The Role of Special Forces in Peace Missions: A Focus on MINUSMA within the African Context

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Abstract

The terror attacks on 11 September 2001 in the United States of America, and the subsequent declaration by George W Bush of a War on Terrorism, has renewed the focus on the use of special forces as the force of choice to combat the new security threat. It also focussed the international concern on the security threats occupying ungoverned spaces, failed states, and the threat inherent in the spreading of terror. This, in turn, created a merging of failed states and counter-terrorism agendas, which resulted in a powerful new framework for humanitarian actors. Non-governmental organisation interventions in the form of the United Nations Multidimensional Integrated Stabilisation Mission in Mali (MINUSMA), to mention but one example, appeared. The subsequent deployment of European special forces to Mali in 2013 as part of MINUSMA was in an effort to restore constitutional order to the Malian government. The mission is still in progress, and thus relevant as example of the employment of special forces within the context of peace missions in Africa. This article offers a brief glimpse at the nature of post-Cold War security, the character of conflict in Africa, and the resulting employment of special forces in peace missions.

Keywords: Special Forces, Peace Missions, Terrorism, Mali, MINUSMA

Introduction

The mere thought of special forces conjures up images of figures, clad in black, equipped with the latest technology and bristling with weapons, moving stealthy at night in a built-up area in order to capture or kill high-value targets. With so much so-called "kill and tell" literature[2] available on various media platforms documenting the missions of these secret warriors, one might be forgiven for having these mental pictures. Breede states that much of the published literature on special forces is 'descriptive, sensationalized, or simply boosting the image' of special forces.[3] In fact, special forces have probably become some of the socially most fascinating military units in contemporary times, with the public slurping up any new story. Even in high politics, these units are regarded as the favoured option, the 'easy button'[4] to push, when it comes to serious military matters. Although special forces have been around for decades, the early 2000s saw renewed growth in public attention as well as a rapid expansion in these units with regard to allocated funds, personnel, and the number of important missions.[5]

The terrorist attacks against the United States on 11 September 2001 and the subsequent declaration of the War on Terrorism by George W Bush pushed the special forces of the United States and many other Western countries to the forefront of fighting the new national security threat. Their expertise, equipment, and structure for counter-terrorism and counterinsurgency made special forces the natural choice for countering the asymmetric nature of terrorism.[6] Horn and Balasevicius, for example, note that the 'inherent responsiveness, small footprint, cultural and regional awareness', as well as the wide array of specialist capabilities of special forces have proved them to be reliable force multipliers in the past whose impact far exceeded the numbers deployed. These traits have clearly made them an indispensable component of national security and defence capabilities.[7]

The 2001 terrorist attacks also focussed the international concern on the security threats inherent to ungoverned spaces, failed states, and the use of terror. A merger of the failed states and counter-terrorism agendas developed, and this created a powerful new framework for humanitarian actors.[8] This introduced non-governmental organisation (NGO) interventions, which 'blur the insurgency and counterinsurgency domains with the peace mission paradigm'.[9] Two pertinent examples are the United Nations Organisation Stabilisation Mission in the Democratic Republic of the Congo (MONUSCO) and the United Nations Multidimensional Integrated Stabilisation Mission in Mali (MINUSMA). Ironically, the growing involvement of NGOs in conflict zones seems to have encouraged insurgencies further, as insurgency seems to have become the means by which rebel groups can be included in national politics. In addition, insurgencies have to reconcile with NGO demands. Adebajo refers to the games that the powers play, putting the interest of the Western world first and dictating where, when, and for how long peace missions[10] will be deployed. This stands central to any analysis of United Nations (UN) peace missions.[11]

Although UN member state forces have been deployed in theatres where terrorism and violent extremists are present, they have only started to confront these complex threats in Mali directly since 2013. In 2016, of the 11 countries that were most affected by terrorism, seven hosted UN missions. Discussions among policymakers and experts concerning the security environment have focussed to a large extent on whether peace missions could undertake kinetic counterterrorism operations,[12] and what the possibilities might be for the UN Security Council to request peacekeepers to fight terrorists.[13] MINUSMA has become one of the deadliest missions in the history of the United Nations, suffering numerous fatalities as a result of hostile acts by various belligerent groups, including terrorist groups, such as al-Qaeda. MINUSMA is the first multidimensional peacekeeping operation[14] in a theatre where there are ongoing counterterrorist operations as well.[15] The deployment of European special forces to Mali in 2013, as part of MINUSMA, was an effort to restore constitutional order within Mali. The mission is still going on and thus relevant as a case study to explore the role of special forces in the context of peace missions.

Numerous publications have documented special forces as a security and defence phenomenon, specifically in terms of their training and operations. The same applies for peace missions internationally, specifically in Africa. Very little literature, however, focusses on the involvement and role of special forces in peace missions. The existing

theoretical gap can and has translated into the incorrect use of special forces in peace missions in some instances. A lack of education among joint force commanders (and often special force commanders) in terms of their correct deployment within peace missions risks results ranging from negative foreign policy fallout to the failure of peace missions. The study on which this article reports, explored the role of special forces in peace missions, using the role of European special forces in MINUSMA as case study.

The approach adopted in the study was analytical and descriptive in nature, drawing on publications about peace missions and special forces in general. This is expanded with official publications on MINUSMA and the deployment of special forces in the MINUSMA mission. Furthermore, existing international military and UN doctrine and manuals were consulted to gain insight into the practicalities of such deployments. The initial focus is on the nature of post-Cold War security and the contemporary nature of conflict in Africa, after which there is a brief analysis of a UN peace mission in Africa and specifically the European approach to the employment of special forces as part of the UN operational concept. The existing doctrine on the use of special forces in peace missions, as well as the challenges and dangers that might be encountered in the use of special forces in peace missions is also briefly discussed.

Nature of post-Cold War security in Africa

The former UN Secretary-General, Boutros Boutros-Ghali, stated in *An Agenda for Peace* that the concept of peace was easy to grasp, but that of international security was more complex, 'for a pattern of contradiction has arisen here'.[16],[17] The foundation of the pattern of order during the Cold War was, according to Sørensen, the bipolar military competition between the United States and the Soviet Union, supported by their allies. At the time, the world order pivoted on 'the creation of a stable balance of power that would secure peace and the independence of the state', as well as the rule of law, freedom and socio-economic well-being.[18] The end of the Cold War saw the international rule-based system losing its structured framework which ensured regulation of the internal and international behaviour of the Third World states (now known as "the developing world"). Gone were the ideological patrons who provided governments and potential insurgents with the means to destabilise and subvert national order. This opened the door for instability and the outbreak of violent conflict.[19] Surplus Cold War aid, in the form of weapons, became readily accessible to insurgent forces in several conflict areas, increasing vulnerability of constitutional order and fuelling the drivers of internal conflict. Many states now justified intervening in hostile countries by simply interpreting sovereignty in a way that suited their own national interests and those of their alliances, making use of their national security and defence capabilities to enforce their narrow political aims.[20]

Some of the underlying causes for internal conflicts are listed by Gilbert as –

- the disintegration of diversified multi-ethnic federations;
- the expression of ancient hatreds, the legacies of colonialism;
- the different versions of the democratic process in various states;
- the long lineage of illegitimate authoritarian regimes; and more recently

- the rise of Islamic fundamentalism after the terror attacks against the United States in 2001.[21]

Ngubane and Solomon neatly categorise these sources by dividing them under the headings 'military', 'political', 'environmental' and 'societal' sources of insecurity, specifically within the African context.[22] According to Cilliers, the structural drivers of violence in Africa – which will determine future levels of violence on the continent – are poverty, democratisation, the regime type, the population age structure, repeated violence, the bad neighbourhood effect and poor governance.[23] Cilliers argues that the tendency towards violence stems from the collective influence of some or all of these drivers. For violence to erupt, some form of politicisation and triggering effect is necessary, and there must be high levels of pre-existing social tension and discontent among the population.

The African continent has witnessed some of the bloodiest conflicts in the world since the 1960s. In fact, according to Bakken and Rustad, 2015 and 2016 saw the most conflicts in Africa since 1946.[24] They regard state-based conflicts[25] as the most deadly type of conflict in the world. An interesting fact is that many of the African conflicts between 2015 and 2017 show a strong correlation to the rise of the Islamic State (IS),[26] and IS was gaining traction in other existing conflicts involving Islam. This is troublesome, as governments, such as Nigeria, for example, are no longer fighting against Boko Haram[27] alone anymore, but against IS as well. Seen in the light that IS would be linked to other Islamic terrorist groups, the potential of the spill-over effect increases dramatically. In addition to this, terrorist networks are known to be associated with transnational organised crime, which inherently funds their activities, creating an added layer of national security threat complexity.[28]

Despite the fact that Africa had been an operational theatre for terrorist attacks long before 11 September 2001, the Western world, and more specifically the United States, had only started to regard the continent as part of the frontline in the fight against global terror after the attacks on the Twin Towers.[29] The international community is, however, concerned about a number of stumbling blocks hampering military or peace mission interventions in conflicted African areas. First, African conflicts are very complex due to a tendency for these to recur in areas that had previously been affected by war. Especially those regions where transnational armed or criminal groups are active are susceptible to the recurrence of conflict. Second, there is a severe risk inherent in the transnational mobility of groups, as well as the way this mobility can be exploited in mediatised asymmetric warfare. Much publicised terrorist attacks, such as by al-Shabaab on the shopping centre in Nairobi in 2013 is a case in point. This was a transnational spill-over from the conflict zone in Somalia to a major urban centre. The targeted area would have had to provide the terror group with a local support network and media coverage that would reach the whole world. Although such attacks hold no gain in territory or victory over enemy combatants, civilian populations are increasingly subverted by means of fear as primary tool of terror, and could in some instances encourage those states at risk of similar violence to back proxy groups in the conflict, and in doing so, escalate and prolong the internationalised civil war.[30]

Character of Post-Cold War Conflict

The intrastate conflicts in Africa, which broke out in the 1990s following the end of the Cold War, became increasingly non-conventional in nature, primarily because they were fought mostly in developing countries with limited conventional armed forces and capabilities. Van Vuuren, however, cautions that the danger of chemical, biological and nuclear weapons is still real.[31] He furthermore mentions that the organisation of armed forces becomes random and doctrines become vague, making strategic early warning very difficult to obtain. In the resulting low-intensity conflicts, the main types of belligerents would be indigenous ethnic groups, insurgents, and warlords with gangs, instead of soldiers organised in formal national armed forces. Conflicts would be characterised by large-scale killing and raping of civilians, the prevention of humanitarian aid reaching those in need, and the humiliation of UN peacekeepers.[32]

According to Reno, there are a number of features that characterise warfare in Africa.[33] The first is that both state and non-state armed groups favour the control of resources and commercial networks, which are responsible for sustaining the authority of groups and lining their pockets above that of population-centric warfare. Second, state and non-state armed groups are fragmented, adding much complexity to the friction and conflict. In the case of non-state groups, this could be due to state rulers employing divide and rule tactics by encouraging rebel leaders to start their own groups in order to buy them off, or in the case of state armed groups, to compete for state power in order to exploit natural resources. Lastly, due to the conflicts in Africa, many states are marginalised from the international economic and political networks. This could also be ascribed to numerous international state and non-state actors set on undermining the sustainability of these states' patronage politics, using "bad governance" as excuse.

Many of the conflicts in Africa are left unresolved at political and military level, which produces simmering anger and tension, and in turn merely gives belligerents time to rebuild their forces to start the conflict all over again. The populations who bear witness to these conflicts often become disillusioned with their governments, which appear to be only concerned with their own safety and security, at the expense of the population. Disregarding civil responsibility and accountability to the citizens results in an increase in political and social opposition, and gives rise to new security threats. Left unattended and unchecked by government, as it usually is, these threats will affect the 'Pillars of the State', which Barlow lists as intelligence, law enforcement, the armed forces, governance, the economy, the populace and perception.[34] African armed conflicts today include many insurgencies which, according to Vreÿ, all demonstrate one general trait, namely the lingering influence African states that emerged from earlier insurgent campaigns.[35] The cycle repeats itself as these newly emerging states fall prey to similar insurgencies due to political or economic reasons with unresolved friction serving as catalyst. One might argue that Africa has an ingrained insurgent strategic culture.

As dissident groups grow larger and more successful they start evolving from simple banditry to full-scale insurgency. These insurgencies, however, at some stage start depending on foreign assistance, which could be from state or non-state actors. Thom

suggests that these internal struggles could simply be proxy wars that are disguised as internal conflict.[36] Terrie also lists an external support base, sanctuary, and resources as some of the conditions for insurgencies to commence and endure.[37] Conflict dynamics have, in fact, become very complex, with the motives, methods and objectives of the actors involved leaning increasingly towards criminality. Although foreign nationals, who are operating in countries, such as the *Democratic Republic of the Congo (*DRC), might align themselves with those rebel groups that strive for democratic or liberation objectives, their motives are normally less altruistic and more selfish in nature than those of local rebel groups, and linked to economic gains. The globalisation of crime, enhanced by open borders, cheap global communications, and electronic financial transactions, thrive during these insurgencies and see illegal weapons, drugs and natural resources, such as diamonds, flowing freely in and out of the conflict areas.[38] This level of insurgency integration into society blurs the lines between war, organised crime, and large-scale human rights abuses. This is normally the entry point for peace missions. But with the increasing levels of complexity of these asymmetric conflicted spaces, conventional peacekeeping forces could be found wanting from a functional performance perspective. Special forces are especially suitable for deployment to such environments, but not without controversy.

Exploring the role of special forces during peace missions

Spulak reasons that the value of special forces in peacetime operations, such as peace missions, is derived from their unique role in times of conflict, violence and war.[39] Contrary to the popular, and stereotypical, belief that special forces only engage in 'the application of lethal effects', special forces actually have significant non-lethal capabilities.[40] In the past, there was unfortunately minimal focus on the deployment of special forces during peace missions and on the allocation of tasks to these units designed to transition periods of inactivity until more significant tasks presented themselves. Horn, however, argues that contemporary requirements in peace missions place a considerable demand on the deployment of special forces, as well as on the allocation of resources for these types of missions.[41] He notes that special forces are ideally suited to meet the agile threats inherent in social and political challenges characterising the future security environment.

Johansen echoes Horn's contention that special forces will keep on playing a vital role in counterterrorism in the future. Yet, it remains an open question as to what exactly future taskings might hold.[42] He lists a number of threat actors that would typically form the basis for operational tasking of special forces. These include irregular threats, transnational networks, and sub-state groups that are able to overthrow governments. These are all agile and asymmetric threats, which require agile, flexible and asymmetric responses. Added to this is increasing defence budgetary pressure, which forces governments to search for cost-effective ways and means to ensure that national and international security is maintained. With this in mind, the nature of special forces, combined with appropriate technologies, sets them apart from conventional forces and offers a new and different way for executing force and exerting a presence in global affairs.[43] The evolution of special forces over many decades has resulted in a corps of shadow warriors who have grown in capacity and skill to such an extent that they have moved away from so-called "state cracking" as primary methods of influencing opposing political elites towards state paralysis, and

morphed into a professional elite with 'often-unrecognised game-changing potential'.[44] It is these traits which, if incorporated correctly, could prove invaluable in peace missions.

Meredith is of the opinion that special forces could serve as conflict resolution experts, especially in places where civilian peacekeepers cannot hope to go or make an impact.[45] He argues that special forces operations show several similarities to traditional peace efforts, and list their approach to the task at hand as one important similarity. Special forces units can perform peacekeeping functions, which are aimed at removing the long-term causes of conflict, thereby functioning in ways beyond traditional military peacekeeping, which is aimed at the ending of hostilities as primary function.[46]

During the 2015 High-Level Independent Panel on Peace Operations (HIPPO), discussions focussed on the capabilities and methods that are required in order for peace missions to function safely and effectively in dangerous environments, with a particular focus on the importance of intelligence.[47] Of particular interest was the need for an effective system to assist with the gathering, analysing and operationalising of intelligence for peace missions in complex environments. This merely echoes the views of Major General Cammaert in 2006 on field intelligence assets, specifically referring to the MONUSCO mission in the DRC.[48] At the time, Cammaert effectively deployed special forces in a peacekeeping capacity to determine the exact figures regarding the strengths of various armed groups.

Since then, the United Nations have published a manual on peacekeeping missions for special forces in 2015 in order to formalise capability standards, and to enhance the preparation, operational readiness, and efficiency of the special forces of troop-contributing countries (TCCs).[49] Primacy is awarded to the conduct of special reconnaissance as principal task allocated to special forces deploying within a UN mandate. The purpose of special reconnaissance is to collect or verify information of strategic or operational significance. The United States,[50] Canada[51] and South Africa[52] have also included within the peacekeeping doctrine of their defence forces the role that special forces would play when mandated to function in a peacekeeping capacity.

The UN manual on peacekeeping missions for special forces describes how special forces could influence and deter those elements working against UN efforts to engage in the peace process, should the appropriate UN authorities deem it fit. Despite being described by Breede as 'a rather little-known policy document',[53] the manual fills a large gap in multilateral doctrinal literature on special forces deployments within peace missions. Contained in the manual, the standardised special forces capabilities and organisational structures are adapted to fit the UN peacekeeping requirements. The manual does not attempt to override military doctrine of TCCs and does not address any tactics or techniques.[54] According to the manual, special forces committed by TCCs to UN missions could be fully integrated into the overall operational plan of a UN peace mission. Special forces would also complement the efforts of conventional forces in the mission, and should be able to adopt a proactive approach in fulfilling the mandate of the mission.

In the US Army Field Manual on Peace Operations (FM 100-23), special forces are described as a valuable asset when it comes to the planning of peace missions.[55] Special

forces would typically assist in preparing the operational area by means of reconnaissance to gain intelligence updates on key terrain, personnel, or facilities. Special forces can also make contact with local and friendly agencies because of their language skills as well as area orientation or conduct operations to prevent synchronised defence or counterattacks by forces hostile to the peace mission. These units can provide temporary support, such as airspace control for landing zones, communication nodes, security, as well as advanced force assessments, to assist with the deployment of conventional peacekeeping forces or designated humanitarian assistance organisations.[56] The Canadian Defence Force acknowledges that the characteristics of special forces have many relevant applications in peace missions, but cautions that the overt deployment of these units can be very controversial in politically charged environments.[57] The units are, however, well suited for civil–military cooperation tasks, community relations, and community information activities. In addition, these forces can also assist with the raising, training, and reform of local security forces in hostile areas.

The US Special Operations Manual for the Joint Services (JP 3-05) describes foreign humanitarian assistance (FHA) as humanitarian activities conducted outside US borders.[58] This is often conducted in conjunction with multilateral organisations, such as the United Nations. It comes as no surprise then that the most important capabilities that special forces can provide in FHA are their cultural knowledge, language capabilities, and their ability to work closely with multi-ethnic indigenous populations. Special forces can also provide initial and ongoing assessments of the causes of conflict to international relief organisations. These small, versatile and self-contained units can deploy rapidly and can provide a full spectrum of air, ground, and maritime support, with links to assets that are space-based.[59] When properly directed, special forces within the peace mission environment can –

- support sensitive reconnaissance missions;
- conduct operations aimed at targeting war crimes suspects and drug trafficking; and
- track terrorist training camps, to name but a few.

Commanders must, however, ensure that tasks are appropriate for these units, as special forces personnel are limited, they are high in demand, and should be focussed on tasks that would have a positive strategic effect.

The Participation of European Special Forces in Mali (2013 until present)

Background to the Conflict

The violent relations between the Tuareg ethnic minority in the north of Mali and the dominant Mandé ethnic group in the south of the country have been a dominating factor in Malian politics since independence of the country from France in 1960.[60] The policies implemented against the Tuareg by the post-colonial Malian government triggered the first Tuareg rebellion, which lasted from 1963 to 1964. The legacy of this rebellion would time and again result in renewed violence in the form of the second Tuareg rebellion from

1990 to 1996, the third Tuareg rebellion from 2006 to 2009, and ultimately the fourth and current Tuareg rebellion, which started in 2012. Prior to the outbreak of conflict in Mali in 2012, the country had been regarded as 'a beacon of stability and a model of democratic evolution in West Africa'.[61] A military coup in 2012 was followed by a swift takeover of half of the country by armed insurgents. The crisis was unexpected to both the coup makers and all the parties involved in the conflict. The outbreak of hostilities was the culmination of a number of historical, social and political factors, which served as triggers to the conflict. The desire for northern independence by the Tuareg was and is regarded as the dominant reason for each of these violent conflicts.[62]

Another trigger of the latest rebellion in 2012was the conflict spill-over effect of terrorism and unrest in Algeria and Libya into the Malian Sahara. Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) had established bases in the northern parts of Mali in the early 2000s and became very active in 2007. The return in January 2012 of well-armed Tuareg fighters from Libya in the aftermath of the Arab Spring uprisings sparked a new rebellion in Mali, which saw a combination of the historic Tuareg claim to occupy "lost" territory and militant Islamism.[63] In March 2012, the increase in government corruption and general dissatisfaction with the Malian government among the Mandé led to a mutiny at a military barracks outside the capital, Bamako. This escalated into a military coup, which led to the overthrow of Malian President Touré. The coup weakened the government and seriously impaired its ability to offer effective resistance against the Tuareg rebellion.[64] The end of 2012 saw Mali effectively divided into the south (controlled by the government) and the north (under control of the National Movement for the Liberation of Azawad [MNLA] rebel group).

The threat of violent extremist groups, such as Movement for Oneness and Jihad in West Africa (MUJAO), resulted in the African Union (AU) deploying a peace enforcement mission, the African-led International Support Mission to Mali (AFISMA).[65] In January 2013, when the Islamist extremists attacked Konna, the strategically located town close to the capital of Bamako, France also decided to intervene in the conflict with a small military force. This French mission, Operation Serval, managed to repel the extremist attacks and to push them back north.[66] February 2013 saw the European Union (EU) launching a multinational military mission, the European Union Training Mission in Mali (EUTM-Mali), in order to train the Malian military. Two months later, the security situation had improved sufficiently for the UN Security Council to authorise the MINUSMA with a Chapter VII mandate.[67],[68]

In its efforts to help restore constitutional order and ensure free and peaceful elections, the United Nations is, however, constantly challenged by corruption and the weak political institutions of Mali. Chauzal and Van Damme argue that Mali had become a playing field for foreign powers.[69] Whereas Mali had initially been regarded as a so-called "no interest zone" by the international community, due largely to the apparent democratic normality in the country and the absence of strategic resources, some African countries, such as Libya and Algeria, have made the northern parts of Mali central to their Sahel strategies because the Malian government could not assert its political and military presence in these northern areas. It was only after the 2001 terror attacks in the United States that international attention started pivoting towards Mali as a good candidate for

the implementation of new security doctrines. The United States and France therefore significantly increased their security and military programmes in the region.

Once MINUSMA had replaced AFISMA and had taken over from France, MINUSMA quickly became the target of attacks by militants and spoilers[70] who wanted control. This was made worse by the unpreparedness of the Malian security forces and the ease with which militants could cross international borders.[71] MINUSMA received a proactive mandate to stabilise key population centres, to deter threats, and to take active steps to prevent the return of armed belligerents, and to use force if necessary, as was mandated within a Chapter VII mission. In attempting to do so, MINUSMA had become one of the deadliest missions in the history of the United Nations, with increasing fatalities among UN personnel. It has also become the first multidimensional peace mission to be deployed alongside the ongoing counter-terrorist operations by the French military.[72] Although most European countries had backed away from peacekeeping operations as a result of their experiences in Somalia and Bosnia, the Dutch government had decided to contribute a significant number of troops and key enablers to MINUSMA, as well as drawing in support from a number of European countries.[73] The Netherlands and Sweden featured prominently in providing special forces, surveillance drones, and Apache attack helicopters in order to establish the first explicit intelligence cell, dubbed the All Sources Information Fusion Unit (ASIFU), in a UN peacekeeping mission.[74] This cell works closely with special forces deployed in the mission area.

Involvement of Special Forces

In 2012, the UN Secretariat called on member states to assist in providing an intelligence capacity for this mission, due to the mounting pressure on MINUSMA to increase its ability to deal with the threat of armed groups attacking UN personnel.[75] As a result of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) starting to reduce its presence in Afghanistan, many NATO and EU countries saw the call of the UN Secretariat as an opportunity to get involved in UN peacekeeping and a new environment for their militaries to practice interoperability within multilateral operations. Those countries deploying forces to MINUSMA, however, favoured high-end but low-risk capabilities. The intelligence capacity had to focus on capabilities over numbers and improve performance and accountability.[76] Consequently, the Netherlands contributed 450 troops to MINUSMA in 2013, which included a special operations land task group (SOLTG) and an intelligence, surveillance and reconnaissance (ISR) company, which combined with air assets. This task force was stationed in Gao.[77]

From the onset, the deployment of special forces in MINUSMA was justified by the need for tactical human intelligence. These units accessed areas where it was difficult to collect crucial information, and which, once processed, was used to reduce the threat to the mission in a high-risk environment, as well as reduce uncertainty within the complex mission area. This intelligence not only contributed to the safety and security of peacekeepers, but also enhanced the situational awareness of the mission, which in turn informed all operations related to the protection of civilians.[78] These are all considered strategic enablers for peace mission success. Historically, MINUSMA became the first

peace operation to establish a stand-alone unit for collecting and analysing information within the organisational structure of the peace mission. This was ASIFU, which deployed in January 2014.[79] The primary countries contributing troops to ASIFU were Belgium, Denmark, Germany, the Netherlands, Norway and Sweden.

Following the example of the Netherlands, Sweden pledged a combined group of 250 intelligence operatives and special forces operators to MINUSMA in 2015. The intelligence capacity of this Swedish task force was about twice the size of that of the Dutch unit, and was situated in Timbuktu. Its capabilities included military reconnaissance personnel, a weapons intelligence team, and small unmanned aerial vehicles (UAVs). This task force had been able to operate as far as 120 kilometres from Timbuktu, with an overnight capability, and allowed the mission to gather information on local dynamics. However, despite the complex work it was doing in Mali, the Swedish task force would later complain that they were underutilised.[80] Germany also started contributing forces in 2016, and supported the Dutch contingent with intelligence, surveillance and reconnaissance assets. The Dutch SOLTG consisted of approximately 90 special force operators under the command of the MINUSMA force commander and, together with the Dutch helicopter detachment, was mandated to operate throughout the entire country.[81]

The United Kingdom announced in 2019 that it would also deploy 250 troops with a long-range reconnaissance (special forces) capability.[82] This consisted of troops from the Irish Special Forces Unit and the Army Ranger Wing,[83] which was deployed as part of a German-led task force in Sector East in Mali. Their tasking involved '[to] support the collection of information within the operational environment for the accurate development, decision and implementation of mandate activities'.[84] Due to years of experience in counterinsurgency operation in Afghanistan and Iraq, the European countries contributing troops to MINUSMA were in a unique position to introduce new capabilities, technology, operational and doctrinal concepts to the MINUSMA peace mission.[85] This increased the expectations of what they could achieve. ASIFU was the primary component in synchronising all special forces and intelligence efforts for MINUSMA. Designed around Western intelligence doctrine and practice, the ASIFU headquarters was based in Bamako. The ASIFU collection assets were however located within the Dutch and Swedish ISR units. In order for the ISR units to obtain information from human sources, it made use of its special forces in these units, which in turn formed human intelligence teams, civil–military interaction teams, mission review and advisory teams, and liaison personnel.[86]

In late 2020, MINUSMA conducted Operation Mongoose in central Mali. This was part of the MINUSMA efforts to operationalise its mobile task force concept. This concept was aimed at increasing the mobility of the mission and its ability for rapid response in remote areas.[87] The operation involved the mobilisation of both land and air units, which included special forces and helicopter units from different military sections. This allowed MINUSMA to make further strides towards a more proactive posture in the protection of civilians. It is activities, such as Operation Mongoose, which are supported by the efforts of ASIFU. This unit would typically collect and analyse information to support activities, such as the provision of humanitarian aid, recovery and stabilisation efforts, and the facilitation of peace dialogue.[88] It strives to produce a wide range of tailor-made services

according to client requirements. Purposeful efforts concentrate on the provision of emergency intelligence support, operational intelligence support, and focussed intelligence operations, which enhance the overall success rate of the peace mission.[89]

Special Forces in Peace Missions – The Challenges

The most important challenge facing those employing special forces in peace missions is experiential knowledge and understanding of the role and employment parameters of special forces in peace missions. This predicament is unfortunately of a transversal nature, affecting policymakers and the senior command of conventional forces, right down to the special forces rank and file. Special forces are encultured to be deployed in the traditional warfighting tasks. However, for many special forces across the globe, the environment between war and peace where 'lethal actions and peaceful exchange ebb and flow', the so-called "grey zone",[90] is still unfamiliar territory. It may thus come as no surprise when senior special forces personnel acknowledge that they are unsure about the role and intentions of special forces in peace missions, and whether special forces should be involved in peacekeeping at all.[91] This, fortunately, is a challenge that can be resolved over time from the lessons learnt during missions, such as MINUSMA.

The mission criteria, which determine the advisability of the deployment of special forces in peace missions, as laid out in the UN Military Special Forces Manual[92] provide clear guidance with regard to the factors that need to be taken into consideration. The changes in international security conditions determine the grand strategy and defence policy of any country and should likewise inform the demands by policymakers for the services of special forces. Gray highlights the importance of educating the entire military establishment (special forces included) with regard to the limited yet crucial role that special forces could play in both their traditional warfighting as well as their peacekeeping role.[93] Failure to do so will almost certainly result in confusing command relationships, which will compromise missions and, in worse case scenarios, result in failure and death. It is thus crucial for all stakeholders to understand each other's operational context in order to solve command and control issues.[94]

If special forces are given unclear guidance in terms of tasks that must be performed rapidly, and if these tasks should only require a fraction of the capabilities that special forces possess, the chances are very good that their effort could fail. The withdrawal of the Swedish special forces from MINUSMA due to under-utilisation or as a result of employing them in tasks that did not require the expertise of special forces, is a point in case.[95] In the final debrief of the South African Special Forces (SASF) deployment under the United Nations in Burundi (ONUB), the mission commander spelled out his scepticism about the concept of using special forces in a UN role.[96] At the time, the role of special forces in UN missions was still an unchartered area and most of the SASF deployments to Burundi found that effective special forces operations within UN mandates were very difficult due to the following reasons:

- The rules of engagement under a typical Chapter VI[97] UN mission, such as ONUB, did not allow for special forces operations.

- The memorandum of understanding (MoU) and the standing operating procedures (SOPs) of the United Nations dictate that all personnel have to wear blue berets and insignia clearly identifying them as working under the United Nations. Furthermore UN vehicles have to be white. It is thus felt that the United Nations does not cater for the principles of surprise, stealth, good intelligence, pre-emption or swift aggressive action.
- The compilation of UN headquarters staff renders fast action with maximum surprise almost impossible due to the long channels of command, the difference in language among the staff, and the inherent difference in processes and procedures.
- The whole ethos of UN peace missions stands in grave contrast to the essence of a highly trained special forces unit.[98]

Conclusion

Changes in the character of conflict in the aftermath of the Cold War resulted in an existential growth in the need for peace missions around the world. A combination of reluctance and a lack of capacity by the major powers to respond to the increasing violent intra-state conflicts, especially in Africa, saw the African continent becoming the hub of approximately two thirds of the activities of all peace missions between 1990 and 2020. These peace missions evolved in parallel with the evolution of the strategic environment and of late have shown a trend towards more robust peace missions and military interventions. Since the start of the twenty-first century, the rise of illegitimate non-state actors has added fuel to the spread of cross-border conflicts in Africa. Greed and grievances of populations have been exploited by extremist groups, such as al-Qaeda, which seem to be making their own rules. Large-scale violence, mass killing, and raping of civilian populations have become common features of many conflicts, with humanitarian aid being prevented from reaching those in need, and the peacekeepers often being humiliated.

The growing need for the deployment of special forces in peace missions in Africa is linked to the evolutionary nature of the threat agendas, conflicts and peace missions on the African continent. Decreasing defence and security budgets will force governments to opt for more cost-effective ways and means to maintain global security, hence the justification for the use of special forces in peace missions. Their use of modern technologies, in particular, sets them apart from conventional forces and offers unique and different ways for executing force and exerting a presence; thus, making them ideally suited to meet the social and political challenges characterising peace missions.

The value of special forces in peace missions can be seen in the role it plays in times of conflict and counterinsurgency. In addition to their skills in the application of lethal actions, special forces also have significant non-lethal capabilities. They may, for instance, serve as conflict resolution experts, especially in places where peacekeepers cannot hope to go or to make an impact. Special forces units often perform peacekeeping functions aimed at removing the long-term causes of conflict, and by doing so, they operate in ways beyond traditional peacekeeping, with the ending of hostilities as primary objective. MINUSMA, for example, has become the deadliest mission in the history of the United Nations. Its

experience demonstrates that UN peace missions in asymmetric threat environments require capabilities for intelligence and special forces operations.

By deploying a variety of capabilities to counter the asymmetric threat, Mali became a laboratory for exploring new methods in UN peacekeeping. ASIFU provides a new intelligence capacity to deal with the threat of targeted attacks against UN personnel. It is a robust intelligence structure, which has led to controversy and conflict within the United Nations. The special forces of the Netherlands and Sweden were responsible for intelligence gathering to feed ASIFU. It was however found that the intelligence product generated by ASIFU was of little value to the mission due to the lack of its integration by ASIFU into the overall mission structure. It was also found that the cultural and language gap between the European special forces teams busy with human intelligence gathering and the Malian role players, combined with an inability to grasp the complexity of the conflict fully, were complicating intelligence gathering. Sweden complained that its special forces contingent was overly capable of the task at hand but underutilised, and they subsequently withdrew and replaced the contingent with an infantry reconnaissance unit. The primary lesson in the employment of special forces in Mali is that senior command is not always fully aware of the assets the special forces have at their disposal, how to integrate the efforts of those assets with the overall mission structure, or how to use the assets optimally.

The European special forces in Mali favour deploying high-end, yet low-risk capabilities. Emphasis is placed on intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance capabilities, with the addition of air assets and unmanned aerial vehicles. The primary aim of the special forces components is the collection and analysis of tactical human intelligence. Years of experience in NATO deployments and the advantage of having high-technology assets available to assist with reconnaissance and surveillance, underpin the success of European special forces in Mali, specifically in gathering information for ASIFU. Despite ASIFU generating good intelligence products, based on the raw data that special forces feed it, the products are of little value to the mission due to the inability of integrating ASIFU into the overall mission, the classification of information, and the unwillingness to share the information with other stakeholders. European special forces are restricted in their collection efforts in the field due to the culture and language gap, and the fact that the teams only consist of Europeans. They also do not fully grasp the complexity of the conflict in Mali. Sweden has complained that its special forces were underutilised, and subsequently replaced them with normal infantry. Currently, intelligence reports and targeting packs developed by ASIFU are passed on to the French special forces who are conducting counter-terrorist operations in parallel with MINUSMA. Despite having sufficient special forces in place, senior MINUSMA command seem not fully aware of the potential of the assets at their disposal, or how to use these optimally. The predicament will change over time with lessons learnt from missions, such as MINUSMA.

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ENDNOTES

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2 This refers to first-hand accounts by former Special Forces operators on their exploits on operations.

3 H Breede, 'Special (Peace) Operations: Optimizing SOF for UN Missions', *International Journal*, 73, 2 (2018), 221.

4 A Finlan, 'A Dangerous Pathway? Toward a Theory of Special Forces', *Comparative Strategy*, 38, 4 (2019), 255.

5 E Shamir & E Ben-Ari, 'The Rise of Special Operations Forces: Generalized Specialization, Boundary Spanning and Military Autonomy', *The Journal of Strategic Studies*, 41, 3 (2018), 335.

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7 B Horn &T Balasevicius, 'Introduction', in B Horn &T Balasevicius (eds.), *Casting Light on the Shadows: Canadian Perspectives on Special Operations Forces* (Ontario: Canadian Defence Academy Press, 2007), 13–14.

8 T Lyons, 'Humanitarian Aid and Conflict: From Humanitarian Neutralism to Humanitarian Intervention', in J Hentz (ed.), *Routledge Handbook of African Security* (London: Routledge, 2014), 144.

9 F Vreÿ, 'Current and Future Trends in Insurgency', in D Baker &E Jordaan (eds.), *South Africa and Contemporary Counterinsurgency: Roots, Practices, Prospects* (Claremont: UCT Press, 2010), 62–63.

10 The term 'peace mission' will be used throughout the article. It constitutes an appropriate generic term to include 'preventive diplomacy', 'peace-making', 'peacekeeping', 'peace enforcement' and 'peace-building'. Peacekeeping is the deployment of UN personnel (which include military, police or civilian components) in a conflict area, hitherto with the consent of all the parties involved. It is a technique that expands the possibilities for the prevention of conflict as well as the making of peace.

11 A Adebajo, *UN Peacekeeping in Africa: From the Suez Crisis to the Sudan Conflict* (London: Lynne Rienner, 2011), 2.

12 This refers to aggressive and offensive measures to eliminate or capture network members and their supporters.

13 A Boutellis & NC Fink, *Waging Peace: UN Peace Operations Confronting Terrorism and Violent Extremism* (New York: International Peace Institute, 2016), 3.

14 This means that the UN mission has a combination of military, civilian and police capabilities.

15 J Karlsrud, 'Towards UN Counter-terrorism Operations?', *Third World Quarterly*, 38, 6 (2017), 1215–1216.

16 B Boutros-Ghali, *An Agenda for Peace: Preventive Diplomacy, Peacemaking and Peacekeeping* (New York: Report of the Secretary-General, 1992), 6.

[17] According to Boutros-Ghali, despite the negotiation between major nuclear powers regarding arms reduction, the spread of weapons of mass destruction and amassing of conventional arms around the world increased; similarly so with racism being recognised as a destructive force in the world. New racial tensions simply found expression in violence and flared up in other parts of the world. Therefore, one evil is replaced with another.

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[21] LD Gilbert, 'A Retrospective Examination of Post-Cold War Conflicts in Africa: Ended, Abated and Prolonged Conflicts', *International Journal of Humanities and Social Science*,4, 9 (2014), 152.

[22] S Ngubane & H Solomon, 'Southern Africa's New Security Agenda', *Africa Insight*,32, 1 (2002), 60–63.

[23] J Cilliers, *Violence in Africa: Trends, Drivers and Prospects to 2023*, Africa Report 12 (Pretoria: Institute for Security Studies, August 2018), 11.

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[25] This refers to those conflicts where there exist a contested mismatch that concerns government and territory where there is an armed struggle in which at least one of the parties involved is the government, and where there are at least 25 battle-related deaths in one calendar year. It is also known as an intra-state conflict.

[26] IS is a transnational militant Islamist terrorist group and former unrecognised quasi-state that follows the Salafi Jihadist militant organisation that seeks to establish an Islamic caliphate in Iraq and Syria, and to create a global Salafi-Jihadist movement.

[27] This is an Islamist militant organisation based in north-eastern Nigeria, which is also active in Chad, Niger, northern Cameroon and Mali. Their primary objective is the establishment of an Islamic State under Shariah law in Nigeria. Its secondary objective is the wider imposition of Islamic rule beyond Nigeria.

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[37] J Terrie, 'Countering Spoilers: Peacekeeping and Counterinsurgency in Africa", in D Baker & E Jordaan (eds.), *South Africa and Contemporary Counterinsurgency: Roots, Practices, Prospects* (Claremont: UCT Press, 2010), 153.

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[43] Finlan, *A Dangerous Pathway*?, 270.

[44] Finlan, *A Dangerous Pathway*?, 270.

[45] SB Meredith, 'The Use of Special Operations in Conflict Resolution: Assessing the Value of Peace Warriors', *Interagency Journal*, 6, 4 (2015), 30.

[46] Similar to traditional peace efforts, special forces specialise in mapping the causes and courses of the challenges which initially resulted into conflict in a theatre. They attempt to reconcile people, interests and values on multiple levels by building trust with the locals through hearts and minds campaigns. Belligerents are identified and isolated from the local population. Conflict prevention measures such as the strengthening of civil society, rule and law are implemented, and structural injustices are resolved.

[47] Anon, *UN Peace Operations in Violent and Asymmetric Threat Environments* (New York: International Peace Institute, March 2016), 4.

[48] PC Cammaert, 'Ongoing UN Operations and New Challenges in Peacekeeping', in AC Lugert (ed.), *Peace Keeping Forces: Today and Tomorrow*, Proceedings of the Blue Helmet Forum, 30 May-1 June 2005, Reichenau, 53.

[49] United Nations Peacekeeping Missions Military Special Forces Manual, January 2015, 4.

[50] United States of America, FM 100-23 Peace Operations, Headquarters Department of the Army, December 1994, 40.

[51] Canadian National Defence, Peace Support Operations, Joint Doctrine Manual, 2002, 3–14.

[52] South African National Defence Force. Joint Operations Division, Joint Warfare Publication, JWP 106 Part 2, Peace Support Operations, February 2006, 5–23.

[53] Breede, *Special (Peace) Operations*, 222–223.

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[65] Boutellis &Fink, *Waging Peace*, 19.

[66] Nomikos, *Mali Country Report*, 8.

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[68] A Chapter VII mandate under the UN Charter is a more robust mandate, in that it allows the UN Security Council to determine the existence of any threat to the peace, breach of the peace or act of aggression and to take military and non-military action to restore international peace and security.

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[70] Parties who exclude themselves from a peace process and use violence to attack the peace process.

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93 CS Gray, 'Handfuls of Heroes on Desperate Ventures: When Do Special Operations Succeed?', *Parameters* Spring (1999), 4.

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96 Operational Debrief OP FIBRE 12: Special Forces Deployment to Burundi (ONUB), compiled by SASF Mission Commander, 31 December 2004, 11.

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98 E-mail correspondence with retired senior Special Forces Officer, Pretoria, 16 March 2021.