



**Congressional  
Research Service**

Informing the legislative debate since 1914

---

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

**Andrew Feickert**

Specialist in Military Ground Forces

April 13, 2018

**Congressional Research Service**

7-5700

[www.crs.gov](http://www.crs.gov)

RS21048

## 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 now has the responsibility to organize, train, and equip TSOCs. While USSOCOM is now responsible for the organizing, training, and equipping of TSOCs, the Geographic Combatant Commands will continue to 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 current 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 Administration assigned USSOCOM the leading role in coordinating DOD's efforts to counter WMDs, a mission previously assigned to U.S. Strategic Command (USSTRATCOM).

Potential issues for Congress include the overuse of U.S. SOF and readiness implications and USSOCOM and countering Weapons of Mass Destruction (CWMD).

## **Contents**

Background .....	1
Overview .....	1
Command Structures and Components .....	1
Theater Special Operations Commands (TSOCs) .....	1
Additional USSOCOM Responsibilities .....	2
Army Special Operations Command.....	3
Air Force Special Operations Command .....	4
U.S. Air Force Special Tactics .....	5
AFSOC Aircraft .....	5
Naval Special Warfare Command .....	6
U.S. Marine Corps Forces Special Operations Command (MARSOC).....	6
Joint Special Operations Command (JSOC) .....	6
USSOCOM’s FY2019 Budget Request.....	7
Potential Issues for Congress.....	7
The Overuse of U.S. SOF and Readiness.....	7
USSOCOM and Countering Weapons of Mass Destruction (CWMD) .....	8

## **Contacts**

Author Contact Information .....	10
----------------------------------	----

# 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. USSOCOM headquarters currently consists of approximately 2,500 military and Department of Defense (DOD) civilians (not including government contractors).<sup>1</sup> 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 Raymond A. Thomas III is the current USSOCOM Commander. The USSOCOM Commander reports directly to the Secretary of Defense. The Assistant Secretary of Defense for Special Operations and Low Intensity Conflict (ASD/SOLIC), a member of the Office of the Secretary of Defense for Policy (OSD-P), provides civilian oversight over USSOCOM activities and is chain of supervision between the Secretary of Defense and USSOCOM Commander. The current ASD/SOLIC is Mr. Owen West.

As of February 15, 2018, USSOCOM consisted of 57,478 active duty, 7,668 reserve and National Guard, and 6,552 civilian personnel assigned to its headquarters, its four components, and sub-unified commands.<sup>2</sup> 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

---

<sup>1</sup> Joint Publication 3.05, Doctrine for Special Operations, July 16, 2014; [http://www.dtic.mil/doctrine/new\\_pubs/jp3\\_05.pdf](http://www.dtic.mil/doctrine/new_pubs/jp3_05.pdf).

<sup>2</sup> Statement of General Raymond A. Thomas III, Commander, United States Special Operations Command, Before the House Armed Services Committee, Subcommittee on Emerging Threats and Capabilities, February 15, 2018, p. 3.

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.<sup>3</sup> This means USSOCOM now 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 is intended to enable USSOCOM to standardize, to the extent possible, TSOC capabilities and manpower requirements. While USSOCOM is now 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:

Current TSOCs are<sup>4</sup>

- 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; and
- 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.<sup>5</sup> In this regard, USSOCOM "receives, reviews, coordinates and prioritizes all DOD plans that support the global campaign against

---

<sup>3</sup> Information in this section is taken from USSOCOM Information Paper, "Special Operations Forces: 2020: Theater Special Operations Commands," April 25, 2013.

<sup>4</sup> USSOCOM Pamphlet, "United States Special Operations Command, GlobalSOF Network2020," 2013.

<sup>5</sup> "Fact Book: United States Special Operations Command," USSOCOM Public Affairs, February 2013, p. 10.

terror, and then makes recommendations to the Joint Staff regarding force and resource allocations to meet global requirements.”<sup>6</sup> In October 2008, USSOCOM was designated the DOD proponent for Security Force Assistance (SFA).<sup>7</sup> 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.

## **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.<sup>8</sup> 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),<sup>9</sup> 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. In addition, an elite airborne light infantry unit specializing in direct action operations,<sup>10</sup> the 75<sup>th</sup> Ranger Regiment, is headquartered at Fort Benning, GA, and consists of three battalions of about 800 soldiers each and a regimental special troops battalion providing support to the three Ranger battalions. The Army’s special operations aviation unit, the 160<sup>th</sup> Special Operations Aviation Regiment (Airborne) (SOAR), consists of five battalions and is headquartered at Fort Campbell, KY. The 160<sup>th</sup> 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 exclusively 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 95<sup>th</sup> Civil Affairs Brigade (Airborne) is the only active CA unit that exclusively supports USSOCOM. In September 2011 the 85<sup>th</sup> Civil Affairs Brigade was activated to support U.S. Army General Purpose Forces (GPFs). All other CA units reside in the Reserves and are affiliated with Army GPF units. Military Information Support Operations (formerly known as psychological operations) units disseminate information to large foreign audiences through mass

---

<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

<sup>7</sup> 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. For a more in-depth treatment of Security Force Assistance, see CRS Report R41817, *Building the Capacity of Partner States Through Security Force Assistance*, by Thomas K. Livingston.

<sup>8</sup> Information in this section, unless otherwise noted is taken from “U.S. Special Operations Command Factbook 2018” USSOCOM Public Affairs, 2018, p. 18.

<sup>9</sup> 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).

<sup>10</sup> 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.

media. Two active duty Military Information Support Groups (MISGs)—the 4<sup>th</sup> Military Information Support Group (MISG) (Airborne) and 8<sup>th</sup> 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 19,500 active, reserve, and civilian personnel.<sup>11</sup> AFSOC units operate out of four major continental United States (CONUS) locations and two overseas locations. The headquarters for AFSOC, the 1<sup>st</sup> Special Operations Wing (1<sup>st</sup> SOW), 24<sup>th</sup> Special Operations Wing (24<sup>th</sup> SOW), and the Air Force Special Operations Air Warfare Center (AFSOAWC) are located at Hurlburt Field, FL.<sup>12</sup> The AFSOAWC is responsible for training, education, irregular warfare program, innovation development, and operational testing.<sup>13</sup> From AFSOAWC's fact sheet:

The AFSOAWC's mission includes non-standard aviation in support of Army, Navy, Air Force, Marine and allied special operations forces.

The following units are consolidated under the Air Warfare Center [AFSOAWC]:

- U.S. Air Force Special Operations School, Hurlburt Field, FL
- 6<sup>th</sup> Special Operations Squadron, Duke Field, FL
- 19<sup>th</sup> Special Operations Squadron, Hurlburt Field, FL
- 551<sup>st</sup> Special Operations Squadron, Cannon Air Force Base, NM
- 5<sup>th</sup> Special Operations Squadron, a reserve unit from the 919<sup>th</sup> Special Operations Wing, Duke Field, FL
- 371<sup>st</sup> Special Operations Combat Training Squadron, Hurlburt Field, FL
- 18<sup>th</sup> Flight Test Squadron, Hurlburt Field, FL
- 592<sup>nd</sup> Special Operations Maintenance Squadron, Duke Field, FL
- 209<sup>th</sup> Civil Engineer Squadron, a guard unit from Gulfport, MS
- 280<sup>th</sup> Special Operations Communications Squadron, a guard unit from Dothan, AL

The Air Warfare Center provides mission qualification training in SOF aviation platforms to include AC-130U, AC-130W, U-28, MQ-1, MQ-9, C-145, C-146 as well as small unmanned aerial systems (SUAS), Combat Aviation Advisors, medical element personnel, and AFSOC Security Forces. In addition to AFSOC personnel, AFSOAWC is responsible for educating and training other USSOCOM components and joint/interagency/coalition partners.<sup>14</sup>

The 27<sup>th</sup> SOW is at Cannon AFB, NM. The 352<sup>nd</sup> and 353<sup>rd</sup> Special Operations Wings provide forward presence in Europe (RAF Mildenhall, England) and in the Pacific (Kadena Air Base,

---

<sup>11</sup> Information in this section, unless otherwise noted, is taken from "U.S. Special Operations Command Factbook 2018" USSOCOM Public Affairs, 2018, p. 26.

<sup>12</sup> AFSOAWC Fact Sheet, <http://www.afsoc.af.mil/AboutUs/FactSheets/Display/tabid/140/Article/571079/air-force-special-operations-air-warfare-center.aspx>, accessed April, 2, 2015.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid.



Japan), respectively. The 6<sup>th</sup> SOS's mission is to assess, train, and advise partner nation aviation units with the intent to raise their capability and capacity to interdict threats to their nation. The 6<sup>th</sup> SOS provides aviation expertise to U.S. foreign internal defense (FID) missions. The Air National Guard's 193<sup>rd</sup> SOW at Harrisburg, PA, and the Air Force Reserve Command's 919<sup>th</sup> SOW at Duke Field, FL, complete AFSOC's major flying units.

The 24<sup>th</sup> Special Operations Wing is one of three Air Force active duty special operations wings assigned to Air Force Special Operations Command. The 24<sup>th</sup> SOW is based at Hurlburt Field, Fla. The 24<sup>th</sup> SOW is the only Special Tactics wing in the Air Force.

## **U.S. Air Force Special Tactics**

From the Air Force's Special Tactics fact sheet:

The primary mission of the 24 SOW is to provide Special Tactics forces for rapid global employment to enable airpower success. The 24 SOW is U.S. Special Operation Command's tactical air and ground integration force, and the Air Force's special operations ground force to enable global access, precision strike, and personnel recovery operations.

Core capabilities encompass: airfield reconnaissance, assessment, and control; personnel recovery; joint terminal attack control and environmental reconnaissance.

Special Tactics is comprised of Special Tactics Officers, Combat Controllers, Combat Rescue Officers, Pararescuemen, Special Operations Weather Officers and Airmen, Air Liaison Officers, Tactical Air Control Party operators, and a number of combat support Airmen which comprise 58 Air Force specialties.

These unique skills provide a full-spectrum, air-focused special operations capability to the combatant commander in order to ensure airpower success. With their unique skill sets, Special Tactics operators are often the first special operations elements deployed into crisis situations. Special Tactics Airmen often embed with Navy SEALs, Army Green Berets and Rangers to provide everything from combat air support to medical aid and personnel recovery, depending on their specialty.

AFSOC's Special Tactics experts include Combat Controllers, Pararescuemen, Special Operations Weather Teams, Combat Aviation Advisors, and Tactical Air Control Party (TACPs). As a collective group, they are known as Special Tactics and have also been referred to as "Battlefield Airmen." Their basic role is to provide an interface between air and ground forces, and these airmen have highly developed skill sets. Usually embedded with Army, Navy, or Marine SOF units, they provide control of air fire support, medical and rescue expertise, or weather support, depending on the mission requirements.<sup>15</sup>

## **AFSOC Aircraft**

AFSOC's active duty and reserve component flying units operate fixed and rotary-wing aircraft, including the CV-22B, AC-130, C-130, EC-130, MC-130, MQ-1, MQ-9, U-28A, C-145A, C-146A, and PC-12.<sup>16</sup>

---

<sup>15</sup>From Air Force Special Tactics website: <http://www.24sow.af.mil/AboutUs/FactSheets/Display/tabid/140/Article/496534/24th-special-operations-wing.aspx>, accessed April 22, 2015.

<sup>16</sup> From AFSOC website, <http://www.af.mil/AboutUs/FactSheets/Display/tabid/224/Article/104528/air-force-special-operations-command.aspx>, accessed April 22, 2015.



## **Naval Special Warfare Command<sup>17</sup>**

The Naval Special Warfare Command (NSWC) is composed of approximately 10,000 personnel, including active-duty Special Warfare Operators, known as SEALs; Special Warfare Boat Operators, known as Special Warfare Combatant-craft Crewmen (SWCC); reserve personnel; support personnel; and civilians. NSWC is organized around 10 SEAL Teams, 2 SEAL Delivery Vehicle (SDV) Teams, and 3 Special Boat Teams. SEAL Teams consist of six SEAL platoons each, consisting of 2 officers and 16 enlisted personnel. The major operational components of NSWC include Naval Special Warfare Groups One, Three, and Eleven, stationed in Coronado, CA, and Naval Special Warfare Groups Two, Four, and Ten and the Naval Special Warfare Development Group in Little Creek, VA. These components deploy SEAL Teams, SEAL Delivery Vehicle Teams, and Special Boat Teams worldwide to meet the training, exercise, contingency, and wartime requirements of theater commanders. 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.

## **U.S. Marine Corps Forces Special Operations Command (MARSOC)<sup>18</sup>**

On November 1, 2005, DOD announced the creation of the Marine Special Operations Command (MARSOC) as a component of USSOCOM. Now referred to as the U.S. Marine Corps Forces Special Operations Command, MARSOC consists of the Marine Raider Regiment, which includes 1<sup>st</sup>, 2<sup>nd</sup>, and 3<sup>rd</sup> Marine Raider Battalions; the Marine Raider Support Group; 1<sup>st</sup>, 2<sup>nd</sup>, and 3<sup>rd</sup> Marine Raider Support Battalions; and the Marine Special Operations School. MARSOC headquarters, the 2<sup>nd</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup> Marine Raider Battalions, the Marine Special Operations School, and the Marine Raider Support Group are stationed at Camp Lejeune, NC. The 1<sup>st</sup> Marine Raider Battalion is 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 currently has approximately 3,000 personnel assigned.<sup>19</sup>

## **Joint Special Operations Command (JSOC)<sup>20</sup>**

From USSOCOM's official website:

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

---

<sup>17</sup> Information in this section, unless otherwise noted is taken from “U.S. Special Operations Command Factbook 2018” USSOCOM Public Affairs, 2018, p. 22.

<sup>18</sup> 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.

<sup>19</sup> U.S. Special Operations Command Factbook 2018” USSOCOM Public Affairs, 2018, p. 30.

<sup>20</sup> Taken directly from USSOCOM website, <http://www.socom.mil/pages/jointspecialoperationscommand.aspx>, accessed November 18, 2015.

standardization, plan and conduct Special Operations exercises and training, and develop joint Special Operations tactics.

## **USSOCOM's FY2019 Budget Request<sup>21</sup>**

The FY2019 budget request for USSOCOM was \$13.6 billion, 2% of the overall DOD budget request but an approximately 10% increase from FY2018 and the largest budget request ever submitted by USSOCOM. The FY2019 budget request seeks additional personnel authorizations to grow the force above 71,000, also the largest size of USSOCOM. USSOCOM continues to rely heavily on Overseas Contingency Operations (OCO) Funding, most acutely in its Operations and Maintenance (O&M) accounts, where it currently constitutes 33% of funding. In general terms, OCO funds vary based on operational demand and are intended to fund unforeseen events. Some argue that after more than 16 years of post-September 11 conflicts, most funding—like USSOCOM's O&M requirements—should be included in DOD's annual base budget requests.

## **Potential Issues for Congress**

### **The Overuse of U.S. SOF and Readiness<sup>22</sup>**

U.S. SOF has more than doubled from around 33,000 personnel in 2001 to about 70,000 personnel as of early 2018. USSOCOM's FY2019 budget request calls for growing the force to 71,000 personnel. USSOCOM currently sustains an average deployed force of about 8,300 personnel across 90 countries.<sup>23</sup> In one country alone—Afghanistan—Joint U.S. SOF conducted 2,175 ground operations where they advised and assisted Afghan commandos from June 1 to November 24, 2017—an almost six-month period. In 2017, DOD reportedly moved more than 15% of its deployed SOF to assist African militaries, up from 1% in 2006, for a total of about 1,200 deployed to about a dozen African countries. It has been suggested that over the past 16 years, U.S. SOF have become “the new American way of war.”<sup>24</sup> Some suggest U.S. SOF has become an “easy button”<sup>25</sup> for consecutive Administrations to push—a politically attractive alternative to sending thousands of conventional military personnel into complex and dangerous regions of the world.

Exercising this option has not been without its costs. Past USSOCOM commanders have testified to Congress about the “fraying” of U.S. SOF forces and readiness due to excessive use.<sup>26</sup> At a

---

<sup>21</sup> CQ Congressional Transcripts, House Armed Services Subcommittee on Emerging Threats and Capabilities Holds Hearing on President Donald Trump's Fiscal 2019 Budget Request for U.S. Special operations, February 15, 2018.

<sup>22</sup> Information in this section is taken from W.J. Hennigan, “The New American Way of War,” *Time*, November 30, 2017; Nick Turse, “Bulking Up on Special Operations Forces in 2018 Will Not Stop Terrorism,” *The Nation*, January 9, 2018; and Department of Defense, “Enhancing Security and Stability in Afghanistan,” Report to Congress In Accordance With Section 1225 of the Carl Levin and Howard P. “Buck” McKeon National Defense Authorization Act for Fiscal Year 2015 (P.L. 113-291), December 2017.

<sup>23</sup> Statement of General Raymond A. Thomas III, Commander, United States Special Operations Command, Before the House Armed Services Committee, Subcommittee on Emerging Threats and Capabilities, February 15, 2018, p. 4.

<sup>24</sup> W.J. Hennigan.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>26</sup> CQ Congressional Transcripts, Senate Armed Services Committee Holds Hearings on the Fiscal 2012 Defense Authorization Requests for the U.S. Special Operations Command and the U.S. Central Command, March 1, 2011 and Posture Statement of Admiral Eric T. Olson, USN, Commander, United States Special Operations Command Before the 112<sup>th</sup> Congress House Armed Services Committee, March 3, 2011.

2016 conference, former USSOCOM Commander Admiral William McRaven reportedly noted “my soldiers have been fighting now for 12, 13 years in hard combat. And anybody that has spent any time in this war has been changed by it.”<sup>27</sup> The current commander of USSOCOM, General Raymond Thomas, told Congress in May 2017 the rate of deployments was “unsustainable,”<sup>28</sup> with one retired USSOCOM general officer reportedly noting, “We are not frayed at the edges – we’re ripped at the damn seams. We’ve burned through this force.”<sup>29</sup> Drug and alcohol abuse, family problems, and suicides among USSOCOM personnel and family members, as well as increased incidences of battlefield mistakes, have reportedly been attributed to USSOCOM’s high operational tempo and its detrimental effect on readiness.<sup>30</sup> While USSOCOM efforts under its Preservation of the Force & Family (POTFF) and Warrior Care initiatives have helped to address these issues, high operational tempo continues to be a key catalyst affecting the health of the force and readiness.

The solution to overuse and its effect on readiness appears simple—either significantly decrease the number of U.S. SOF deployments or create more SOF. In terms of decreased SOF deployments, the Administration could potentially choose this course of action, but the trend toward ever-increasing U.S. SOF involvement worldwide seems to discourage this as a viable solution. If decreasing SOF usage is not an option, creating more SOF presents a number of challenges. While it is not known how many of the proposed 1,000 personnel increase for FY2019 will be “operators,” it is assumed that a significant portion of those individuals will require selection and special training. If this is the case, USSOCOM would need to attract more candidates to attend specialized selection and training. If successful in this regard, will USSOCOM need to modify standards for training courses such as Ranger School, the Special Forces Qualification Force, and Basic Underwater Demolition and SEAL training to obtain sufficient numbers of troops to expand the force? Does USSOCOM have sufficient training cadre to accommodate this expansion, and would this affect the readiness of operational forces if more training cadre are required? Another concern is the practical level of USSOCOM expansion (i.e., how much larger USSOCOM can grow before its selection and training standards will need to be modified to create and sustain a larger force).

## **USSOCOM and Countering Weapons of Mass Destruction (CWMD)**

In August 2016, at the request of then-Secretary of Defense Ashton Carter, the Administration assigned USSOCOM the leading role in coordinating DOD’s efforts to counter WMDs, a mission previously assigned to U.S. Strategic Command (USSTRATCOM).<sup>31</sup> USSOCOM is charged with coordinating the development of a “coherent” DOD response to WMDs and will not be granted any new authorities but will have new influence on how DOD responds to WMD threats.<sup>32</sup> The decision to give USSOCOM yet another leading role in coordinating DOD-wide efforts is said to

---

<sup>27</sup> W.J. Hennigan.

<sup>28</sup> Statement of General Raymond A. Thomas, III, U.S. Army, Commander United States Special Operations Command, Before the Senate Armed Services Committee, May 4, 2017.

<sup>29</sup> W.J. Hennigan.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid.

<sup>31</sup> Dan Lamothe, “Special Operations Command Takes a Leading Role in Countering Weapons of Mass Destruction,” *The Washington Post*, December, 2016.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid and DOD Directive 2060.02 DOD Countering Weapons of Mass Destruction Policy (WMD) Policy, January 27, 2017.

be in response to long-standing complaints that USSTRATCOM had not devoted enough personnel and emphasis to the counter-WMD (CWMD) mission.<sup>33</sup>

General Thomas, in recent testimony, noted that as the Countering WMD Authority for DOD, USSOCOM was developing a new Functional Campaign Plan to provide a comprehensive trans-regional approach to coordinate DOD campaign activities.<sup>34</sup> In addition, in conjunction with the Defense Threat Reduction Agency (DTRA), USSOCOM established a Counter WMD Fusion Center to work with other U.S. government departments and agencies, as well as international partners.<sup>35</sup>

A recent article suggests the benefits of USSOCOM assuming responsibility for DOD's CWMD activities:

The transfer of responsibility to SOCOM, in particular, represents an important juncture that demands fresh thinking on how best to address the core challenges. The policy decision to vest SOCOM with this responsibility further acknowledges that CWMD and SOCOM's ongoing counterterrorism mission share strong commonalities; both missions face highly complex, multi-regional, and overlapping threats, and both call for a networked interagency and inter organizational response. As the new mission lead for countering weapons of mass destruction, SOCOM is ideally suited to take on a coordinated, trans-regional approach to address today's increasingly dynamic and multidimensional WMD threat.

SOCOM's experience in counterterrorism brings critical advantages – namely, the know-how needed to establish, coordinate, and leverage needed relationships and partnerships, develop agile operational models and tactics, and employ innovative technologies and capabilities in pursuit of mission goals. But the sheer scale and relative complexity of the WMD threat, the support needed to sustain a “unity of effort” approach to the mission, and the extreme stakes intrinsic to CWMD that demand zero tolerance for failure all require a more deliberate approach to the intelligence and coordination challenges needed to keep the command and its mission partners in synch and at maximum effectiveness.<sup>36</sup>

There are, however, concerns about USSOCOM's new CWMD responsibilities. Some question whether USSOCOM has been ceded too much power, noting that recently USSOCOM was also given the authority “to coordinate all U.S. efforts to track foreign fighters globally.”<sup>37</sup> Another concern is how effectively USSOCOM will address the CWMD mission given its primary focus on countering violent extremism. With senior USSOCOM leadership and policymakers alike warning that USSOCOM is already extensively committed and its forces “strained,” it is unclear how elevating USSOCOM's involvement in the nation's counter-WMD efforts will affect USSOCOM's overall readiness.

Congress might decide to further examine the ramifications of assigning USSOCOM the DOD-wide responsibility for countering WMDs. In addition to considering the aforementioned concerns, Congress may opt to explore with DOD and USSOCOM what additional resources—

---

<sup>33</sup> Dan Lamothe.

<sup>34</sup> Statement of General Raymond A. Thomas III, Commander, United States Special Operations Command, Before the House Armed Services Committee, Subcommittee on Emerging Threats and Capabilities, February 15, 2018, p. 6.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>36</sup> Todd McNutt and BG (Retired) William E. King IV, “Opinion: The Risks and Rewards for Giving the Counter WMD Mission to SOCOM,” *DefenseNews.com*, April 6, 2018.

<sup>37</sup> Dan Lamothe, “Special Operations Command Takes a Leading Role in Countering Weapons of Mass Destruction,” *The Washington Post*, December, 2016.

including personnel, units, equipment, and budgetary authority—will be needed if USSOCOM is to successfully fulfill its new responsibilities.

## **Author Contact Information**

Andrew Feickert  
Specialist in Military Ground Forces  
afeickert@crs.loc.gov, 7-7673