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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 the Administration has given U.S. SOF forces greater responsibility for planning and conducting worldwide counterterrorism operations. The 2006 Quadrennial Defense Review (QDR) has called for a 15% increase in special operations forces beginning in FY2007. Proposals to elevate the command of the Joint Special Operations Command (JSOC) and the realignment of civil affairs, psychological operations (psyops) and combat search and rescue (CSAR) functions out from under the control of the U.S. Special Operations Command (USSOCOM), has raised concerns that SOF is perhaps becoming too focused on immediate versus long-term results. This report will be updated as events warrant.

Background

Overview. Special Operations Forces (SOF) are small, elite military units with special training and equipment that can infiltrate into hostile territory through land, sea, or air to conduct a variety of operations, many of them classified. SOF personnel undergo rigorous selection and lengthy, specialized training. The U.S. Special Operations Command (USSOCOM) oversees the training, doctrine, and equipping of all U.S. SOF units.

Command Structures. In 1986 Congress (P.L. 99-661) expressed concern for the status of SOF within overall U.S. defense planning and passed measures to strengthen its position. These actions included the establishment of USSOCOM as a new unified command. USSOCOM is headquartered at MacDill Air Force Base in Tampa, FL. The Commander of USSOCOM is a four-star officer who may be from any service. Commander, USSOCOM reports directly to the Secretary of Defense, although an Assistant Secretary of Defense for Special Operations and Low Intensity Conflict (SO/LIC) provides immediate civilian oversight over many USSOCOM activities.

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Army Special Operations Forces.¹ U.S. Army SOF (ARSOF) include 26,000 soldiers from the Active Army, National Guard, and Army Reserve who are organized into Special Forces units, Ranger units, special operations aviation units, civil affairs units, psychological operations units, and special operations support units. ARSOF Headquarters and other resources, such as the John F. Kennedy Special Warfare Center and School, are located at Fort Bragg, NC. Five active Special Forces Groups (Airborne) are stationed at Fort Bragg and at Fort Lewis, WA, Fort Campbell, KY, and Fort Carson, CO. Special Forces soldiers — also known as the Green Berets — are trained in various skills, including foreign languages, that allow teams to operate independently in designated regions of the world. Two Army National Guard SF groups are headquartered in Utah and Alabama. An elite airborne light infantry unit, the 75th Ranger Regiment, is headquartered at Fort Benning, GA and consists of three battalions specializing in direct action operations. Army special operations aviation units, including the 160th Special Operations Aviation Regiment (Airborne) at Fort Campbell, KY, feature pilots trained to fly the most sophisticated Army rotary-wing aircraft in the harshest environments, day or night, and in adverse weather.

The most frequently deployed SOF assets are civil affairs (CA) units, which provide experts in every area of civil government to help administer civilian affairs in the theater. The 96th Civil Affairs Battalion (Airborne) is the only active CA unit; all other CA units reside in four Army Reserve Civil Affairs Commands located in Pensacola, FL, Mountain View, CA, Riverdale, MD, and Bronx, NY. Psychological operations units disseminate information to large foreign audiences through mass media. The active duty 4th Psychological Operations Group (Airborne) is stationed at Fort Bragg, and two Army Reserve groups are located in Cleveland, OH, and at Moffett Federal Airfield, CA.

Air Force Special Operations Forces.² The Air Force Special Operations Command (AFSOC) includes about 10,000 active and reserve personnel, of which about 22% are stationed overseas. AFSOC is headquartered at Hurlburt Field, FL, which is also the home of most of AFSOC's active units, including the 16th Special Operations Wing, the 720th Special Tactics Group, the 18th Flight Test Squadron, and the U.S. Air Force Special Operations School. 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. The V-22 Osprey tilt-rotor aircraft, a Marine Corps priority, is also being developed for AFSOC. If procured, SOF CV-22s will conduct long-range vertical takeoff and landing infiltration, exfiltration, and resupply missions.

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

² For additional information on Air Force SOF units, see Robert Wall, "Conflict Could Test Special Ops Improvements," *Aviation Week & Space Technology*, Oct. 1, 2001, p. 30.

Special Operations Unmanned Aerial Vehicle (UAV) Squadron.³ The Air Force is currently standing up a special operations Predator UAV squadron at Indian Springs Auxiliary Field, NV. The squadron will initially consist of 24 MQ-1 aircraft but could eventually add the larger MQ-9 Predator B when the aircraft completes development. The Air Force has not announced a specific timetable for the completion of the stand up of the AFSOC Predator squadron. The Air Force was formally tasked to stand up this squadron in the 2006 Quadrennial Defense Review.⁴

Naval Special Operations Forces.⁵ The Naval Special Warfare Command (NSWC) is located in Coronado, CA. The major operational components of NSWC include Naval Special Warfare Groups 1 and 3 stationed in San Diego, CA, and Naval Special Warfare Groups 2 and 4 in Norfolk, VA. These components deploy SEAL Teams, SEAL Delivery Vehicle Teams, and Special Boat Teams worldwide to meet the training, exercise, contingency and wartime requirements of theater commanders. NSWC has approximately 5,400 total active-duty personnel — including 2,450 SEALs and 600 Special Warfare Combatant-craft Crewmen (SWCC) — as well as a 1,200-person reserve component of approximately 325 SEALs, 125 SWCC and 775 support personnel. SEALs are considered the best-trained combat swimmers in the world, and can be deployed covertly from submarines or from sea-based aircraft.

Marine Special Operations Command (MARSOC).⁶ On November 1, 2005, DOD announced the creation of the Marine Special Operations Command (MARSOC) as a component of USSOCOM. MARSOC will consist of three subordinate units — the Marine Special Operations Regiment, the Foreign Military Training Unit, and the Special Operations Support Group — totaling approximately 2,600 Marines. MARSOC Headquarters, the Foreign Military Training Unit, and the Special Operations Support Group will be stationed at Camp Lejeune, NC. The Marine Special Operations Regiment will also have its headquarters at Camp Lejeune and will have an element stationed at Camp Pendleton, CA. An activation date for MARSOC and its subordinate units has not yet been determined but MARSOC officials will reportedly deploy six Foreign Military Training Units and one special operations company this summer.⁷ USSOCOM and the Marine Corps were formally tasked to stand up MARSOC in the 2006 Quadrennial Defense Review (QDR).⁸

³ Information in this section is from Bruce Rolfsen, “Spec Ops Predators,” *Armed Forces Journal*, July 2005, pp. 18-19.

⁴ Department of Defense, Quadrennial Defense review Report, February 6, 2006, p. 5.

⁵ Information in this section is from the U.S. Naval Special Warfare Command’s Official website, [<https://www.navsoc.navy.mil/>], accessed on May 26, 2005.

⁶ Information in this section is taken from DOD Press Release No. 1127-05, dated Nov. 1, 2005, Subject: Secretary of Defense Approves Marine Special Operations Command; Donna Miles, “Marine Corps to Join U.S. Special Operations Command,” *American Forces Press Service*, Nov. 1, 2005; and Christian Lowe, “U.S. Marine Corps to Create Special Operations Unit,” *Defense News*, Nov. 1, 2005.

⁷ Copley News Service, “Marine Corps Force Deploys in Summer,” *San Diego Union Tribune*, March 16, 2006.

⁸ Department of Defense, Quadrennial Defense Review Report, February 6, 2006, p. 5.

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.”⁹ While not officially acknowledged by DOD or USSOCOM, JSOC, which is headquartered at Pope Air Force Base in North Carolina, 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.¹⁰ JSOC’s primary mission is believed to be identifying and destroying terrorists and terror cells worldwide.

Current Topics

Global War on Terror. Special operations forces continue to operate in Iraq and Afghanistan where they are actively pursuing key insurgents. U.S. SOF continue their involvement in the Philippines and Colombia where their role is strictly limited to training the armed forces of those respective countries in counterterrorism and counterinsurgency tactics. U.S. SOF are also involved in operations in the Horn of Africa region as part of Combined Joint Task Force Horn of Africa (CJTF-HOA) where the focus of U.S. activities is training regional militaries.

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

- An overall increase of SOF by 15%;
- Increase in the number of Army Special Forces battalions by one-third;
- An increase in SEAL team manning and the development of a riverine warfare capability; and
- Expansion of Psychological Operations and Civil Affairs units by 3,700 personnel - a 33% increase.¹¹

According to analysts, such a proposed expansion of Army SOF would lead to an increase from 15 to 20 active duty battalions, creating approximately 90 additional A-Teams.¹²

⁹ USSOCOM Website [<http://www.socom.mil/components/components.htm>], accessed April 4, 2006.

¹⁰ Sean D. Naylor, “JSOC to Become Three-Star Command,” *Army Times*, February 13, 2006.

¹¹ *Ibid.*

¹² Reuters, “Pentagon Plans Major Increase in Special Forces,” *New York Times on the Web*, (continued...)

Joint Special Operations Command (JSOC) to Become a Three-Star Command.¹³ Reports suggest that DOD will accept an independent report's recommendation to make the commander of JSOC a three-star (Lieutenant General or Vice Admiral) versus its current two-star (Major General or Rear Admiral (Upper Half)) billet. The report was allegedly commissioned by the Secretary of Defense in October 2005 after meeting with USSOCOM leadership and then reportedly expressing a "lack of confidence" in USSOCOM's assessment of its capabilities, having been told by USSOCOM officials that despite a substantial commitment of funds, that USSOCOM's capabilities were "declining." An additional recommendation from the independent committee chaired by retired Army General Wayne Downing (a former USSOCOM and JSOC commander) to temporarily remove JSOC from USSOCOM and have it report directly to the Secretary of Defense was reportedly opposed by the Joint Chiefs of Staff and therefore not implemented.

Civil Affairs/Psychological Operations Shifted out of USSOCOM.¹⁴ One report suggests that the majority of Civil Affairs and Psychological Operations forces will be shifted from USSOCOM to the conventional Army. This reorganization, under discussion for more than a year, was reportedly ordered by the Secretary of Defense and plans for implementing this change are to be presented to him by this Spring. Under this new arrangement, reserve component civil affairs and psyops units will have an association with active Army brigade combat teams for training and deployment purposes. USSOCOM will retain active duty civil affairs and psychological operations units under its command.

Combat Search and Rescue (CSAR) to Move to Air Combat Command.¹⁵ According to one report, the Chief of Staff of the Air Force, General T. Michael Moseley, has decided to move the Air Force's HC-130 and HH-60 rescue aircraft, along with its rescue officers and pararescue troops - also known as PJs - from the Air Force Special Operations Command (AFSOC) to the Air Combat Command (ACC). This move, supposedly based on lessons learned from Afghanistan and Iraq, is intended speed the ability to dispatch aircraft and rescue specialists to search for and retrieve downed air crews. General Moseley suggested that combat search and rescue, under previous command arrangements, was not always on the top of USSOCOM's list of priorities and that CSAR assets were often used on SOF-type missions and not always available to conduct search and rescue operations.

¹² (...continued)
January 24, 2006.

¹³ Information in this section is from Sean D. Naylor's, "JSOC to Become Three-Star Command," *Army Times*, February 13, 2006 and SpecOps Beset by Command Confusion, *Army Times*, March 3, 2006.

¹⁴ Information in this section is from Joshua Kucera, "Civil Affairs, Psyops Shift Away from SOCOM," *Jane's Defense Weekly*, March 22, 2006.

¹⁵ Information in this section is from John T. Bennett, "Moseley: Move to ACC Will Elevate CSAR to 'Primary Mission' Status," *InsideDefense.com*, February 27, 2006.

Issues for Congress

Is QDR-Mandated SOF Growth Achievable? Congress may decide to examine the feasibility of the QDR-mandated 15% increase in SOF forces, perhaps focusing on the proposed growth of Army Special Forces, Navy SEALs, and psychological warfare and civil affairs personnel. Volunteers for Army Special Forces and Navy SEALs, in particular, are subjected to rigorous assessment and selection regimens that traditionally yield only a handful of men selected to serve in these units - around a 20% pass rate in the case of SEAL Basic Underwater Demolition (BUD) Training.¹⁶ In order to meet a growing requirement, USSOCOM has “overhauled” its accession schools, increasing the number of training cadre and number of classes to increase candidate throughput while allegedly “maintaining the same high standards.”¹⁷ USSOCOM’s goal for producing 750 enlisted Green Beret graduates per year starting in FY2006 was exceeded a year early as in FY2005, 790 new enlisted Green Berets successfully completed assessment and qualification training. USSOCOM notes that for the first few years of this initiative, additional SOF soldiers will be used to fill existing vacancies in Army Special Forces units but that USSOCOM is “now postured for additional future growth.”¹⁸

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

JSOC’s Increasing Role and Loss of Civil Affairs, Psyops, and Combat Search and Rescue Capabilities. Congress might act to review the implications of JSOC’s increasing role in special operations as well as the loss of civil affairs, psyops, and combat search and rescue capabilities. While proponents suggest that these and other changes will better enable USSOCOM to focus on intelligence gathering and direct action missions against individual terrorists and terror cells, others are concerned that by marginalizing the role of civil affairs, psyops, and training foreign militaries, that USSOCOM may not be optimally suited for fighting both the “long war” on terror as well as the insurgency in Iraq. Some USSOCOM officials suggest that while direct action missions may “show effect immediately” that they can be detrimental in an insurgency, whereas civil affairs, psyops and special forces participating in foreign internal defense, information operations, and civil-military operations historically tend to be more effective in long-running counterinsurgency campaigns.¹⁹

¹⁶ United States Special Operations Command, Posture Statement 2006, p. 15.

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ Sean Naylor, “More Than Door Kickers,” Armed Forces Journal, April 7, 2006.