



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 merits of cross-border raids and possible equipment and logistical support shortfalls are potential policy issues for congressional consideration. This report will be updated as events warrant.

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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 and Components

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.

USSOCOM has about 54,000 Active Duty, National Guard and Reserve personnel from all four Services and Department of Defense (DOD) civilians assigned to its headquarters, its four components, and one sub-unified command.¹ 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.

Army Special Operations Forces

U.S. Army SOF (ARSOF) includes 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), consisting of about 1,400 soldiers each, are stationed at Fort Bragg and at Fort Lewis, WA, Fort Campbell, KY, and Fort Carson, CO. The 7th Special Forces Group (Airborne) currently stationed at Ft. Bragg will be moving to Eglin Air Force Base, FL by

¹ Information in this section is from "Fact Book: United States Special Operations Command," USSOCOM Public Affairs, February 2009, p. 7. DOD defines a sub-unified command as a command established by commanders of unified commands, when so authorized through the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, to conduct operations on a continuing basis in accordance with the criteria set forth for unified commands. A subordinate unified command may be established on an area or functional basis. Commanders of subordinate unified commands have functions and responsibilities similar to those of the commanders of unified commands and exercise operational control of assigned commands and forces within the assigned joint operations area.

September 2011 as mandated by the 2005 Base Closure and Realignment Act². 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 December 2005, a Sustainment Brigade (Special Operations) (Airborne) was activated at Ft. Bragg, NC, to provide combat service support and medical support to Army special operations forces.³

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. In August 2008, the Army stood up the first of these new battalions—the 4th Battalion, 5th Special Forces Groups (Airborne)—at Fort Campbell, KY.⁴ Two Army National Guard SF groups are headquartered in Utah and Alabama. An elite airborne light infantry unit specializing in direct action operations⁵, 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 2009.⁶ 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 1st Special Operations Wing (SOW) and the U.S. Air Force Special Operations School and Training Center.⁷ The 27th SOW is located at Cannon Air Force Base (AFB), NM. 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 SOW, Air National Guard, stationed at Harrisburg, PA 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.

² Henry Cuningham, "Delays in 7th Group Move Could be Costly," *Fayetteville (NC) Observer*, November 7, 2008.

³ "Fact Book: United States Special Operations Command," USSOCOM Public Affairs, February 2009, p. 10.

⁴ Sean D. Naylor, "Special Forces Expands," *Army Times*, August 11, 2008.

⁵ 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.

⁶ Kevin Maurer, "Newly Formed 95th Civil Affairs Brigade Activates," *Fayetteville Times*, August 18, 2006.

⁷ Information in this section is taken from "Fact Book: United States Special Operations Command," USSOCOM Public Affairs, February 2009, p. 27.

AFSOC Initiatives

AFSOC officials expect to have the first CV-22 tilt rotor squadron operational in early 2009.⁸ 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. Reportedly, the Air Force is requesting funding to accelerate the purchase of CV-22s to eight aircraft per year starting in FY2010, which will enable AFSOC to have their full complement of 50 CV-22s by 2015.⁹ AFSOC is also accelerating efforts to replace the aging AC-130U gunship fleet with a lighter version—perhaps a modified version of the C-27B Joint Cargo Aircraft (JCA).¹⁰ AFSOC is said to be 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.¹¹

Naval Special Operations Forces¹²

The Naval Special Warfare Command (NSWC) is located in Coronado, CA. NSWC is organized around 10 SEAL Teams, two SEAL Delivery Vehicle (SDV) Teams, and three Special Boat Teams. SEAL Teams consist 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, Three, and Eleven stationed in Coronado, CA, and Naval Special Warfare Groups Two and Four 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. 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 and land-based aircraft.

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 four subordinate units—the 1st and 2nd Marine Special Operations Battalions, the Marine Special Operations Advisory Group, and the Marine Special Operations Support Group. MARSOC Headquarters, the 2nd Marine Special Operations Battalion, the Marine Special Operations School, and the Marine Special

⁸ Nathan Hodge, "AFSOC to Stand Up First Osprey Unit in 2009," *Jane's Defence Weekly*, May 28, 2008, p. 10.

⁹ Marina Malenic, "Bell-Boeing Sees V-22 Program Growth, Potential Line Expansion," *Defense Daily*, March 16, 2009.

¹⁰ John Reed, "AFSOC Quickly Working to Field Next-Generation Light Gunship," *InsideDefense.com*, June 27, 2008.

¹¹ John Reed, "AFSOC Working to Increase Drone Fleet by Two-Thirds in POM-10 Build," *InsideDefense.com*, July 18, 2008.

¹² Information in this section is from "Fact Book: United States Special Operations Command," USSOCOM Public Affairs, February 2009, p. 18 and the U.S. Naval Special Warfare Command Website, www.navsoc.navy.mil, accessed March 19, 2009.

¹³ Information in this section is from "Fact Book: United States Special Operations Command," USSOCOM Public Affairs, February 2009, p. 34.

Operations Support Group are stationed at Camp Lejeune, NC. The 1st Marine Special Operations Battalion is stationed at Camp Pendleton, CA. MARSOC forces have been deployed world-wide to conduct a full range of special operations activities.

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.”¹⁴ 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 special missions units—the Army’s Delta Force, the Navy’s SEAL Team Six—as well as the 75th Ranger Regiment, the 160th Special Operations Aviation Regiment and the Air Force’s 24th Special Tactics Squadron.¹⁵ JSOC’s primary mission is believed to be identifying and destroying terrorists and terror cells worldwide.

Current Issues

SOF Ground Assaults into Pakistan and Syria¹⁶

Reports maintain that in July 2008, President Bush secretly approved authorization for U.S. SOF to carry out ground raids inside Pakistan without prior approval of the Pakistani government. On September 3, 2008, more than two dozen SEALs were said to have conducted a raid near Angor Adda in the South Waziristan Tribal Area, killing about two dozen insurgents suspected of having conducted cross-border attacks against an American forward operating base in Afghanistan. This was not believed to be the first such raid, with the SEALs and other JSOC forces having conducted “two or three” similar raids in the past. Severe Pakistani political reaction to the September 3rd raid, in particular the threat to cut coalition supply lines transiting Pakistan, resulted in a decision to suspend future unapproved U.S. SOF raids into Pakistan. On October 26, 2008, U.S. SOF, supported by helicopters, reportedly conducted a small cross-border raid near the town of Abu Kamal, five miles inside the Syrian border. Both the Pakistan and Syria raids were said to be a result of those nation’s unwillingness to prevent cross-border attacks against U.S. and allied forces, but critics of these operations contend that they are of limited tactical benefit and only serve to further complicate already tenuous diplomatic efforts with those nations and incite local civilians. In the case of Pakistan, where U.S. SOF is said to be training Pakistani Frontier Corps paramilitary personnel,¹⁷ these raids could result in the suspension of these activities, which are viewed by many as a long-term solution to deal with Taliban and Al Qaeda forces operating in the border region.

¹⁴ USSOCOM website <http://www.socom.mil/components/components.htm>, accessed March 19, 2008.

¹⁵ Jennifer D. Kibbe, “The Rise of the Shadow Warriors,” *Foreign Affairs*, Volume 83, Number 2, March/April 2004 and Sean D. Naylor, “JSOC to Become Three-Star Command,” *Army Times*, February 13, 2006.

¹⁶ Eric Schmitt and Mark Mazzetti, “Bush Said to Give Orders Allowing Raids In Pakistan,” *New York Times*, September 11, 2008; Sean D. Naylor, “Spec Ops Raids Into Pakistan Halted,” *Army Times*, September 29, 2008; Sean D. Naylor, “U.S. Stops Spec Ops Raids Into Pakistani Tribal Areas,” *Army Times*, October 6, 2008; and Albert Ali, “Special Forces Launch Rare Attack Inside Syria,” *Army Times*, October 26, 2008.

¹⁷ Stephen Graham, “Elite GIs Training Pakistani Forces to Fight Taliban,” *Arizona Republic*, October 25, 2008.

Special Operations Raids in Afghanistan and Civilian Casualties

Civilian casualties in Afghanistan have been a significant issue throughout the conflict. While many of these casualties have come from aerial bombing or missile strikes, a number have also resulted from direct ground combat. One report suggests that U.S. SOF operating in Afghanistan temporarily suspended the majority of its raids during February 2009 because some of these operations, many of which were conducted at night, resulted in civilian casualties.¹⁸ During this suspension, new safeguards were reportedly developed and implemented to help reduce the risk of civilian deaths. While there have been numerous civilian deaths in Afghanistan due to coalition combat operations, it has also been suggested that the Afghan government has exaggerated the number of civilian deaths for political purposes.

SOF Equipment and Support Forces Issues

SOF Equipment Concerns¹⁹

Recent congressional testimony suggests SOF acquisition, once noted for efficiently and rapidly getting new equipment “into the hands of operators,” has dramatically slowed, attributed in part to a lack of SOF-familiar acquisition executives and a “risk-adverse approach.”²⁰ Some suggest that the focus is more on buying expensive platforms as opposed to personal equipment, with some SOF personnel believing that conventional, general-purpose forces are now better equipped than special operations units. There are other factors, however, that might attribute to equipment problems in USSOCOM. One factor cited was that 2006 SOF QDR growth was not balanced or entirely resourced, resulting in shortages of radios, weapons, ground and air transportation, and facilities for newly-created special operations units.²¹ Also contributing to this problem was that new SOF personnel emerged from the “school house or training pipeline” faster than anticipated and were therefore incorporated existing and new units earlier than anticipated. Industrial capacity is also cited as a contributing factor, as earlier contracts for equipment were based on original projections for personnel growth. Finally, SOF equipment acquisition has reportedly been based on what units were authorized to have, not on what units are actually required to have for operations. In an attempt to address these problems, funding was accelerated which partially solved some equipment issues, but this acceleration of funding might mean that it could be difficult to purchase next generation technologies in the coming years.²²

¹⁸ Information in this section is from Mark Mazzetti and Eric Schmitt, “U.S. Halted Some Afghan Raids Over Concern on Deaths,” *New York Times*, March 10, 2009.

¹⁹ Information in this section is taken from Testimony Before the House Armed Services Committee’s Subcommittee on Terrorism and Unconventional Threats and Capabilities, “Special Operations Forces: Challenges and Opportunities,” Roger D. Carstens, Center for a New American Security, March 3, 2009.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 3.

²¹ *Ibid.*, p. 10.

²² *Ibid.*, p. 26.

SOF Competition for Support Forces²³

There is growing concern by some that when large numbers of conventional forces depart Iraq, that SOF staying behind may not have adequate logistical and transportation support, as U.S. conventional support units that provide significant support for SOF, will not be replaced. This support includes fuel, maintenance, helicopter and ground transportation, as well as facility and food support services. Support from conventional units—sometimes referred to as “enablers”—such as engineers, military police, intelligence, signal, and medical units is also in high demand from SOF units. One concern is that when conventional forces do begin their anticipated large-scale departure this year, that remote SOF units that rely on nearby conventional force support, may have to pull out of their operational areas and consolidate near remaining logistical support units, which could adversely impact SOF missions. A similar dependence by SOF in Afghanistan on conventional units is also of concern. In the case of Afghanistan, where there are no immediate plans for force reductions, SOF forces rely on conventional helicopter units for over one half of their helicopter support. Because of anticipated increased demand for support as the U.S. increases conventional force levels in Afghanistan, there is concern that support forces will have a difficult time meeting growing demands, and that SOF operations may suffer. One proposed solution would be the establishment of additional SOF support units within USSOCOM, but USSOCOM leadership is said to favor the development of more conventional force support units that could, in turn, be used to support SOF units and operations.

Issues for Congress

SOF Raids into Pakistan and Other Countries

While SOF raids into Pakistan and other countries are well within its capabilities, such operations may not be in the best long-term interest. These raids may in fact kill insurgents and their leaders, disrupt their operations, and send the message that there is no sanctuary for them but such raids might also make it more difficult for SOF to conduct “indirect operations.” SOF indirect operations, such as training foreign militaries—like Pakistan’s Frontier Corps—have proven successful in the Philippines and in Colombia, but are very dependent on “strong, long-term ties to foreign militaries”²⁴ and the host nation’s government. While such raids are likely necessary to protect coalition forces and destroy the insurgent’s ability to conduct tactical operations, there is also a “cost-benefit” aspect (including the risk of civilian casualties) that factors into these decisions by commanders. Given Pakistan’s reaction to the September 2008 raid into South Waziristan and reactions to civilian casualties in the region, U.S. leaders may wish to review how further efforts might affect long-term indirect SOF efforts to train Pakistani forces to assist in defeating insurgents in the tribal and border regions—a key operational requirement for stability in Afghanistan.

²³Information in this section is from Testimony Before the House Armed Services Committee’s Subcommittee on Terrorism and Unconventional Threats and Capabilities, “Special Operations Forces: Challenges and Opportunities,” Roger D. Carstens, Center for a New American Security, March 3, 2009; Lolita C. Baldor, “Iraqi Pullout Raises Concerns for Elite Forces,” *Army Times*, March 7, 2009; Sean D. Naylor, “A Duel for the Enablers of U.S. Wars,” *Defense News*, March 16, 2009, p. 33.

²⁴ Peter Spiegel, “Indirect Approach is Favored in the War on Terror,” *Los Angeles Times*, October 13, 2008.

SOF Equipment Concerns

Reports of SOF equipment inadequacies might merit further investigation. Issues for examination could include the adequacy of USSOCOM's acquisition staff in terms of numbers, experience in the SOF community, seniority and education, and past relevant program management and budgetary experience with SOF-peculiar programs. Has SOF acquisition become overly risk-adverse or are expectations from SOF commanders and operators unrealistic? What is the proper balance between getting new equipment to the field expeditiously and insuring that this equipment is properly tested, meets design specifications, and that proper and adequate repair parts and tools are available? Has procurement for SOF individual and small unit equipment caught up with the quicker than expected growth of SOF personnel? If not, what programs are in place to ensure that SOF units receive "required" levels of equipment as opposed to what they are authorized? Do we have SOF units that cannot be operationally employed due to equipment shortages? Because USSOCOM has accelerated funding to meet equipment challenges, are there potential equipment and platform procurement issues in the budgetary out years that Congress should be made aware of?

SOF and Adequacy of Support Forces

SOF's access to support forces and enablers also raises a number of issues for potential consideration. While USSOCOM does have organic support forces for its components, the demands of operating in almost 60 countries has likely strained the modest capabilities of these support forces. In Iraq, the possibility that SOF operations may have to be modified because there may not be enough support forces or enablers to sustain them after the majority of U.S. conventional forces depart is particularly troubling. The short-term solution appears to be to retain support forces and enablers in Iraq to insure adequate support for SOF and increase support forces and enablers in Afghanistan so that SOF operations are not degraded by the anticipated introduction of additional U.S. conventional ground forces in Afghanistan. These solutions, while potentially solving the SOF support problem, would likely create problems for the Army, in particular, because they would be unable to reset these forces to support future deployments of Army combat formations. Longer term solutions could include establishing organic, higher echelon support forces in USSOCOM, but USSOCOM would prefer that the Services increase their support forces so that USSOCOM forces could obtain their in-theater support from these units.

While all Services provide a degree of support to their deployed USSOCOM components, a significant amount of in-theater support to U.S. SOF comes from the Army. In 2009, the total Army (Active and Reserve) plans to have 85 multi-functional support brigades and 113 functional support brigades, which would provide a significant amount of logistical and "enabling" support to land-based deployed U.S. SOF.²⁵ This represents 87% of planned growth, as the Army plans on a total of 97 multi-functional support brigades and 130 functional support brigades by FY2013 to achieve 100% planned growth. While the Army likely accounted for support to SOF as well as other Services in determining this total proposed growth in support brigades, it is not clear if the current high level of SOF support in Iraq, Afghanistan, and other theaters has changed requirements not only for support brigades, but possibly Army aviation units as well that, in some cases, have provided over half of U.S. SOF's rotary wing support. Given current and potential

²⁵ U.S. Army Briefing to Congressional Staff Members: GAO Report on Army Modularity, January 16, 2009, p. 10.

future demands from U.S. SOF for logistics support and support from “enablers,” a comprehensive review of the adequacy of current and planned logistical and enabling forces might be beneficial. Such a review, involving DOD, the Services, and USSOCOM, might include an examination of all potential solutions, including the establishment of additional units within USSOCOM, or establishing new units within the Services—if necessary—from which USSOCOM can draw support when deployed on operations.

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