

## Book Review â?? Into the Void: Special Operations Forces after the War on Terror

### Description

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The end of the war on terrorism sparked a relentless yet often monotone debate within the special operations community over its relevance in a world dominated by peer competitors and potential high-end conflict. For a community so transformed by two decades at the forefront of global expeditionary counterterrorism, it seems natural that changes are in store again for the special operations forces (SOF) enterprise. Yet, much of the current debate over SOF roles in strategic competition starts from the assumption that its size, shape, and structure are worth preserving.

Taking a refreshing approach, James D. Kiras and Martijn Kitzen assemble an impressive array of experts in the edited volume, [\*Into the Void: Special Operations Forces after the War on Terror\*](#). They present a positive, forward-looking vision of what makes special operations forces unique and explore how the SOF enterpriseâ??s character, concepts, and capabilities canâ?? and mustâ?? evolve.

Central to this vision is the premise that special operations forces are not meant to be elite; rather, they are meant to be special. This argument stands in stark contrast to the prevailing image of special operators in the war on terrorism as Spartan-like warriors on the leading edge of tactical war-fighting expertise. While such framing has been (rightfully) criticized by others,

[\*Into the Void\*](#) identifies the most harmful side effect of this warrior-first ethosâ?? it inaccurately conflates the importance of special operations forcesâ?? adaptability and agility with the outcome of the last, most ambitious transformation into an elite find-fix-finish force over the last 20 years.

The bookâ??s mix of contributorsâ??including academics and practitioners from a mix of countries and backgroundsâ??make a strong case that special operations forces should be boldly transformed toward operating in a peer-dominated security environment and that the SOF enterprise is uniquely capable of adapting to reduce uncertainty and deliver effects that cannot be addressed through

conventional military action alone. The editors offer ample historical evidence to make this case, including chapters exploring early Australian and British experimentation in counter-subversion efforts in the Indo-Pacific in World War II (by Andrew Maher) and the mechanics of state and non-state actor development of novel special operations capabilities to overcome novel hard problems (by Ian Rice and Craig Whiteside). Similarly, Troels Burchell Henningsen makes a clear argument for special operations forces' ability to maintain a "volatile alignment" of proxies that has borne out well in the history of successful SOF-led coalitions of fragile proxies in Bosnia, Iraq, Syria, and even occupied France in World War II.

*Into the Void* also presents a range of new operational concepts through which special operations forces can experiment. Pierre Jean Dehaene proposes a localization strategy that reimagines military assistance in frontline states as partner-driven, not just partner-centric. Thomas R. Searle makes the case for enduring counterterrorism assistance to partners as a democratic counterweight against Chinese and Russian autocratic expansion that stands ready to take its place. Ben Gans, Leo Blanken, and Robert Stelmack argue for SOF operators' unique potential as multidomain integrators of physical, virtual, and cognitive effects.

Helpful deep dives into adversary thinking include Christopher Marsh, who explores likely future Russian conceptions of the gray zone through *maskirovka* (deception). David Kilcullen similarly breaks down Chinese organization and thinking about future roles for special operations forces in similar environments.

One challenge raised throughout *Into the Void*, albeit never fully settled, is how best to anchor the SOF enterprise's core value proposition for agility and adaptation in future defense strategy to harness its full potential.

Several contributors note the growing dichotomy between increased operational demands placed upon the SOF enterprise and downward budgetary pressures for these forces to demonstrate their value vis-à-vis China and Russia, and in response, propose a range of potential SOF missions to help, for example, counter Chinese coercion in the Indo-Pacific or bolster resilience in Europe's high north. Such menus of static options largely undersell the SOF enterprise's real potential as dynamic campaigners. Instead of options, further work is needed to develop and articulate strategies for the agile employment of special operations forces in time and space to expand decision space for policymakers.

Overall, *the book's* emphasis on adaptation and transformation remains its most important contribution and one that should resonate with policymakers and military leaders looking to move beyond simply defending the enterprise as it exists today and toward unleashing the enterprise to

transform to meet the next generation of threats.

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*Main Image: Cover art for "Into the Void: Special Operations Forces after the War on Terror" by James D. Kiras and Martijn Kitzen | Oxford University Press, 2024 394 pages \$59.99*

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