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

Andrew Feickert
Specialist in Military Ground Forces

Updated March 11, 2020

Congressional Research Service
7-....
www.crs.gov
RS21048

CRS REPORT
Prepared for Members and
Committees of Congress

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 70,000 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 has the responsibility to organize, train, and equip TSOCs. While USSOCOM is responsible for the organizing, training, and equipping of TSOCs, the Geographic Combatant Commands will 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 provide support to the Geographic Combatant Command headquarters.

The Unified Command Plan (UCP) stipulates USSOCOM responsibility for synchronizing planning for global operations to combat terrorist networks. This focus on planning 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. In August 2016, the Obama Administration assigned USSOCOM the leading role in coordinating DOD's efforts to counter WMDs, a mission previously assigned to U.S. Strategic Command (USSTRATCOM). USSOCOM is also the DOD proponent for Security Force Assistance and recently was assigned the mission to field a transregional Military Information Support Operations (MISO) capability.

USSOCOM's FY2021 budget request is for $16.6 billion, and USSOCOM has requested a force structure of 67,092 military and 6,831 civilian personnel.

Potential issues for Congress include the 2020 Comprehensive Review of Special Operations Forces Culture and Ethics and Civilian Oversight of USSOCOM.

Contents

Tables

Contacts

Background

Overview

Special operations are military operations requiring unique modes of employment, tactical techniques, equipment, and training. These operations are often conducted in hostile, denied, or politically sensitive environments and are characterized by one or more of the following elements: 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 MacDill 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. 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 Richard Clarke is the current USSOCOM Commander. The USSOCOM Commander reports directly to the Secretary of Defense. The Assistant Secretary of Defense for Special Operations/Low-Intensity Conflict (ASD SO/LIC) is the principal civilian advisor to the Secretary of Defense on special operations and low-intensity conflict matters. The ASD (SO/LIC) has as his principal duty overall supervision (to include oversight of policy and resources) of special operations and low-intensity conflict activities.[1] At present there is no ASD (SO/LIC), but Mr. Thomas Alexander is currently performing the duties of ASD (SO/LIC).[2]

As of 2020, USSOCOM consists of over 70,000 active duty, reserve, National Guard, and civilian personnel assigned to its headquarters (about 2,500 personnel), its four components, and sub-unified commands.[3] USSOCOM's components are the U.S. Army Special Operations Command (USASOC); the Naval Special Warfare Command (NSWC); the Air Force Special Operations Command (AFSOC); and the Marine Corps Forces 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 Combatant Commanders (GCCs). TSOCs are special operational headquarters elements designed

[1] https://policy.defense.gov/OUSDP-Offices/ASD-for-Special-Operations-Low-Intensity-Conflict/; accessed March 5, 2020.

[2] Ibid.

[3] 2020 Fact Book, USSOCOM, p. 12.

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.[4] This means USSOCOM 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 was intended to enable USSOCOM to standardize, to the extent possible, TSOC capabilities and manpower requirements. While USSOCOM is 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.[5]

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

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.[6] 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

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

[5] USSOCOM Pamphlet, "United States Special Operations Command, GlobalSOF Network2020," 2013.

[6] "Fact Book: United States Special Operations Command," USSOCOM Public Affairs, February 2013, p. 10.

allocations to meet global requirements."[7] In October 2008, USSOCOM was designated the DOD proponent for Security Force Assistance (SFA).[8] 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. In 2018, USSOCOM was also assigned the mission to field a transregional Military Information Support Operations (MISO) capability intended to "address the opportunities and risks of global information space."[9]

Army Special Operations Command

U.S. Army SOF (ARSOF) includes approximately 33,000 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.[10] 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),[11] 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,[12] the 75th Ranger Regiment, is headquartered at Fort Benning, GA, and consists of three battalions of about 800 soldiers each, a regimental special troops battalion, and a regimental military intelligence battalions. The Army's special operations aviation unit, the 160th Special Operations Aviation Regiment (Airborne) (SOAR), consists of five battalions and is headquartered at Fort Campbell, KY. The 160th SOAR features pilots trained to fly the most sophisticated Army rotary-wing aircraft in the harshest environments, day or night, and in adverse weather and supports all USSOCOM components, not just Army units.

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. 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 (MISGs)—the 4th Military

[7] Ibid.

[8] 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.

[9] Statement of General Raymond A. Thomas, III, U.S. Army, Commander, United States Special Operations Command before the Senate Armed Services Committee, February 14, 2019, p. 12.

[10] Information in this section, unless otherwise noted, is taken from 2020 Fact Book, USSOCOM, p. 18.

[11] 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).

[12] 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.

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 20,800 active, reserve, and civilian personnel.[13] AFSOC units operate out of four major continental United States (CONUS) locations and two overseas locations. The headquarters for AFSOC is Hurlburt Field, FL.[14] AFSOC units are stationed as follows:

- 1st Special Operations Wing, Hurlburt Field, FL;
- 24th Special Operations Wing, Hurlburt Field, FL;
- 27th Special Operations Wing, Cannon Air Force Base, NM;
- 137th Special Operations Wing (Air National Guard), Oklahoma City, OK;
- 193rd Special Operations Wing (Air National Guard), Harrisburg, PA;
- 352nd Special Operations Wing, Royal Air Force Mildenhall, UK;
- 492nd Special Operations Wing, Hurlburt Field, FL;
- 919th Special Operations Wing (Air Force Reserves), Duke Field, FL; and
- 353rd Special Operations Group, Kadena Air Base, Japan.[15]

Air Force Special Operations Command specialties generally fall into four groups:

- **Special Tactics:** Special Tactics comprises Special Tactics Officers, Combat Controllers, Combat Rescue Officers, Pararescuemen, Special Operations Weather Officers and Airmen, Air Liaison Officers, and Tactical Air Control Party Operators.
- **Special Operations Aviators:** Aircrew who fly a fleet of specially modified aircraft in permissive, contested, denied, or politically sensitive environments. Missions include long-range infiltration and exfiltration; nonstandard aviation; precision strike; aerial refueling; military information support operations; foreign internal defense; and command, control, intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance.
- **Combat Aviation Advisors:** Combat aviation advisors work with foreign aviation forces as part of Foreign Internal Defense, Security Force Assistance, and Unconventional Warfare operations.
- **Support Air Commandos:** A variety of Air Force specialties who serve in mission support, maintenance, and medical specialties in support of AFSOC units.[16]

[13] Information in this section, unless otherwise noted, is taken from 2020 Fact Book, USSOCOM, p. 26.

[14] Ibid.

[15] Ibid., p. 27.

[16] Ibid., pp. 28-29.

Naval Special Warfare Command[17]

The Naval Special Warfare Command (NSWC) comprises approximately 10,000 personnel, including active duty and reserve component Special Warfare Operators, known as SEALs; Special Warfare Boat Operators, known as Special Warfare Combatant-craft Crewmen (SWCC); reserve personnel; support personnel, referred to as Enablers; and civilians. NSWC headquarters is located at Coronado, CA, and is composed of eight active duty SEAL Teams, two reserve component SEAL Teams, two SEAL Delivery Vehicle (SDV) Teams, three Special Boat Teams, and two Special Reconnaissance Teams. 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. Naval Special Warfare Groups (NSWGs), NSWC's major components, are stationed as follows:

- NSWG-1, San Diego, CA;
- NSWG-2, Virginia Beach, VA;
- NSWG-3, Joint Base Pearl Harbor-Hickam, HI;
- NSWG-4, Virginia Beach, VA;
- NSWG-10; Virginia Beach, VA; and
- NSWG-11, Can Diego, CA.[18]

U.S. Marine Corps Forces Special Operations Command (MARSOC)[19]

On November 1, 2005, DOD created the Marine Special Operations Command (MARSOC) as a component of USSOCOM. MARSOC comprises almost 3,000 personnel, including Critical Skills Operators (enlisted), Special Operations Officers, Special Operations Independent Duty Corpsmen (medics), Special Operations Capabilities Specialists, Combat Service Support Specialists, and Marine Corps Civilians.[20] MARSOC consists of the Marine Raider Regiment, which includes 1st, 2nd, and 3rd Marine Raider Battalions; the Marine Raider Support Group; 1st, 2nd, and 3rd Marine Raider Support Battalions; and the Marine Special Operations School. MARSOC headquarters, the 2nd and 3rd Marine Raider Battalions, the Marine Special Operations School, and the Marine Raider Support Group are stationed at Camp Lejeune, NC. The 1st Marine Raider Battalion and 1st Marine Raider Support Battalion are currently 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.

[17] Information in this section, unless otherwise noted, is taken from 2020 Fact Book, USSOCOM, p. 23.

[18] https://www.nsw.navy.mil/CONTACT/Components/; accessed March 6, 2020.

[19] 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.

[20] 2020 Fact Book, USSOCOM, p. 30.

MARSOC to Consolidate at Camp Lejeune, NC[21]

Reportedly, the 1st Marine Raider Battalion and 1st Marine Raider Support Battalion will move from Camp Pendelton, CA, to Camp Lejeune, NC. Beginning in the fall of 2019, the move is planned to be completed during the summer of 2022. Concerns have been expressed that the move to Camp Lejeune could result in family stress, decreased training efficiency, negative culture and morale, and a decrease in recruiting and retention. MARSOC reportedly contends the move will save money on several fronts and create greater training opportunities by having all three battalions together. Associated cost savings are said to include

- saving millions of dollars due to the lower cost of living in North Carolina;
- moving all the Raiders to Camp Lejeune could save $55 million between 2021-2026 from reduced Basic Allowance for Housing (BAH) and the elimination of Permanent Change of Station (PCS) costs; and
- eliminating the need for duplicate equipment, reducing MARSOC acquisition costs by $65 million, and permitting the return of $33 million worth of equipment to the Marine Corps.[22]

Joint Special Operations Command (JSOC)[23]

From USSOCOM's 2020 Factbook:

> The Joint Special Operations Command, located at Fort Bragg, North Carolina, is a sub-unified command of the U.S. Special Operations Command. 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.

FY2021 USSOCOM Budget Request

USSOCOM's FY2021 presidential budget request of $13.0 billion represents a decrease of -$700 million (-5%) from the FY2020-enacted position of $13.7 billion. USSOCOM's FY2021 baseline request totals $9.4 billion, a -$187 million (-2%) decrease from the FY2020-enacted level of $9.6 billion, while the FY2021 Overseas Contingency Operations (OCO) request totals $3.6 billion, a -$512 million (-12%) decrease from the FY2020-enacted level of $4.1 billion. The OCO request captures incremental Special Operations-Peculiar (SO-Peculiar) requirements directly associated with deploying SOF to Afghanistan, Iraq, and other locations to support the Geographic Combatant Commands.[24]

[21] Information in this section is taken from Philip Athey, "It's Official: Marine Raiders Leaving California for a New Home in North Carolina," *Marine Corps Times,* January 6, 2020.

[22] Ibid.

[23] Taken directly from 2020 Fact Book, USSOCOM, p. 34.

[24] Taken directly from United States Special Operations Command, FY2021 Budget Highlights, February 2020, p. 7.

Table 1. FY2021 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)	$6.2 B	$3.4 B	$9.6 B
Research, Development, Testing & Evaluation (RDT&E)	$720 M	12 M	$732 M
Procurement	$2.1 B	$246 M	$2.346 B
Military Construction (MILCON)	$439 M	—	$439 M

Source: United States Special Operations Command, FY2021 Budget Highlights, February 2020, p. 8.

Note: Numbers may not add due to rounding.

FY2021 USSOCOM Requested Force Structure

The FY2021 presidential budget request seeks an increase in overall personnel of 720 (1%), from 73,203 in FY2020 to 73,923 in FY2021. Active duty military personnel comprise 540 of that increase, from 58,245 in FY2020 to 58,785 in FY2021, as USSOCOM continues to strengthen joint capabilities, fill training gaps, and mitigate Combat Support/Combat Service Support (CS/CSS) shortfalls.[25]

Table 2. FY2021 USSOCOM Requested Force Structure

Personnel	FY2021 Request
Air Force Military	16,907
Air Force Civilians	2,554
Army Military	36,212
Army Civilians	2,799
Navy Military	10,600
Navy Civilians	1,322
Marine Corps Military	3,373
Marine Corps Civilians	156
USSOCOM Military Total	67,092
USSOCOM Civilian Total	6,831
TOTAL MANPOWER	73,923

Source: Taken directly from United States Special Operations Command, FY2021 Budget Highlights, February 2020, p. 6.

Note: Military totals reflect Active, Reserve, and Guard personnel. Civilian totals reflect budgeted full-time equivalents (FTEs).

[25] Ibid., p. 6.

Potential Issues for Congress

Comprehensive Review of Special Operations Forces Culture and Ethics[26]

On August 9, 2019, Commander, USSOCOM directed a Comprehensive Review of Special Operations Forces Culture and Ethics. On January 23, 2020, the review was released publically. In it, among other things, the Review Team found that USSOCOM does not have a systemic ethics problem. The Review Team did assess that, in some instances, USSOCOM's cultural focus on SOF employment and mission accomplishment adversely affected leadership, discipline, and accountability throughout the command. An examination of this review raises potential issues for Congress, including the following:

- The report recommended 16 actions to address the review's findings, taking a holistic approach to addressing a SOF culture overly focused on employment and mission accomplishment to the detriment of leadership, discipline, and accountability.[27] It further emphasized that previous USSOCOM efforts to address similar factors had experienced varying degrees of success—such as the 2011 Preservation of the Force and Family or POTFF study—largely due to the challenges of implementation. Congress might seek additional insight on the challenges USSOCOM faced in 2011 implementing the POTFF study's recommendations, and consider the anticipated challenges to implement USSOCOM's recommended cultural and ethical reforms.
- Regarding the POTFF study, USSOCOM's review noted: "Selective implementation of the recommended actions temporarily alleviated some symptoms, but the larger institutional issues (such as force employment and force structure)—those most critical to bringing about and sustaining meaningful change—did not receive sustained understanding, attention, or advocacy at the appropriate level."[28] Congressional understanding regarding individuals or institutions lacking understanding, indifferent to, or failing to advocate POTF recommendations could prove beneficial as Congress works with USSOCOM as it institutes cultural and ethical reforms.
- The comprehensive review noted that one of the reviews evaluation teams "had additional concerns regarding the selection of SOF personnel (military, civilian, contractors) selected to fill assessment, selection, and initial training roles, and whether they demonstrated the appropriate balance of character and competence for these tasks."[29] Congress may wish to further explore this issue with USSOCOM to ensure that substandard personnel of questionable character are not responsible for selecting and training incoming SOF personnel.
- The comprehensive review noted "the creation of ad hoc SOF command and control structures to support the bias towards force employment increases the demand for rank-appropriate leaders to staff those structures, resulting in

[26] United States Special Operations Command Comprehensive Review, January 23, 2020.

[27] Ibid., p. 7.

[28] Ibid., pp. 13-14.

[29] Ibid., pp. 29-30.

command teams (O-5 and O-6 commanders and their senior enlisted leaders) and key staff being absent from their units and responsibilities while their units are preparing for operational deployment."[30] Congress might decide to examine why a "bias towards force employment" requires the creation of ad hoc command and control structures. Furthermore, Congress may assess how prevalent the practice is of removing a unit's senior leadership and key staff for other taskings while the unit or elements of that unit are training for deployment, along with how this practice affects training and readiness of those units.

- The comprehensive review suggested "current employment models disrupt purpose-built teams, consume leadership capacity, and impact individual predictability."[31] It also noted the "support of ad hoc requirements contributes to the slow erosion of leadership, discipline and accountability and the habitual breaking apart of SOF units to meet demands strains effective present and engaged leadership." Perhaps more concerning, the Review Team noted that analysis of incidents of misconduct complemented these findings and identified trends of unit disaggregation down to the individual level were a causal factor across all these incidents. Does this mean that one common characteristic of these major incidents of misconduct are individuals or parts of units separated from their parent detachment or platoon who are employed in an ad hoc role?
- The Reserve Components of all the Services are a major part of USSOCOM. For example, two of the Army's seven Special Forces groups—the 19th and the 20th—are reserve component. An examination of the of the culture and ethics review however, suggested that little attention was given to Reserve Component SOF, whether it be the review's Advisory or Review Team membership or as part of the review's engagement strategy. Was there a reason why the ethics and culture review seemingly deemphasized the Reserve Component? Does this perhaps suggest that ethical and cultural problems reside almost exclusively in the Active Component? If so, why is this the case and is there something to be learned about culture and ethics from the Reserve Components?

Civilian Oversight of USSOCOM [32]

While the aforementioned USSOCOM Comprehensive Review suggests that USSOCOM's military leaders are both part of the problem and solution for USSOCOM's cultural and ethical problems, others suggest better civilian leadership and oversight are also essential in addressing these problems. While Congress created the position of Assistant Secretary of Defense for Special Operations and Low Intensity Conflict (ASD [SOLIC]) in 1987 (10 U.S.C. §138), it has been suggested that post-2001, as USSOCOM amassed resources and influence, the office of ASD (SOLIC) failed to keep pace, contributing to USSOCOM's over emphasis on direct action missions, ethics problems, and resulting in a command not prepared to meet the challenges of great power competition.[33] Furthermore, even though Congress expanded ASD (SOLIC)'s role and responsibilities in 2017 (§922, FY2017 National Defense Authorization Act; P.L. 114–328),

[30] Ibid., pp. 29-30.

[31] Ibid., p. 31.

[32] Mark E. Mitchell, Zachary Griffiths, and Cole Livieratos, "America's Special Operators Will be Adrift Without Better Civilian Oversight," *War on the Rocks,* February 18, 2020.

[33] Ibid.

some feel that it has been difficult to restore civilian leadership to USSOCOM (e.g., at present, there is only an Acting ASD [SOLIC]). Without stronger guidance from civilian leadership in the Pentagon and Congress, it is allegedly unlikely USSOCOM will enact the necessary changes to produce capable and ethical special operations forces.[34]

Three potential solutions for enhancing civilian oversight and control could include (1) continuing DOD's "incremental but non-committal approach" toward meeting the requirements of Section 922 of the FY2017 National Defense Authorization Act, (2) congressional elevation of ASD (SOLIC) to an Under Secretary of Defense for Special Operations reporting directly to the Secretary of Defense, or (3) making ASD (SOLIC) an independent Assistant Secretary of Defense similar to the Assistant Secretary of Defense for Public Affairs.[35] As part of its oversight activities, Congress might decide to examine these and other potential options for enhancing civilian control and oversight of USSOCOM.

Author Contact Information

Andrew Feickert
Specialist in Military Ground Forces
[redacted]@crs.loc.gov, 7-....

[34] Ibid.

[35] Ibid.