



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. The progress of mandated SOF growth and SOF's role in irregular warfare (IW) are potential policy 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

Joint Special Operations Command (JSOC). According to DOD, the JSOC is “a joint headquarters designed to study special operations requirements and techniques; ensure interoperability and equipment standardization; plan and conduct joint special operations exercises and training; and develop joint special operations tactics.”⁷ While not officially acknowledged by DOD or USSOCOM, JSOC, which is headquartered at Pope Air Force Base, NC, is widely believed to command and control what are described as the military's three special missions units — the Army's Delta Force, the Navy's SEAL

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

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.⁸ JSOC's primary mission is believed to be identifying and destroying terrorists and terror cells worldwide.

USSOCOM Budget

FY2009 Budget Request.⁹ 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).¹⁰ 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. The House and Senate Appropriations Committees have not scheduled a mark-up of the FY2009 defense appropriations bill.

Current Issues

Continued SOF Growth.¹¹ 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. This expansion is intended to relieve the global shortfall of U.S. SOF, as about 80% of SOF are deployed to the U.S. Central Command (USCENTCOM) area of operations, which has resulted in a shortage of SOF in other regions.¹² The emphasis on USCENTCOM has resulted in a dilution of skill levels for some SOF members who under normal circumstances could be assigned to other areas of the world where they would be using and refining different languages, cultural skills, and

⁸ Sean D. Naylor, "JSOC to Become Three-Star Command," *Army Times*, February 13, 2006.

⁹ 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.

¹⁰ 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, 2008.

¹¹ *Ibid.*

¹² Information in this section is from William H. McMichael, "Some Spec Ops Skills Being Lost, Official Says," *Army Times*, June 23, 2008.

operational tactics. In addition, the high concentration of U.S. SOF in the USCENTCOM region has hindered USSOCOM efforts to establish what it describes as a “global network of persistent presence rather than an episodic presence.”

SOF and Irregular Warfare (IW).¹³ It is anticipated that the forthcoming 2008 National Defense Strategy will require the Services to focus more on IW while accepting greater risk in traditional combat capability.¹⁴ The House version of the FY2009 National Defense Authorization Act (H.R. 5658) directs DOD to designate an Assistant Secretary of Defense to be responsible for IW matters and also calls for the establishment of an Executive Agent for IW.¹⁵ Some believe that DOD might designate USSOCOM as the Executive Agent for IW. USSOCOM, which had previously been considered by some as too focused on direct action missions, is said to be focusing increasingly more on indirect warfare and its application to IW.¹⁶ With this emphasis on IW, some senior DOD officials have suggested that general-purpose forces need to become “more SOF-like” in terms of responsiveness and the ability to adapt.¹⁷ DOD’s ongoing Roles and Missions review reportedly will attempt to establish “the right division of responsibilities for special operations troops and general-purpose forces across the spectrum of irregular warfare, including for counterinsurgency and foreign internal defense.”¹⁸ Within this context, it is possible that general-purpose forces might be assigned a greater share of foreign internal defense and training, advisory, and assistance missions, which have traditionally fallen to SOF units. This shift in mission could have a number of operational implications for U.S. SOF units.

AFSOC Initiatives. AFSOC officials expect to have the first CV-22 tilt rotor squadron operational in early 2009.¹⁹ This first AFSOC Osprey squadron will have six aircraft and nine crews. The Osprey will eventually replace AFSOC’s MH-53 Pave Low helicopters, which were officially retired in 2008. AFSOC is also accelerating efforts to replace the aging AC-130U gunship fleet with a lighter version — perhaps a modified

¹³ DOD’s Irregular Warfare (IW) Joint Operating Concept (JOC), September 11, 2007, defines IW as a violent struggle among state and non-state actors for legitimacy and influence over the relevant populations. IW favors indirect and asymmetric approaches, though it may employ the full range of military and other capabilities, in order to erode an adversary’s power, influence, and will. It is an inherently protracted struggle that will test the resolve of our nation and strategic partners.

¹⁴ Jason Sherman, “Defense Strategy Urges More Investment in Irregular Capabilities,” *InsideDefense.com*, July 24, 2008.

¹⁵ House Armed Services Committee Press Release, “House Armed Services Committee Passes H.R. 5658: FY 2009 National Defense Authorization Act,” May 18, 2008, p. 22.

¹⁶ Richard Lardner, “Commando Leaders Shift Away from Rumsfeld Strategy,” *Norfolk Virginian-Pilot*, May 11, 2008.

¹⁷ Goeff Fein, “OEF, OIF Demonstrating U.S. Forces Will Need to be More SOF-Like,” *InsideDefense.com*, June 11, 2008.

¹⁸ Christopher J. Castelli “Pentagon Must Fix Shortfalls in Key Irregular Warfare Missions,” *InsideDefense.com*, May 22, 2008.

¹⁹ Nathan Hodge, “AFSOC to Stand Up First Osprey Unit in 2009,” *Jane’s Defence Weekly*, May 28, 2008, p. 10.

version of the C-27B Joint Cargo Aircraft (JCA).²⁰ AFSOC is said to working to increase the number of MQ-1 Predator and MQ-9 Reaper unmanned aerial vehicles (UAVs) it uses to support special operations missions by about two-thirds in the FY2010 Program Objective Memorandum (POM).²¹

Issues for Congress

Growth in SOF “Operators”.²² 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. Slower than required growth of SOF operators could hinder the creation of additional Special Forces Battalions and SEAL units and affect USSOCOM’s goal of establishing a more persistent world-wide presence.

SOF and Irregular Warfare (IW). A shift in national defense strategy to IW could have a number of implications for U.S. SOF. One is that more foreign internal defense and training, advisory, and assistance missions could be transferred to general-purpose forces, which could potentially free up SOF units, that normally would be assigned these missions, for other operations. The call for general-purpose forces to become more “SOF-like” might facilitate IW operations and remove some of the operational burden from SOF, but in order to achieve this “transformation” of general-purpose forces, SOF resources and personnel would likely be dedicated to this effort, which could preclude their availability for operational missions. The possibility that USSOCOM could be designated the Executive Agent for IW raises the concern that the command, which is already responsible for planning and conducting worldwide counterterrorism operations, might be overextended in terms of its responsibilities. If USSOCOM is designated Executive Agent for IW, it is possible that the command will require additional personnel and funding to fulfill this mandate. Another consideration in this case is that USSOCOM might need to undertake efforts to ensure that they maintain the proper balance between direct and indirect actions as IW, as currently defined, places heavy emphasis on the “indirect approach.”

²⁰ John Reed, “AFSOC Quickly Working to Field Next-Generation Light Gunship,” *InsideDefense.com*, June 27, 2008.

²¹ John Reed, “AFSOC Working to Increase Drone Fleet by Two-Thirds in POM-10 Build,” *InsideDefense.com*, July 18, 2008.

²² 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.