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

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Summary

Special Operations Forces (SOF) play a significant role in U.S. military operations and, in recent years, have been given greater responsibility for planning and conducting worldwide counterterrorism operations. U.S. Special Operations Command (USSOCOM) has about 66,000 Active Duty, National Guard, and reserve personnel from all four services and Department of Defense (DOD) civilians assigned to its headquarters, its four 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 provided 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 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.

USSOCOM's FY2016 budget request was \$10.547 billion. This includes both the Base Budget and Overseas Contingency Operation (OCO) funding.

A potential issue for Congress is the potential effects of sequestration (P.L. 112-25) on service-provided enabling forces. This report will be updated.

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Background

Overview

Special Operations are military operations requiring unique modes of employment, tactical techniques, equipment, and training often conducted in hostile, denied, or politically sensitive environments and characterized by one or more of the following: 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 Mac Dill 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 is headquartered at MacDill Air Force Base in Tampa, FL, and currently consists of approximately 2,500 military and Department of Defense (DOD) civilians (not including government contractors).¹ 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 Joseph Votel is the current USSOCOM Commander. 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. The current ASD/SOLIC is Mr. Michael Lumpkin, a former Navy SEAL officer.

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

Theater Special Operations Commands (TSOCs)

Theater-level command and control responsibilities are vested in Theater Special Operations Commands (TSOCs). TSOCs are sub-unified commands under their respective Geographic

¹ Joint Publication 3.05, Doctrine for Special Operations, July 16, 2014; http://www.dtic.mil/doctrine/new_pubs/jp3_05.pdf.

² Information in this section, unless otherwise noted is taken from "U.S. Special Operations Command Factbook 2015" USSOCOM Public Affairs, 2015.

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.³ This means USSOCOM now has the responsibility to organize, train, and equip TSOCs as it previously had for all assigned SOF units as specified in U.S. Code, Title 10, Section 167. This change is intended to enable USSOCOM to standardize, to the extent possible, TSOC capabilities and manpower requirements. While USSOCOM is now responsible for the organizing, training, and equipping of TSOCs, the GCCs 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:

Current TSOCs are⁴

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

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

³ Information in this section is taken from USSOCOM Information Paper, "Special Operations Forces: 2020: Theater Special Operations Commands," April 25, 2013.

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

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 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 October 2008, USSOCOM was designated the DOD proponent for Security Force Assistance (SFA).⁷ In this role, USSOCOM performs a synchronizing function in global training and assistance planning similar to the previously described role of planning against terrorist networks.

Army Special Operations Command

U.S. Army SOF (ARSOF) includes approximately 27,000 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.⁸ 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),⁹ 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. An elite airborne light infantry unit specializing in direct action operations,¹⁰ the 75th Ranger Regiment, is headquartered at Fort Benning, GA, and consists of three battalions and a regimental special troops battalion that provides support to the three Ranger battalions. Army special operations aviation units, including the 160th Special Operations Aviation Regiment (Airborne) (SOAR), headquartered at Fort Campbell, KY, feature pilots trained to fly the most sophisticated Army rotary-wing aircraft in the harshest environments, day or night, and in adverse weather.

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

⁶ *Ibid.*

⁷ Information in this section is from testimony given by Admiral Eric T. Olson, Commander, 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. For a more in-depth treatment of Security Force Assistance, see CRS Report R41817, *Building the Capacity of Partner States Through Security Force Assistance*, by Thomas K. Livingston.

⁸ Information in this section, unless otherwise noted is taken from “U.S. Special Operations Command Factbook 2015” USSOCOM Public Affairs, p. 18.

⁹ 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).

¹⁰ 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.

Some of the most frequently deployed SOF assets are Civil Affairs (CA) units, which provide experts in every area of civil government to help administer civilian affairs in operational theaters. The 95th Civil Affairs Brigade (Airborne) is the only active CA unit that exclusively supports USSOCOM. In September 2011 the 85th Civil Affairs Brigade was activated to support U.S. Army General Purpose Forces (GPFs). All other CA units reside in the Reserves and are affiliated with Army GPF units. Military Information Support Operations (formerly known as psychological operations) units disseminate information to large foreign audiences through mass media. Two active duty Military Information Support Groups (MISG)—the 4th Military Information Support Group (MISG) (Airborne) and 8th Military Information Support Group (MISG) (Airborne)—are stationed at Fort Bragg, and their subordinate units are aligned with Geographic Combatant Commands.

Air Force Special Operations Command

The Air Force Special Operations Command (AFSOC) is one of the Air Force's 10 major commands, with approximately 19,500 active, reserve, and civilian personnel.¹¹ AFSOC units operate out of four major continental United States (CONUS) locations and two overseas locations. The headquarters for AFSOC, the first Special Operations Wing (1st SOW), and the 720th Special Tactics Group are located at Hurlburt Field, FL. The 27th SOW is at Cannon AFB, NM. The 352nd and 353rd Special Operations Groups provide forward presence in Europe (RAF Mildenhall, England) and in the Pacific (Kadena Air Base, Japan), respectively. The 6th SOS's mission is to assess, train, and advise partner nation aviation units with the intent to raise their capability and capacity to interdict threats to their nation. The 6th SOS provides aviation expertise to U.S. foreign internal defense (FID) missions. The Air National Guard's 193rd SOW at Harrisburg, PA, and the Air Force Reserve Command's 919th SOW at Duke Field, FL, complete AFSOC's major units. A training center, the U.S. Air Force Special Operations School and Training Center (AFSOTC), is located at Hurlburt Field. AFSOC's four active-duty flying units are composed of more than 100 fixed and rotary-wing aircraft.

AFSOC's Special Tactics experts include Combat Controllers, Pararescuemen, Special Operations Weather Teams, Combat Aviation Advisors, and Tactical Air Control Party (TACPs). As a collective group, they are known as Special Tactics and have also been referred to as "Battlefield Airmen." Their basic role is to provide an interface between air and ground forces, and these airmen have highly developed skill sets. Usually embedded with Army, Navy, or Marine SOF units, they provide control of air fire support, medical and rescue expertise, or weather support, depending on the mission requirements.

Naval Special Warfare Command¹²

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

¹¹ Information in this section, unless otherwise noted, is taken from "U.S. Special Operations Command Factbook 2015" USSOCOM Public Affairs, p. 26.

¹² Information in this section, unless otherwise noted is taken from "U.S. Special Operations Command Factbook 2015" USSOCOM Public Affairs, p. 22.

Vehicle (SDV) Teams, and 3 Special Boat Teams. SEAL Teams consist of six SEAL platoons each, consisting of 2 officers and 16 enlisted personnel. The major operational components of NSWC include Naval Special Warfare Groups One, Three, and Eleven, stationed in Coronado, CA, and Naval Special Warfare Groups Two, Four, and Ten and the Naval Special Warfare Development Group in Little Creek, VA. These components deploy SEAL Teams, SEAL Delivery Vehicle Teams, and Special Boat Teams worldwide to meet the training, exercise, contingency, and wartime requirements of theater commanders. Because SEALs are considered experts in special reconnaissance and direct action missions—primary counterterrorism skills—NSWC is viewed as well postured to fight a globally dispersed enemy ashore or afloat. NSWC forces can operate in small groups and have the ability to quickly deploy from Navy ships, submarines and aircraft, overseas bases, and forward-based units.

Marine Special Operations Command (MARSOC)¹³

On November 1, 2005, DOD announced the creation of the Marine Special Operations Command (MARSOC) as a component of USSOCOM. MARSOC consists of three subordinate units: the Marine Special Operations Regiment, which includes 1st, 2nd, and 3rd Marine Special Operations Battalions; the Marine Special Operations Support Group; the Marine Special Operations Intelligence Battalion; and the Marine Special Operations School. MARSOC headquarters, the 2nd and 3rd Marine Special Operations Battalions, the Marine Special Operations School, and the Marine Special Operations Support Group and the Marine Special Operations Intelligence Battalion are stationed at Camp Lejeune, NC. The 1st Marine Special Operations Battalion is stationed at Camp Pendleton, CA. MARSOC forces have been deployed worldwide to conduct a full range of special operations activities. MARSOC missions include direct action, special reconnaissance, foreign internal defense, counterterrorism, and information operations. MARSOC currently has approximately 3,000 personnel assigned. MARSOC reportedly at present consists of 625 critical skills operators, 32 teams, and 9 companies, but plans to expand to 844 critical skills operators, 48 teams, and 12 companies by 2016.¹⁴

Marine Special Operations Adopt World War II Marine Raider Designation¹⁵

On August 6, 2014, the Marines announced it would redesignate Marine Special Operations units as Marine Raider units to honor Marine Raider units established in World War II to conduct amphibious raids and operations behind enemy lines. From the MARSOC website:

While MARSOC is adopting the name Marine Raiders, the command's official title will remain MARSOC. However, Major Subordinate Elements of the unit will reflag with the

¹³ 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.

¹⁴ Amanda Wilcox, “MarSOC Continues Growing Despite Marine Corps Drawdown,” *Jacksonville (NC) Daily News*, November 25, 2012.

¹⁵ Dan Lamothe, “Marine Corps to Adopt Iconic Raider Name for its Special Operations Troops,” *Washington Post*, August 6, 2014 and Gunnery Sgt. Josh Higgins, “The Past Aligned with the Future: MARSOC Becomes Marine Raiders,” MARSOC News, August 6, 2014, <http://www.marsoc.marines.mil/News/NewsArticleDisplay/tabid/1213/Article/513778/the-past-aligned-with-the-future-marsoc-becomes-marine-raiders.aspx>.

Raider name. For example, subordinate commands will reflag as Marine Raider Regiment, Marine Raider Support Group, Marine Raider battalions, etc.¹⁶

Joint Special Operations Command (JSOC)¹⁷

From USSOCOM's official website:

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

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

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

Budgetary Issues

FY2016 USSOCOM Budget Request¹⁸

USSOCOM's FY2016 budget request is \$10.547 billion, including both the Base Budget and Overseas Contingency Operation (OCO) funding.

¹⁶ Gunnery Sgt. Josh Higgins.

¹⁷ Taken directly from USSOCOM Website, <http://www.socom.mil/pages/jointspecialoperationscommand.aspx>, accessed March 24, 2015.

¹⁸ Information in this section is taken from Department of Defense Fiscal Year (FY) 2016 President's Budget Submission, United States Special Operations Command, February 2015.

Table I. FY2016 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)	\$5.3 B	\$2.345 B	\$7.645 B
Research, Development, Testing & Evaluation (RDT&E)	\$538.445 M	—	\$538.445 M
Procurement	\$1.733 B	\$174.996 M	\$1.908 B
Military Construction (MILCON)	\$456.747 M	—	\$456.747 M
Totals	\$8.027 B	\$2.52 B	\$10.547 B

Source: This table was prepared by CRS using information taken from Department of Defense Fiscal Year (FY) 2016 President's Budget Submission, United States Special Operations Command, February, 2015.

Potential Issue for Congress

The Potential Effects of Sequestration (P.L. 112-25) on Service-Provided Forces¹⁹

In testimony to the House Armed Services Subcommittee on Emerging Threats and Capabilities, General Votel and Secretary Lumpkin expressed their concern about the impact of sequestration on the forces provided by the Services to USSOCOM, which is often referred to as enabling forces or “enablers.” Specifically, General Votel noted:

Beyond that, as I mentioned, I am very concerned about the impact that it [sequestration] has on the services. The lack of availability of air, ground, especially maritime platforms will affect our readiness and our training exercises and—that we count on to be ready to deal with situations that will affect our operational effectiveness when we are conducting operations.

We depend heavily on service-provided capabilities to support us. A good example, of course, is the Navy's helicopter capability that is provided in the past for us, which as it now goes away is a lost—a service provider capability that we no longer are able to rely on.²⁰

Regarding General Votel's reference to lost Navy helicopter capability, it was reported that as part of the Navy's FY2016 budget request, it plans to shut down Helicopter Sea Combat Squadrons 84 and 85, the Navy's only dedicated aviation support units for USSOCOM.²¹ The Navy argues by eliminating the 24 HH-60H Rescue Hawk helicopters split between the two squadrons, it will

¹⁹ Information in this section, unless otherwise noted, is taken from CQ Congressional Transcripts, “House Armed Services Subcommittee on Emerging Threats and Capabilities Holds Hearing on President Obama's Fiscal 2016 Budget Request for U.S. Special Operations,” March 18, 2015.

²⁰ Ibid., p. 9.

²¹ Meghann Meyers, “Navy to Shutter Two Special Ops Rescue Hawk Squadrons,” *Navy Times*, February 22, 2015.

save more than \$27 million in FY2016.²² Furthermore, the Navy contends it can fulfill the 84ths and 85ths USSOCOM mission requirements with newer helicopters in the fleet's remaining helicopter squadrons. Reportedly, the 84th and 85th Helicopter Sea Combat Squadrons—along with the Army's 160th Special Operations Aviation Regiment—are responsible for a third of USSOCOM's training flights in the continental United States, with those units presently able to respond to only about 70% of USSOCOM's training requests.²³

This example cited by General Votel is likely just one of a number of examples of how sequestration-associated force structure cuts have the potential to negatively affect USSOCOM training and, possibly, operational effectiveness.

Congress might wish to review with the Department of Defense, the Services, and USSOCOM all proposed force structure cuts and their potential impact on USSOCOM training and operations. End strength cuts imposed on the Services could adversely affect the pool of volunteers from which special operators are drawn and these cuts, in addition to impacting special operations units, might also affect the TSOCs and enabling units provided by the Services that support USSOCOM. While on a by-Service basis individual unit cuts might seem innocuous, collectively, they could have a highly detrimental impact on USSOCOM and its ability to support the GCCs.

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²² Ibid.

²³ Ibid.