

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

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Summary

Special Operations Forces (SOF) play a significant role in U.S. military operations. 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 improve interoperability among the branches of U.S. SOF. These actions included the establishment of USSOCOM as a new unified command.

As of 2023, USSOCOM consisted of approximately 70,000 Active Duty, Reserve, National Guard, and civilian personnel assigned to its headquarters, its four components, and sub-unified commands. 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.

USSOCOM also comprises seven 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.

Considerations for Congress include Army Special Forces recruiting and possible force structure reductions and Air Force Special Operations Power Projection Wings and future unit relocations.

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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 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 improve interoperability among the branches of U.S. SOF. These actions included the establishment of USSOCOM as a new unified command. As stipulated by *U.S. Code* (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 P. Bryan Fenton is the current USSOCOM Commander. The USSOCOM Commander reports directly to the Secretary of Defense. The Assistant Secretary of Defense for Special Operations/Low-Intensity Conflict (ASD (SOLIC)) is the principal civilian advisor to the Secretary of Defense on special operations and low-intensity conflict matters. The current ASD (SOLIC) is the Honorable Christopher Maier.¹

In this role, the ASD (SOLIC)

- exercises authority, direction, and control of all special operations-peculiar issues relating to the organization, training, and equipping of SOF;
- is the Principal Special Operations and Low Intensity Conflict Official within the senior management of the Department of Defense (DOD);
- sits in the chain-of-command above USSOCOM for special operations-peculiar administrative matters and provides civilian oversight of the SOF enterprise; and
- advises, assists, and supports the Under Secretary of Defense for Policy (USD- P) on special operations and irregular warfare policy matters.²

As of 2023, USSOCOM consisted of approximately 70,000 Active Duty, Reserve, National Guard, and civilian personnel assigned to its headquarters, 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 Department of Defense, ASD (SOLIC): <https://policy.defense.gov/OUUSD-Offices/ASD-for-Special-Operations-Low-Intensity-Conflict/>, accessed August 15, 2023.

² Ibid.

³ USSOCOM 2023 Fact Book, p. 6.

Title X USSOCOM Authorities

10 USC §167, Unified Combatant Command for Special Operations Forces, states:

Subject to the authority, direction, and control of the Assistant Secretary of Defense for Special Operations and Low Intensity Conflict, the commander of such command shall be responsible for, and shall have the authority to conduct, the following functions relating to special operations activities (whether or not relating to the special operations command).

Current authorities include

- developing special operations strategy, doctrine and tactics;
- preparing and submitting budget proposals for special operations forces;
- exercising authority, direction, and control over special operations expenditures;
- training assigned forces;
- conducting specialized courses of instruction;
- validating requirements;
- establishing requirement priorities;
- ensuring interoperability of equipment and forces;
- formulating and submitting intelligence support requirements;
- monitoring special operations officers' promotions, assignments, retention, training, and professional military education;
- ensuring special operations forces' combat readiness;
- monitoring special operations forces' preparedness to carry out assigned missions;
- developing and acquiring special operations-peculiar equipment, materiel, supplies and services;
- commanding and controlling U.S.-based special operations forces;
- providing special operations forces to Geographic Combatant Commanders; and
- conducting activities specified by the President or Secretary of Defense.⁴

Additional USSOCOM Responsibilities

In addition to the aforementioned Title X authorities and responsibilities, USSOCOM has been given additional responsibilities. In the 2004 Unified Command Plan (UCP), USSOCOM was given the responsibility for synchronizing DOD planning 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 2008, USSOCOM was designated the DOD proponent for Security Force Assistance (SFA).⁷ In this role, USSOCOM performs a

⁴ Ibid., p. 8.

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

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ 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.

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 Trans Regional Military Information Support Operations (MISO) capability intended to “address the opportunities and risks of global information space.”⁸

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 2013, based on a request from USSOCOM and with the concurrence of every geographic and functional combatant commander and the Service Chiefs and Secretaries, the Secretary of Defense transferred combatant command of the TSOCs from the GCCs to USSOCOM.⁹ 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 X, Section 167. This change was intended to enable USSOCOM to standardize, to the extent possible, TSOC capabilities and manpower requirements. While USSOCOM is 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:¹⁰

- 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), Camp Humphries, Republic of Korea; supports U.S. Forces Korea; its CCSA is the Army.

⁸ 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.

⁹ Information in this section is taken from USSOCOM Information Paper, “Special Operations Forces: 2020: Theater Special Operations Commands,” April 25, 2013.

¹⁰ USSOCOM 2023 Fact Book, pp. 21-29.

- Special Operations Command U.S. Northern Command (SOCNORTH), Peterson Air Force Base, CO; supports U.S. Northern Command; its CCSA is the Air Force.

Joint Special Operations Command (JSOC)¹¹

From USSOCOM's 2023 Factbook:

The Joint Special Operations Command, located at Fort Bragg, North Carolina, is a sub-unified command of the U.S. Special Operations Command. JSOC prepares assigned, attached and augmented forces, and, when directed, conducts special operations against threats to protect the homeland and U.S. interests abroad.

Army Special Operations Command

U.S. Army SOF (ARSOF) includes approximately 36,000 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.¹² ARSOF Headquarters and other resources, such as the John F. Kennedy Special Warfare Center and School, are located at Fort Liberty (formerly Ft. Bragg), NC.¹³ Five active Special Forces (SF) Groups (Airborne),¹⁴ consisting of about 1,400 soldiers each, are stationed at Fort Liberty and at Joint Base Lewis-McChord, 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.

An elite airborne light infantry unit specializing in direct action operations,¹⁵ the 75th Ranger Regiment, is headquartered at Fort Moore (formerly Ft. Benning), GA,¹⁶ and consists of three battalions of about 800 soldiers each, a regimental special troops battalion, and a regimental military intelligence battalion. 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

¹¹ Ibid., p. 12.

¹² Information in this section, unless otherwise noted, is taken from USSOCOM 2022 Fact Book, pp. 20-23.

¹³ The former Fort Bragg was renamed Fort Liberty on June 2, 2023, in accordance with the recommendation of the Naming Commission. For more on the commission, see CRS Insight IN10756, *Confederate Names and Military Installations*. CRS uses military installation names as listed on the Department of Defense's Military OneSource website at <https://installations.militaryonesource.mil/view-all> (last accessed April 26, 2023).

¹⁴ 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).

¹⁵ 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.

¹⁶ The former Fort Benning was renamed Fort Moore on May 11, 2023, in accordance with the recommendation of the Naming Commission. For more on the commission, see CRS Insight IN10756, *Confederate Names and Military Installations*. CRS uses military installation names as listed on the Department of Defense's Military OneSource website at <https://installations.militaryonesource.mil/view-all> (last accessed April 26, 2023).

sophisticated Army rotary-wing aircraft in the harshest environments, day or night, and in adverse weather and supports all USSOCOM components, not just 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. Military Information Support Operations (also known as psychological operations) units disseminate information to large foreign audiences through mass media. Two Active Duty Psychological Operations (PSYOPS) groups—the 4th PSYOPS Group and 8th PSYOPS Group—are stationed at Fort Liberty, NC, 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 major commands, comprising approximately 17,000 Active, Reserve, and civilian personnel.¹⁷ AFSOC units operate out of four major continental United States (CONUS) locations and two overseas locations. The headquarters for AFSOC is Hurlburt Field, FL.¹⁸ AFSOC units are stationed as follows:

- 1st Special Operations Wing, Hurlburt Field, FL;
- 24th Special Operations Wing, Hurlburt Field, FL;
- 27th Special Operations Wing, Cannon Air Force Base, NM;
- 137th Special Operations Wing (Air National Guard), Oklahoma City, OK;
- 193rd Special Operations Wing (Air National Guard), Harrisburg, PA;
- 352nd Special Operations Wing, Royal Air Force Mildenhall, UK;
- 492nd Special Operations Wing, Hurlburt Field, FL;
- 919th Special Operations Wing (Air Force Reserves), Duke Field, FL; and
- 353rd Special Operations Group, Kadena Air Base, Japan.¹⁹

Air Force Special Operations Command specialties generally fall into four groups:

- **Special Tactics:** Special Tactics comprises Special Tactics Officers, Combat Controllers, Combat Rescue Officers, Pararescuemen, Special Operations Weather Officers and Airmen, Air Liaison Officers, and Tactical Air Control Party Operators.
- **Special Operations Aviators:** Aircrew who fly a fleet of specially modified aircraft in permissive, contested, denied, or politically sensitive environments. Missions include long-range infiltration and exfiltration; nonstandard aviation; precision strike; aerial refueling; military information support operations; foreign internal defense; and command, control, intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance.
- **Combat Aviation Advisors:** Combat aviation advisors work with foreign aviation forces as part of Foreign Internal Defense, Security Force Assistance, and Unconventional Warfare operations.

¹⁷ USSOCOM 2023 Fact Book, p. 16.

¹⁸ Information in this section, unless otherwise noted, is taken from USSOCOM 2022 Fact Book, pp. 28-31.

¹⁹ Ibid., p. 29.

- **Support Air Commandos:** A variety of Air Force specialties who serve in mission support, maintenance, and medical specialties in support of AFSOC units.²⁰

Naval Special Warfare Command²¹

The Naval Special Warfare Command (NSWC) comprises approximately 11,000 personnel, including Active Duty and Reserve Component Special Warfare Operators, known as SEALs; Special Warfare Boat Operators, known as Special Warfare Combatant-craft Crewmen (SWCC); reserve personnel; support personnel, referred to as Enablers; and civilians. NSWC headquarters is located at Coronado, CA, and is composed of eight Active Duty SEAL Teams, two Reserve Component SEAL Teams, two SEAL Delivery Vehicle (SDV) Teams, three Special Boat Teams, and two Special Reconnaissance Teams. 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. Naval Special Warfare Groups (NSWGs), NSWC's major components, are stationed as follows:

- NSWG-1, San Diego, CA;
- NSWG-2, Virginia Beach, VA;
- NSWG-3, Joint Base Pearl Harbor-Hickam, HI;
- NSWG-4, Virginia Beach, VA;
- NSWG-10; Virginia Beach, VA; and
- NSWG-11, San Diego, CA.²²

U.S. Marine Corps Forces Special Operations Command (MARSOC)²³

On November 1, 2005, DOD created the Marine Special Operations Command (MARSOC) as a component of USSOCOM. MARSOC comprises approximately 3,500 personnel, including Critical Skills Operators (enlisted), Special Operations Officers, Special Operations Independent Duty Corpsmen (medics), Special Operations Capabilities Specialists, Combat Service Support Specialists, and Marine Corps civilians. 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 and forces are stationed at Camp Lejeune, NC. MARSOC units 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.

²⁰ Ibid., pp. 30-31.

²¹ Information in this section, unless otherwise noted, is taken from USSOCOM 2023 Fact Book, pp. 14-15.

²² <https://www.nsw.navy.mil/CONTACT/Components/>; accessed March 6, 2020.

²³ Information in this section is from USSOCOM 2023 Fact Book, pp. 18-19.

Considerations for Congress

Oversight questions Congress could consider include the following:

Army Special Forces Recruiting and Possible Force Structure Reductions

Reportedly, the Army has struggled to meet its goals to recruit Army Special Forces (Green Berets) soldiers since 2018.²⁴ According to an article:

Between 2018 and 2020, the service recruited an average of 1,011 new Special Forces soldiers, missing its goal of 1,540 each year. That data is strictly contract signups, not the total number of soldiers who make it all the way through Green Beret training.²⁵ Those who don't make it sometimes get second chances or are put into the regular Army infantry. In 2021, the Army scaled back its recruiting goals, seeking to bring in 1,250 new Green Berets. It exceeded its goals that year with 1,358 new Special Forces contracts, but dropped again with 779 recruits in 2022. So far this year [2023], 527 new applicants have signed on to try for the Green Beret.²⁶

The article further implies “the quality of Green Beret applicants is also on the decline,” noting, regarding the Special Forces Qualification Course:

That pass rate was between 60% and 80% in the early 2010s, but has plummeted to around 45% and 60% in recent years. It's unclear what led to that lower pass rate, though failing land navigation accounts for roughly 70% of all failures.

As a result, it was reported that:

Amid a low rate of soldiers making it through the initial selection process and overall recruiting woes, the Army considered shortening the Special Forces training pipeline by about half to get new operators in to fill units faster, according to an internal 2018 briefing.

Another article suggests the Army is considering cutting 10% to 20% of its special operations forces.²⁷ Reportedly, such cuts would be “most acute on SOF enablers like logistics and intelligence, but that some changes to force structure are also likely for Special Forces, civil affairs, psychological operations.”²⁸ It is possible the cuts are necessary due to the current recruiting crisis and exacerbated by fewer soldiers volunteering for and passing Army Special Forces selection, but it was also noted that “changes to force structure are needed both to address those impacts to the overall end strength of the Army and to ensure that the Army can compete with China and Russia, and fight and win America's wars,” suggesting that Army Special Forces reductions are a part of overall Army force reductions.²⁹

The nexus of not meeting Army Special Forces recruiting goals, fewer candidates making it through Special Forces selection, and possible Special Forces force structure cuts could have national security implications that Congress might examine. Having fewer Special Forces units

²⁴ Information in this section, unless otherwise noted, is taken from Steve Beynon, “Green Berets Have Struggled for Years with Recruiting, Internal Data Shows,” *Military.com*, June 8, 2023.

²⁵ It should be noted that many soldiers already serving in the Army also volunteer for special forces testing and selection and are not new recruits (sign-ups).

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ Caitlin M. Kenney, “Army Mulls 10-20% Cut to Special Operations Forces,” *Defense One*, May 22, 2023.

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ Ibid.

and fewer Special Forces soldiers might result in not being able to support Combatant Commander requirements. Furthermore, unless there is a corresponding reduction in requirements for Army Special Forces support, operational tempo (OPTEMPO) for Army Special Forces could become unacceptably high, possibly resulting in quality of life, health, family, and retention issues. If requirements for Army Special Forces remain high and cannot be met, other Service's special operations forces might be required to step in, which could result in similar OPTEMPO concerns for units covering for Army Special Forces shortfalls.

Air Force Special Operations Power Projection Wings and Planned Future Unit Relocations³⁰

On August 2, 2023, the Air Force announced it had selected Davis-Monthan Air Force Base, AZ, as the preferred location to host AFSOC's third power projection wing. Under this plan, the Air Force plans to "transform the 492nd Special Operations Wing into a power projection wing with all of AFSOC's mission capabilities (strike, mobility, ISR, air/ground integration)."³¹ The Air Force noted that "standing up the new wing at Davis-Monthan AFB requires several relocations, planned throughout the next five years. The final decision is planned to be made following completion of the environmental impact analysis process."³²

Planned transitions include the following:

- The 492nd SOW at Hurlburt Field, Florida, is to relocate to Davis-Monthan AFB. The relocation includes the 492nd SOW's transition from support wing into a power projection wing.
- The U-28 Draco fleets at Cannon AFB, New Mexico, and Hurlburt Field is to be replaced by the OA-1K Armed Overwatch aircraft. As part of the 492nd SOW's transition to a power projection wing, one OA-1K Armed Overwatch squadron is to relocate from Hurlburt Field to Davis-Monthan AFB.
- An MC-130J Commando II squadron is to relocate from Cannon AFB to Davis-Monthan AFB to join the 492nd SOW.
- An additional MC-130J squadron is to activate at Davis-Monthan AFB.
- The 21st Special Tactics Squadron is to relocate from Pope Army Airfield, North Carolina, to Davis-Monthan AFB.
- The 22nd Special Tactics Squadron is to relocate from Joint Base Lewis-McChord, Washington, to Davis-Monthan AFB.
- The 492nd Theater Air Operations Squadron is to activate at Duke Field and transfer to Davis-Monthan AFB.
- The 47th Fighter Squadron (24 A-10s), the 354th Fighter Squadron (26 A-10s), and the 357th Fighter Squadron (28 A-10s) at Davis-Monthan AFB will inactivate and their respective A-10s are to be retired. The 47th FS and 357th FS are to continue A-10 formal training until inactivation.

³⁰ Information in this section is taken from Secretary of the Air Force Public Affairs, "Davis-Monthan AFB Identified as AFSOC's Next Power Projection Wing," August 2, 2023.

³¹ Ibid.

³² Ibid.

- The 34th Weapons Squadron and the 88th Test and Evaluation Squadron are to relocate from Nellis AFB, Nevada, to Davis-Monthan AFB, transferring five HH-60W Jolly Green IIs.³³

This appears to be a major AFSOC reorganization for units based in the United States, which could have oversight implications for Congress. A fundamental consideration arguably is how this planned transition and relocation improves AFSOC's ability to support the National Security Strategy and Combatant Commanders. Another consideration is the total estimated cost for this planned five-year transition, including related Military Construction (MILCON) costs. Also, related to cost, is how this planned transition affects overall Air Force modernization and readiness efforts. The potential economic, infrastructure, and social impacts on local communities near bases both gaining and losing units under this plan might also be of critical interest to Congress.

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³³ Ibid.