



**Congressional
Research Service**

Informing the legislative debate since 1914

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

Updated March 22, 2019

Congressional Research Service

<https://crsreports.congress.gov>

RS21048

Summary

Special Operations Forces (SOF) play a significant role in U.S. military operations and, in recent years, have been given greater responsibility for planning and conducting worldwide counterterrorism operations. U.S. Special Operations Command (USSOCOM) has about 70,000 Active Duty, National Guard, and reserve personnel from all four services and Department of Defense (DOD) civilians assigned to its headquarters, its four service component commands, and eight sub-unified commands.

In 2013, based on a request from USSOCOM (with the concurrence of Geographic and Functional Combatant Commanders and the Military Service Chiefs and Secretaries), the Secretary of Defense assigned command of the Theater Special Operations Commands (TSOCs) to USSOCOM. USSOCOM now has the responsibility to organize, train, and equip TSOCs. 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. Because the TSOCs are now classified as sub-unified commands, the services are responsible to provide non-SOF support to the TSOCs in the same manner in which they provide support to the Geographic Combatant Command headquarters.

The current Unified Command Plan (UCP) stipulates USSOCOM responsibility for synchronizing planning for global operations to combat terrorist networks. This focus on planning 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 August 2016, the Obama Administration assigned USSOCOM the leading role in coordinating DOD's efforts to counter WMDs, a mission previously assigned to U.S. Strategic Command (USSTRATCOM). USSOCOM is also the DOD proponent for Security Force Assistance and recently was assigned the mission to field a transregional Military Information Support Operations (MISO) capability.

USSOCOM's FY2020 budget request is for \$13.8 billion, and USSOCOM has requested a force structure of 66,553 military and 6,651 civilian personnel.

A potential issue for Congress is the future of USSOCOM and U.S. SOF.

Contents

| | |
|---|----|
| Background | 1 |
| Overview | 1 |
| Command Structures and Components | 1 |
| Theater Special Operations Commands (TSOCs) | 2 |
| Additional USSOCOM Responsibilities | 2 |
| Army Special Operations Command..... | 3 |
| Air Force Special Operations Command | 4 |
| U.S. Air Force Special Tactics | 5 |
| AFSOC Aircraft | 6 |
| Naval Special Warfare Command | 6 |
| U.S. Marine Corps Forces Special Operations Command (MARSOC)..... | 6 |
| Joint Special Operations Command (JSOC) | 7 |
| FY2020 USSOCOM Budget Request | 7 |
| FY2020 USSOCOM Requested Force Structure | 7 |
| Potential Issue for Congress | 8 |
| The Future of USSOCOM and U.S. SOF..... | 8 |
| Discussion..... | 10 |

Tables

| | |
|--|---|
| Table 1. FY2020 USSOCOM Budget Request | 7 |
| Table 2. FY2020 USSOCOM Requested Force Structure..... | 8 |

Contacts

| | |
|-------------------------|----|
| Author Information..... | 11 |
|-------------------------|----|

Background

Overview

Special operations are military operations requiring unique modes of employment, tactical techniques, equipment, and training. These operations are often conducted in hostile, denied, or politically sensitive environments and are characterized by one or more of the following elements: time sensitive, clandestine, low visibility, conducted with and/or through indigenous forces, requiring regional expertise, and/or a high degree of risk. Special Operations Forces (SOF) are those active and reserve component forces of the services designated by the Secretary of Defense and specifically organized, trained, and equipped to conduct and support special operations. The U.S. Special Operations Command (USSOCOM), headquartered at MacDill Air Force Base in Tampa, FL, is a functional combatant command responsible for training, doctrine, and equipping for 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 and to strengthen interoperability among the branches of U.S. SOF. These actions included the establishment of USSOCOM as a new unified command. USSOCOM headquarters currently consists of approximately 2,500 military and Department of Defense (DOD) civilians (not including government contractors).¹ As stipulated by U.S.C. Title X, Section 167, the commander of USSOCOM is a four-star officer who may be from any military service. U.S. Army General Raymond A. Thomas III is the current USSOCOM Commander. Army Lieutenant General Richard Clarke has been approved to replace General Thomas when he retires in March 2019.² The USSOCOM Commander reports directly to the Secretary of Defense. The Assistant Secretary of Defense for Special Operations and Low Intensity Conflict (ASD SOLIC), a member of the Office of the Secretary of Defense for Policy (OSD-P), provides civilian oversight over USSOCOM activities and is chain of supervision between the Secretary of Defense and USSOCOM Commander. The current ASD SOLIC is Owen West.

As of 2019, USSOCOM consists of over 70,000 active duty, reserve, National Guard, and civilian personnel assigned to its headquarters (about 2,500 personnel), its four components, and sub-unified commands.³ USSOCOM's components are the U.S. Army Special Operations Command (USASOC); the Naval Special Warfare Command (NSWC); the Air Force Special Operations Command (AFSOC); and the Marine Corps Forces Special Operations Command (MARSOC). The Joint Special Operations Command (JSOC) is a USSOCOM sub-unified command.

¹ Joint Publication 3.05, *Doctrine for Special Operations*, July 16, 2014; http://www.jcs.mil/Portals/36/Documents/Doctrine/pubs/jp3_05.pdf.

² Statement for the Record, the Honorable Owen West, Assistant Secretary of Defense for Special Operations and Low – Intensity Conflict, before the Committee on Armed Services, United States Senate, February 14, 2019, p. 1.

³ 2019 Fact Book, USSOCOM, p. 12, <https://www.socom.mil/FactBook/2019%20Fact%20Book.pdf>, accessed March 6, 2019.

Theater Special Operations Commands (TSOCs)

Theater-level 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 command and 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 transferred combatant command of the TSOCs from the GCCs to USSOCOM.⁴ This means USSOCOM 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 continue to have operational control over the TSOCs and all special operations in their respective theaters. TSOC commanders are the senior SOF advisors for their respective GCCs. Each TSOC is capable of forming the core of a joint task force headquarters for short-term operations, and can provide command and control for all SOF in theater on a continuous basis. The services have what the DOD calls "Combatant Command Service Agency (CCSA)" responsibilities for providing manpower, non-SOF peculiar equipment, and logistic support to the TSOCs. The current TSOCs, the GCCs they support, and the CCSA responsibility for those TSOCs are as follows.⁵

- Special Operations Command South (SOCSOUTH), Homestead Air Force Base, FL; supports U.S. Southern Command; its CCSA is the Army.
- Special Operations Command Africa (SOCAFRICA), Stuttgart, Germany; supports U.S. Africa Command; its CCSA is the Army.
- Special Operations Command Europe (SOCEUR), Stuttgart, Germany; supports U.S. European Command; its CCSA is the Army.
- Special Operations Command Central (SOCCENT), MacDill Air Force Base, FL; supports U.S. Central Command; its CCSA is the Air Force.
- Special Operations Command Pacific (SOCPAC), Camp Smith, HI; supports U.S. Pacific Command; its CCSA is the Navy.
- Special Operations Command Korea (SOCKOR), Yongsang, Korea; supports U.S. Forces Korea; its CCSA is the Army.
- Special Operations Command U.S. Northern Command (SOCNORTH), Peterson Air Force Base, CO; supports U.S. Northern Command; its CCSA is the Air Force.

Additional 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

⁴ Information in this section is taken from USSOCOM Information Paper, "Special Operations Forces: 2020: Theater Special Operations Commands," April 25, 2013.

⁵ USSOCOM Pamphlet, "United States Special Operations Command, GlobalSOF Network2020," 2013.

responsibility for synchronizing DOD planning against global terrorist networks and, as directed, conducting global operations against those networks.⁶ 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.”⁷ In October 2008, USSOCOM was designated the DOD proponent for Security Force Assistance (SFA).⁸ 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. In 2018, USSOCOM was also assigned the mission to field a transregional Military Information Support Operations (MISO) capability intended to “address the opportunities and risks of global information space.” By April of 2019, a Joint MISO WebOps Center (JMWC) is planned to be operating with the Interagency and Combatant Command teams to provide joint messaging capabilities.⁹

Army Special Operations Command

U.S. Army SOF (ARSOF) includes approximately 33,000 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.¹⁰ 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),¹¹ 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.

Two Army National Guard Special Forces groups are headquartered in Utah and Alabama. In addition, an elite airborne light infantry unit specializing in direct action operations,¹² the 75th Ranger Regiment, is headquartered at Fort Benning, GA, and consists of three battalions of about 800 soldiers each and a regimental special troops battalion providing support to the three Ranger battalions. The Army’s special operations aviation unit, the 160th Special Operations Aviation Regiment (Airborne) (SOAR), consists of five battalions and is headquartered at Fort Campbell, KY. The 160th SOAR features pilots trained to fly the most sophisticated Army rotary-wing

⁶ “Fact Book: United States Special Operations Command,” USSOCOM Public Affairs, February 2013, p. 10.

⁷ *Ibid.*

⁸ Information in this section is from testimony given by Admiral Eric T. Olson, Commander, USSOCOM, 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.

⁹ Statement of General Raymond A. Thomas, III, U.S. Army, Commander, United States Special Operations Command before the Senate Armed Services Committee, February 14, 2019, p. 12.

¹⁰ Information in this section, unless otherwise noted, is taken from 2019 Fact Book, USSOCOM, p. 18, <https://www.socom.mil/FactBook/2019%20Fact%20Book.pdf>, accessed March 6, 2019.

¹¹ 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).

¹² 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.

aircraft in the harshest environments, day or night, and in adverse weather and supports all USSOCOM components, not just exclusively Army units.

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 (MISGs)—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 19,500 active, reserve, and civilian personnel.¹³ AFSOC units operate out of four major continental United States (CONUS) locations and two overseas locations. The headquarters for AFSOC, the 1st Special Operations Wing (1st SOW), 24th Special Operations Wing (24th SOW), and the Air Force Special Operations Air Warfare Center (AFSOAWC) are located at Hurlburt Field, FL.¹⁴ The AFSOAWC is responsible for training, education, irregular warfare program, innovation development, and operational testing.¹⁵ From AFSOAWC's fact sheet:

The AFSOAWC's mission includes non-standard aviation in support of Army, Navy, Air Force, Marine and allied special operations forces.

The following units are consolidated under the Air Warfare Center [AFSOAWC]:

- U.S. Air Force Special Operations School, Hurlburt Field, FL
- 6th Special Operations Squadron, Duke Field, FL
- 19th Special Operations Squadron, Hurlburt Field, FL
- 551st Special Operations Squadron, Cannon Air Force Base, NM
- 5th Special Operations Squadron, a reserve unit from the 919th Special Operations Wing, Duke Field, FL
- 371st Special Operations Combat Training Squadron, Hurlburt Field, FL
- 18th Flight Test Squadron, Hurlburt Field, FL
- 592nd Special Operations Maintenance Squadron, Duke Field, FL
- 209th Civil Engineer Squadron, a guard unit from Gulfport, MS
- 280th Special Operations Communications Squadron, a guard unit from Dothan, AL

¹³ Information in this section, unless otherwise noted, is taken from 2019 Fact Book, USSOCOM, p. 26, <https://www.socom.mil/FactBook/2019%20Fact%20Book.pdf>, accessed March 6, 2019.

¹⁴ AFSOAWC Fact Sheet, <http://www.afsoc.af.mil/AboutUs/FactSheets/Display/tabid/140/Article/571079/air-force-special-operations-air-warfare-center.aspx>, accessed April, 2, 2015.

¹⁵ Ibid.

The Air Warfare Center provides mission qualification training in SOF aviation platforms to include AC-130U, AC-130W, U-28, MQ-1, MQ-9, C-145, C-146 as well as small unmanned aerial systems (SUAS), Combat Aviation Advisors, medical element personnel, and AFSOC Security Forces. In addition to AFSOC personnel, AFSOAWC is responsible for educating and training other USSOCOM components and joint/interagency/coalition partners.¹⁶

The 27th SOW is at Cannon AFB, NM. The 352nd and 353rd Special Operations Wings 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 flying units.

The 24th Special Operations Wing is one of three Air Force active duty special operations wings assigned to Air Force Special Operations Command. The 24th SOW is based at Hurlburt Field, Fla. The 24th SOW is the only Special Tactics wing in the Air Force.

U.S. Air Force Special Tactics

From the Air Force's Special Tactics fact sheet:

The primary mission of the 24 SOW is to provide Special Tactics forces for rapid global employment to enable airpower success. The 24 SOW is U.S. Special Operation Command's tactical air and ground integration force, and the Air Force's special operations ground force to enable global access, precision strike, and personnel recovery operations.

Core capabilities encompass: airfield reconnaissance, assessment, and control; personnel recovery; joint terminal attack control and environmental reconnaissance.

Special Tactics is comprised of Special Tactics Officers, Combat Controllers, Combat Rescue Officers, Pararescuemen, Special Operations Weather Officers and Airmen, Air Liaison Officers, Tactical Air Control Party operators, and a number of combat support Airmen which compromise 58 Air Force specialties.

These unique skills provide a full-spectrum, air-focused special operations capability to the combatant commander in order to ensure airpower success. With their unique skill sets, Special Tactics operators are often the first special operations elements deployed into crisis situations. Special Tactics Airmen often embed with Navy SEALs, Army Green Berets and Rangers to provide everything from combat air support to medical aid and personnel recovery, depending on their specialty.

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 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.¹⁷

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷From Air Force Special Tactics website: <http://www.24sow.af.mil/AboutUs/FactSheets/Display/tabid/140/Article/496534/24th-special-operations-wing.aspx>, accessed April 22, 2015.

AFSOC Aircraft

AFSOC's active duty and reserve component flying units operate fixed and rotary-wing aircraft, including the CV-22B, AC-130, C-130, EC-130, MC-130, MQ-1, MQ-9, U-28A, C-145A, C-146A, and PC-12.¹⁸

Naval Special Warfare Command¹⁹

The Naval Special Warfare Command (NSWC) is composed of approximately 10,000 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.

U.S. Marine Corps Forces Special Operations Command (MARSOC)²⁰

On November 1, 2005, DOD announced the creation of the Marine Special Operations Command (MARSOC) as a component of USSOCOM. Now referred to as the U.S. Marine Corps Forces Special Operations Command, MARSOC consists of the Marine Raider Regiment, which includes 1st, 2nd, and 3rd Marine Raider Battalions; the Marine Raider Support Group; 1st, 2nd, and 3rd Marine Raider Support Battalions; and the Marine Special Operations School. MARSOC headquarters, the 2nd and 3rd Marine Raider Battalions, the Marine Special Operations School, and the Marine Raider Support Group are stationed at Camp Lejeune, NC. The 1st Marine Raider 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, and information operations. MARSOC currently has approximately 3,000 personnel assigned.²¹

¹⁸ From AFSOC website, <http://www.af.mil/AboutUs/FactSheets/Display/tabid/224/Article/104528/air-force-special-operations-command.aspx>, accessed April 22, 2015.

¹⁹ Information in this section, unless otherwise noted, is taken from 2019 Fact Book, USSOCOM, p. 22, <https://www.socom.mil/FactBook/2019%20Fact%20Book.pdf>, accessed March 6, 2019.

²⁰ 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 2015” USSOCOM Public Affairs, p. 30; and CRS discussions with USSOCOM staff, September 10, 2013.

²¹ Information in this section, unless otherwise noted, is taken from 2019 Fact Book, USSOCOM, p. 30, <https://www.socom.mil/FactBook/2019%20Fact%20Book.pdf>, accessed March 6, 2019.

Joint Special Operations Command (JSOC)²²

From USSOCOM’s official website:

The Joint Special Operations Command, located at Fort Bragg, North Carolina, is a sub-unified command of the U.S. Special Operations Command. 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.

FY2020 USSOCOM Budget Request

USSOCOM’s FY2020 budget request of \$13.8 billion represents an increase of \$381 million (2.8%) from the FY2019-enacted position. USSOCOM’s FY2020 base budget request totals \$9.6 billion, a \$435 million (5%) increase from the FY2019-enacted position of \$9.2 billion, while overall FY2020 personnel increases by 1,358 (increases military personnel by 1,407 and reduces civilian personnel by 49). The FY2020 Overseas Contingency Operations (OCO) request totals \$4.2 billion, a \$54 million decrease (-1%) from the FY2019-enacted position.²³

Table 1. FY2020 USSOCOM Budget Request

In Billions (B) and Millions (M) of dollars

| Budget Category | Base Budget | Overseas Contingency Operations (OCO) | Total |
|---|-------------|---------------------------------------|-----------|
| Operations and Maintenance (O&M) | \$6.1 B | \$3.8 B | \$9.9 B |
| Research, Development, Testing & Evaluation (RDT&E) | \$809 M | 12 M | \$821 M |
| Procurement | \$2.2 B | \$375 M | \$2.575 B |
| Military Construction (MILCON) | \$578 M | — | \$578 M |

Source: United States Special Operations Command, FY2020 Budget Highlights, March 6, 2019.

Note: Numbers might not add due to rounding.

FY2020 USSOCOM Requested Force Structure

USSOCOM’s FY 2020 budget request seeks a 2.2% manpower increase, from 71,612 personnel in FY2019 to 73,204 in FY2020.

²² Taken directly from USSOCOM website, <http://www.socom.mil/pages/jointspecialoperationscommand.aspx>, accessed April 12, 2018.

²³ Taken directly from United States Special Operations Command, FY2020 Budget Highlights, March 6, 2019, p. 7.

Table 2. FY2020 USSOCOM Requested Force Structure

| Personnel | FY2020 Request |
|------------------------|----------------|
| Air Force Military | 16,830 |
| Air Force Civilians | 2,579 |
| Army Military | 35,976 |
| Army Civilians | 2,632 |
| Navy Military | 10,526 |
| Navy Civilians | 1,288 |
| Marine Corps Military | 3,221 |
| Marine Corps Civilians | 152 |
| USSOCOM Military Total | 66,553 |
| USSOCOM Civilian Total | 6,651 |
| TOTAL MANPOWER | 73,2014 |

Source: Taken directly from United States Special Operations Command, FY2020 Budget Highlights, March 6, 2019, p. 4.

Potential Issue for Congress

The Future of USSOCOM and U.S. SOF.

After 17 years at the forefront of the global military campaign against terrorism, policymakers, defense officials, and academics are questioning the future role of USSOCOM and U.S. SOF. Three legislative provisions in the FY2019 National Defense Authorization Act (P.L. 115-232) suggest growing congressional concern with misconduct, ethics, and professionalism; roles and responsibilities for ASD SOLIC; and SOF's ability to counter future threats across the spectrum of conflict.

SEC. 1066. COMPREHENSIVE REVIEW OF PROFESSIONALISM AND ETHICS PROGRAMS FOR SPECIAL OPERATIONS FORCES²⁴

(a) **REVIEW REQUIRED.**—The Secretary of Defense shall conduct a comprehensive review of the ethics programs and professionalism programs of the United States Special Operations Command and of the military departments for officers and other military personnel serving in special operations forces.

(b) **ELEMENTS OF THE REVIEW.**—The review conducted under subsection (a) shall specifically include a description and assessment of each of the following:

- (1) The professionalism and ethics standards of the United States Special Operations Command and affiliated component commands.
- (2) The ethics programs and professionalism programs of the military departments available for special operations forces.
- (3) The ethics programs and professionalism programs of the United States Special Operations Command and affiliated component commands.

²⁴Conference Report 115-874 to Accompany H.R. 5515, John S. McCain National Defense Authorization Act for Fiscal Year 2019, July 25, 2018, pp. 341-343.

(4) The roles and responsibilities of the military departments and the United States Special Operations Command and affiliated component commands in administering, overseeing, managing, and ensuring compliance and participation of special operations forces in ethics programs and professionalism programs, including an identification of—

(A) Any gaps in the administration, oversight, and management of such programs and in ensuring the compliance and participation in such programs; and

(B) Any additional guidance that may be required for a systematic, integrated approach in administering, overseeing, and managing such programs and in ensuring compliance with and participation in such programs in order to address issues and improve adherence to professionalism and ethics standards.

(5) The adequacy of the existing management and oversight framework for ensuring that all ethics programs and professionalism programs available to special operations forces meet Department standards.

(6) Tools and metrics for identifying and assessing individual and organizational ethics and professionalism issues with respect to special operations forces.

(7) Tools and metrics for assessing the effectiveness of existing ethics programs and professionalism programs in improving or addressing individual and organizational ethics-related and professionalism issues with respect to special operations forces.

(8) Any additional actions that may be required to address or improve individual and organizational ethics and professionalism issues with respect to special operations forces.

(9) Any additional actions that may be required to improve the oversight and accountability by senior leaders of ethics and professionalism-related issues with respect to special operations forces.

(c) **LIMITATION ON DELEGATION.**—The Secretary of Defense may only delegate responsibility for any element of the review required by subsection (a) to the Assistant Secretary of Defense for Special Operations and Low Intensity Conflict, in coordination with other appropriate offices of the Secretary of Defense and the secretaries of the military departments.

(d) **DEADLINE FOR SUBMITTAL OF REVIEW.**—The Secretary of Defense shall submit the review required by subsection (a) to the Committees on Armed Services of the Senate and the House of Representatives by not later than March 1, 2019.

(e) **DEFINITIONS.**—In this section:

(1) The term “ethics program” means a program that includes—

(A) Compliance-based ethics training, education, initiative, or other activity that focuses on adherence to rules and regulations; and

(B) Values-based ethics training, education, initiative, or other activity that focuses on upholding a set of ethical principles in order to achieve high standards of conduct and incorporate guiding principles to help foster an ethical culture and inform decision-making where rules are not clear.

(2) The term “professionalism program” means a program that includes training education, initiative, or other activity that focuses on values, ethics, standards, code of conduct, and skills as related to the military profession.

SEC. 917. DEADLINE FOR COMPLETION OF FULL IMPLEMENTATION OF REQUIREMENTS IN CONNECTION WITH ORGANIZATION OF THE

DEPARTMENT OF DEFENSE FOR MANAGEMENT OF SPECIAL OPERATIONS FORCES AND SPECIAL OPERATIONS²⁵

The Secretary of Defense shall ensure that the implementation of Section 922 of the National Defense Authorization Act for Fiscal Year 2017 (Public Law 114–328; 130 Stat. 2354) and the amendments made by that section is fully complete by not later than 90 days after the date of the enactment of this Act.

SEC. 914. ASSISTANT SECRETARY OF DEFENSE FOR SPECIAL OPERATIONS AND LOW INTENSITY CONFLICT REVIEW OF UNITED STATES SPECIAL OPERATIONS COMMAND²⁶

(a) **REVIEW REQUIRED.**—The Assistant Secretary of Defense for Special Operations and Low Intensity Conflict shall, in coordination with the Commander of the United States Special Operations Command, conduct a comprehensive review of the United States Special Operations Command for purposes of ensuring that the institutional and operational capabilities of special operations forces are appropriate to counter anticipated future threats across the spectrum of conflict.

(b) **SCOPE OF REVIEW.**—The review required by subsection (a) shall include, at a minimum, the following:

(1) An assessment of the adequacy of special operations forces doctrine, organization, training, materiel, education, personnel, and facilities to implement the 2018 National Defense Strategy, and recommendations, if any, for modifications for that purpose.

(2) An assessment of the roles and responsibilities of special operations forces as assigned by law, Department of Defense guidance, or other formal designation, and recommendations, if any, for additions to or divestitures of such roles or responsibilities.

(3) An assessment of the adequacy of the processes through which the United States Special Operations Command evaluates and prioritizes the requirements at the geographic combatant commands for special operations forces and special operations-unique capabilities and makes recommendations on the allocation of special operations forces and special operations unique capabilities to meet such requirements, and recommendations, if any, for modifications of such processes.

(4) Any other matters the Assistant Secretary considers appropriate.

(c) **DEADLINES.**—

(1) **COMPLETION OF REVIEW.**—The review required by subsection (a) shall be completed by not later than 270 days after the date of the enactment of this Act.

(2) **REPORT.**—Not later than 30 days after completion of the review, the Assistant Secretary shall submit to the congressional defense committees a report on the review, including the findings and any recommendations of the Assistant Secretary as a result of the review.

Discussion

These three legislative provisions, in addition to directing the Secretary of Defense to fully implement directed changes in ASD SOLIC, call for ASD SOLIC and USSOCOM to take an introspective look at U.S. SOF’s culture, roles and responsibilities, adequacy of resources,

²⁵ H.R. 5515, John S. McCain National Defense Authorization Act for Fiscal Year 2019, p. 290.

²⁶ Conference Report 115-874 to Accompany H.R. 5515, John S. McCain National Defense Authorization Act for Fiscal Year 2019, July 25, 2018, pp. 289-290.

organizational structure, and the adequacy of training, education, and personnel. Some have suggested these provisions are a precursor for congressional and DOD actions to “rein in and reorient” U.S. SOF from fighting terrorists to taking on nation-states instead.²⁷ Others, citing reportedly nonsanctioned military combat operations in Africa, where U.S. SOF are said to have strayed from their train and assist mandate, have questioned whether or not U.S. SOF was involved in direct combat in Niger.²⁸ Some believe this situation calls into question the adequacy of civilian oversight and control of U.S. SOF.²⁹ Others assert that the size of U.S. SOF and the scope of their missions have expanded beyond the ability of USSOCOM to handle them and that congressional actions to increase ASD SOLIC oversight and control of U.S. SOF are necessary to improve the current state of affairs.³⁰ Aware that U.S. SOF are overburdened and that there is a need to find the right balance between continuing to challenge terrorist organizations while simultaneously addressing growing irregular warfare threats posed by nation-states, policymakers will likely make good use of the two forthcoming congressionally mandated reviews. It is possible that over the next few years, significant public policy debates on the future of USSOCOM and U.S. SOF will be undertaken, potentially resulting in a number of changes for ASD SOLIC, USSOCOM, and U.S. SOF.

Author Information

Andrew Feickert
Specialist in Military Ground Forces

Disclaimer

This document was prepared by the Congressional Research Service (CRS). CRS serves as nonpartisan shared staff to congressional committees and Members of Congress. It operates solely at the behest of and under the direction of Congress. Information in a CRS Report should not be relied upon for purposes other than public understanding of information that has been provided by CRS to Members of Congress in connection with CRS’s institutional role. CRS Reports, as a work of the United States Government, are not subject to copyright protection in the United States. Any CRS Report may be reproduced and distributed in its entirety without permission from CRS. However, as a CRS Report may include copyrighted images or material from a third party, you may need to obtain the permission of the copyright holder if you wish to copy or otherwise use copyrighted material.

²⁷ Sean D. Naylor, “Special Operations Boom Years May Be Coming to a Close,” *Yahoo News*, September 13, 2018.

²⁸ Ibid. and Alice Hunt Friend, “The Accompany They Keep: What Niger Tells Us About Accompany Missions, Combat, and Operations Other Than War,” *War on the Rocks*, May 11, 2018.

²⁹ Naylor.

³⁰ Ibid.