



CRS Report for Congress

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. Potential increased SOF involvement in Pakistan and SOF expansion mandated by the 2006 Quadrennial Defense Review (QDR) might be issues for congressional consideration. This report will be updated as events warrant.

Background

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

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

Army Special Operations Forces. U.S. Army SOF (ARSOF) include approximately 30,000 soldiers from the Active Army, National Guard, and Army Reserve who are organized into Special Forces, Ranger, and special operations aviation units, along with civil affairs units, psychological operations units, and special operations

support units. ARSOF Headquarters and other resources, such as the John F. Kennedy Special Warfare Center and School, are located at Fort Bragg, NC. Five active Special Forces (SF) Groups (Airborne) are stationed at Fort Bragg and at Fort Lewis, WA, Fort Campbell, KY, and Fort Carson, CO. Special Forces soldiers — also known as the Green Berets — are trained in various skills, including foreign languages, that allow teams to operate independently throughout the world. In FY2008, the Army began to increase the total number of Army Special Forces battalions from 15 to 20, with one battalion being allocated to each active Special Forces Group. Two Army National Guard SF groups are headquartered in Utah and Alabama. An elite airborne light infantry unit specializing in direct action operations¹, the 75th Ranger Regiment, is headquartered at Fort Benning, GA, and consists of three battalions. Army special operations aviation units, including the 160th Special Operations Aviation Regiment (Airborne) headquartered at Fort Campbell, KY, feature pilots trained to fly the most sophisticated Army rotary-wing aircraft in the harshest environments, day or night, and in adverse weather.

Some of the most frequently deployed SOF assets are civil affairs (CA) units, which provide experts in every area of civil government to help administer civilian affairs in operational theaters. The 95th Civil Affairs Brigade (Airborne) is the only active CA unit, and plans call for the brigade to expand from one to four battalions by 2009.² All other CA units reside in the Reserves and are affiliated with conventional Army units. Psychological operations units disseminate information to large foreign audiences through mass media. The active duty 4th Psychological Operations (PSYOPS) Group (Airborne) is stationed at Fort Bragg, and two Army Reserve PSYOPS groups work with conventional Army units.

Air Force Special Operations Forces. The Air Force Special Operations Command (AFSOC) includes about 13,000 active and reserve personnel. AFSOC is headquartered at Hurlburt Field, FL, along with the 720th Special Tactics Group, the 18th Flight Test Squadron, and the U.S. Air Force Special Operations School. The 16th Special Operations Wing (SOW) relocated from Hurlburt Field to Cannon Air Force Base (AFB) in 2007.³ AFSOC plans to activate the 1st SOW at Hurlburt Field using elements of the 16th SOW.⁴ The 352nd Special Operations Group is at RAF Mildenhall, England, and the 353rd Special Operations Group, is at Kadena Air Base, Japan. Reserve AFSOC components include the 193rd Special Operations Wing, Air National Guard, stationed at Harrisburg, PA, the 280th Combat Communications Squadron, Air National Guard, stationed at Dothan, AL, and the 919th Special Operations Wing, Air Force Reserve,

¹ Direct action operations are short-duration strikes and other small-scale offensive actions conducted as a special operation in hostile, denied, or politically sensitive environments and which employ specialized military capabilities to seize, destroy, capture, exploit, recover, or damage designated targets. Direct action differs from conventional offensive actions in the level of physical and political risk, operational techniques, and the degree of discriminate and precise use of force to achieve specific objectives.

² Kevin Maurer, “Newly Formed 95th Civil Affairs Brigade Activates,” *Fayetteville Times*, August 18, 2006.

³ Michael Sirak, “Air Force Assigns Special Operations Wing to Cannon Air Force Base,” *Defense Daily*, June 22, 2006.

⁴ Ibid.

stationed at Duke Field, FL. AFSOC's three active-duty flying units are composed of more than 100 fixed and rotary-wing aircraft.

Naval Special Operations Forces. The Naval Special Warfare Command (NSWC) is located in Coronado, CA. NSWC is organized around eight SEAL Teams and two SEAL Delivery Vehicle (SDV) Teams. Two of these eight SEAL Teams are deployed at any given time, with each SEAL Team consisting of six SEAL platoons each, consisting of two officers and 16 enlisted personnel. The major operational components of NSWC include Naval Special Warfare Groups One and Three stationed in San Diego, CA, and Naval Special Warfare Groups Two and Four in Norfolk, VA. These components deploy SEAL Teams, SEAL Delivery Vehicle Teams, and Special Boat Teams worldwide to meet the training, exercise, contingency and wartime requirements of theater commanders. NSWC has approximately 5,400 total active-duty personnel — including 2,450 SEALs and 600 Special Warfare Combatant-Craft Crewmen (SWCC) — as well as a 1,200-person reserve component of approximately 325 SEALs, 125 SWCC and 775 support personnel. SEALs are considered the best-trained combat swimmers in the world, and can be deployed covertly from submarines or from sea-based aircraft.

Marine Special Operations Command (MARSOC).⁵ On November 1, 2005, DOD announced the creation of the Marine Special Operations Command (MARSOC) as a component of USSOCOM. MARSOC consists of three subordinate units — the Marine Special Operations Regiment, the Foreign Military Training Unit, and the Special Operations Support Group — totaling approximately 2,600 Marines. MARSOC Headquarters, the Foreign Military Training Unit, and the Special Operations Support Group are stationed at Camp Lejeune, NC. The Marine Special Operations Regiment has its headquarters at Camp Lejeune and has an element stationed at Camp Pendleton, CA. MARSOC has reportedly deployed Foreign Military Training Teams to Africa and South America and two Marine Special Operations Battalions have been activated — one on each coast.⁶ By the end of November 2007, the MARSOC commander reported that he had approximately 65% of his authorized 2,600 Marines and expected to fill the remaining positions in 2008.⁷

Joint Special Operations Command (JSOC). According to DOD, the JSOC is “a joint headquarters designed to study special operations requirements and techniques; ensure interoperability and equipment standardization; plan and conduct joint special

⁵ Information in this section is taken from DOD Press Release No. 1127-05, dated November 1, 2005, Subject: Secretary of Defense Approves Marine Special Operations Command; Donna Miles, “Marine Corps to Join U.S. Special Operations Command,” American Forces Press Service, November 1, 2005; and Christian Lowe, “U.S. Marine Corps to Create Special Operations Unit,” *Defense News*, November 1, 2005.

⁶ Statement by General Bryan D. Brown, Commander, U.S. Special Operations Command, before the House Subcommittee on Terrorism, Unconventional Threats and Capabilities, “Current Manning, Equipping, and Readiness Challenges Facing Special Operations Forces,” January 31, 2007, p. 4.

⁷ Meagn Scully, “Marine Corps Continues to Build Special Operations Force,” *National Journal's Congress Daily PM*, November 29, 2007.

operations exercises and training; and develop joint special operations tactics.”⁸ While not official acknowledged by DOD or USSOCOM, JSOC, which is headquartered at Pope Air Force Base, NC, is widely believed to command and control what are described as the military’s three special missions units — the Army’s Delta Force, the Navy’s SEAL Team Six, a joint unit allegedly designed to conduct clandestine operations, as well as the 75th Ranger Regiment, the 160th Special Operations Aviation Regiment and the Air Force’s 24th Special Tactics Squadron.⁹ JSOC’s primary mission is believed to be identifying and destroying terrorists and terror cells worldwide.

USSOCOM Budget

FY2009 Budget Request.¹⁰ USSOCOM’s FY2009 Presidential Budget request is \$5.727 billion. Over half — \$3.7 billion — is for Operations and Maintenance, with \$1.5 billion for Research, Development, Technology, and Evaluation (RDT&E).

House and Senate Markup of FY2009 National Defense Authorization Act (H.R. 5658).¹¹ The House Armed Services Committee authorized \$5.9 billion, an increase of \$185.8 million, primarily to provide resources for 8 of USSOCOM’s 10 unfunded priorities, including improved surveillance capabilities, personal protection gear, aircraft countermeasures, radios, and night imagers. The Senate Armed Services Committee fully funded the \$5.7 billion budget request and added an additional \$20 million for intelligence, surveillance, reconnaissance, and tracking technologies.

Current Issues

Continued SOF Growth.¹² As mandated by the 2006 Quadrennial Defense Review (QDR) SOF continues to expand. USSOCOM added 6,643 military and civilians in 2007. By the end of FY2009, USSOCOM hopes to grow to 55,890 civilian and military personnel, of which 43,745 will be active duty military, 4,310 Guard, 2,560 Reserves, and 5,275 government civilians. These increases roughly translate into adding five additional Special Forces battalions, four additional Ranger companies, 300 additional SEALs, 2,500 Marine Special Operations Forces, and additional special operations aviators.

⁸ USSOCOM website [<http://www.socom.mil/components/components.htm>], accessed March 19, 2008.

⁹ Sean D. Naylor, “JSOC to Become Three-Star Command,” *Army Times*, February 13, 2006.

¹⁰ Information in this section is from the Statement of Admiral Eric T. Olson, Commander, United States Special Operations Command, before the Senate Armed Services Committee on the Posture of Special Operations Forces, March 4, 2008.

¹¹ House Armed Services Subcommittee Press Release on H.R. 5658: FY2009 National Defense Authorization Act, May 15, 2008 and Senate Armed Services Committee Press Release: Senate Armed Services Committee Completes Markup of National Defense Authorization Bill for Fiscal Year 2009, May 1, 2009.

¹² *Ibid.*

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

Most Urgent Needs.¹⁴ USSOCOM Commander, Admiral Eric T. Olson testified to the House Armed Services Subcommittee on Terrorism, Unconventional Threats and Capabilities on March 5, 2008, that their most immediate acquisition needs were the recapitalization of the C-130 fleet; increased intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance (ISR) capability and capacity; and the V-22 acceleration effort. AFSOC has 37 C-130 variants that require recapitalization in the near term. The three variants include early C-130 models outfitted to penetrate hostile airspace, a tanker aircraft, and AC-130 gunships. USSOCOM’s ISR needs are not solely the procurement of ISR platforms, but it is the development of overhead, ground, and maritime ISR capabilities to meet SOF’s sometimes unique requirements. With USSOCOM retiring the last of its remaining 31 operational MH-53 Pave Low helicopters by the end of September 2008, USSOCOM hopes to accelerate the delivery of CV-22s. Four CV-22 trainer aircraft and the first three operational CV-22s were delivered in 2006 and 2007.¹⁵ Three additional aircraft are anticipated to be delivered in 2008.¹⁶

New Commander for JSOC.¹⁷ Navy Rear Admiral (RADM) William McRaven, currently serving as commander of Special Operations Command, Europe, has reportedly

¹³ Information in this section is taken from Je DiMascio, “Olson: SOCOM Could Use Dozens of Additional UAVs,” *Defense Daily*, April 25, 2007; Ann Roosevelt, “U.S.SOCOM Commander Details Aviation Needs,” *Defense Daily*, May 17, 2007; Michael Sirak, “Wooley: Training Proficiency, Need for New Aircraft AFSOC’s Biggest Concerns,” *Defense Daily*, May 11, 2007; and David A. Fulghum, “USAF Special Ops Growing in Personnel and Equipment,” *Aerospace Daily & Defense Report*, May 14, 2007.

¹⁴ Information in this section is from Congressional Transcripts: House Armed Services Subcommittee on Terrorism, Unconventional Threats and Capabilities — FY2009 Budget for the U.S. Special Operations Command and U.S. Northern Command, March 5, 2008.

¹⁵ Information in this section is from the Statement of Admiral Eric T. Olson, Commander, United States Special Operations Command, before the Senate Armed Services Committee on the Posture of Special Operations Forces, March 4, 2008.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*

¹⁷ Sean Naylor, “Admiral Nominated to Head Joint Special Operations Command,” *Army Times*, March 10, 2008, p. 19.

been nominated for a third star and selected to command JSOC. JSOC's current commander, Army Lieutenant General (LTG) Stanley McChrystal, has been assigned as Director of the Joint Staff.

Increased SOF Role in Pakistan?¹⁸ In response to what many perceive as intensified efforts by Al Qaeda and Taliban militants within Pakistan to destabilize Pakistan's government, reports suggest that senior U.S. officials are discussing proposals to permit U.S. Special Operations Forces and the CIA to conduct more aggressive operations in Pakistan's Federally Administered Tribal Area, a lawless region bordering Afghanistan. Current U.S. military efforts involve about 50 U.S. service members training Pakistan's Frontier Corps, which operates in the tribal areas and training elite Pakistani Army units. Expanded operations could involve enhanced training of Pakistani units and possibly more aggressive operations against Al Qaeda and Taliban insurgents.

Issues for Congress

Growth in SOF "Operators".¹⁹ Admiral Olson testified to the Senate Armed Services Committee that USSOCOM had achieved 89% of FY2007 QDR growth. This growth represents all of USSOCOM, including staff, support, and civilian personnel, but is not clear how successful efforts have been to add "operators" such as SEAL Team members, Army Special Forces A Team members, and Army Rangers serving in Ranger Battalions. Congress may decide to examine USSOCOM growth in detail and look at growth in terms of specific military specialties, including "operators" and support personnel, to include growth in the officers and enlisted grades. It is possible that the 89% aggregate 2007 growth showcased by USSOCOM might actually "hide" lower levels of growth in certain key specialty areas and growth in the officer and enlisted ranks.

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

¹⁸ For additional information on U.S.-Pakistani relations, see CRS Report RL33498, *Pakistan-U.S. Relations*, by K. Alan Kronstadt. Information on possible U.S. military operations in Pakistan is taken from Steven Lee Meyers, David E. Sanger, and Eric Schmitt, "U.S. Considers New Covert Push Within Pakistan," *New York Times*, January 6, 2008, and from Ann Scott Tyson and Robin Wright, "U.S. Officials Review Approach in Pakistan," *Washington Post*, January 7, 2008.

¹⁹ Information in this section is from the Statement of Admiral Eric T. Olson, Commander, United States Special Operations Command, before the Senate Armed Services Committee on the Posture of Special Operations Forces, March 4, 2008.

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