

An hourglass-shaped graphic with a globe inside. The top bulb is dark blue, and the bottom bulb is light blue. The globe is centered in the narrow neck of the hourglass. The text is centered within the hourglass.

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

Andrew Feickert, Specialist in Military Ground Forces

January 16, 2008

Abstract. 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, possible equipment and logistical shortfalls, and SOF's role in irregular warfare (IW) are potential policy issues for congressional consideration.

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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, possible equipment and logistical shortfalls, and SOF's role in irregular warfare (IW) 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

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. The 7th Special Forces Group (Airborne) currently stationed at Ft. Bragg will be moving to Eglin Air Force Base, FL by September 2011 as mandated by the 2005 Base Closure and Realignment Act.¹ 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. 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.² Two Army National Guard SF groups are headquartered in Utah and Alabama. An elite airborne light infantry unit specializing in direct action operations³,

¹ Henry Cuninghame, “Delays in 7th Group Move Could be Costly,” *Fayetteville (NC) Observer*, November 7, 2008.

² Sean D. Naylor, “Special Forces Expands,” *Army Times*, August 11, 2008.

³ 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 (continued...)

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 2009.⁴ 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 2007.⁵ AFSOC plans to activate the 1st SOW at Hurlburt Field using elements of the 16th SOW.⁶ 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, stationed at Duke Field, FL. AFSOC's three active-duty flying units are composed of more than 100 fixed and rotary-wing aircraft.

AFSOC Initiatives

AFSOC officials expect to have the first CV-22 tilt rotor squadron operational in early 2009.⁷ 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 version of the C-27B Joint Cargo Aircraft (JCA).⁸ AFSOC is said to be working to increase the number of MQ-1 Predator and MQ-9 Reaper unmanned aerial vehicles

(...continued)

of force to achieve specific objectives.

⁴ Kevin Maurer, "Newly Formed 95th Civil Affairs Brigade Activates," *Fayetteville Times*, August 18, 2006.

⁵ Michael Sirak, "Air Force Assigns Special Operations Wing to Cannon Air Force Base," *Defense Daily*, June 22, 2006.

⁶ *Ibid.*

⁷ Nathan Hodge, "AFSOC to Stand Up First Osprey Unit in 2009," *Jane's Defence Weekly*, May 28, 2008, p. 10.

⁸ John Reed, "AFSOC Quickly Working to Field Next-Generation Light Gunship," *InsideDefense.com*, June 27, 2008.

(UAVs) it uses to support special operations missions by about two-thirds in the FY2010 Program Objective Memorandum (POM).⁹

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)¹⁰

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.¹¹

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.”¹² While not officially acknowledged by DOD or USSOCOM, JSOC, which is

⁹ John Reed, “AFSOC Working to Increase Drone Fleet by Two-Thirds in POM-10 Build,” *InsideDefense.com*, July 18, 2008.

¹⁰ 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.

¹¹ 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.

¹² USSOCOM website <http://www.socom.mil/components/components.htm>, accessed March 19, 2008.

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.¹³ JSOC's primary mission is believed to be identifying and destroying terrorists and terror cells worldwide.

Current Issues

SOF Ground Assaults into Pakistan and Syria¹⁴

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 3 raid, in particular the threat to cut coalition supply lines transiting Pakistan, has supposedly resulted in the 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 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,¹⁵ 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.

Continued SOF Growth¹⁶

As mandated by the 2006 Quadrennial Defense Review (QDR) SOF continues to expand. In FY2009, USSOCOM hopes to grow by 1,536 military and civilian positions.¹⁷ 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

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

¹⁴ 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.

¹⁵ Stephen Graham, "Elite GIs Training Pakistani Forces to Fight Taliban," *Arizona Republic*, October 25, 2008.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*

¹⁷ USSOCOM FY2009 Budget Highlights, February 2008, p. 5.

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.¹⁸ Another concern impacting SOF expansion is that DOD reports that a “full one third of Special Forces soldiers are eligible to retire.”¹⁹ 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 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.”

Possible SOF Equipment and Logistics Shortages²⁰

One report suggests that while SOF expansion is proceeding as planned, equipment shortages may have an operational impact on USSOCOM forces. One crucial shortage area is airlift—both rotary and fixed wing. Analysts maintain that the SOF helicopter fleet has not increased in proportion with the expansion of SOF units. As a result, SOF units in Iraq have relied heavily on conventional Army aviation, which is said to provide two-thirds of SOF’s lift requirements. This deficit could worsen as SOF takes on more missions world-wide and also if there is a significant reduction of Army aviation in Iraq as there is not expected to be a corresponding SOF draw down. Observers also note that SOF requires additional unmanned aerial vehicles (UAVs) for intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance (ISR) support. Portable radios and even small arms are also reported equipment shortfalls for special operations units. A contributing factor is said to be USSOCOM’s acquisition emphasis, which has focused instead on “big-ticket programs” such as the SEAL delivery vehicle and large air platforms at the expense of smaller items of equipment.

A related difficulty is a lack of SOF logistics capability and units needed to repair equipment and sustain SOF operations. SOF support units have been characterized as not being “robust” enough—lacking human intelligence analysts, cooks, mechanics, and other support specialists. Because of these shortages, conventional Army units have been providing much of SOF’s logistical support in Iraq, including running dining facilities, refueling vehicles, flying medical evacuations, and guarding SOF bases. The concern is that in the case of Iraq, if there is a significant draw down of conventional forces as anticipated, SOF operations might become significantly constrained due to lack of organic logistical capabilities. The lack of SOF aviation, intelligence, and logistics support is said to be a factor impacting a possible “surge” of SOF to Afghanistan to target insurgents.²¹

¹⁸ Information in this section is from William H. McMichael, “Some Spec Ops Skills Being Lost, Official Says,” *Army Times*, June 23, 2008.

¹⁹ Donna Miles, “Gates Gets Update on Army Special Ops Capabilities, Challenges,” *Armed Forces Press Service*, October 24, 2008.

²⁰ Grace V. Jean, “Equipment Shortages Undercut U.S. Special Operations Forces,” *National Defense Magazine*, February 2009.

²¹ Peter Spiegel, “U.S. Considers Sending Special Ops to Afghanistan,” *Los Angeles Times*, October 26, 2008.

SOF and Irregular Warfare (IW)²²

Irregular Warfare (IW) is defined 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. DOD's December 2008 directive on IW directs the ASD/ SOLIC&IC to "serve as the principal civilian advisor to the Secretary of Defense for IW and provide overall policy oversight within DOD." Commander, USSOCOM was tasked to assist the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff by "coordinating the development of those aspects of SOF doctrine relevant to IW." USSOCOM was also directed to "lead the development of SOF-IW-relevant training and education standards for units and individuals." In addition, USSOCOM was tasked to "develop SOF capabilities for extending U.S. reach into denied areas and uncertain environments by operating with and through indigenous foreign forces or by conducting low-visibility operations."

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.²³ 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."²⁴ 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.

Issues for Congress

SOF Raids into Pakistan and Other Countries

While SOF non-permissive raids into Pakistan and other countries are well within its capabilities, such operations may not be in its best self-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"²⁵ and the host nation's government. Given Pakistan's reaction to the September 2008 unsanctioned raid into South Waziristan, U.S. leaders may wish to consider that further efforts could imperil long-term indirect SOF efforts to train Pakistani forces to assist

²² Unless otherwise noted, information in this section is from DOD Directive Number 3000.07, "Irregular Warfare (IW)," December 1, 2008.

²³ Geoff Fein, "OEF, OIF Demonstrating U.S. Forces Will Need to be More SOF-Like," *InsideDefense.com*, June 11, 2008.

²⁴ Christopher J. Castelli "Pentagon Must Fix Shortfalls in Key Irregular Warfare Missions," *InsideDefense.com*, May 22, 2008.

²⁵ Peter Spiegel, "Indirect Approach is Favored in the War on Terror," *Los Angeles Times*, October 13, 2008.

in defeating insurgents in the tribal and border regions—a key operational requirement for stability in Afghanistan.

SOF Equipment and Logistics Shortages

Reports of equipment and logistical shortages might merit further investigation. Given the fact that USSOCOM’s budget has more than doubled since 2001, the issue is not likely a lack of funds but instead an overemphasis on larger procurement items and expanding SOF “operators” at the expense of soldier-specific items such as weapons and radios and the development of organic logistics assets. Such an imbalance could result in the inability to fully equip newly manned SOF units as well as employ them in operations. SOF’s reported dependency on significant support from the conventional Army might make it extremely difficult for them to take on a greater role in Iraq as conventional forces are redeployed or to “surge” in Afghanistan to support an anticipated increased U.S. commitment.

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.

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