

Review of Special Operations and National Security: Policies, Strategies, and Tactics by Ben Gans

Description

When everything is “special,” nothing is.

In [*Special Operations and National Security: Policies, Strategies, and Tactics*](#), Ben Gans confronts an enduring and increasingly relevant question: what exactly constitutes a *special operation* in the modern era? As technological innovation, multidomain integration, and the blurring of military and intelligence activities reshape contemporary warfare, that question has become harder to answer. Gans deserves credit for engaging it head-on and for reminding readers that “special” should denote more than mere difficulty, danger, or daring. Yet, while the book offers useful provocation, its examples often conflate special operations with complex conventional ones—an error that risks obscuring rather than clarifying what makes special operations unique. Even where his conceptual clarity falters, Gans performs an important service by forcing readers to grapple with the fundamental problem of how we categorize military activities in an era when technological capabilities increasingly outpace our conceptual vocabularies.

Defining “Special” in Special Operations

Since at least the Second World War, special operations have occupied a liminal space between the conventional and unconventional. They are designed to achieve *strategic effects* disproportionate to their size, often through asymmetric means, and typically under conditions that demand precision, speed, and political sensitivity. Doctrine provides helpful, if imperfect, boundaries: U.S. joint doctrine defines special operations as “operations requiring unique modes of employment, tactical techniques, equipment, and training often conducted in hostile, denied, or politically sensitive environments.” These criteria separate “special” from the routine or conventional military operation.

Gans argues that defining special operations depends on the “specific mission” and the “respective context,” while special operations forces (SOF) are easier to define clearly based on the contours of their bureaucratic organization and operational capacity (13–14). In doing so, Gans revisits the modern battlefield’s expanding domains—cyber, space, undersea, and

informational—and asks the question “how do the personnel involved fulfill the strategic promise of special operations, given their position within the larger framework for policy?” (17). He argues that as warfare migrates into these arenas, the traditional boundaries of what constitutes a special operation may no longer apply. A cyber strike on an adversary’s satellite system, he suggests, might have effects similar in scale and risk to a cross-border raid. Likewise, small teams of space operators working under extreme secrecy could mirror the mission profile of traditional SOF elements.

These are valuable questions, and Gans is right to raise them. The book’s best sections highlight how the diffusion of technology and information has eroded the monopoly of traditional SOF on high-risk, high-reward missions. Gans’s call to revisit the institutional and doctrinal boundaries of “special operations” is both timely and necessary, particularly as states and nonstate actors increasingly operate in the gray zone between overt and covert conflict.

When Everything Is Special

The problem, however, is that Gans often treats “special” as synonymous with “complex,” “elite,” or “politically important.” Many of the case studies he presents—ranging from large-scale counterterrorism campaigns to conventional amphibious operations—fail to meet even the broadest doctrinal criteria for special operations. These are not “special” in their conception or execution; they are simply *joint* or *combined* operations involving sophisticated capabilities or sensitive targets. For example, the chapter on Operation Orchard describes a conventional attack by the Israeli Air Force against the Al-Kibar nuclear site in Syria. While a good case study in the planning and execution of a precision airstrike with strategic effects, nothing about the operation was outside the bounds of what a premier Air Force can deliver.

This conceptual inflation matters. The value of special operations lies in their *economy of force*—their ability to achieve disproportionate strategic effect through limited means. When every difficult mission is labeled “special,” we risk diluting that meaning and misunderstanding the kind of problems SOF are designed to solve.

In this sense, Gans’s book unintentionally exacerbates a trend: the impulse to brand as “special” any capability or activity that departs from conventional forces restricted to conventional engagement. As cyber, space, and information operations proliferate, the temptation to apply the “special” label grows. Yet the attributes that make an operation “special”—discreet employment, strategic precision, and policy-level oversight—are not automatically transferable to every high-tech or domain-spanning activity.

An F-35 strike deep in denied airspace or a submarine-launched cyber intrusion may be *sophisticated*, *strategically significant*, or *sensitive* in nature, but those attributes alone do not make them *special*. The distinction is not semantic—it is functional. SOF exist to provide decision-makers with options that are feasible, acceptable, and suitable where conventional forces or covert intelligence tools are not. Blurring that distinction confuses mission design, training pipelines, and resourcing priorities.

Strengths in Conceptual Framing

Despite its definitional drift, Gans's conceptual instinct is sound. His recognition that modern operations increasingly blend military and nonmilitary tools—kinetic and informational, physical and virtual—is spot on. The book also succeeds in drawing attention to how bureaucratic seams between military, intelligence, and diplomatic entities complicate integrated campaigns.

In particular, his argument that the fusion of domains has outpaced the development of doctrine deserves amplification. This observation parallels challenges that Western militaries have faced in integrating irregular and conventional warfare approaches. Just as Israel and Iran struggle to calibrate between direct and indirect means, modern militaries risk oscillating between kinetic and cyber, overt and covert, without a coherent political strategy or theory of victory.

Gans's work is at its best when he explores these structural and doctrinal misalignments rather than the operational details of specific missions. He rightly cautions that the next generation of special operations will require cross-domain fluency and political savvy—operators who understand not only the mechanics of breaching a door or inserting by submarine but also how those actions interplay with cyber, informational, and diplomatic effects.

This is a message worth reinforcing. The United States and its allies are entering an era where SOF must operate as integrators across the competition continuum, not merely as precision strike assets. Gans grasps that challenge intuitively, even if the examples he uses to illustrate it occasionally miss the mark.

Which Forces Aren't Special?

The book's weakness stems from an overly inclusive conception of *special operations* and an absence of doctrinal rigor in distinguishing them from other forms of military action. The result is an analytical framework so elastic that almost any small-scale or politically sensitive operation could qualify as *special*.

This elasticity obscures one of the field's enduring truths: *special operations are defined less by their tools than by their purpose*. A raid, a rescue, a sabotage mission, or an advisory campaign earns the "special" label not because of the platform used but because of the problem it is designed to solve and the political risk it entails.

Moreover, Gans occasionally implies that technological complexity alone can render an operation "special." This reverses causality. It is not the sophistication of the tool but the asymmetry of the effect—its ability to achieve strategic results disproportionate to inputs—that distinguishes special operations. A cyber intrusion that disables an adversary's air-defense network in advance of a strike may be special if it relies on the unique physical access and placement to a denied area that only a SOF team could provide, either unilaterally or through a surrogate or proxy; a denial-of-service attack that merely disrupts communications is not.

By conflating the two, the book risks perpetuating the same conceptual confusion that has dogged defense institutions since the 9/11 era, when the "special" label became a growth industry. The result is a form of mission creep—both bureaucratic and intellectual—where SOF are tasked with missions that lack the strategic distinctiveness or risk profile that justify their employment.

Gans's underlying insight, however, still stands: that the definition of "special operations" must evolve in response to the changing character of war, but not so far that it loses coherence. A firmer editorial hand could have sharpened the book's argument and tightened its examples without diminishing its ambitious scope.

Policy and Institutional Implications

Gans's work arrives at a time when defense institutions are reassessing the balance between conventional and irregular capabilities, and between SOF and general-purpose forces. The renewed focus on state competition and deterrence has led some to argue that SOF should pivot toward enabling joint warfighting campaigns in large-scale conflict and enabling asymmetric self-defense of vulnerable allies and partners. Others contend that the future of special operations lies in how SOF, space, and cyber capabilities can yield amplified effects. While still others see SOF in its more traditional role since 9/11 of counterterrorism, crisis response, and working with-and-through allies and partners. These camps are not necessarily mutually exclusive but do require prioritization.

All these camps can find support in Gans's text—but they should also heed its cautionary lesson. As states expand their definition of what constitutes a special operation, they risk eroding the specialization that gives SOF their comparative advantage. If every domain has its own "special" component—special cyber, special space—the term ceases to denote a distinct culture or capability

set.

This inflation has practical consequences. It dilutes standards, fragments command structures, and confuses policymakers about what SOF can realistically deliver. The enduring value of special operations lies in their ability to operate in ambiguity—*not* to become the catchall solution for every ambiguous problem, especially if political leaders do not understand the opportunities and limitations of special operations capabilities.

Re-centering the Definition

A more precise approach would begin with key principles: (1) Does the operation seek strategic effect disproportionate to the force employed? (2) Does it require unique skills, training, or capabilities unavailable to general-purpose forces? (3) Does it involve political or operational risk demanding a discrete chain of command and oversight?

Only when all three conditions are met should an operation qualify as “special.” Applying this framework to Gans’s examples would yield a far narrower—but far more meaningful—universe of special operations.

Conclusion

Ben Gans’s *Special Operations and National Security* is an ambitious and thought-provoking attempt to reframe special operations in an era of multidomain conflict. It succeeds in asking the right question: *what makes an operation truly special?* It stumbles in the answer, often conflating complexity with uniqueness and stretching definitions beyond doctrinal or practical coherence.

Still, this is a valuable book for practitioners and scholars alike—not because it settles the debate, but because it reopens one that had grown complacent. Gans reminds us that the distinction between the conventional and the special is not fixed but must be guarded. As warfare extends into new domains, militaries must resist the temptation to redefine or reapply “special” until the term loses meaning—a lesson applicable to proponents of irregular warfare, as well.

In that sense, the book performs an inadvertent service. By overextending the definition, it forces readers to confront why limits matter—and why, in both irregular and special operations, discipline in definition is as important as innovation in practice.

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Main Image: Swedish K3 Rangers conduct an ambush alongside Green Berets with U.S. Army 10th Special Forces Group (Airborne) during Adamant Serpent 26 in Alvdalen, Sweden, Oct. 25, 2025. U.S. Special Operations Forces and NATO Allies demonstrate their unity through combined and joint trainings in support of NATO operations responding to emerging threats. ([U.S. Army photo by Staff Sgt. Reece Heck](#)).

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