation, cyberattacks, economic sabotage, etc.) alongside paramilitary actions carried out by intermediaries, making the overall strategy difficult to detect and interpret for the adversary as well as for observers.

17. See the 2018 *National Defense Review*, which identifies China, Russia, North Korea, and Iran as the principal adversaries, ahead of “violent extremist organizations”. This analysis is confirmed by the *Global Posture Review* published in November 2021.

18. French Ministry of Armed Forces, “Actualisation stratégique 2021”, January 21, 2021, p. 14.

19. M. Debos, *Le métier des armes au Tchad : Le gouvernement de l'entre-guerres*, Paris: Karthala, 2013; A. Quesnay, *La guerre civile irakienne : Ordres partisans et politiques identitaires à Kirkouk (2003–2020)*, Paris: Karthala, 2021.

As a result, action in the “gray zone” seems to be the primary future field of special operations.²⁰ The main purpose is to test and dispel doubts about the adversary’s exact intentions and to blame them for aggression. These actions may make it possible to interrupt the escalation, even if only temporarily, and discourage the enemy. Their success depends above all on surprise, the use of unorthodox modes of action, and the management of risk, offering political decision-makers a graduated and flexible response.

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Special forces in major confrontations

Finally, special operations cannot afford not to prepare for a potential major engagement—a possibility that dictates the dimensions of operational contracts and which, although not the most likely scenario, is the most demanding one for the armed forces. They must be able to contribute to any such engagement while continuing to act against irregular forces and in the “gray zone”, domains that the enemy may exploit to distract from the principal confrontation.

Their role begins with the implementation of strategic prevention measures, from issuing strategic warnings to paralyzing a potential adversary. One-time exercises or operations allow them to demonstrate their capabilities, make their presence felt in disputed areas, or reassure friendly forces. These actions may be conducted jointly or alongside conventional forces, alone, or as part of coalitions or partnerships.

If, despite everything, a confrontation does in fact emerge, the field of action of the special forces has two aspects. First, they would be tasked with facilitating access to the theater for the conventional forces²¹ in the face of anti-access and area denial strategies (A2/AD), for example by targeting surface-to-air or coastal defenses using their in-depth intelligence capabilities and their ability to operate behind the lines. They might also attack the enemy’s special forces (SOF-to-SOF engagements), as well as carrying out diversionary operations.²² Second, the special forces may conduct indirect actions via the exploitation and/or support of forces opposed to enemy regimes,²³ whether dissidents or paramilitaries. To that end, following the example of trends in the United States or NATO, the French special forces would do well to reappropriate the expertise acquired by their precursors from the Second World War onward but abandoned since the end of the Cold War.

20. D. Madden *et al.*, “Special Warfare: The Missing Middle in US Coercive Options”, RAND, 2014.

21. P. Lohaus, “Special Operations Forces in the Gray Zone: An Operational Framework for Employing Special Operations Forces in the Space Between War and Peace”, American Enterprise Institute, 2016.

22. G. A. LeMire, “Employing Special Operations Forces to Conduct Deception in Support of Shaping and Decisive Operations”, School of Advanced Military Studies, United States Army Command and General Staff College, 2002.

23. W. Irwin, “Support to Resistance: Strategic Purpose and Effectiveness and How Civil Resistance Works (and Why It Matters to SOF)”, Tampa: Joint Special Operations University Press, 2019; O. Fiala, “Resistance Operating Concept”, Tampa: Joint Special Operations University Press, 2020.

Ongoing adaptation of special operations

To confront uninhibited, militarily equipped rivals who are prepared to accept heavy losses, the French special forces must evolve. Over the last few decades, the transformations of the French model have already upgraded them from mere effectors into multi-domain and multi-field effect producers. They must now improve their stealth and liaison-management capabilities and make the most of their international stature.

Better action below the threshold: Signature management

The long counterterrorism campaigns, with permanent deployments of relatively large task forces, have increased the visibility of special operations.²⁴ To respond effectively to hybrid strategies, a return to more stealth-based modes of action with a minimal footprint seems essential. Going against the “return of mass”²⁵ trend, which consolidates the conventional approach of reassurance in the face of the risk of confrontation, the full effectiveness of special operations lies in maximum discretion, whatever the field of expression—physical or informational. In this context, the special forces will have to reduce their signature by prioritizing light, low-profile equipment, in-and-out actions with no permanent infrastructure, and an organizational structure utilizing command and coordination capacities from the rear, known as “reach-back”.

Likewise, their intelligence missions are still mostly oriented toward direct action or knowledge, with the aim of understanding or even imputing events to enemy forces. In the future, they may attempt to produce cognitive effects more regularly, thus forming part of military influence in the context of broad-spectrum targeting.

To optimize special operations, therefore, we must continue to develop synergies with the intelligence services and with COMCYBER in order to detect and understand our adversaries’ intentions and prevent the imposition of a *fait accompli*.

24. P. Le Pautremat, “Actions spéciales et projection de forces”, *Revue Défense Nationale*, Vol. 790, No. 5, 2016, pp. 26–34.

25. R. Briant, J.-B. Florant, and M. Pesqueur, “La masse dans les armées françaises : Un défi pour la haute intensité”, *Focus stratégique*, No. 105, Ifri, June 2021.

Increased reliance on liaison-actors

In parallel, the management of liaison-actors must become (again) a major feature of special operations. Reflections on the response to hybrid warfare often focus on a single aspect of the origins of special forces: the management of groups of local resistance fighters by SOE or Jedburgh-type units behind Axis lines.²⁶ During the Cold War, the support provided to certain anti-Communist movements was largely inspired by those antecedents. It also seems essential to relearn to integrate and manage the contributions of liaison-actors. Effectors working outside the French armed forces, they may be military or paramilitary units, organizations, companies, or even individuals, political cadres, facilitators, or experts.²⁷ The nature of the connection maintained with each actor determines the level of common interest and control; the relationship may be based on law in the form of defense accords, rely on common interests or personal ties, or simply be contractually agreed.

Relearn to integrate and manage the contributions of liaison-actors

Of course, the French special forces are already accustomed to working closely with partner units. Nevertheless, regaining the ability to manage a broader spectrum of actors requires major strengthening of skills that are still too patchy,²⁸ especially in terms of mastering the languages of theaters of engagement, intercultural knowledge, or psychological operations.²⁹ Eventually, the COS will have to be able to embed very small special forces detachments with local actors on a long-term basis and to coordinate with their structures, making sure to never lose the upper hand or the initiative.

Strengthening ties with allied special forces

Great-power competition serves to reveal the convergence of interests of allied nations. That is why the COS and its branches have built significantly closer relations with their counterparts in the West, the Middle East, and Asia, in order to improve interoperability. The United States remains an indispensable ally due to the size of its special forces community—more than 80,000-strong in 2022³⁰—, its global access, its support capability, but also the normative power of its doctrinal views. The combined effect of Operation Serval in 2013 and TF Hydra, deployed in the Levant in 2014, has been to

26. M. R. D. Foot, *SOE in France: An Account of the Work of the British Special Operations Executive in France 1940–1944 (Government Official History Series)*, Her Majesty's Stationery Office, 1966.

27. A. E. Kramer, "Training Civilians, Ukraine Nurtures a Resistance in Waiting", *The New York Times*, December 26, 2021.

28. E. Olson, "America's Not Ready for Today's Gray Wars", *Defense One*, December 10, 2015.

29. B. S. Koven and C. Mason, "Back to the Future: Getting Special Forces Ready for Great-Power Competition", *War on the Rocks*, May 4, 2021.

30. Including civilian contractors and reserves, cited in M. F. Cancian, "U.S. Military Forces in FY 2022: Space, SOF, Civilians, and Contractors", Center for Strategic and International Studies, December 20, 2021.

considerably strengthen the relationship between the French and American special forces. This relationship has enabled the accomplishment of sensitive operations, particularly in the field of counterterrorism (targeting several senior figures within al-Qaeda and Islamic State). To formalize this relationship, France and the United States signed a ministerial roadmap in July 2021, which should facilitate operational, organic, and capability collaboration between their special forces.

In parallel, building on an operational experience that is unique in Europe, the COS is strengthening its relationships with its European counterparts. Supported by the

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ROLOS, these exchanges enable the sharing of situation assessments, the carrying out of joint training exercises, and open up the prospect of joint operations. The sharing of experience with the countries of northern and central Europe and the Balkans also enriches France's knowledge of those countries' historical adversaries, whose rhetoric they understand perfectly. These relationships contribute to the development of a common special operations culture in the spirit of the European Intervention

Initiative agreed in 2018. France's relationships with many of these partners were also strengthened as a result of the Takuba Task Force.³¹ Conceived in the COS, this ad hoc coalition was a chance to test the interoperability of European units, hitherto restricted largely to the framework of the NATO Special Operations Headquarters (NSHQ). As the deployment of special forces is still, for many partners, the easiest type of offensive operation to embark upon politically, these collaborations are at the vanguard of the European response to identified threats.

Conclusion

The beginning of an era of great-power rivalry marks a turning point for the French special forces. Fifteen years of counterterrorism have enabled them to reach an exceptional level of technical expertise, thanks to daily use of the highly demanding techniques required for targeting missions. Future special operations will, of course, have to maintain and even intensify the unique nature of their actions, between audacity and risk management. They will also have to relearn to act behind the lines in small groups, either working alone or with partisans, in non-permissive areas, and with increased stealth: countering our rivals will require it. As T. E. Lawrence said, "irregular warfare is far more intellectual than a bayonet charge".³²

31. Deployed in the Sahel since 2020, this TF carries out 3A missions (advise, assist, and accompany) in support of units of the Malian Armed Forces. Belgium, Denmark, Estonia, Italy, the Netherlands, Portugal, the Czech Republic, and Sweden are also active there alongside France, the lead nation.

32. T. E. Lawrence, "Evolution of a Revolt", *Army Quarterly*, Vol. 1, No. 1, 1920.

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