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

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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. U.S. Special Operations Command (USSOCOM) has about 66,000 active duty, National Guard, and reserve personnel from all four services and Department of Defense (DOD) civilians assigned to its headquarters, its four components, and one sub-unified command.

In February 2013, based on a request from USSOCOM and the concurrence of Geographic and Functional Combatant Commanders and Military Service Chiefs and Secretaries, the Secretary of Defense assigned command of the Theater Special Operations Commands (TSOCs) to USSOCOM. This means that USSOCOM now has the responsibility to organize, train, and equip TSOCs as it previously had for all assigned SOF units. While USSOCOM is now responsible for the organizing, training, and equipping of TSOCs, the Geographic Combatant Commands will continue to have operational control over the TSOCs.

The current Unified Command Plan (UCP) stipulates USSOCOM is responsible only for synchronizing planning for global operations to combat terrorist networks. This limits its ability to conduct activities designed to deter emerging threats, build relationships with foreign militaries, and potentially develop greater access to foreign militaries. USSOCOM is proposing changes that would, in addition to current responsibilities, include the responsibility for synchronizing the planning, coordination, deployment, and, when directed, the employment of special operations forces globally and will do so with the approval of the Geographic Combatant Commanders, the Services and, as directed, appropriate U.S. government agencies. Further, the proposed changes would give broader responsibility to USSOCOM beyond counterterrorism activities, to include activities against other threat networks.

In February 2014, DOD issued the 2014 Quadrennial Defense Review (QDR). The 2014 QDR calls for 3,700 personnel to be added to USSOCOM's current strength but falls short of the 72,000-person goal set by the 2010 QDR. The 2014 QDR also places heavy emphasis on USSOCOM's role in counterterrorism operations. Beyond this, the QDR offers little detail as to how these additional personnel will be allocated and how the counterterror mandate will be accomplished.

USSOCOM's FY2015 budget request was \$9.913 billion—a 4% reduction over the \$10.409 billion FY2013 budget request. This includes both the Base Budget and Overseas Contingency Operation (OCO) funding.

Potential issues for Congress include possible greater clarification of the 2014 QDR's implications for USSOCOM and U.S. SOF and recent events in Crimea and the rest of Ukraine. This report will be updated.

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Background

Overview

Special Operations Forces (SOF) are elite military units that are highly trained and specially equipped and have the ability to 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 and Components

In 1986, Congress, concerned about the status of SOF within overall U.S. defense planning, passed legislation (P.L. 99-661) to strengthen special operations' position within the defense community. These actions included the establishment of USSOCOM as a new unified command. USSOCOM is headquartered at MacDill Air Force Base in Tampa, FL, and currently consists of approximately 2,500 military and Department of Defense (DOD) civilians (not including government contractors).¹ The commander of USSOCOM is a four-star officer who may be from any military service. Navy Admiral William H. McRaven is the current USSOCOM Commander. The USSOCOM Commander 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.

USSOCOM currently has about 66,000 active duty, National Guard, and reserve personnel from all four services and DOD civilians assigned to its headquarters, its four components, and sub-unified commands.² USSOCOM's components are the U.S. Army Special Operations Command (USASOC); the Naval Special Warfare Command (NAVSPECWARCOM); the Air Force Special Operations Command (AFSOC); and the Marine Corps Special Operations Command (MARSOC). The Joint Special Operations Command (JSOC) is a USSOCOM sub-unified command.

Theater Special Operations Commands (TSOCs)

Additional command and control responsibilities are vested in Theater Special Operations Commands (TSOCs). TSOCs are sub-unified commands under their respective Geographic Combatant Commanders (GCCs). TSOCs are special operational headquarters elements designed to support a GCC's special operations logistics, planning, and operational control requirements, and are normally commanded by a general officer.

In February 2013, based on a request from USSOCOM and with the concurrence of every Geographic and Functional Combatant Commander and Military Service Chiefs and Secretaries, the Secretary of Defense reassigned the TSOCs from the GCCs to USSOCOM.³ This means

¹ Information in this section, unless otherwise noted is taken from "U.S. Special Operations Command Factbook 2014" USSOCOM Public Affairs, February 2014, p. 12.

² Ibid.

³ Information in this section is taken from USSOCOM Information Paper, "Special Operations Forces: 2020: Theater (continued...)"

USSOCOM now has the responsibility to organize, train, and equip TSOCs as it previously had for all assigned SOF units as specified in *U.S. Code* Title 10, Section 167. This change is intended to enable USSOCOM to standardize, to the extent possible, TSOC capabilities and manpower requirements. While USSOCOM is now responsible for the organizing, training, and equipping of TSOCs, the GCCs will continue to have operational control over the TSOCs.

Current TSOCs are⁴

- Special Operations Command South (SOCSOUTH), Homestead Air Force Base, FL;
- Special Operations Command Africa (SOCAFRICA), Stuttgart, Germany;
- Special Operations Command Europe (SOCEUR), Stuttgart, Germany;
- Special Operations Command Central (SOCCENT), MacDill Air Force Base, FL;
- Special Operations Command Pacific (SOCPAC), Camp Smith, HI;
- Special Operations Command Korea (SOCKOR), Yongsang, Korea; and
- Special Operations Command U.S. Northern Command (SOCNORTH), Peterson Air Force Base, CO.

It should also be noted that in 2013, USSOCOM disestablished a TSOC assigned to U.S. Joint Forces Command (USJFC) due to DOD's decision to close USJFC.

Expanded USSOCOM Responsibilities

In addition to Title 10 authorities and responsibilities, USSOCOM has been given additional responsibilities. In the 2004 Unified Command Plan (UCP), USSOCOM was given the responsibility for synchronizing DOD plans against global terrorist networks and, as directed, conducting global operations against those networks.⁵ In this regard, USSOCOM “receives reviews, coordinates and prioritizes all DOD plans that support the global campaign against terror, and then makes recommendations to the Joint Staff regarding force and resource allocations to meet global requirements.”⁶ In October 2008, USSOCOM was designated the DOD proponent for Security Force Assistance (SFA).⁷ In this role, USSOCOM performs a synchronizing function in global training and assistance planning similar to the previously described role of planning against terrorist networks.

(...continued)

Special Operations Commands,” April 25, 2013.

⁴ USSOCOM Pamphlet, “United States Special Operations Command, GlobalSOF Network2020,” 2013.

⁵ “Fact Book: United States Special Operations Command,” USSOCOM Public Affairs, February 2013, p. 10.

⁶ *Ibid.*

⁷ Information in this section is from testimony given by Admiral Eric T. Olson, Commander, U.S. SOCOM, to the House Terrorism, Unconventional Threats and Capabilities Subcommittee on the Fiscal Year 2010 National Defense Authorization Budget Request for the U.S. Special Operations Command, June 4, 2009. For a more in-depth treatment of Security Force Assistance, see CRS Report R41817, *Building the Capacity of Partner States Through Security Force Assistance*, by Thomas K. Livingston.

Proposed Changes to the Unified Command Plan (UCP)⁸

The Unified Command Plan or UCP is:

A document approved by the President, that sets forth basic guidance to all unified combatant commanders; which establishes their missions, responsibilities, and force structure; delineates the general geographical area of responsibility (AOR) for geographic combatant commanders; and specifies functional responsibilities for functional combatant commanders.⁹

Under the current UCP signed by the President in April 2011, USSOCOM is tasked in accordance with Title 10 U.S.C. §167 to serve as a global SOF provider with the inherent responsibility to coordinate global SOF operations with the Services, Combatant Commanders, the Joint Staff, and the Office of the Secretary of Defense (OSD). The current UCP stipulates that the USSOCOM Commander is responsible only for synchronizing planning for global operations to combat terrorist networks. This limits USSOCOM's ability to conduct activities designed to deter emerging threats, build relationships with foreign militaries, and potentially develop greater access to foreign militaries. USSOCOM is proposing changes that include the responsibility for synchronizing the planning, coordination, deployment, and, when directed, the employment of special operations forces globally and will do so with the approval of the Geographic Combatant Commanders, the Services and, as directed, appropriate U.S. government agencies. Further, the proposed changes would give broader responsibility to USSOCOM beyond counterterrorism activities, to include activities against other threat networks.¹⁰

Army Special Operations Command

U.S. Army SOF (ARSOF) includes approximately 29,000 soldiers from the Active Army, National Guard, and Army Reserve organized into Special Forces, Ranger, and special operations aviation units, along with civil affairs units, military information units, and special operations support units.¹¹ 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),¹² consisting of about 1,400 soldiers each, are stationed at Fort Bragg and at Fort Lewis, WA; Fort Campbell, KY; Fort Carson, CO; and Eglin Air Force Base, FL. 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.

⁸ Information in this section is taken from USSOCOM Information Paper, "Special Operations Forces: 2020: Unified Command Plan," March 14, 2013.

⁹ Joint Publication 1-02, Department of Defense Dictionary of Military and Associated Terms, November 8, 2010 (as amended through May 15, 2011), p. 385.

¹⁰ Information provided by USSOCOM to CRS, May 1, 2014.

¹¹ Information in this section, unless otherwise noted is taken from "U.S. Special Operations Command Factbook 2014" USSOCOM Public Affairs, February 2014, p. 18.

¹² Airborne refers to "personnel, troops especially trained to effect, following transport by air, an assault debarkation, either by parachuting or touchdown." Joint Publication 1-02, Department of Defense Dictionary of Military and Associated Terms, 12 April 2001 (As Amended Through 31 July 2010).

Two Army National Guard Special Forces groups are headquartered in Utah and Alabama. An elite airborne light infantry unit specializing in direct action operations,¹³ the 75th Ranger Regiment, is headquartered at Fort Benning, GA, and consists of three battalions and a regimental special troops battalion that provides support to the three Ranger battalions. Army special operations aviation units, including the 160th Special Operations Aviation Regiment (Airborne) (SOAR), 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 that exclusively supports USSOCOM. In September 2011 the 85th Civil Affairs Brigade was activated to support U.S. Army General Purpose Forces (GPFs). All other CA units reside in the Reserves and are affiliated with Army GPF units. Military Information Support Operations (formerly known as psychological operations) units disseminate information to large foreign audiences through mass media. Two active duty Military Information Support Groups (MISG)—the 4th Military Information Support Group (MISG) (Airborne) and 8th Military Information Support Group (MISG) (Airborne)—are stationed at Fort Bragg, and their subordinate units are aligned with Geographic Combatant Commands.

Air Force Special Operations Command

The Air Force Special Operations Command (AFSOC) is one of the Air Force's 10 major commands, with approximately 18,000 active, Reserve, and civilian personnel.¹⁴ AFSOC units operate out of four major continental United States (CONUS) locations and two overseas locations. The headquarters for AFSOC, the first Special Operations Wing (1st SOW), and the 720th Special Tactics Group are located at Hurlburt Field, FL. The 27th SOW is at Cannon AFB, NM. The 352nd and 353rd Special Operations Groups provide forward presence in Europe (RAF Mildenhall, England) and in the Pacific (Kadena Air Base, Japan), respectively. The 6th SOS's mission is to assess, train, and advise partner nation aviation units with the intent to raise their capability and capacity to interdict threats to their nation. The 6th SOS provides aviation expertise to U.S. foreign internal defense (FID) missions. The Air National Guard's 193rd SOW at Harrisburg, PA, and the Air Force Reserve Command's 919th SOW at Duke Field, FL, complete AFSOC's major units. A training center, the U.S. Air Force Special Operations School and Training Center (AFSOTC), is located at Hurlburt Field. AFSOC's four active-duty flying units are composed of more than 100 fixed and rotary-wing aircraft.

AFSOC's Special Tactics experts include Combat Controllers, Pararescuemen, Special Operations Weather Teams, Combat Aviation Advisors, and Tactical Air Control Party (TACPs). As a collective group, they are known as Special Tactics and have also been referred to as "Battlefield Airmen." Their basic role is to provide an interface between air and ground forces, and these

¹³ 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, as well as employing 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.

¹⁴ Information in this section, unless otherwise noted, is taken from "U.S. Special Operations Command Factbook 2014" USSOCOM Public Affairs, February 2014, p. 26.

airmen have highly developed skill sets. Usually embedded with Army, Navy, or Marine SOF units, they provide control of air fire support, medical and rescue expertise, or weather support, depending on the mission requirements.

Naval Special Warfare Command¹⁵

The Naval Special Warfare Command (NSWC) is composed of approximately 8,800 personnel, including active-duty Special Warfare Operators, known as SEALs; Special Warfare Boat Operators, known as Special Warfare Combatant-craft Crewmen (SWCC); reserve personnel; support personnel; and civilians. NSWC is organized around 10 SEAL Teams, 2 SEAL Delivery Vehicle (SDV) Teams, and 3 Special Boat Teams. SEAL Teams consist of six SEAL platoons each, consisting of 2 officers and 16 enlisted personnel. The major operational components of NSWC include Naval Special Warfare Groups One, Three, and Eleven, stationed in Coronado, CA, and Naval Special Warfare Groups Two, Four, and Ten and the Naval Special Warfare Development Group in Little Creek, 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. Because SEALs are considered experts in special reconnaissance and direct action missions—primary counterterrorism skills—NSWC is viewed as well postured to fight a globally dispersed enemy ashore or afloat. NSWC forces can operate in small groups and have the ability to quickly deploy from Navy ships, submarines and aircraft, overseas bases, and forward-based units.

Marine Special Operations Command (MARSOC)¹⁶

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, which includes 1st, 2nd, and 3rd Marine Special Operations Battalions; the Marine Special Operations Support Group; the Marine Special Operations Intelligence Battalion; and the Marine Special Operations School. MARSOC Headquarters, the 2nd and 3rd Marine Special Operations Battalions, the Marine Special Operations School, and the Marine Special Operations Support Group and the Marine Special Operations Intelligence Battalion are stationed at Camp Lejeune, NC. The 1st Marine Special Operations Battalion is stationed at Camp Pendleton, CA. MARSOC forces have been deployed worldwide to conduct a full range of special operations activities. MARSOC missions include direct action, special reconnaissance, foreign internal defense, counterterrorism, information operations, and unconventional warfare. MARSOC currently has approximately 3,000 personnel assigned. MARSOC reportedly at present consists of 625 critical skills operators, 32 teams, and 9 companies, but plans to expand to 844 critical skills operators, 48 teams, and 12 companies by 2016.¹⁷

¹⁵ Information in this section, unless otherwise noted is taken from “U.S. Special Operations Command Factbook 2014” USSOCOM Public Affairs, February 2014, p. 22.

¹⁶ Information in this section is from “Fact Book: United States Special Operations Command,” USSOCOM Public Affairs, February 2013, p. 20; “U.S. Special Operations Command Factbook 2014” USSOCOM Public Affairs, February 2014, p. 30; and CRS discussions with USSOCOM staff, September 10, 2013.

¹⁷ Amanda Wilcox, “MarSOC Continues Growing Despite Marine Corps Drawdown,” *Jacksonville (NC) Daily News*, November 25, 2012.

Joint Special Operations Command (JSOC)¹⁸

From JSOC's official website:

The Joint Special Operations Command (JSOC) is a subunified command of the US Special Operations Command (USSOCOM). It is charged to study special operations requirements and techniques, ensure interoperability and equipment standardization, plan and conduct special operations exercises and training, and develop joint special operations tactics.

Despite its innocuous sounding charter, JSOC has made incredible strides in the special operations field and is comprised of an impressive amalgamation of rigorously screened and accessed Soldiers, Sailors, Airmen, Marines, and Civilians. These men and women possess unique and specialized skills, and are routinely among the best in their field. Among them are seasoned combat veterans who cut their teeth by participating in joint special operations like the Son Tay Prison Raid in Vietnam War which took place in 1970, long before JSOC was activated. More recent members of the Command include active duty special operations veterans of all services who have successfully completed the toughest training regiments and demonstrated their mettle under the most challenging and difficult circumstances, including combat. As a result, past and present members of JSOC have participated in all of our Nation's wars and contingency operations since it was activated in 1980. Included among the places that military and civilian members of the Command have previously served our Nation are Desert One in Iran (1980), Grenada (1983), the Mediterranean Sea during the Achille Lauro hijacking (1985), Panama (1989), the Mideast during the Gulf War (1991), Somalia (1993), Haiti (1994), the Balkans (1996-2002), Afghanistan (2001-present), and Iraq (2003-present).

The Command is always decisively engaged in working to fulfill its charter and typically has members located throughout the world at any given time. An incredibly busy Command, JSOC accomplished its assigned missions successfully in the face of expanding commitments largely due to the quality, dedication, and patriotism of its military and civilian members and the family members who support them.

Organizational and Budgetary Issues

2014 Quadrennial Defense Review (QDR) Report SOF-Related Directives¹⁹

The 2014 QDR contained a number of SOF-related directives pertaining to personnel, organizations, and equipment. These include the following:

- **“Counter Terror and Special Operations.** We will grow overall Special Operations Forces end strength to 69,700 personnel, protecting our ability to sustain persistent, networked, distributed operations to defeat al Qa’ida, counter

¹⁸ Taken directly from JSOC Website, <http://www.socom.mil/pages/jointspecialoperationscommand.aspx>, accessed April 21, 2014.

¹⁹ Information in this section is from Department of Defense, Quadrennial Defense Review Report, February 2014.

other emerging transnational threats, counter WMD, build the capacity of our partners, and support conventional operations.” (Page 17)

- **“Counterterrorism and Special Operations.** The Department of Defense will continue to protect its capacity and capability to counter terrorist threats around the world. U.S. Special Operations Forces play a central role in these efforts, increasingly maintaining persistent forward presence to prevent crises in addition to serving as a crisis response and contingency force. The Department will grow overall SOF end strength to 69,700. We will protect the ability of SOF to sustain persistent, networked, distributed operations to defeat al Qaeda and counter other emerging transnational threats, counter WMD, build partnership capacity for counterterrorism, deny enemy sanctuary, and conduct or support direct action, as appropriate. As forces are withdrawn from Afghanistan, more SOF will be available to support Combatant Commanders’ efforts to counter a range of challenges across the globe. The demand for U.S. forces to expand the counterterrorism capabilities of allied or partner forces will likely increase in the coming years. The United States will continue to advise, train, and equip partner forces to perform essential tasks against terrorist networks, complementing U.S. activities in the field. Operations and activities in the Maghreb, Sahel, and Horn of Africa, for example, further our national security interests without a large commitment of U.S. forces.” (Page 37)
- **“Special Operations Forces**
 - Approximately 660 special operations teams (Includes Army Special Forces Operational Detachment-Alpha (ODA) teams and their equivalents; Navy Sea, Air, Land (SEAL) platoons.
 - Marine special operations teams; Air Force special tactics teams; and operational aviation detachments (OADs). Does not include civil affairs (CA) teams or military information support operations (MISO) detachments.
 - 3 Ranger battalions.
 - 259 mobility and fire support aircraft.
 - Approximately 83 ISR aircraft (40 remotely-piloted and 43 manned).
 - Personnel end strength: 69,700.” (Page 41)

FY2015 USSOCOM Budget Request²⁰

USSOCOM’s FY2015 budget request was \$9.913 billion—a 4% reduction over the \$10.409 billion FY2013 budget request. This includes both the Base Budget and Overseas Contingency Operation (OCO) funding.

²⁰ Information in this section is taken from Department of Defense Fiscal Year (FY) 2015 President’s Budget Submission, United States Special Operations Command, March 2014.

Potential Issues for Congress

U.S. Special Operations Forces and the 2014 Quadrennial Defense Review (QDR)

The 2014 QDR calls for approximately 3,700 additional personnel to be added to the command and places a heavy emphasis on the conduct of counterterrorism operations, but it provides little detail or discussion on how these mandates will be accomplished. In terms of the 3,700 additional personnel, are they “operators,” headquarters, or support personnel or a combination of all three? Are these increases spread across USSOCOM components or, instead, service component-specific personnel increases? Over how many years will this growth occur? Regarding the emphasis on counterterrorism, if USSOCOM is required to focus the majority of its resources and efforts to address counterterrorism threats, are other USSOCOM mission areas that are not terrorism-related adequately addressed? If gaps in mission coverage do occur as a result of USSOCOM’s counterterror focus, how will these gaps be addressed? Will U.S. conventional forces be asked to fill these gaps? Could one solution be asking allied SOF forces to take on non-counterterror SOF missions that are mutually beneficial? From an intellectual perspective, if USSOCOM’s focus is to be counterterrorism-related for the foreseeable future, does the U.S. special operations community run the risk of losing the knowledge, experience, and skills needed if it is employed in a more traditional war fighting role?

U.S. SOF and Recent Events in Crimea and the Rest of Ukraine

It can be argued recent events in Crimea and the rest of Ukraine illustrate there are threats to U.S. national security that are not terror-related and can present themselves with little to no notice. Over the past decade, U.S. SOF efforts have been focused in the U.S. Central Command (USCENTCOM) area of operations and, during the latter half of the decade, the United States has increased U.S. SOF involvement in Africa in response to a growing terrorist threat in the region. The Administration’s 2012 strategic shift to the Asia-Pacific region has also likely resulted in increased U.S. SOF involvement in that region as well. Given the heavy emphasis on these regions, it is possible that European-focused U.S. SOF activities have been scaled back over the recent past to compensate for increased SOF employment in other regions.

Congress might choose to examine how U.S. SOF are currently postured in the U.S. European Command (USEUCOM) region. Potential questions for examination could include the following:

- Have European-based or aligned U.S. SOF units been allocated to other regions?
- If so, what U.S. SOF activities in Europe were either assigned to non-SOF units or not accomplished due to a lack of forces?
- Are there U.S. SOF Title 10 activities, such as Foreign Internal Defense, Security Force Assistance, or other authorized activities, that might be included as part of a U.S./NATO response to events in Crimea and the rest of Ukraine?
- At present, are there adequate U.S. SOF assets in or dedicated to Europe that could participate in U.S. or NATO activities in response to events in Crimea and the rest of Ukraine? For example, about 600 U.S. paratroopers from the Italy-based 173rd Infantry Brigade Combat Team (Airborne) were recently deployed to

Poland, Lithuania, Latvia, and Estonia to “reassure” U.S. Eastern European allies.²¹

- In light of events in Crimea and the rest of Ukraine and the possibility that unrest in Eastern Europe could become a wider, long-term issue, are there plans to relook at the role of U.S. SOF in the USEUCOM region and perhaps reallocate U.S. SOF units to the region?

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²¹ Philip Ewing, “U.S. Dispatches Troops to Reassure Eastern Europe,” *Politico*, April 23, 2014.