



CRS Report for Congress

U.S. Special Operations Forces (SOF): Background and Issues for Congress

Andrew Feickert
Specialist in Military Ground Forces
Foreign Affairs, Defense, and Trade Division

Summary

Special Operations Forces (SOF) play a significant role in U.S. military operations and the Administration has given U.S. SOF greater responsibility for planning and conducting worldwide counterterrorism operations. Potential increased SOF involvement in Pakistan and achieving the proper balance between direct and indirect SOF missions might be issues for congressional consideration. This report will be updated as events warrant.

Background

Overview. Special Operations Forces (SOF) are small, elite military units with special training and equipment that can infiltrate into hostile territory through land, sea, or air to conduct a variety of operations, many of them classified. SOF personnel undergo rigorous selection and lengthy, specialized training. The U.S. Special Operations Command (USSOCOM) oversees the training, doctrine, and equipping of all U.S. SOF units.

Command Structures. In 1986, Congress expressed concern for the status of SOF within overall U.S. defense planning and passed measures (P.L. 99-661) to strengthen its position. These actions included the establishment of USSOCOM as a new unified command. USSOCOM is headquartered at MacDill Air Force Base in Tampa, FL. The Commander of USSOCOM is a four-star officer who may be from any service. Commander, USSOCOM reports directly to the Secretary of Defense, although an Assistant Secretary of Defense for Special Operations and Low Intensity Conflict (ASD/SOLIC) provides immediate civilian oversight over many USSOCOM activities.

Army Special Operations Forces.¹ U.S. Army SOF (ARSOF) include approximately 30,000 soldiers from the Active Army, National Guard, and Army Reserve who are organized into Special Forces, Ranger, and special operations aviation units, along with civil affairs units, psychological operations units, and special operations support units. ARSOF Headquarters and other resources, such as the John F. Kennedy Special Warfare Center and School, are located at Fort Bragg, NC. Five active Special Forces (SF) Groups (Airborne) are stationed at Fort Bragg and at Fort Lewis, WA, Fort Campbell, KY, and Fort Carson, CO. Special Forces soldiers — also known as the Green Berets — are trained in various skills, including foreign languages, that allow teams to operate independently throughout the world. Beginning in FY2008, the Army will begin to increase the total number of Army Special Forces battalions from 15 to 20, with one battalion being allocated to each active Special Forces Group. Two Army National Guard SF groups are headquartered in Utah and Alabama. An elite airborne light infantry unit specializing in direct action operations², the 75th Ranger Regiment, is headquartered at Fort Benning, GA, and consists of three battalions. Army special operations aviation units, including the 160th Special Operations Aviation Regiment (Airborne) headquartered at Fort Campbell, KY, feature pilots trained to fly the most sophisticated Army rotary-wing aircraft in the harshest environments, day or night, and in adverse weather.

Some of the most frequently deployed SOF assets are civil affairs (CA) units, which provide experts in every area of civil government to help administer civilian affairs in operational theaters. The 95th Civil Affairs Brigade (Airborne) is the only active CA unit, and plans call for the brigade to expand from one to four battalions by 2009.³ All other CA units reside in the Reserves and are affiliated with conventional Army units. Psychological operations units disseminate information to large foreign audiences through mass media. The active duty 4th Psychological Operations (PSYOPS) Group (Airborne) is stationed at Fort Bragg, and two Army Reserve PSYOPS groups work with conventional Army units.

Air Force Special Operations Forces.⁴ The Air Force Special Operations Command (AFSOC) includes about 13,000 active and reserve personnel. AFSOC is headquartered at Hurlburt Field, FL, along with the 720th Special Tactics Group, the 18th Flight Test Squadron, and the U.S. Air Force Special Operations School. The 16th Special Operations Wing (SOW) relocated from Hurlburt Field to Cannon Air Force Base (AFB)

¹ Information in this section was taken from General Bryan Brown, “U.S. Army Special Operations: Focusing on People — Humans are More Important than Hardware,” *Army*, October 2001, pp. 157-162.

² Direct action operations are short-duration strikes and other small-scale offensive actions conducted as a special operation in hostile, denied, or politically sensitive environments and which employ specialized military capabilities to seize, destroy, capture, exploit, recover, or damage designated targets. Direct action differs from conventional offensive actions in the level of physical and political risk, operational techniques, and the degree of discriminate and precise use of force to achieve specific objectives.

³ Kevin Maurer, “Newly Formed 95th Civil Affairs Brigade Activates,” *Fayetteville Times*, August 18, 2006.

⁴ For additional information on Air Force SOF units, see Robert Wall, “Conflict Could Test Special Ops Improvements,” *Aviation Week & Space Technology*, October 1, 2001, p. 30.

in 2007.⁵ AFSOC plans to activate the 1st SOW at Hurlburt Field using elements of the 16th SOW.⁶ The 352nd Special Operations Group is at RAF Mildenhall, England, and the 353rd Special Operations Group, is at Kadena Air Base, Japan. Reserve AFSOC components include the 193rd Special Operations Wing, Air National Guard, stationed at Harrisburg, PA, the 280th Combat Communications Squadron, Air National Guard, stationed at Dothan, AL, and the 919th Special Operations Wing, Air Force Reserve, stationed at Duke Field, FL. AFSOC's three active-duty flying units are composed of more than 100 fixed and rotary-wing aircraft.

AFSOC Operational Requirements.⁷ AFSOC commander Air Force LTG Michael Wooley, noting that AFSOC plans to grow from 13,000 to 15,000 personnel by the end of FY2013, cites the need for both new and additional aircraft as well as time to train with existing and future aircraft as areas of major concern. Although AFSOC has stood up the 3rd Special Operations Squadron, consisting of six Predator unmanned aerial vehicles (UAVs), USSOCOM leadership suggests that they could use “dozens more.” AFSOC is presently preparing to stand up its first CV-22 tilt rotor squadron, which is expected to be combat ready sometime in 2009. USSOCOM plans to replace its entire fleet of HH-53 Pave Low helicopters over the next two years with CV-22s, but not on a one-for-one basis as USSOCOM presently plans to procure only 50 CV-22s by 2017. In addition, USSOCOM would like to increase the size of its MC-130 fleet to 61 aircraft to accommodate the growth of Army and Marine Corps special operations forces. AFSOC has also indicated that it would like to replace its eight AC-130H and 13 AC-130U gunships by 2020 with a new gunship. AFSOC leadership has also voiced concern that because special operations aircraft are being used so heavily that they are not as available for training as they should be, thereby adversely impacting on aircrew training.

Naval Special Operations Forces.⁸ The Naval Special Warfare Command (NSWC) is located in Coronado, CA. NSWC is organized around eight SEAL Teams and two SEAL Delivery Vehicle (SDV) Teams. Two of these eight SEAL Teams are deployed at any given time, with each SEAL Team consisting of six SEAL platoons each, consisting of two officers and 16 enlisted personnel. The major operational components of NSWC include Naval Special Warfare Groups One and Three stationed in San Diego, CA, and Naval Special Warfare Groups Two and Four in Norfolk, VA. These components deploy SEAL Teams, SEAL Delivery Vehicle Teams, and Special Boat Teams worldwide to meet the training, exercise, contingency and wartime requirements of theater commanders. NSWC has approximately 5,400 total active-duty personnel —

⁵ Michael Sirak, “Air Force Assigns Special Operations Wing to Cannon Air Force Base,” *Defense Daily*, June 22, 2006.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Information in this section is taken from Je DiMascio, “Olson: SOCOM Could Use Dozens of Additional UAVs,” *Defense Daily*, April 25, 2007; Ann Roosevelt, “U.S.SOCOM Commander Details Aviation Needs,” *Defense Daily*, May 17, 2007; Michael Sirak, “Wooley: Training Proficiency, Need for New Aircraft AFSOC’s Biggest Concerns,” *Defense Daily*, May 11, 2007; and David A. Fulghum, “USAF Special Ops Growing in Personnel and Equipment,” *Aerospace Daily & Defense Report*, May 14, 2007.

⁸ Information in this section is from the U.S. Naval Special Warfare Command’s Official website, [<https://www.navy.mil/>], accessed on March 6, 2007.

including 2,450 SEALs and 600 Special Warfare Combatant-Craft Crewmen (SWCC) — as well as a 1,200-person reserve component of approximately 325 SEALs, 125 SWCC and 775 support personnel. SEALs are considered the best-trained combat swimmers in the world, and can be deployed covertly from submarines or from sea-based aircraft.

Marine Special Operations Command (MARSOC).⁹ On November 1, 2005, DOD announced the creation of the Marine Special Operations Command (MARSOC) as a component of USSOCOM. MARSOC consists of three subordinate units — the Marine Special Operations Regiment, the Foreign Military Training Unit, and the Special Operations Support Group — totaling approximately 2,600 Marines. MARSOC Headquarters, the Foreign Military Training Unit, and the Special Operations Support Group are stationed at Camp Lejeune, NC. The Marine Special Operations Regiment has its headquarters at Camp Lejeune and has an element stationed at Camp Pendleton, CA. MARSOC has reportedly deployed Foreign Military Training Teams to Africa and South America and two Marine Special Operations Battalions have been activated — one on each coast.¹⁰ By the end of November 2007, the MARSOC commander reported that he had approximately 65% of his authorized 2,600 Marines and expected to fill the remaining positions in 2008.¹¹

Joint Special Operations Command (JSOC). According to DOD, the JSOC is “a joint headquarters designed to study special operations requirements and techniques; ensure interoperability and equipment standardization; plan and conduct joint special operations exercises and training; and develop joint special operations tactics.”¹² While not officially acknowledged by DOD or USSOCOM, JSOC, which is headquartered at Pope Air Force Base, NC, is widely believed to command and control what are described as the military’s three special missions units — the Army’s Delta Force, the Navy’s SEAL Team Six, a joint unit allegedly designed to conduct clandestine operations, as well as the 75th Ranger Regiment, the 160th Special Operations Aviation Regiment and the Air Force’s 24th Special Tactics Squadron.¹³ JSOC’s primary mission is believed to be identifying and destroying terrorists and terror cells worldwide.

⁹ Information in this section is taken from DOD Press Release No. 1127-05, dated November 1, 2005, Subject: Secretary of Defense Approves Marine Special Operations Command; Donna Miles, “Marine Corps to Join U.S. Special Operations Command,” American Forces Press Service, November 1, 2005; and Christian Lowe, “U.S. Marine Corps to Create Special Operations Unit,” Defense News, November 1, 2005.

¹⁰ Statement by General Bryan D. Brown, Commander, U.S. Special Operations Command, before the House Subcommittee on Terrorism, Unconventional Threats and Capabilities, “Current Manning, Equipping, and Readiness Challenges Facing Special Operations Forces,” January 31, 2007, p. 4.

¹¹ Meagn Scully, “Marine Corps Continues to Build Special Operations Force,” *National Journal’s Congress Daily PM*, November 29, 2007.

¹² USSOCOM website [<http://www.socom.mil/components/components.htm>], accessed April 4, 2006.

¹³ Sean D. Naylor, “JSOC to Become Three-Star Command,” *Army Times*, February 13, 2006.

USOCOM Budget

FY2008 Budget. USSOCOM requested \$3.28 billion for Operations & Maintenance (O&M); \$374 million for Research, Development, Test & Evaluation (RDT&E); \$1.83 billion for Procurement; and \$652 million for Military Construction (MILCON) for FY2008.¹⁴ USSOCOM also reportedly had \$391 million in “unfunded requirements for FY2008, including such items as body armor, laser range finders, advanced night vision devices, and weapons.”¹⁵ H.R. 4986, National Defense Authorization Act for FY2008, recommended fully funding USSOCOM’s \$6.2 billion budget request and also recommended a number of initiatives to “empower SOCOM and improve its ability to face current security challenges.”¹⁶

Current Issues

Increased SOF Role in Pakistan?¹⁷ In response to what many perceive as intensified efforts by Al Qaeda and Taliban militants within Pakistan to destabilize Pakistan’s government, reports suggest that senior U.S. officials are discussing proposals to permit U.S. Special Operations Forces and the CIA to conduct more aggressive operations in Pakistan’s Federally Administered Tribal Area, a lawless region bordering Afghanistan. Current U.S. military efforts involve about 50 U.S. service members training Pakistan’s Frontier Corps, which operates in the tribal areas and training elite Pakistani Army units. Expanded operations could involve enhanced training of Pakistani units and possibly more aggressive operations against Al Qaeda and Taliban insurgents.

SOF and Africa Command (AFRICOM).¹⁸ U.S. defense officials are reportedly in the process of creating a special operations component command to support the newly created Africa Command (AFRICOM). This component command (SOCAFRICA) would be responsible for overseeing all special operations activities in Africa. Personnel assigned to SOCAFRICA are not expected to be stationed in Africa, and it is unclear whether these personnel will come from current special operations component commands for U.S. Central Command (USCENTCOM) or U.S. European Command (USEUCOM) or from another source within USSOCOM.

¹⁴ USSOCOM FY2008/FY2009 Budget Estimates, February 2007.

¹⁵ Jason Sherman, “SOCOM Requires Additional \$391 Million in FY-08 for Body Armor, Weapons,” *InsideDefense.com*, February 19, 2007.

¹⁶ House Armed Services Committee, House Armed Services Committee Approves Fiscal Year 2008 Defense Authorization Bill, May 9, 2007.

¹⁷ Information in this section is taken from Steven Lee Meyers, David E. Sanger, and Eric Schmitt, “U.S. Considers New Covert Push Within Pakistan,” *New York Times*, January 6, 2008, and from Ann Scott Tyson and Robin Wright, “U.S. Officials Review Approach in Pakistan,” *Washington Post*, January 7, 2008.

¹⁸ Carlo Munoz, “Special Ops to Stand Up New Component Command Within Africa,” *Inside the Pentagon*, November 15, 2007.

Direct and Indirect SOF Missions.¹⁹ Debate continues on the proper balance of direct versus indirect SOF missions. Some maintain that JSOC-conducted direct-action missions to kill or capture insurgents in Iraq and Afghanistan and terrorists worldwide detract from SOF's ability to conduct indirect missions such as training and equipping foreign militaries. While most agree that direct action missions are needed, many believe that indirect missions are even more important in combating insurgencies and terrorism over the long term. The Assistant Secretary of Defense for Special Operations and Low Intensity Conflict, Michael Vickers, has indicated an increase in emphasis for SOF-led indirect operations in the long-term U.S. war on terror strategy is needed. Some have even proposed creating a separate unconventional warfare command within USSOCOM to oversee indirect action operations.

Issues for Congress

Increased SOF Role in Pakistan. The deteriorating security situation in Pakistan has defense officials considering a greater role for U.S. forces. While reports maintain that U.S. SOF will increase training and advisory operations in Pakistan in the near future,²⁰ there have also been references made to "covert" SOF operations, including working with or for the CIA. Congress, in its oversight role, might act to review Administration plans for the increased use of SOF in "covert" and other roles in Pakistan. In addition to increasing the number of U.S. SOF trainers, Administration officials are supposedly also considering using U.S. contractors to conduct training.

Direct and Indirect SOF. Congress might decide to examine DOD's and USSOCOM's proposals for addressing perceived inequities in the conduct of direct and indirect SOF missions. There have been accusations made that DOD and USSOCOM military leadership have become so enamored with direct action operations that others within the USSOCOM community wish to literally secede and create a separate command dedicated to unconventional warfare or "indirect" operations. If this is a true representation of the current situation within USSOCOM, greater congressional involvement might be warranted to ensure that a proper balance is achieved and U.S. SOF are properly postured for what has been described as a global "Long War" on terrorism.

¹⁹ Information in this section is from Sean D. Naylor, "Support Grows for Standing Up an Unconventional Warfare Command," *Armed Forces Journal*, September 2007, and from Carlo Munoz, "New Balance Seen Needed Between Direct and Indirect Forces," *InsideDefense.com*, November 26, 2007.

²⁰ Ann Scott Tyson, "U.S. to Step Up Training of Pakistanis," *Washington Post*, January 24, 2008.