



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 2006 Quadrennial Defense Review (QDR) has called for a 15% increase in special operations forces beginning in FY2007. There has been concern expressed that this expansion might not be achievable and could result in a lower-quality force. There has also been debate over the role of SOF direct action missions in the overall U.S. counterterrorism campaign. 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 (P.L. 99-661) expressed concern for the status of SOF within overall U.S. defense planning and passed measures 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 (SO/LIC) provides immediate civilian oversight over many USSOCOM activities.

Army Special Operations Forces.¹ 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 units, Ranger units, special operations aviation units, 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 in designated regions of the world. Two Army National Guard SF groups are headquartered in Utah and Alabama. An elite airborne light infantry unit, the 75th Ranger Regiment, is headquartered at Fort Benning, GA and consists of three battalions specializing in direct action operations. Army special operations aviation units, including the 160th Special Operations Aviation Regiment (Airborne) 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.

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 the theater. The recently activated 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 the conventional Army.

Air Force Special Operations Forces.³ The Air Force Special Operations Command (AFSOC) includes about 10,000 active and reserve personnel, of which about 22% are stationed overseas. 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), is expected to relocate from Hurlburt Field to Cannon Air Force Base (AFB), NM by October 2007.⁴ AFSOC plans to activate the 1st SOW at Hurlburt Field using elements of the 16th SOW.⁵ 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,

¹ Information in this section was taken from General Bryan Brown, “U.S. Army Special Operations: Focusing on People — Humans are More Important than Hardware,” *Army*, Oct. 2001, pp. 157-162.

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

³ For additional information on Air Force SOF units, see Robert Wall, “Conflict Could Test Special Ops Improvements,” *Aviation Week & Space Technology*, Oct. 1, 2001, p. 30.

⁴ Michael Sirak, “Air Force Assigns Special Operations Wing to Cannon Air Force Base,” *Defense Daily*, June 22, 2006.

⁵ *Ibid.*

PA, the 280th Combat Communications Squadron, Air National Guard, stationed at Dothan, AL, and the 919th Special Operations Wing, Air Force Reserve, stationed at Duke Field, FL. AFSOC's three active-duty flying units are composed of more than 100 fixed and rotary-wing aircraft. The V-22 Osprey tilt-rotor aircraft, a Marine Corps priority, is also being developed for AFSOC. On November 16, 2006, AFSOC received its first operational Osprey — the CV-22 — the first of 50 of the \$89 million aircraft planned to be fielded to AFSOC by 2017.⁶

Special Operations Unmanned Aerial Vehicle (UAV) Squadron.⁷ The Air Force is currently standing up a special operations Predator UAV squadron at Indian Springs Auxiliary Field, NV. The squadron will initially consist of 24 MQ-1 aircraft but could eventually add the larger MQ-9 Predator B when the aircraft completes development. The Air Force has not announced a specific timetable for the completion of the stand up of the AFSOC Predator squadron.

Naval Special Operations Forces.⁸ 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 1 and 3 stationed in San Diego, CA, and Naval Special Warfare Groups 2 and 4 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).⁹ On November 1, 2005, DOD announced the creation of the Marine Special Operations Command (MARSOC) as a component of USSOCOM. MARSOC will consist 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 will be stationed at Camp Lejeune, NC. The Marine Special Operations Regiment

⁶ Louis Cooper, "Hurlburt Gets First Osprey," *Pensacola News Journal*, Nov. 17, 2006.

⁷ Information in this section is from Bruce Rolfsen, "Spec Ops Predators," *Armed Forces Journal*, July 2005, pp. 18-19.

⁸ Information in this section is from the U.S. Naval Special Warfare Command's Official website, [<https://www.navsoc.navy.mil/>], accessed on March 6, 2007.

⁹ 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*, Nov. 1, 2005; and Christian Lowe, "U.S. Marine Corps to Create Special Operations Unit," *Defense News*, Nov. 1, 2005.

will also have its headquarters at Camp Lejeune and will have 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.¹⁰

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.”¹¹ 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 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.¹² JSOC’s primary mission is believed to be identifying and destroying terrorists and terror cells worldwide.

Current Topics

Global War on Terror. The majority of Special Operations Forces operate in Iraq and Afghanistan where they are actively pursuing key insurgents. U.S. SOF continue their involvement in the Philippines and Colombia where their role is strictly limited to training the armed forces of those respective countries in counterterrorism and counterinsurgency tactics. U.S. SOF are also involved in operations in the Horn of Africa region as part of Combined Joint Task Force Horn of Africa (CJTF-HOA) where the focus of U.S. activities is training regional militaries. Recent reports suggest that a special operations task force, Task Force 88, deployed in Ethiopia and Kenya, has been operating in Somalia against Al Qaeda forces.¹³ On January 7, 2007, an AFSOC AC-130 gunship, possibly guided by U.S. SOF personnel on the ground in Somalia, attacked a suspected Al Qaeda cell in southern Somalia.

Quadrennial Defense Review and Proposed SOF Expansion. In addition to standing up an Unmanned Aerial Vehicle squadron and the Marine Corps Special Operations Command, the 2006 QDR calls for the following initiatives to begin in FY2007:

¹⁰ 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.

¹¹ USSOCOM Website [<http://www.socom.mil/components/components.htm>], accessed April 4, 2006.

¹² Sean D. Naylor, “JSOC to Become Three-Star Command,” *Army Times*, Feb. 13, 2006.

¹³ Information in this section is from Michael R. Gordon and Mark Mazzetti, “U.S. Uses Bases in Ethiopia to Hunt Al Qaeda in Africa,” *New York Times*, February 23, 2007; Karen DeYoung, “U.S. Strike in Somalia Targets Al Qaeda Figure,” *Washington Post*, January 9, 2007; David S. Cloud, “U.S. Airstrike Aims at Qaeda Cell in Somalia,” *New York Times*, January 9, 2007.

- The addition of five tactical Special Forces battalions, one Special Operations Aviation battalion, one Ranger Special Troops battalion, and three Ranger infantry companies ;
- An increase in SEAL team manning by the manpower equivalent of two SEAL Teams and the development of a riverine warfare capability; and
- Expansion of Psychological Operations and Civil Affairs units by 3,700 personnel — a 33% increase including three new Civil Affairs battalions, a Civil Affairs brigade headquarters, and five new Psychological Operations companies.¹⁴

Not Enough SOF Available?¹⁵ Reports suggest that so many of America's special operations forces "have been thrown into combat in Iraq and Afghanistan that only a handful of these elite troops are available for the quiet but critical work of training local security forces and stabilizing governments elsewhere."¹⁶ One reason for this lack of available forces are ongoing shortages of special operations personnel. Reports suggest shortages of SEALs, Air Force combat controllers who direct airstrikes, and manning on 12-man Army Special Forces "A" Teams in some units is between 50% to 75%.¹⁷ Attrition is another possible factor, as an unknown number of SOF personnel have been wounded and injured, and many leave due to retirement or the completion of their service obligations. Little has been made public about SOF attrition, but it is possibly an important factor in the lack of availability of these units.

Direct Action Versus Unconventional Warfare.¹⁸ Concerns have been expressed that DOD's counterterrorism plan developed by USSOCOM — Operation Plan (OPLAN) 7500 — places too much emphasis on direct action missions (killing and capturing terrorists) as opposed to unconventional warfare and foreign military training (the "indirect approach"). Critics suggest that a direct action approach results in fewer special operations forces being available for unconventional warfare and foreign training missions - missions that require special forces language and cultural capabilities — which is viewed by some as the most effective means to combat the spread of terrorism.

Issues for Congress

Is QDR-Mandated SOF Growth Achievable? The 110th Congress may decide to examine the feasibility of the QDR-mandated 15% increase in SOF forces, perhaps focusing on the proposed growth of Army Special Forces, Navy SEALs, and

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Ann Roosevelt, "SO/LIC Building Capability, Capacity for Irregular Warfare," *Defense Daily*, Oct. 19, 2006; Sean D. Naylor, "The Spec Ops Stretch," *Armed Forces Journal*, October 2006; David Wood, "Special Forces Stretched Thin by Two Wars," *Baltimore Sun*, Sept. 1, 2006; and Tom Vanden Brook, "U.S. Elite Forces Face Shortfall," *USA Today*, July 3, 2006.

¹⁶ Wood.

¹⁷ Naylor.

¹⁸ Ann Roosevelt, "SO/LIC Building Capability, Capacity for Irregular Warfare," *Defense Daily*, Oct. 19, 2006; Sean D. Naylor, "The Spec Ops Stretch," *Armed Forces Journal*, October 2006; David Wood, "Special Forces Stretched Thin by Two Wars," *Baltimore Sun*, Sept. 1, 2006; and Tom Vanden Brook, "U.S. Elite Forces Face Shortfall," *USA Today*, July 3, 2006.

psychological warfare and civil affairs personnel. Concerns have been raised that such an expansion will result in a force that “while bigger on paper, will contain half-filled units manned by troops who are less mature, less experienced and less skilled in languages and foreign cultures than SF soldiers traditionally have been.”¹⁹

Volunteers for Army Special Forces and Navy SEALs are subjected to rigorous assessment and selection regimens that traditionally yield only a handful of men selected to serve in these units — around a 20% pass rate in the case of SEAL Basic Underwater Demolition (BUD) Training.²⁰ In order to meet a growing requirement, USSOCOM has “overhauled” its accession schools, increasing the number of training cadre and number of classes to increase candidate throughput while allegedly “maintaining the same high standards.” USSOCOM notes that for the first few years of this initiative, additional SOF soldiers will be used to fill existing vacancies in Army Special Forces units but that USSOCOM is “now postured for additional future growth.”

While USSOCOM may be graduating additional operators from its qualification courses, working against this increase is the continued attrition of SOF personnel due to, wounds, injuries, retirement as well as those who voluntarily separate from the service. While retention is a significant focus for USSOCOM, little is known about how many SOF personnel of all ranks are leaving the service and a significant increase in these numbers could preclude any meaningful growth for USSOCOM forces.

Balance Between Direct Action and Unconventional Warfare. The 110th Congress might act to review the balance between direct action and traditional unconventional warfare missions, such as advising and training foreign security forces. Senior USSOCOM leadership acknowledges that it “cannot kill our way to victory” but notes that certain terrorists must be killed or captured and that terrorist networks must be disrupted.²¹ By dedicating more SOF forces in Iraq and Afghanistan to fight insurgents “than we would like” USSOCOM leaders reportedly acknowledge that they are “under represented globally” for other missions such as intelligence gathering, unconventional warfare, and foreign military training.²² Critics of a direct action-heavy strategy suggest that by focusing on “the indirect approach” that SOF can train the security forces of other nations and help to set conditions to help combat the spread of terrorism in foreign countries, which some consider a more effective long-term strategy. A detailed examination of the balance between these resource-competing missions might reveal mission areas where direct-action SOF units could be reallocated to conduct intelligence gathering, unconventional warfare, and foreign military training missions with minimal impact on SOF terrorist-hunting operations.

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¹⁹ Sean D. Naylor, “The Spec Ops Stretch,” *Armed Forces Journal*, October 2006

²⁰ Information in this section is from United States Special Operations Command, Posture Statement 2006, p. 15.

²¹ David Wood, “Special Forces Stretched Thin by Two Wars,” *Baltimore Sun*, Sept. 1, 2006.

²² *Ibid.*