
SUMMARY

During the Vietnam War and the Persian Gulf conflict, U.S. forces confronted sets of strategically important but elusive adversary ground targets. Political and other considerations prevented the deployment of conventional ground units, and air power alone proved unable to eliminate the targets. In both cases, policymakers turned to special operations forces (SOF) to conduct reconnaissance operations to locate the hidden targets. During the Vietnam conflict, SOF teams crossed the border into Laos to search for truck parks, storage depots, and other critical targets along the Ho Chi Minh Trail that were obscured by triple-canopy jungle and camouflage. During the Gulf War, British and American SOF patrolled vast areas of western Iraq searching for mobile Scud launchers that had escaped coalition strike aircraft.

In both cases, the nature and size of the terrain, combined with adversary countermeasures, made it extremely difficult for the ground teams to achieve their tactical and operational objectives. The operations along the Ho Chi Minh Trail did not succeed in reducing Hanoi's ability to move materiel along North Vietnam's strategic life-line to the south. However, these campaigns were not failures. The SOF operations succeeded in harassing the communist forces, and they compelled Hanoi to divert resources to the trail's defense that would have otherwise been committed to the war against South Vietnam. In the case of the Scud-hunting campaign in western Iraq, coalition forces failed to locate and destroy Saddam Hussein's mobile missile launchers. However, the SOF teams were successful at the strategic level, in that they helped persuade Israel not to enter the war and fracture the fragile anti-Iraq coalition.

The campaigns against the Ho Chi Minh Trail and the mobile Scud launchers have a number of implications for future operations. They highlight the difficulty of employing ground SOF to search vast areas of difficult terrain behind enemy lines. Although new technology, such as mini- and micro-unmanned aerial vehicles (UAVs), may make it easier for teams to conduct wide-area reconnaissance, it is unlikely that using SOF in this fashion will achieve U.S. objectives. In addition, popular and official concerns about casualties and prisoners of war are likely to limit the use of U.S. SOF to those situations in which only the most vital national interests are at stake. That said, however, there are a number of possible ways in which SOF could be employed to improve the U.S. military's ability to find and destroy elusive adversary ground targets. Unattended ground sensors (UGS) could play an increasingly important role in future operations. Although most will be delivered by air, some UGS will require hand emplacement in difficult enemy terrain, a mission well suited to SOF. In addition, SOF can be used in a battle damage assessment (BDA) role to help ensure that critical targets have been destroyed. Finally, SOF could be employed to disable, destroy, or recover nuclear, biological, or chemical weapons, tasks that may be difficult or impossible to achieve with air power alone.