

THE CHARACTERISTICS OF UNCONVENTIONAL WARFARE

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Abstract: *Unconventional warfare (UW) represents the most complex mission performed by Special Operations Forces (SOF). It is often executed deep in the enemy territory, in a clandestine/covert manner, having limited or no support from regular supply channels. Also, UW is often conducted over a long period of time to achieve strategic political and military objectives. Moreover, UW is a great option to protect national interests deploying small military elements. Special Operations Forces represent the force of choice for this type of missions. In recent years, in the context of Hybrid Warfare, the interest for UW has grown. Therefore, this concise study attempts to identify how the UW concept developed and changed throughout recent history in order to identify its main characteristics. In order to accomplish that, this paper will mainly look at the United States Army Special Operations Forces Doctrine post-World War II and highlight the main ideas surrounding UW evolution.*

Keywords: *Unconventional Warfare, Special Operations Forces, guerilla operations*

1. INTRODUCTION

The terms of *unconventional warfare, unconventional operations and unconventional military actions* are addressed in detail in unclassified, open-source literature. This study focuses on detailing these concepts and describing them through historical examples, especially from the Second World War and the Vietnam conflict in order to highlight their main characteristics. Addressing these concepts is not a contemporary scientific approach, but was done since the dawn of studying military science and art. Carl von Clausewitz [1], Jomini [2], Lawrence and Hart Lindell [3] looked at unconventional warfare, defining and explaining the concept as one of the main attributes of partisan organizations. On the other hand, Mao, Che Guevara and David Kilcullen believe that actions related to unconventional warfare are carried out solely by revolutionary movements or insurgency. Going forward, S.D. Maxwell, J. Osborne and D. Kilcullen address the current issue of terrorism, conceptualizing it as a global insurgency, which uses goals, tactics, techniques and procedures typical to those of unconventional warfare [4]. Regardless of how unconventional warfare is presented, we can highlight *three distinct characteristics* specific to this type of manifestation of war as a phenomenon, namely:

- *the active involvement of the civilian population either as partisan organizations or insurgent movements;*
- *the use of tactics, techniques and procedures specific to this type of warfare (sabotage, subversion, small-scale raids, harassment of enemy forces, full exploitation of psychological effects, fostering chaos);*

- *the existence of an external support organization (usually a sponsor belonging to either the host nation or a different nation and it can be represented by the armed forces or the intelligence services).*

These characteristics make the unconventional warfare phenomenon unique, and require a specific approach in order to understand the dynamics and mechanisms that influence its beginning, course and outcome.

From the above information we can easily see that most bibliographic sources are mainly from the academic and military domains from the Western countries and specifically the United States where the unconventional warfare issue is dealt with extensively in scientific papers. Although less studied, unconventional warfare is also reflected in the studies of Romanian authors. We note the interest shown by Valerică Cruceru who comprehensively addresses issues of guerrilla movements conducting unconventional warfare [5] as well as the correlation between insurgency and limited war [6]. Furthermore, Vasile Soare briefly presents the evolution of the war phenomenon, from the war in ancient times to the modern day unconventional warfare presenting historical examples showing the use of special operations forces in the full spectrum of missions assigned to these types of structures [7].

In the current operational context, the issue of unconventional warfare is found in scientific studies of both foreign and Romanian authors. The approach of this issue focuses mainly on identifying the characteristics of unconventional warfare and the presentation of the specific timeline of events occurring throughout an unconventional war. Also, a number of foreign authors, such as: S. Hy Rothstein [8], Susan L. Marquis [9] and John Arquilla [10] were committed to studying and understanding the use of United States Army Special Operations Forces in unconventional military operations. Given this context, our scientific approach aims to capitalize on the results of the scientific research of the mentioned authors and, combined with the personal experience in Special Operations Forces, we aim to identify the best ways and the most appropriate conditions for the use of special operations forces in unconventional military actions / operations and to highlight the crucial role of SOF in carrying out this type military action.

2. THE EVOLUTION OF THE MAIN CHARACTERISTICS OF UNCONVENTIONAL WARFARE

The definition of *unconventional warfare* has evolved over time, but this trend has brought no significant changes in the understanding of the actual term. As mentioned in the introduction, this concept has been discussed since the very beginning of studying military science. Theorists such as Sun-Tzu, Clausewitz and Jomini mentioned unconventional military actions in their works, each treating the subject in the context of their respective historical period. Furthermore, throughout the history of warfare, the belligerents have conducted operations specific to unconventional warfare. However, doctrinal record of this type of military action appears only after the Second World War, the determining factor for this being the experience of Great Britain, Russia and the United States in this conflict.

In terms of semantics, the term *unconventional warfare* is the opposite of *conventional warfare* in the sense that the dictionary-provided definitions of the former show the following characteristics: *not conventional, which is not subject to conventions, norms* [11].

Also, the objective in the two types of war differs in that while during a classical confrontation the emphasis is on neutralizing / destroying the opponents' military power, while in unconventional warfare the emphasis is on defeating the opponent without a direct military confrontation, but through external support for one of the warring parties.

Typically, the unconventional forces act undercover or discrete, their targets are not exclusively of military nature, and the techniques, tactics and procedures employed are distinct from those specific to purely military operations.

Studying these concepts is not an easy endeavor because there are few unclassified relevant bibliographic sources. In this context, most of the unclassified bibliography comes from the United States; therefore, we will particularly analyze how this term has evolved in the realm of United States Army Special Forces (USSF). This is due to the fact that the USSF were initially created in order to carry out unconventional warfare, currently this being the defining characteristic of their structure. Thus, under the current military doctrine of the United States military, unconventional warfare is defined as "*military operations conducted along with, or through irregular forces in support of resistance movements or conventional operations*"[12].

The concept of unconventional warfare appears in US military doctrine starting with the creation of the Office of Strategic Services (OSS), during the Second World War. This office was created to coordinate support for the resistance movements of the civilian population. Therefore, military forces and undercover agents coordinated by OSS acted in support of the partisans throughout Europe, especially in Belgium, France, the Netherlands and Poland, who fought against the German occupying forces. In the same time, OSS agents have acted in support of the resistance movement in the Philippines who fought against the Japanese occupying forces. Actions carried out and coordinated by OSS agents during the Second World War led to the definition of unconventional operations, in the context of guerrilla warfare, as military actions executed undercover in enemy-occupied territory, or where the enemy exercises influence. Probably the most famous unconventional missions carried out during the Second World War are those executed by the Jedburgh [13] teams in the territories occupied by German forces. Also, the establishment of these teams represented the first time that the United Kingdom, through the Special Operations Executive (SOE) and the United States, through the OSS, cooperated in the domain of special operations.

After the Second World War, the definition of unconventional warfare focused on the specifics of *guerrilla warfare*, and on the *covert actions* conducted in territories occupied by a foreign military force. The experience of working with partisan movements in Europe has broadened the definition to include actions executed by *partisans*. Therefore, in 1950, The Dictionary of United States Army Terms, defined actions executed by partisans as "actions against an enemy force carried out by people devoted to a cause, but were not part of the armed forces of a country. These actions include: *actions specific to guerrilla warfare, passive resistance of clandestine groups, espionage, sabotage and propaganda*" [14].

In 1951, the US Army established The Psychological Operations Bureau that included units tasked with the execution of unconventional warfare. Furthermore, the first two regulations detailing the execution of Special Operations were published, namely: F.M. 31-21, *Organization and Conduct of Guerrilla Warfare* and F.M. 31-20, *Operations Against Guerrilla Forces*. Thus, according to F.M. 31-21 actions specific to guerrilla warfare were defined as "operations carried on by small independent forces, generally in the rear of the enemy, with the objective of harassing, delaying, and disrupting military operations of the enemy.

The term as used in this manual also includes organized and directed passive resistance, espionage, assassination, sabotage, and propaganda, and, in some cases, conventional combat. Guerilla warfare ordinarily is carried on by irregular, or partisan, forces; however, regular military forces which have been cut off behind enemy lines or which have infiltrated into enemy rear areas may use guerilla tactics"[15].

Also, the same regulations indicated that actions specific to guerrilla warfare can influence political decisions and economic aspects of the country and their overall aim is to reduce the enemy's fighting ability by delaying and preventing its actions, thus weakening its morale and will to fight.

Once Special Forces were officially established, the earlier mentioned regulations were superseded, making room for new regulations and manuals specific to this type of forces that tackled the issue of unconventional warfare from a Special Forces perspective. Thus, in 1955 F.M. 31-20, *Special Forces Group* is published and supersedes the 1951 edition. This manual stated that the unconventional warfare includes actions specific to guerrilla warfare but also the escape from enemy occupied territories and the subversion actions carried out against a hostile force.

In 1958 a new version is published called F.M. 31-21, *Guerilla Warfare and Special Operations Forces*, which defines guerrilla warfare specific actions as "that part of unconventional warfare which is conducted by relatively small groups employing offensive tactics to reduce enemy combat effectiveness, industrial capacity, and morale. Guerilla operations are normally conducted in enemy-controlled territory by units organized on a military basis"[16]. The manual also points out that unconventional warfare includes, in addition to actions specific to *guerrilla warfare*, *evasion and escape from enemy-occupied territories* and *subversive actions* against hostile forces.

In 1969 F.M. 31-21, *Special Forces Operations* is published, detailing the concept of unconventional warfare. Thus, according to this manual, unconventional warfare consist of actions specific to *guerrilla warfare*, *escape from the enemy-occupied territories*, and *subversion* executed by the local population against hostile forces, supported by an external force. Unconventional actions are the *military, political, psychological and economic* actions executed *overtly* or *clandestinely* in areas that are under occupation or influence of foreign forces whose interests are conflicting with those of the US. These actions can be executed unilaterally by the USSF or in cooperation with the local population and will avoid formal direct military confrontation [17].

Currently, the assessment of cyber threats and the security of electronic means becomes a basic task to be taken into account in line with developments in the modern actions. The methods used depend on the direct cost-effectiveness ratio [18].

Unconventional warfare is executed in order to exploit the enemy's military, political, psychological and economic vulnerabilities through support and guidance offered to the resistance movements or unilaterally by USSF. These actions can be *covert, clandestine* or *overt*. Undercover operations are executed so as not to disclose the identity of the external sponsor. In the case of clandestine operations, the focus is on hiding both the operations and the sponsor. In a developed theater of war, in which conventional forces are fully engaged in armed conflict, SF will execute unconventional military warfare in support of the conventional campaign. The 1990 USSF doctrine slightly broadens the definition of unconventional warfare, introducing details regarding the duration of the campaign, but also the concept of "*surrogate forces*."

Thus, Unconventional Warfare consists of "*operations conducted behind enemy lines, mainly by indigenous people assisted and guided by allied forces, in order to fulfill political and military objectives. UW consists of guerrilla warfare specific actions, evasion and escape from the enemy-occupied territories and subversion against hostile states*" [19].

Throughout history, unconventional warfare was executed either during the staging phases of a conventional campaign or independent, the latter being executed usually undercover [20]. Therefore, according to the doctrine, unconventional warfare take place over *a long period of time*, through *indigenous or surrogate forces* and consist of the same type of actions that were included in previous definitions of this concept.

The doctrines that were developed later resumed this definition, the differences between them consisting in slightly different nuances of the same aspects.

Thus, The Joint Special Operations Doctrine introduces the concept of the unconventional assisted recovery as part of the unconventional warfare. Also, the doctrine states that the unconventional warfare represents the military and paramilitary aspects of resistance movements. Consequently, because of their implications the unconventional military actions are considered to be both *military* and *political* actions.

3. CONCLUSIONS

From the above information, we note that although each newly developed manual or regulation addressed the topic of unconventional warfare, essentially its definition has not significantly changed in over 50 years.

A classic example of a campaign where unconventional operations were conducted in support of actions carried out by conventional forces is Operation Allied Support (in support of resistance movements in Western Europe, the Balkans and the Far East during the Second World War). Regarding unconventional military actions executed unilaterally, they are much less known because they were conducted undercover. However, worth mentioning are the USSF actions conducted in Europe after the end of the Second World War in order to support and develop the capabilities of resistance movements in the event of an occupation of Europe by the Soviet Union. This operation was codenamed *Gladio* and USSF have recruited indigenous members from Europe, which they trained, organized in cells, and equipped to perform specific guerrilla warfare actions and sabotage in the event of an invasion of Western Europe by countries of the Warsaw Pact. Such cells have been set up and operated in several European countries such as Austria, Belgium, Denmark, Finland, France, Germany, Greece, Italy, Netherlands, Portugal, Spain, Sweden, and also Turkey. Furthermore, similar operations were executed in Afghanistan in the 1980s during the war with the USSR, where the USSF supported, organized and coordinated the actions of Afghan Mujahedeen. Also, we would like to mention the Russian Special Operations Forces unconventional warfare in Ukraine in support of conventional operations carried out by the Russian Armed Forces starting 2014. These operations require a separate study that the authors are committed to address in the near future.

Looking through the historical perspective at unconventional warfare, we can conclude that this type of operations was carried out in all major conflicts. Regardless of who executed UW, we can conclude that its main characteristics remained unchanged throughout history. They are: *the implication of local population, the presence of Special Operations Forces, subversive actions, the combination of military, and non-military means, and discrete execution.*

In the end, we estimate that UW will continue to remain an important mission for Special Operations Forces. Given its political and military implications, UW requires detailed planning and discrete execution.

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