



**The Chairman of the European Union Military
Committee
General Claudio GRAZIANO**



**CEUMC Keynote Speech at the Global Special Operations Forces
(SOF) Symposium 2019**

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Dear Stuart (*Col (ret) BRADIN, Senior representative for the GSF*)

Dear Vincent (*Col DESCHEEMAEKER, BEL SOCOM Director*)

Good afternoon, Ladies and Gentlemen.

I can see many friendly faces in the crowd...

I am very pleased to be here today to address this expert audience from governments, civilian and private companies.

As for me, for those who are not familiar, I chair the European Union Military Committee, the highest military body within the EU, which gives military advice to the political and security committee.

The committee makes recommendations on military matters, and directs military activities within the EU framework, like the planning and execution of military missions and operations under the common security and defence policy (the so called CSDP) and the development of specific capabilities.

I also have the responsibility of Military Adviser for the HR, Mme Mogherini, whom I represent today, with her best wishes for the success of this event.

In my former "national" life, I covered the position of Italian Chief of the Army and Chief of the Joint Staff.

Therefore, i was directly involved with SOF for many years.

Today I would focus on the potential roles of SOF in EU perspective, in EU military missions and operations or as a key tool for contemporary warfare.

There are several examples of the participation of SOF in the EU military missions and operations, starting from OPERATION ARTEMIS in 2003.

It was the FIRST military operation led autonomously by the EU, outside Europe, in support of the UN military mission to the Democratic Republic of Congo, during the ITURI conflict.

The success of the Operation led to real progress in the co-operation between the EU and the UN in crisis management.

That mission largely relied on SOF initiative and adaptability.

The same design of Artemis was implemented on another EU deployment in Congo in 2006, as well as in Central African Republic in 2008.

On the latter occasion, the establishment of a Combined Joint Special Operations Task Force (CJSOTF) under the command of the Operational HQ was a real step forward.

But the use of SOF in CSDP military missions and operations should not be seen as an exception for short-term operations.

In fact, there are examples of a more structured participation like in EUTM CAR as well as in the context of the EU Training Mission in MALI.

You all know very well, SOFs ensure early entry with a limited footprint but a very effective combat power with high-end capacities.

SOF have constantly proved to be also invaluable sensors, when used properly, timely and at the right place.

In this vein, for example, the use of special reconnaissance is the primary tool to provide an in-depth assessment of the situation on the ground, at any time, as well as to refine previous assessments by other sources, providing decision makers with a very up-to-date and highly reliable situational picture.

Therefore, the participation of SOF elements in the initial planning and in the several stages for the launch of a CSDP military operation and mission is strongly advisable, and it can be a real game changer.

SO, what about the role of SOF in contemporary warfare?

In recent years much has been written on this subject, focusing on the ability of the SOF to act as an extremely powerful tool in countering hybrid warfare, versus the traditional military doctrine.

In fact, the more complex, innovative, and adaptive threats seriously challenge the fundamental military approach to warfare.

The need to revise our military instrument in light of the proliferation of non-state actors and to better address their growing impact on security and stability has brought to adapt the tactics, while adopting a new strategy.

I think that the good news is that we have the right tools to face this kind of complexity.

In fact, when it comes to hybrid warfare, despite the lack of a commonly accepted definition, we all agree it can be considered as a blend of typical military methods and irregular warfare, in combination with

misinformation and propaganda, as well as elements of economic and cyber, and A.I.

These elements belong to a wider strategy, to use all possible means, allowing the attacker to destabilise and weaken the adversary, remaining below the threshold of declared warfare.

It is self-evident that SOF are probably among the best positioned actor - not the only one - to tackle the multidimensional nature of hybrid threats, by contributing to threat prevention and risk reduction.

It must be recalled that SOF require training to develop and maintain a specific set of skills, to be able to operate in stealth mode, seeking high impact through small numbers.

As a result of their ability to think out of the box and to foresee their opponents' intentions and to counter their *modus operandi*, if properly used Special Operations Forces can be a real game changer, as I said before.

Therefore, they can be of great effectiveness in timely detecting and properly assessing the use of hybrid tools since its early signs, like in the case of the so-called "little green men"¹, who appeared during the Ukrainian crisis of 2014.

In this respect, the role played by Special Operations Forces in the unconventional warfare has a two-fold dimension:

- Act directly or,

¹ The phrase "little green men" refers to masked soldiers in unmarked green army uniforms and carrying modern Russian military weapons and equipment who appeared during the Ukrainian crisis of 2014. The term first arose during the annexation of Crimea by the Russian Federation (February-March 2014), when such forces occupied and blockaded the Simferopol International Airport, most military bases in Crimea, and the parliament in Simferopol. They also became known as Polite People, as they were perceived to have behaved peacefully with little practical interference in the daily activities of the residents.

- Providing military assistance to other state services, like anti-terrorism and counter intelligence.

As for many other issues, this mostly depends on the political willingness.

But it is clear that we all can have a say and we can play a decisive role, as advisors and experts acting in support of political decision makers.

Several countries in Europe have tragically experienced horrible attacks to the civilian population, over the past years, signs of a clear destabilising strategy.

We are all aware of the high impact on the public opinion and of the cost-effectiveness of these actions coming either from the East or the South of Europe.

But my question is: are the existing law enforcement bodies, including highly specialised teams in police or gendarmerie sufficient to face the risk of massive attacks?

Even more: can we afford to find out that - in fact - they are not?

The role of SOF is key to ensure our Armed Forces and state institutions the necessary resilience, and not to passively observe the scenario evolving at an uncontrolled rate until it reaches a level where we cannot intervene on it.

It is therefore paramount to promote a way how SOF elements are seen and employed, in different phases of crisis management.

I firmly believe that we need to see and manage the issue of usability of SOF from different levels.

In the short to mid-term, we may focus on a better integration of SOF with other assets commonly used, to avoid any unnecessary competition or professional jealousy.

At a higher level, the primary goal is to remove any prejudice and affecting the political willingness to approve the use of SOF beyond the traditional sense.

This can be achieved by informing and advising politicians on the ability of SOF to conduct targeted actions with surgical precision, also in a civilian environment, whilst minimizing the potential side effects.

But still, we know that their direct involvement in homeland activities is under discussion.

We need to make it clear that, often, we cannot address extraordinary threats and challenges – although they are normal nowadays – with ordinary means.

Going to conclusions, I believe that we should pay particular attention to a more balanced relationship between SOF and Conventional Forces.

Despite representing a niche of excellence and a source of pride, we need to reject the idea to consider SOF as a stand-alone instrument.

We should rather see them as one of the driving forces for the development of the Armed Forces, while preserving their peculiarities and their own field of action.

In fact, on the one hand it is clear that they must be able to be tactically autonomous.

On the other hand, it has to be ensured that SOF are used as the spearhead of a wider effort, in full coherence with other instruments of power.

The connection with conventional forces should not be seen as a one-way relationship but more like a mutual exchange.

Drawing on my previous experience as chief of the Italian defence and unit commander at all levels, in real operations, I know that this kind of interaction already happens, at single service level or in a joint environment.

Some examples? The training and the development of specialised skills that SOF share with alpine troops.

Or, the natural connection between SOF and airborne units.

AND the same applies to the close relations in the amphibious operations and underwater demolitions, as well as in various other fields like ISTAR activities and JTAC operations.

When implemented, this collaboration usually results in an insuperable resource and a key asset.

I conclude.

Although the first examples of unconventional warfare go back to the Roman and Byzantine times, if you look on the internet, you will be misled on the fact that SOF - as we know them today - emerged as a new tool only in the Second World War.

In fact, the first modern shock troops were the Arditi, special assault platoons created in 1917, during The FIRST WORLD WAR. At the same time, Germany created also the Stormtroopers.

But the Arditi were not units within infantry divisions, but a separate combat arm.

In that sense, they were able to conduct operations totally independently.

In the same conflict we also saw the constitution of the Italian navy seals from the Regia Marina that used MAS and "MIGNATTE" (sort of torpedoes, manoeuvred by a scuba diver).

I used some history to underline an extra added value of the SOF, which you know very well: they are one of the top testbed for new high-end equipment, starting exactly from those "MIGNATTE" you see in the slide.

And this is a particularly important: modern warfare is constantly seeing the rise of new system, high-end technology and artificial intelligence.

Something that requires a collective approach, in the right direction.

But – again – most of you know this very, very well...

Ladies and gentlemen, thank you very much for your attention.

I think we have a few minutes for Q&A, if any.