

THE SPECIAL FORCES IN THE AGE OF HYBRID WARFARE

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Abstract:

This article attempts to locate the Special Forces in the light of dynamic changes in the environment of national security caused by the situation in Ukraine. The author focuses attention on the issues related to the outline of the essence of activities referred to as “hybrid”, and the possibility of using the Special Forces’ potential in terms of identification and elimination of threats, being a tool of these activities. The analysis of the potential has been performed at two levels: reducing risks and countering threats.

Keywords:

hybrid warfare, Special Forces, risk reduction, threat prevention

INTRODUCTION

According to the Roman maxim: “If you wish to have peace you need to prepare yourself to a war”, many military strategists for centuries have tried to predict a potential enemy’s movement in order to be prepared and be able to counter upcoming threats. It can have fatal consequences if the problem has not been understood, underestimated or no preparatory actions have been taken. Its examples are numerous, one of which can be seen in the recent history.

In the genesis of the beginning of the World War II it is clearly visible that the Western countries did not face timely the posed challenge. Their society could not recover from the nightmarish experiences of the past war and did not even want to hear about further conflicts and armaments. The passive attitude of democratic countries led their armies to the state, where they were only ready for the scenario of the World War I, *a positional warfare*. At this point the military analysts’ thoughts come to mind that their armies were ready for a war, which had ended long ago.

Additionally, the innovative German tactics the so - called *blitzkrieg* was surprising for European armies. Such methods of warfare - a massive strike of armored and motorized forces, combined with the large-scale use of air forces for paralyzing the enemy resources and the support of land forces – were not expected [35]. What is more, the Germans began operation without an act of declaration of war, using the surprise effect with most forces applied so as to gain an advantage in the first “minutes”.

Today we can ask ourselves: *Would the proper attitude of democracies consisting of the proper threat assessment and starting preparations in time for the upcoming threats counter this tragedy?*

The events of the past years have shown that the traditional *military doctrine* [12] often turns out to be insufficient to confront new threats. Thus, a question always arises: *How should a state be prepared for potential threats and how to create the development of its Armed Forces in relation to them?*

1. THE ESSENCE OF HYBRID WARFARE

The current events beyond our eastern border, in Ukraine, apart from political disputes, have aroused interest in Poland in the field of national security, especially with in the preparation and use of forces and measures which are at “our” disposal to counter threats carried by the colloquially called “little green men”, i.e. soldiers without signs of nationality or belonging to particular armed forces. [27] This term was created for the needs of the media during the invasion of the Crimea and became a symbol of the new strategy called *hybrid warfare* [27].

This term is seemingly associated with something new, unprecedented in the history of the world, but it is a combination of classically military methods and, above all, of *irregular warfare* (guerrilla warfare, sabotage, subversion, terrorist acts) in conjunction with elements of *information* (“black propaganda”, misinformation), *economic and cyber warfare* [28]. It is easy noticeable that all of these tools – methods - have been already defined. Therefore, it can be assumed that it is a strategy, which consists in combining the traditional method of struggle including *non-conventional* and *cybernetic weapons*.

This “hybridization” already took place in the past, it was used for describing the combination of two characteristics: physical and psychological. The fact of having “a dirty bomb” (as part of *asymmetrical warfare*) connected to influencing (through television, the Internet) on the behavior of people, showing them not only the attacks or the preparation process, but also the most important consequences of its use, is the whole idea of “hybridization”. The most important was the mind, not just of a soldier, but also of enemies’ societies paying taxes and choosing governments. Currently, among other things, technological progress and globalization have changed its “tools” and the name describing the then form of the strategy has gained in popularity [29].

Analyzing the situation in Ukraine, we see the schematic course of action of the new strategy. The *political and psychological actions* adequate to the social and political situation stand out most of all, because “both the Crimea and Donbas are specific areas, partly disputable, where a large part of the population is politically closer to Russia”

[30]. Thus, in a further step, we can note the emergence of “spontaneous” local separatist groups operating with the unofficial support of the Armed Forces and special services of Russia - the so-called “green men” [31]. Another objective was to paralyze local authorities, which was achieved by taking over building of centers of power [32], subjecting the state militia to newly elected authorities [33] and requesting the recognition of their independence from the authorities in Ukraine [34]. The maintenance of the favor of the local community and the control of information was obtained by occupying the seats of radio and television [22]. Then, beside the occupation of politically and culturally significant objects, there were taken over the critical infrastructure facilities of special importance, especially transportation hubs, by setting *checkpoints* [23] that blocked the access roads to the cities, along which columns of Ukrainian troops moved [24]. As a result, large areas became isolated, and all that prevented the Armed Forces of Ukraine from leading operations. The entire conflict in Ukraine was accompanied by unimaginable and unprecedented information noise, the so-called *disinformation*. The Russian humanitarian convoy became one of the symbols of that situation. “One day the convoy allegedly disappeared from the eyes of the whole world, and no one knew where it was, but on the second day all the RTV stations knew that it had been divided into two parts, one of which was politely waiting on the Ukrainian border, while the other was about to enter Ukraine without any Ukrainian control (implicitly: with weapons and soldiers)” [25]. In addition, at each stage there was applied in parallel psychological pressure, related to the alleged invasion of the aggressor, by conducting exercises and redeployment of tactical battle groups [26].

The actual picture of this situation requires us to draw reasonable inferences, so as to be prepared for potential hazards, which do not necessarily occur in the same scheme. Therefore, we should ask ourselves: How to counter it?

2. THE SPECIAL FORCES’ POSSIBILITIES TO INFLUENCE THE THREATS OF HYBRID WARFARE

Analyzing the current “National Security Strategy of the Republic of Poland” [9], we find that it takes into account the changes that have taken place in the security environment on the east of Poland. First of all, it refers, not directly, to threats resulting from, among others, “hybrid warfare” [9]. It emphasizes that processes occurring in the Eastern Neighborhood, combined with strong political, military and economic pressure from Russia pursuing its own interests, constitute a challenge that the Polish security policy is to face [9]. Thus, it is necessary to prepare the national security system entities for potential threats. The Armed Forces are one of them, as they are naturally associated with ensuring the state security, especially when the forces and resources of other services are not sufficient.

Considering the effects of the impact of “hybrid warfare” from the perspective of using the Armed Forces, we come to the conclusion that a significant role in its creation is played by the Special Forces as well as recruited and mobilized opposition groups. The differentiation of methods implemented with the domain of *irregular actions* and their multidimensional nature (at land, sea, air) imposes the obvious conclusion that in response to occurring threats the limitation only to the Special Forces should not take

place. The question then arises: What is their role in the state security system in terms of the identification and elimination of threats as tools of “hybrid warfare”?

Firstly, it must be stressed that in the context of potential threats arising from the activities of “hybrid warfare” where an enemy performs actions below the threshold of a classic war, applying the full “range” of *asymmetric operations*, the participation of special forces would be desirable, as using the potential of similar nature seems to be reasonable. Moreover, the ratio of the “cost” to “quality”, as a significant advantage of these troops, is not without significance.

The considered “quality”, defined as *a potential* [12], as regard the capability to have an impact on threats being a tool of “hybrid war”, manifests itself in two planes, identified with strategic objectives in the field of security: *risk reduction* and *threat prevention* [9].

1.1. The analysis of characteristics

Risk reduction influences directly and indirectly on the state in respect of protection against threats of ‘hybrid warfare’. It consists in exercising functions of military deterrence on the principle of demonstrating the defense readiness with forces maintained in peacetime and willingness to develop their mobilization in case of a war. Among other things, the measures raising the level of training and skills of military and non-military entities, technical modernization and the degree of readiness serve this purpose.

Referring to the level of the Special Force’s *professionalization* [12] the conclusions drawn after the control undertaken last year by the Supreme Chamber of Control (NIK) cannot be ignored. The report read that “soldiers of the Special Forces are well prepared to fulfill their tasks, properly trained and equipped” [20]. The NIK’s findings were confirmed by the results of certification proceedings of the exercise code-named COBRA-13 conducted by the representatives of the North Atlantic Treaty, under which the Polish Special Forces have been included among the top elite of this type of troops in NATO. At this point, one cannot omit the exercise certifying the readiness of the Special Operations Component (SOC) to perform duties as the part of NATO Response Force in 2015 code-named Noble Sword-14, which was assessed as outstanding. The Head of the International Certification Team stated that “this assessment is no coincidence, which is obvious, but it is also the result of many years of hard, full of effort, work” [21]. The Special Forces proved their *interoperability* [12] with NATO forces not only during international exercises, but also while carrying out missions in Afghanistan, the Persian Gulf and Iraq [5]. Furthermore, as one of the few branches of forces they have frequently held international trainings: individual (e.g. at the NATO Special Operations Headquarters (NSHQ) – Belgium, in Oberammergau - Germany, in Fort Bragg – the United States) and for battle groups with the Special Forces subunits (e.g. in Slovakia [10] and Croatia [11]). They have significantly contributed to strengthening NATO’s readiness and capability of collective defense and building Poland’s strong position in the field of security.

Particular attention should be paid to the unique in the Polish Armed Forces competences of paramedics. Their competence stems from post-mission experiences, practices and numerous courses and medical trainings, where one of the most important is the training SOCM (*Special Operations Combat Medic*) in the United States, which teaches how to sustain a wounded soldier's life on the battlefield for 72 hours. After this training they can lead treatments (disregarding legal conditions), which in Poland are performed only by doctors [3].

What is more, the Special Forces units carry out the cooperation with other services, including primarily entities subordinated to the Minister of Internal Affairs, which have a key role in ensuring internal security of the state. In the case when the threats of "hybrid warfare" appear, due to applicable law, these services, e.g. the Police, will play a leading role at the outset. With respect to the above mentioned threats it has the central combat unit BOA (Bureau of Anti-Terrorist Operations) at the Police Headquarters, Independent Anti-Terrorist Subunits (SPA) in the nine Provincial Police Headquarters and seven Anti-Terrorist Sections in the remaining Provincial Police Headquarters. The cooperation of the Special Forces with the anti-terrorist units aims at the exchange of practical experience in the field of equipment and weapons, self-defense techniques and shooting skills related to, i.e., "room clearing". The Special Forces also allow access to the most modern training facilities, for instance to the digital video shooting range in the Commando Military Unit, which is the most advanced one in Europe [17]. The cooperation is not limited to anti-terrorist activities, but its purpose is also to provide training on techniques for obtaining information (including surveillance, interrogation). The effect of such a broad cooperation was the securing of the conduct of EURO 2012 [1].

Another entity having a significant impact on the course of escalating threats of "hybrid warfare" is the Border Guard, the main task of which will be to prevent the so-called "green men" from trespassing the border [18]. Joint activities of the Special Forces with the border guards based on the agreement of the Chief Commander of the Border Guard and the Commander of the Special Forces (dated on 14.01.2012) covering the exchange of information and experience acquired from practical activities during training and courses using the training bases of both formations [19]. The development of further cooperation can be seen in the possibilities of unmanned aircrafts through the implementation of the imaging diagnosis systems (*Imagery Intelligence – IMINT*) for the operation of border services.

Not negligible is also the cooperation with the civil environment, under which the comprehensive civic orientation and the spirit of patriotism are created. The Special Forces units engage significantly in a number of projects that aim to support the community in military terms, build permanent direct links and awareness about defense matters. They cooperate with secondary and higher schools. In addition, within the framework of the foundations ("*Szturman*", "*Sprzymierzeni z GROM*") and associations ("*Grupa Raptor*") they bring together former soldiers of those units. They may complement the activities of the Special Forces by going to *irregular actions* as well as train potential volunteer battalions.

Another important factor is to provide the Special Forces with weapons and military equipment (means of land, sea and air transport, overt and covert communication systems, individual soldier equipment, etc.), which strongly diverge from the standards of conventional forces [6]. The NIL Military Unit is to a large extent the representative of their logistic capabilities as it fulfills information support and command tasks as well as logistic support of special operations conducted in the country and abroad, having the experience of working in the national and allied systems. Due to its autonomy leads the purchase of technologically advanced weaponry and military equipment for the needs of the Special Forces Units. Additionally, the Military Unit NIL possesses the right logistic and command equipment allowing for the establishment of a fully autonomous command post of the Special Operations Component Commander, which no other formation in the Polish Armed Forces has at disposal [4].

The high-level readiness of the Special Forces results from their structure - properly prepared and meeting needs, which is identical during peace and war times. Owing to this, subunits constitute one compact monolith, without the necessity of the time-consuming personnel reserve training and teams' combat synchronization.

The above conditions do not fully reflect the perceived nature of the Special Forces, however they clearly mark their uniqueness compared to conventional forces. The values of those factors can influence the decision as to the efficiency of this type of troops in the fight against threats of "hybrid warfare". However, it does not prejudice their usefulness. Consequently, the further analysis should cover the specificity of operation and unique capabilities that make this kind of troops an extremely useful tool.

1.2. The unique capabilities

The Special Forces' capabilities of countering threats arise from having unique abilities predisposing to conduct unconventional and counterinsurgent operations in asymmetric conflicts. These abilities emerge from the tasks imposed on them [7].

The capability to conduct *special reconnaissance* (SR) should be subject to the analysis similarly to the schemes of carrying out activities at the first stage. The Special Forces form structures having 'in one place the personal intelligence operators (*Human Intelligence - HUMINT*), the electromagnetic identification devices (*Signals Intelligence - SIGINT*) and the end user equipment of imaging reconnaissance systems (*Imagery Intelligence - IMINT*) capable of producing data based on the imaging from photographs, radars, infrared and thermal imaging electro-optical devices, as well as other ones. An important factor, completely non-technical, is the fact that operators of all of these tools are colleagues from one team, perfectly acquainted with the special groups operators for the needs of whom they work. All this is based on strong analytical structures and the advanced coordination system - hence the highly evaluated effect of their actions. The integration of acquired information in one specialized analytical structure distinguishes them from conventional forces where for the duration of any operation the necessary reconnaissance structures are created using HUMINT, IMINT or SIGINT elements from specialized units available in the Armed Forces [2]. Moreover, an additional feature is the application of techniques that are often closer to intelli-

gence actions rather than military ones [13]. The particular emphasis is placed on the human aspect and the cooperation with the public. Thus, the Special Forces groups, which are able to move freely and communicate with the local population, are able to provide (by means of a classic interview) valuable information impossible to obtain in any other way [8, pp.68]. In the case of 'hybrid warfare' this capability is particularly important because an enemy will collaborate with opposition groups.

Another capability characteristic for this kind of forces is carrying out direct actions (DA). This is nothing but offensive operations, with precision and a limited area and time of action [13]. In the environment of the green men's intensive activity, they may constitute a basic tool to recover and take control over the critical infrastructure objects (the main example is the seizing control of KAAAOT oil terminals in the Iraqi part of the Persian Gulf) [5], also over those of political and cultural importance. The Special Forces teams can also be used for 'high-risk arrests' (often realized in cooperation with the Americans in Iraq) [5], that is the capturing of local hostile armed groups and the liquidation of their bases and weapons depots. Moreover, they can liberate hostages (*Hostage Rescue Operations - HRO*) [14].

The third Special Forces' key capability is the ability to provide military assistance (MA), among others in the field of unconventional warfare (UW), which is a valuable qualification to join, within the framework of advisory teams, to a variety of conventional units.

Other capabilities being the domain of the Forces within the activity zone of "hybrid warfare" include: combat search and rescue actions (CSAR), that is taking personnel from the territory of enemies or occupied by them, close personal protection (CPP) [5].

Furthermore, it should be noted that in the environment of "hybrid warfare" the counter-intelligence protection is of particular importance. Little is heard about it but the specificity of these services. Operations carried out by the Special Forces as well as their strategic and operational importance impose the top-down need to protect information against unauthorized persons. Its significance was also confirmed by the conference "*Służby i Wojska Specjalne RP w operacjach poza granicami Polski*" ("*Special Forces and Services of the Republic of Poland in operations beyond Poland*"), held for the first time in Poland last year, where one of the topics discussed was the assessment and experience of counterintelligence cover for the Special Forces' activities in operations outside the country [15].

When confronting the Special Forces' capabilities with the impact of "hybrid warfare" threats the conclusion can be drawn that the use of such forces in the first 'minutes' of operations (these may be the first signs of intensified diplomatic efforts or the increasing information war) will acquire importance. A strong and early decision, taking into account the basic principles of the use of these Forces [16], may prevent the continuation of an enemy's activities ('green men'), strip away their particular impact possibilities, thereby cancelling the emerged threats. However, the increase and proliferation of threats may lead to the use of conventional troops with the aim to repel the traditionally understood invasion of the armed forces, combined with striving for seizing

the territory, where for reasons of the limited space and potential the Special Forces will only be an element complementing their operation.

CONCLUSIONS

It should be emphasized that the aim of this paper was not to raise the issue of legal conditions associated with the use of the Special Forces in the threatening situation of “hybrid warfare”, but the assessment of their potential. The author attempted to locate this type of forces in the state security system in terms of identification and elimination of threats constituting the “hybrid warfare” tool.

In the context of the potential threats arising from the activities of “hybrid warfare”, where an enemy will use the actions below the threshold of a war without its declaration, applying the full “range” of *asymmetric operations*, it can be estimated that the participation of the Special Forces would be desirable as the use of the potential of similar nature seems reasonable. It should also be mentioned that their use is an attractive option resulting from their characteristics: the economy of effort (especially in the Polish context), interoperability and high readiness [8].

What is more, some conclusions suggest that the Special Forces fill the gap between diplomatic and economic activities and the use of conventional forces, which was also noted by Jacek Trembecki¹ in his considerations on the crisis response [7]. As one can easily guess, the relationship between “costs” and ‘quality’ is the prevailing argument for taking decisions on the use of given forces. They can be significantly reduced by the early decision regarding the use of the Special Forces only in the case of taking appropriate actions that will result in the extinguishing of the occurred risks. The best time for the use of the Special Forces is a situation in which the scale of threats is less than the size of the potential of their activities coordinated with particular services, i.e. the Police and the Border Guard.

If the desired results have not been achieved the use of conventional forces can be expected in order to preserve the integrity of the state borders. The activity of the Special Forces, however, will not change its nature, but will only constitute their indispensable complement.

Thus, the tasks of the Armed Forces in the event of threats are extensive and at the same time limited. The Army is a force remaining in reserve, used when the forces and measures of the services subordinated to the Minister of Internal Affairs are insufficient. This is due to the dispersion of legal regulations concerning the engagement of the Armed Forces. Being contained in a number of laws, from the Police Act to the provisions on the states of emergency, they define different tasks and powers of soldiers, also the use of firearms and the coercive measures, which is a separate issue in itself.

¹ The Head of the Department of Peacekeeping Operations and Crisis Response at the National Defense Academy

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