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

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Summary

Special Operations Forces (SOF) play a significant role in U.S. military operations and 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. In 2016, USSOCOM was assigned 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 Trans Regional Military Information Support Operations (MISO) capability.

USSOCOM's FY2022 budget request was for \$12.6 billion, representing a decrease of \$495 million (4%) of the FY2021-enacted position of \$13.1 billion.

A potential issue for Congress includes potential implications of the Ukraine Conflict for U.S. SOF.

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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 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. Reportedly, U.S. Army Lieutenant General (LTG) Bryan Fenton is expected to be nominated to replace General Clarke.¹ The USSOCOM Commander reports directly to the Secretary of Defense. The Assistant Secretary of Defense for Special Operations/Low-Intensity Conflict (ASD (SOLIC)) is the principal civilian advisor to the Secretary of Defense on special operations and low-intensity conflict matters. In this role, the ASD (SOLIC)

- exercises authority, direction, and control of all special operations-peculiar issues relating to the organization, training, and equipping of SOF;
- is the Principal Special Operations and Low Intensity Conflict Official within the senior management of the Department of Defense (DOD);
- sits in the chain-of-command above USSOCOM for special operations-peculiar administrative matters and provides civilian oversight of the SOF enterprise; and
- advises, assists, and supports the Under Secretary of Defense for Policy (USD[P]) on special operations and irregular warfare policy matters.²

The current ASD (SOLIC) is the Honorable Christopher Maier.³

As of 2020, USSOCOM consisted 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.⁴ USSOCOM's components are the U.S. Army Special Operations Command (USASOC); the Naval Special Warfare Command (NSWC); the Air Force Special

¹ Meghann Myers, "Army Generals to be Nominated to Lead European Command, Special Operations Command: Report," *Military Times*, April 11, 2022.

² <https://policy.defense.gov/OUUDP-Offices/ASD-for-Special-Operations-Low-Intensity-Conflict/>, accessed May 11, 2022.

³ *Ibid.*

⁴ 2022 Fact Book, USSOCOM, p. 12.

Operations Command (AFSOC); and the Marine Corps Forces Special Operations Command (MARSOC). The Joint Special Operations Command (JSOC) is a USSOCOM sub-unified command.

Additional USSOCOM Responsibilities

In addition to Title 10 authorities and responsibilities, USSOCOM has been given additional responsibilities. In the 2004 Unified Command Plan (UCP), USSOCOM was given the responsibility for synchronizing DOD planning against global terrorist networks and, as directed, conducting global operations against those networks.⁵ In this regard, USSOCOM “receives, reviews, coordinates and prioritizes all DOD plans that support the global campaign against terror, and then makes recommendations to the Joint Staff regarding force and resource allocations to meet global requirements.”⁶ In 2008, USSOCOM was designated the DOD proponent for Security Force Assistance (SFA).⁷ In this role, USSOCOM performs a synchronizing function in global training and assistance planning similar to the previously described role of planning against terrorist networks. In 2018, USSOCOM was also assigned the mission to field a Trans Regional Military Information Support Operations (MISO) capability intended to “address the opportunities and risks of global information space.”⁸

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 to support a GCC’s special operations logistics, planning, and operational command and control requirements, and are normally commanded by a general officer.

In 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.⁹ 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,

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

⁶ *Ibid.*

⁷ Information in this section is from testimony given by Admiral Eric T. Olson, Commander, USSOCOM, to the House Terrorism, Unconventional Threats and Capabilities Subcommittee on the Fiscal Year 2010 National Defense Authorization Budget Request for the U.S. Special Operations Command, June 4, 2009.

⁸ 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.

⁹ Information in this section is taken from USSOCOM Information Paper, “Special Operations Forces: 2020: Theater Special Operations Commands,” April 25, 2013.

and logistic support to the TSOCs. The current TSOCs, the GCCs they support, and the CCSA responsibility for those TSOCs are as follows.¹⁰

- 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), Camp Humphries, Republic of 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.

Joint Special Operations Command (JSOC)¹¹

From USSOCOM's 2022 Factbook:

The Joint Special Operations Command, located at Fort Bragg, North Carolina, is a sub-unified command of the U.S. Special Operations Command. JSOC prepares assigned, attached and augmented forces, and, when directed, conducts special operations against threats to protect the homeland and U.S. interests abroad.

Army Special Operations Command

U.S. Army SOF (ARSOF) includes approximately 35,000 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.¹² 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),¹³ 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.

¹⁰ 2022 Fact Book, USSOCOM, pp. 44-45.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 36.

¹² Information in this section, unless otherwise noted, is taken from 2022 Fact Book, USSOCOM, pp. 20-23.

¹³ 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).

An elite airborne light infantry unit specializing in direct action operations,¹⁴ 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 battalion. 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 (also known as psychological operations) units disseminate information to large foreign audiences through mass media. Two active duty Psychological Operations (PSYOPS) groups—the 4th PSYOPS Group and 8th PSYOPS Group—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 major commands, with approximately 16,800 active, reserve, and civilian personnel.¹⁵ AFSOC units operate out of four major continental United States (CONUS) locations and two overseas locations. The headquarters for AFSOC is Hurlburt Field, FL.¹⁶ 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.¹⁷

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

¹⁴ 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.

¹⁵ Information in this section, unless otherwise noted, is taken from 2022 Fact Book, USSOCOM, pp. 28-31.

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Ibid., p. 29.

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.¹⁸

Naval Special Warfare Command¹⁹

The Naval Special Warfare Command (NSWC) comprises approximately 10,500 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, San Diego, CA.²⁰

U.S. Marine Corps Forces Special Operations Command (MARSOC)²¹

On November 1, 2005, DOD created the Marine Special Operations Command (MARSOC) as a component of USSOCOM. MARSOC comprises almost 3,500 personnel, including Critical Skills

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, pp. 30-31.

¹⁹ Information in this section, unless otherwise noted, is taken from 2022 Fact Book, USSOCOM, pp. 24-27.

²⁰ <https://www.nsw.navy.mil/CONTACT/Components/>; accessed March 6, 2020.

²¹ Information in this section is from “Fact Book: United States Special Operations Command,” USSOCOM Public

Operators (enlisted), Special Operations Officers, Special Operations Independent Duty Corpsmen (medics), Special Operations Capabilities Specialists, Combat Service Support Specialists, and Marine Corps Civilians.²² 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.

MARSOC to Consolidate at Camp Lejeune, NC²³

Reportedly, the 1st Marine Raider Battalion and 1st Marine Raider Support Battalion will move from Camp Pendleton, 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.²⁴

FY2022 USSOCOM Budget Request²⁵

USSOCOM's FY2022 budget request was for \$12.6 billion, representing a decrease of \$495 million (4%) from the FY2021-enacted position of \$13.1 billion. As part of its funding, USSOCOM depends heavily on contributions from the services—about \$9 billion annually to provide combat support and service support, base operating support, and enabling capabilities. Nearly 66% of service support to USSOCOM funding is from military personnel accounts.

USSOCOM FY2022 requested amounts are as follows:

- **Operations and Maintenance (O&M):** FY2022 O&M funding request was for \$9.377 billion—a \$51 million decrease (0.5%) from the FY2021-enacted level of \$9.428 billion.

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.

²² 2022 Fact Book, USSOCOM, p. 30.

²³ 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.

²⁴ *Ibid.*

²⁵ Information in this section is taken from USSOCOM FY 2022 Budget Highlights, March 2022, pp. 7-8.

- **Procurement (PROC):** FY2022 Procurement funding request was for \$2.169 billion—a \$234 million decrease (9.7%) from the FY2021-enacted level of \$2.403 billion.
- **Research, Development, Test, and Evaluation (RDT&E):** FY2022 RDT&E funding request was for \$696 million—a \$117 million decrease (14.4 %) from the FY2021-enacted level of \$813 million.
- **Military Construction (MILCON):** FY2022 MILCON funding request was for \$346 million—a \$93 million decrease (21.2%) from the FY2021-enacted level of \$439 million.

Potential Issue for Congress

Implications of the Ukraine Conflict for U.S. SOF

Russia’s February 2022 invasion of Ukraine has arguably changed the global security environment. In recent testimony, General Clark noted:

In Ukraine, Russia’s unprovoked, unjustified, and premeditated invasion reminds us of continued challenges to the rules-based international order. Since 2014, following Russia’s previous aggression in Crimea and Eastern Ukraine, SOF supported multinational training efforts with Ukrainian SOF forces and provided Military Information Support Operations (MISO) assistance to illuminate and counter Russian disinformation. Russia’s destabilizing activities reinforce the importance of USSOCOM’s decades-long commitment to enhancing interoperability with Allied SOF throughout Europe – a critical asset in providing options for the United States and our Allies.²⁶

While U.S. SOF’s pre-2022 support to Ukraine arguably has helped Ukraine to successfully defend its territory against ongoing Russian attacks, there is a degree of uncertainty as to the future role of U.S. SOF in Europe. With some predicting a long conflict in Ukraine,²⁷ and others suggesting that the conflict might spread,²⁸ U.S. SOF’s role in the region could potentially increase not only in duration but in scope as well. As such, there could be a number of implications for SOF’s future. Given this possibility, potential issues might include the following:

- Does USSOCOM have sufficient U.S. SOF force structure for a prolonged role in support of Ukraine and if the present conflict potentially expands elsewhere in Eastern Europe?
- Does USSOCOM have sufficient U.S. SOF Military Information Support Operations resources and capabilities to support Ukraine and other Eastern European allies as well?
- Does USSOCOM have adequate access to resources to support a long-term mission to support Ukraine and other Eastern European NATO members?
- Are there plans to expand and modify USSOCOM regional training activities based on “lessons learned” from the ongoing conflict in Ukraine?

²⁶ Statement of General Richard D. Clarke, USA, Commander, United States Special Operations Command, Before the 117th Congress, Senate Armed Services Committee, April 5, 2022, p. 1.

²⁷ George Wright, “Ukraine War: Putin Preparing for Long Haul, U.S. Intelligence Says,” *BBC News*, May 10, 2022.

²⁸ Laurence Peter, “Transnistria and Ukraine Conflict: Is War Spreading?,” *BBC News*, April 27, 2022.

- Are there plans to reexamine overall NATO SOF support to Ukraine and NATO's Eastern European members? Is there potential for additional NATO SOF support that might lessen long-term U.S. SOF support requirements?

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