

Chapter 1

Special Forces in Contemporary Warfare*

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Abstract: Special Forces units are among the most vital assets of a modern army. This assessment relies not only on their high level of expertise and combat ability but also on the fact that, by their very nature, they are the most effective and suitable component for handling asymmetric and hybrid combat scenarios, which are prevalent in modern warfare. In this context, the capabilities of the Colombian Special Forces provide them with a strategic advantage in projecting power or engaging in combat operations alongside other groups or as part of international coalitions.

Keywords: international conflict; defense; Armed Forces; war; urban warfare; propaganda.

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Introduction

The changing nature of war has become a recurring theme in military studies. From classical authors such as Carl von Clausewitz to contemporary ones like Kaldor (2001) and Münkler (2002), researchers have concentrated on examining the mutations in conflicts and the factors—both exogenous and endogenous—that influence this process. From a chronological analytical perspective, there is consensus that the Cold War marks a milestone in accelerating changes toward *new wars*, as this period experienced an increase in phenomena such as the decline of interstate wars in favor of irregular conflicts sponsored by non-state actors, “warlords,” and, consequently, the rise of asymmetric warfare.

The privatization of war violence in the hands of non-state actors (Münkler, 2002) presents new challenges for the military because it alters the theater of war operations. Irregular warfare blurs traditional battlefronts, reduces large-scale battles in favor of isolated actions, and removes the clear divide between tactical and strategic levels. Therefore, this chapter aims to analyze the role of Special Forces (SF) in hybrid and asymmetric scenarios, particularly in *new wars*. The working hypothesis is that, because of their flexible, mobile, adaptable, and self-sustaining nature, along with their high capacity to strategically influence a campaign, SF is the most effective and appropriate tool for countering the emerging threats posed by this new reality.

SF units are composed of the most select personnel, undergo demanding training, and therefore form the military elite. They are the most important strategic assets of modern States because their operational results significantly surpass the investment in each unit. SF typically operates in small groups, enabling them to maneuver in a sustained, agile, and versatile manner within the theater of operations. Furthermore, due to their rigorous training in diverse areas (hand-to-hand combat,

parachuting, diving, telecommunications, survival in various conditions, use of weapons, etc.), they are crucial in supporting missions in conventional wars and play a leading role in asymmetric and hybrid conflicts.

To develop this argument, the chapter is divided into three sections. The first, titled "Characterizing Asymmetric Warfare and Hybrid Warfare Scenarios in the Contemporary International System," explains the new global context as a result of the historical evolution of the art of war and identifies the asymmetric and hybrid elements on which SF focuses. In fact, *new wars* are being fought in an increasingly volatile, uncertain, complex, and ambiguous (VUCA) environment, where special forces must operate.

The second section, "Doctrinal Elements that Make Special Forces Ideal for Use in Asymmetric Warfare and Hybrid Warfare," aims to define, based on doctrine, these combat capabilities that distinguish SF. It emphasizes their interoperability, mission-type command, and the rigorous training that units undergo. After examining the framework of contemporary warfare and the key features that set SF apart, the final section, "The Use of Special Forces in Asymmetric Warfare and Hybrid Warfare Scenarios," offers examples of how Special Operations have been employed in recent conflicts.

Characterizing Asymmetric Warfare and Hybrid Warfare Scenarios in the Contemporary International System

In the field of security and defense studies, especially in military studies, there is a wealth of literature dedicated to interpreting the phenomenon of war. In contemporary times, William Lind's (2005) now classic proposal on *fourth-generation warfare* stands out: the evolutionary line begins with first-generation war, characterized by the consolidation of the idea of the State, rigid organization into armies, and the pursuit of the decisive battle. Second-generation war, on the other hand, is defined by the effects of the "age of revolutions," where, although inflexibility in maneuvering and battlefield actions with very large armies persisted, new concepts and doctrines were also introduced. Third-generation war involves a completely new approach, based on principles of flexibility, maneuver, elasticity, speed, and a new dimension of mission-type command, which enabled the use of army groups and corps in an agile and dynamic manner. In this regard, Aznar

(2015) complements the discussion on this generation of warfare by stating that it is based on technology, while the defining factor of the fourth generation is globalization and the return to man (p. 7).

Thus, Lind's (2005) contribution introduces new concepts about the nature of war, which are combined with post-World War II conflicts characterized by bipolarity. In this way, polemology became part of the discussion on the best ways to understand and confront wars that do not involve the clash of large armies.

The concept of *irregular warfare* is therefore linked to *protracted people's war*, a term coined doctrinally by the leader of the Chinese Revolution, Mao Tse-tung, who developed the transition from guerrilla warfare to movement warfare and later to positional warfare through this protracted strategy to seize power.

In fact, Mao already emphasized mobility as an essential factor in guerrilla warfare, so that even his response—the doctrine of counterinsurgency and later that of low-intensity conflict—should tend toward the same element. In this regard, Mao Tse-tung (1967) considered:

The question of the initiative [and the flexibility of irregular forces] is even more vital in guerrilla warfare. For most guerrilla units operate in very difficult circumstances, fighting without a rear, with their own weak forces facing the enemy's strong forces, lacking experience (when the units are newly organized), being separated, etc. Nevertheless, it is possible to build up the initiative in guerrilla warfare, the essential condition being to seize on the enemy's three weaknesses. Taking advantage of the enemy's shortage of troops (from the viewpoint of the war as a whole), the guerrilla units can boldly use vast areas as their fields of operation. (p. 175)

This issue has also been examined from different angles. For instance, according to Miron (2019), irregular wars, as a new and common operational scenario, differ significantly from traditional wars.

[...] unlike traditional wars, they mainly refer to the *modus operandi* used by one or all of the belligerents. This *modus operandi* is often favored by the weaker side and involves surprise attacks, guerrilla tactics, and terrorism to reach a political goal. They are often linked to non-state actors who do not have a monopoly on the legitimate use of force. (p. 459)

Although this concept is linked to guerrilla movements that emerged during the Cold War, in some cases, its theoretical importance extended beyond the

1960s and can still be seen today, such as in Colombia. When the Cold War ended, understanding the nature of war had to shift toward studying what Lind (2005) defined as fourth-generation warfare, in which

[...] decentralization and initiative [are maintained] [...], but in other respects, the fourth generation represents the most significant change since the Peace of Westphalia. In fourth-generation warfare, the State no longer holds a monopoly on war. Globally, armed forces are now combating non-state enemies like al-Qaeda, Hamas, Hezbollah, and the FARC. In nearly every case, the State is losing. (p. 15)

The author therefore provides an analytical framework for outlining the new post-Cold War conflicts, which are much more irregular and amorphous and involve a large number of non-state actors. Lind (2005) explores the characteristics of these confrontations in greater detail and suggests that

[...] Fourth-generation warfare is also marked by a renewed focus on cultures, not just conflicts between States. In fourth-generation warfare, invasion through immigration can be as threatening as an invasion by a national army. (p. 14)

In this regard, asymmetric warfare is understood as a set of operational practices that aim to deny the advantages and exploit the vulnerabilities of the stronger party, rather than seeking direct confrontation (Herman, 1997). However, this perspective is debated by authors such as Cabrerizo (2002) and Lind himself (2005), since asymmetry cannot be limited to a disparity in firepower that causes operational blurring; rather, it goes much further and includes highly irregular aspects within the armed component, supported by psychological, social, and even communicational factors. This fundamental error in approach also influences views like that of Verstrynge (2005), who dramatically reduces asymmetry to force disparity. For the author, "asymmetric conflicts are simply confrontations between forces of different capacity and size, and as such, they employ different strategies, with the weaker party often resorting to methods beyond the conventional" (Verstrynge, 2005, p. 72).

However, Verstrynge (2005) is correct in his specific characterization of asymmetric warfare, which helps us understand the use of armed forces as a response by the State to this type of adversary. In fact, Verstrynge's (2005) postulates suggest a flexible, highly agile, self-sustaining, and nearly invisible

response with very high combat power, without relying on traditional, heavy, and immobile formations. According to Verstryngge (2005), the characteristics of an asymmetric adversary are as follows:

- a. Using techniques that differ from conventional and ineffective ones
- b. A non-national or transnational base, which makes identification and location difficult
- c. Freedom to choose the ground or area of operations to make it difficult for the adversary to apply its greatest power
- d. The predominance of surprise
- e. Prioritizing irregular actions that involve very low costs compared to the strategic effect that can be achieved
- f. Having a centralized command that is complemented by decentralized and autonomous operational units, which allows for operational flexibility and a sense of control
- g. Not being bound by the laws of war or international humanitarian law (IHL)
- h. Emphasizing physical attacks that undermine the credibility of States
- i. Involving the civilian population as much as possible
- j. Designing operations in such a way as to maximize visibility and media coverage
- k. Prolonging actions as long as possible to wear down the strongest adversary

Clearly, this playbook indicates that a traditional military unit cannot effectively face an asymmetric adversary, necessitating a more adaptable and decisive force. These are exactly the SF groups.

This approach is further developed by Metz and Johnson (2001), who emphasize that it is necessary to make the military power of an operation more flexible in order to ensure success. Clearly, the operational experiences of the United States, especially those in Iraq and Afghanistan, illustrate this perspective, particularly when considering how Metz and Johnson (2001) characterize the asymmetric adversary:

Acting, organizing, and thinking differently than opponents in order to maximize one's own advantages, exploit an opponent's weaknesses, attain the initiative, or gain greater freedom of action. It can be political-strategic, military-strategic, operational, or a combination of these. It can entail different methods, technologies, values, organizations, time perspectives, or some combination of these. (p. 24)

At the local level, Sánchez et al. (2012) emphasize the importance of interoperability, flexibility, and sustainability for troops engaged in asymmetric warfare. According to the authors, it is crucial for States to consider factors such as combat survivability platforms and dynamic resilience that support mobility and sustainability.

Beyond military science and shifting the discussion to international relations, two concepts connected to contemporary studies of war, within the framework that Kaldor (2001) and Münkler (2002) classify as *new wars*, are essential to the analysis in this chapter. Although somewhat abstract, this definition implies a transition where States are no longer the sole controllers of the resource of war—which they held since the emergence of modern international relations starting with the Treaty of Westphalia in the seventeenth century—and are partially transferring this power to private, subnational, or even tribal actors.

The asymmetry, which refers to the disparity between combatants, is explained by the fact that the costs of war are reduced, making weapons easier to obtain. As a result, small insurgent groups can acquire weapons from the black market more easily and quickly. Furthermore, as conventional combat becomes less relevant, combatants turn to other, weaker targets such as civilians (Münkler, 2002, p. 4).

Although less precise than in military sciences, the definitions of Kaldor (2001) and Münkler (2002) also show that facing these challenges requires forces that differ from traditional ones, more aligned with the capabilities of SF. This issue worsens when actors involved in asymmetric warfare supplement it with conventional means, creating much more challenging scenarios. This combination leads to the emergence of a new concept: *hybrid warfare*.

Since the first approaches to this notion, it has been suggested that hybrid refers to combining conventional capabilities with the use of special warfare and SF units. For this reason, Robert G. Walker (1998) referenced the Fleet Marine Force Manual Warfighting FMFM-1 to highlight that “twenty-first-century wars will be characterized by an intimate blend of conventional and special actions” (p. 36).

For his part, Hoffman (2009), the precursor of the concept, stated that hybrid wars

can be conducted by both states and a variety of nonstate actors. Hybrid threats incorporate a full range of modes of warfare, including conventional capabilities, irregular tactics and formations, terrorist acts that include indiscriminate violence and coercion, and criminal disorder. (p. 35)

Hoffman's (2009) perspective is visionary because it paves the way for conceiving the use of SF in combined scenarios of conventional and asymmetric warfare. From his perspective, these units are more relevant than ever, an idea that was reaffirmed in the 2006 war between Hezbollah and Israel, where the Shiite militia's approach demonstrated the effectiveness of combining flexible and conventional actions.

Subsequently, Guillem Colom (2012) collected and refined Hoffman's ideas, as well as those of Wilkie and Lasica, to define hybrid warfare as

[...] the full integration in time and space of typically conventional procedures with tactics typical of irregular warfare (from classic ambushes or propaganda, agitation, and insurgency actions to information warfare, lawfare, or cyberwarfare), the latter mixed with terrorist acts and connections to organized crime to obtain support and assistance of all kinds. (p. 80)

Here, the distinctive feature of using SF also comes to the forefront, as they are the most effective and powerful means of countering irregular warfare. The historian takes one of Hoffman's analytical elements (2009) and draws on history to assess the novelty of the hybrid. In this regard, Thomas Huber (1996)

[...] describes the phenomenon of regular and irregular forces fighting in a coordinated manner. Huber explains compound warfare as an intellectual framework for understanding the phenomenon of conventional (regular) forces and unconventional (irregular) forces operating under unified command in order to achieve the desired end state. (García et al., 2015, p. 3)

Although there is a historical tendency to combine conventional and irregular actions, this is not enough to suggest that hybrid warfare has already been used or is common. Conversely, the modern demands of asymmetric combat mean its hybrid features require the use of SF.

Once the theoretical and conceptual foundations guiding this chapter are established, it becomes clear that the increasingly rapid flows of interactions and changes in the international system significantly impact the way contemporary wars are understood theoretically. The evolving and complex nature of threats makes it difficult for experts to define them precisely, which affects the very concept of international security and the strategies used to wage war.

In the practical field, the strategic thinking of some political leaders enables measures to be taken to counter threats that violate sovereignty or internal

political order, but this can generate domestic and international tensions. A specific example can be found in the so-called rogue States: Cuba, Iran, Nicaragua, North Korea, Syria, and Venezuela. A critical reading of this designation can be found in Chomsky (2000), who asserts that rulers maintain a wide range of strategies to achieve their objectives or interests, which generally result in the sustainability of their regimes. The geopolitical location of rogue States allows for a relatively uniform distribution of sources of tension within the current international scenario, which, combined with internal tensions—common in developing countries—that are fueled by some sectors, causes chaos and instability. The presence of illegal economies derived from drug trafficking, illegal mining, arms trafficking, and human trafficking, among many other factors, increases the destabilizing effect on the State, as they acquire significant resources to carry out terrorist actions.

Likewise, globalization has deepened in the modern international system, enabling new alliances to form within a diffuse and complex global order where new leaders challenging the power of the United States have emerged since the end of the Cold War. As a result, the world is moving toward a multipolar order, with the rising influence of China—and to some extent Russia—indicating the potential for a new theater of large-scale confrontation, including new forms of hostilities such as digital warfare. All of this presents, once again, an ideal scenario for SF.

Doctrinal Elements that Make Special Forces Ideal for Use in Asymmetric Warfare and Hybrid Warfare

SF or Elite Corps are military units trained in specialized skills, known for their agility and versatility in executing missions. They perform specific tasks and are responsible for duties that require tougher, more mechanical, intensive, and rigorous training compared to regular troops. Unlike conventional units, SF utilizes more advanced equipment that ensures maximum firepower and provides them with more comprehensive, clear, and timely intelligence about their targets.

These agile and versatile units receive more extensive training and have access to advanced technological resources compared to other forces. An SF unit is trained to perform direct or indirect close combat, sabotage, infiltration, intelligence gathering, and special reconnaissance missions. Therefore, it can be argued that SF units are the best option available to the Armed Forces for

confronting asymmetric or hybrid threats, which have the highest likelihood of success and globally undermine the security of States.

By their nature, SF units are designed to make decisive tactical contacts of strategic importance and emerge victorious as they infiltrate deep into enemy territory or highly dynamic areas, relying on their own capabilities rather than fire support or other conventional units during the operation. They require maximum surprise, agility, organizational and maneuvering flexibility, as well as self-sufficiency in logistics and power.

SF should be regarded as assets of high strategic importance for States, as their training enables them to carry out missions vital to a country's survival, integrating tactics and strategy in operations ranging from offensive actions to covert reconnaissance for information gathering. They can also operate independently or alongside conventional forces and other government agencies. These units require minimal resources, being small with targeted missions that can produce a decisive impact on superior military adversaries with surgical precision and efficiency. In essence, Special Operations are conducted to support a specific theater of operations or to target strategic or high-value objectives. As Sigüeñas warns (2018),

[...] most special operations are designed to improve the chances of success of a military campaign in an area of operations or war. Likewise, these multidisciplinary or joint operations, although they can be conducted independently, are planned and carried out as joint operations due to the requirement for multiple specialized skills on a routine basis to support and coordinate the operation. (p. 56)

Due to their fundamental characteristics, SF carries out tasks primarily aimed at new wars. In both asymmetric and hybrid warfare, SF projects its capabilities in unconventional confrontation scenarios because its flexibility and interoperability are ideal for confronting enemies that are equally flexible and diffuse, such as those that predominate in these types of warfare.

In addition, the training and capabilities of SF in counterterrorism, intelligence, and espionage in hostile theaters of operation prevent criminal acts, such as large-scale attacks, whose targets seek to impact the civilian population. Consequently, their special skills and capabilities should not be used in tasks or missions that wear them down, as conventional troops can carry out these actions. In this regard, Trejo (2018) points out that

[...] currently, Special Forces—in addition to their specific training in conventional operations—specialize in the fight against terrorism, which constitutes the main threat to developed countries. These forces have demonstrated flexibility and adaptability, but above all, ingenuity and creativity in carrying out their missions. (p. 49)

Special operations have both strategic and operational implications. Therefore, operational planning is based on specific knowledge of the target in order to exploit it more effectively, as the effort is focused entirely on rapid and accurate attacks, thereby distinguishing it from other groups that employ conventional warfare. In other words, tasks must be carried out using tactics, techniques, and procedures to plan, prepare, and execute special operations at any time and place, autonomously and self-sustainably.

In the context of military operations doctrine, it is noted that Special Operations are conducted in hostile, denied, or sensitive environments for the purpose of achieving military, political, economic, diplomatic, and/or informational objectives. Besides, these actions utilize military capabilities that do not necessitate the involvement of conventional forces and require total discretion, clandestinity, and low visibility. Thus, it is possible to affirm that SF is the asymmetric component within a state force.

This approach has involved a profound and constant change in the doctrine and structure of the Armed Forces, as it seeks to adapt this force potential to new asymmetric and hybrid scenarios. To this end, these special troops receive training to deal with domestic, subnational, tribal, ideological, terrorist, irregular, militia, convergent, international, or transnational threats.

Both asymmetric warfare and hybrid warfare are constantly evolving, so Special Operations units must keep pace with their advancement to counteract or prevent any hostile act. For this reason, the approach and work of an SF group must be entirely proactive, allowing it to continuously adjust its capabilities, doctrine, equipment, and power in response to the mutations presented by asymmetric and hybrid adversaries.

In this respect, terrorism, for instance, most often relies on surprise as a determining factor in committing violent action. States attempt to counter such acts with specialized and dominant intelligence against each of their threats, whether internal or external. However, it is through the direct action of SF groups that they can target and dismantle strategic organizations, often with highly camouflaged structures.

Consequently, States must apply the necessary doctrinal elements to confront emerging threats, among which SF holds a special place. For their part, the context of multilateral forces calls for broader training, as they must assess the enemy forces they may face, which increases their combat capabilities.

It is clear, then, that SF is of paramount importance to the Armed Forces, as well as for the development of unconventional operations by land, sea, or air, and even in cyberwarfare scenarios, during internal or external conflicts among nations. These activities include offensive raids, demolitions, reconnaissance, counter-terrorism, and search and rescue operations. As mentioned, in addition to their constant rigorous training, members of SF often have specialized skills in swimming, diving, parachuting, survival, emergency medicine, and foreign languages.

The capabilities of these units must continually improve to respond to the relentless evolution of contemporary warfare, making it possible to say that they make a difference in the environments of new wars. Historically, the SF doctrine involves characteristics such as:

- Remaining calm in high-stress situations.
- Working as part of a highly specialized team.
- Being fully prepared to face very demanding challenges.
- Facing the greatest possible danger without the possibility of immediate support and with limited resources.

At the regional level, following World War II and as part of the agreements of the Inter-American Treaty of Reciprocal Assistance, Latin American armed forces implemented a series of changes to their organizational structures and doctrine, aiming to create Special Operations Forces that could meet the challenges of the post-war era. Today, these forces, especially those in Colombia, have achieved a position of prestige in the region thanks to their decisive actions (Lauriani, 2017, p. 26).

Use of Special Forces in Asymmetric Warfare and Hybrid Warfare Scenarios

Based on the doctrinal analysis conducted so far, it can be said that SF is distinguished by its focus on strategic operations, offering greater security than any conventional, simple, surprising, or rapid operation. They thoroughly develop flexibility and adaptability, possess a high degree of autonomy, initiative in combat,

and clear innovation. These characteristics enable these units to achieve a more significant and decisive impact than much larger conventional units.

Regarding the operational approach, SF develops critical capabilities to operate in special warfare scenarios and conduct surgical strikes. The former are characterized by being carried out in permissive, uncertain, or hostile operational environments, either alone or in conjunction with other formations. The latter are precise, limited, and rapid actions aimed at capturing, defeating, controlling, or recovering a target of operational or strategic interest.

Additionally, SF units are designed to operate in operational environments and on missions that involve clear time constraints, mandatory isolation from other components, the constant need to exploit opportunities at will, mandatory decentralization in mission execution, constant initiative, and strong interdependence between special teams to synchronize or complement efforts. Only in this way can SF groups be projected toward operational success.

Precisely this concept has been applied for decades in armies such as the US and British armies, which conduct small-scale contingency operations that integrate all SF capabilities, clearly demonstrating their high value in asymmetric and hybrid warfare.

For this reason, an operational evaluation of SF groups in different contexts can show that most have achieved notable results. This is because, before executing a mission, planning and, especially, analyzing courses of action conceive scenarios with a high success rate. To this end, highly detailed information matrices are used, including all the probabilities that may arise during the mission's development, to assess the chances of success.

The communication factor, typical of asymmetric wars, is also considered in the impact of SF. Information about Special Operations that is released to the public and subsequently reaches the enemy is shared in a restricted manner to ensure the mission's efficiency and effectiveness, while also allowing for the psychological impact of the operation to be managed in accordance with the political objective. Therefore, in most cases, nothing is known about Special Operations until they are executed. Details of these actions are often withheld to prevent information from leaking to adversary organizations, which conduct criminal intelligence by analyzing data presented in the media and using it to counter SF or modify their criminal practices.

In the contemporary context of both asymmetric and hybrid wars, there are paradigmatic Special Operations that demonstrate the capabilities and constant

training of these elite units. Therefore, it is necessary to maintain their evolution and manage their interventions appropriately, as a select group can make a significant difference in a war and reduce the number of human losses, which are often unnecessary.

In various war contexts, SF groups have played a crucial role in defending the State or carrying out a specific mission by a multilateral force deployed worldwide. While it is true that not all States have military forces, they do require an allied country to protect them with its special capabilities, ensuring that there are no hostile actions or terrorist attacks from other States or organizations.

In this regard, it is worth emphasizing that the doctrinal approach of SF facilitates interoperability among States that have military or cooperation agreements, ensuring they can react to a threat in a coordinated and planned manner in the future. These peculiar characteristics of interoperability and flexibility are characteristic of asymmetric adversaries when they build their regional or even transnational networks. Thus, SF can balance this adversary status by conducting military exercises, which determine cooperation and measure the potential of SF operations in any context of contemporary war or action.

All of this not only strengthens the joint fight against the transnational threats that States face at all times, but also allows for the exchange of information and verification of areas of mutual interest, such as terrorism, drug trafficking, human trafficking, and arms trafficking. Therefore, this process of transformation and adaptation of SF to new scenarios that threaten national and comprehensive security in the contemporary 21st-century context, highly marked by asymmetry and hybridity, must continue and improve.

Thus, SF operations in most countries consist of hybrid and asymmetric (non-conventional) warfare missions, including foreign internal defense, special reconnaissance, direct action, counterterrorism, combat search and rescue, counternarcotics operations, hostage rescue, humanitarian assistance, information operations, and psychological operations. SF operations have the capacity to ensure that they will be the first on the ground or even assemble in a crisis area when a threat begins to take shape.

Conclusions

Contemporary warfare is basically characterized by two types of confrontations: asymmetric and hybrid. These wars have a highly irregular, flexible, and delocalized

component, based on agile, easily camouflaged groups with high impact power. Without a doubt, this type of adversary represents a serious challenge for conventional units, as their vast power and sheer size offer little advantage.

In response to this difficulty, SF groups are precisely the units that most closely align with the operational concepts required in asymmetric and hybrid conflicts. Their flexibility, small size, and significant firepower, combined with operational sustainability capabilities, enable them to successfully understand and combat adversary organizations in these operational environments.

In this regard, SF groups are not only one of the most important assets of the Colombian Armed Forces, but also, due to their experience, doctrine, training, and combat achievements, offer a window of opportunity for the State. It is therefore clear that this asset could contribute to the country's security and defense and become an international benchmark for professionalism, capabilities, and military power.

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