

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

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## Summary

Special Operations Forces (SOF) play a significant role in U.S. military operations. 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 improve interoperability among the branches of U.S. SOF. These actions included the establishment of U.S. Special Operations Command (USSOCOM) as a new unified command.

As of 2024, USSOCOM consisted of approximately 70,000 Active Duty, Reserve, National Guard, and civilian personnel assigned to its headquarters, its four components, and sub-unified commands. 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.

USSOCOM also comprises seven 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.

Considerations for Congress include Army Special Forces recruiting and planned force structure reductions and Air Force Special Operations Power Projection Wings and future unit relocations.

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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 improve 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. Code* (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 P. Bryan Fenton 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 (SOLIC)) is the principal civilian advisor to the Secretary of Defense on special operations and low-intensity conflict matters. The current ASD (SOLIC) is the Honorable Christopher Maier.<sup>1</sup>

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.<sup>2</sup>

As of 2024, USSOCOM consisted of approximately 70,000 Active Duty, Reserve, National Guard, and civilian personnel assigned to its headquarters, its four components, and sub-unified commands.<sup>3</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.

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<sup>1</sup> Department of Defense, ASD (SOLIC): <https://policy.defense.gov/OUUSD-Offices/ASD-for-Special-Operations-Low-Intensity-Conflict/>, accessed August 15, 2023.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

<sup>3</sup> USSOCOM 2024 *Fact Book*, p. 6.

## **Title X USSOCOM Authorities**

10 U.S.C. §167, Unified Combatant Command for Special Operations Forces, states

Subject to the authority, direction, and control of the Assistant Secretary of Defense for Special Operations and Low Intensity Conflict, the commander of such command shall be responsible for, and shall have the authority to conduct, the following functions relating to special operations activities (whether or not relating to the special operations command).

Current authorities include

- developing special operations strategy, doctrine, and tactics;
- preparing and submitting budget proposals for special operations forces;
- exercising authority, direction, and control over special operations expenditures;
- training assigned forces;
- conducting specialized courses of instruction;
- validating requirements;
- establishing requirement priorities;
- ensuring interoperability of equipment and forces;
- formulating and submitting intelligence support requirements;
- monitoring special operations officers' promotions, assignments, retention, training, and professional military education;
- ensuring special operations forces' combat readiness;
- monitoring special operations forces' preparedness to carry out assigned missions;
- developing and acquiring special operations-peculiar equipment, materiel, supplies, and services;
- commanding and controlling U.S.-based special operations forces;
- providing special operations forces to Geographic Combatant Commanders (GCCs); and
- conducting activities specified by the President or Secretary of Defense.<sup>4</sup>

## **Additional USSOCOM Responsibilities**

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

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<sup>4</sup> Ibid., p. 8.

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

<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 (continued...)

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.”<sup>8</sup>

## U.S. SOF Core Activities

USSOCOM describes its core activities as follows:

- **Direct Action:** Short-duration strikes and other small-scale offensive actions employing specialized military capabilities to seize, destroy, capture, exploit, recover, or damage designated targets.
- **Special Reconnaissance:** Actions conducted in sensitive environments to collect or verify information of strategic or operational significance.
- **Unconventional Warfare:** Actions taken to enable a resistance movement or insurgency to coerce, disrupt, or overthrow a government or occupying power.
- **Foreign Internal Defense:** Activities that support a host nation’s internal defense and development (IDAD) strategy and program designed to protect against subversion, lawlessness, insurgency, terrorism, and other threats to their internal security, and stability, and legitimacy.
- **Civil Affairs Operations:** Activities taken to enhance the relationship between military forces and civilian authorities in localities where military forces are present.
- **Counterterrorism:** Actions taken directly against terrorist networks and indirectly to influence and render global and regional environments inhospitable to terrorist networks.
- **Military Information Support Operations (MISO):** MISOs are undertaken to convey selected information and indicators to foreign audiences to influence their emotions, motives, objective reasoning, and ultimately the behavior of foreign governments, organizations, groups, and individuals in a manner favorable to the originator’s objectives.
- **Counter-proliferation of Weapons of Mass Destruction:** Activities to support USG efforts to curtail the conceptualization, development, possession, proliferation, use, and effects of weapons of mass destruction (WMD), related expertise, materials, technologies, and means of delivery by state and non-state actors.
- **Security Force Assistance:** Activities taken to enhance organizing, training, equipping, rebuilding, and advising various components of Foreign Security Forces.
- **Counterinsurgency:** Actions taken that blend civilian and military efforts designed to end insurgent violence and facilitate a return to peaceful political processes.

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Terrorism, Unconventional Threats and Capabilities Subcommittee on the FY2010 National Defense Authorization Budget Request for the U.S. Special Operations Command, June 4, 2009.

<sup>8</sup> 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.

- **Hostage Rescue and Recovery:** Offensive measures taken to prevent, deter, preempt, and respond to terrorist threats and incidents, including recapture of U.S. facilities, installations, and sensitive material in overseas areas.
- **Foreign Humanitarian Assistance:** The range of DOD humanitarian activities conducted outside the United States and its territories to relieve or reduce human suffering, disease, hunger, or privation.<sup>9</sup>

## USSOCOM Organization

### 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 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 the Service Chiefs and Secretaries, the Secretary of Defense transferred combatant command of the TSOCs from the GCCs to USSOCOM.<sup>10</sup> 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 X, Section 167. This change was intended to enable USSOCOM to standardize, to the greatest 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:<sup>11</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.

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<sup>9</sup> USSOCOM Core Activities, <https://www.socom.mil/about/core-activities>, accessed October 4, 2024.

<sup>10</sup> Information in this section is taken from USSOCOM Information Paper, "Special Operations Forces: 2020: Theater Special Operations Commands," April 25, 2013.

<sup>11</sup> USSOCOM 2024 *Fact Book*, pp. 21-29.

- 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)<sup>12</sup>**

From USSOCOM's 2024 *Fact Book*

The Joint Special Operations Command, located at Fort Liberty, 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 36,000 soldiers from the Active Army, National Guard, and Army Reserve organized into Special Forces, Ranger, and special operations aviation units, along with Civil Affairs (CA) units, military information units, and special operations support units.<sup>13</sup> ARSOF Headquarters and other resources, such as the John F. Kennedy Special Warfare Center and School, are located at Fort Liberty (formerly Fort Bragg), NC.<sup>14</sup> Five active Special Forces (SF) Groups (Airborne),<sup>15</sup> consisting of about 1,400 soldiers each, are stationed at Fort Liberty and at Joint Base Lewis-McChord, 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,<sup>16</sup> the 75<sup>th</sup> Ranger Regiment, is headquartered at Fort Moore (formerly Fort Benning), GA,<sup>17</sup> 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 160<sup>th</sup> Special Operations Aviation Regiment (Airborne) (SOAR), consists of five battalions and is

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<sup>12</sup> Ibid., p. 20.

<sup>13</sup> Information in this section, unless otherwise noted, is taken from USSOCOM 2024 *Fact Book*, pp. 12-13.

<sup>14</sup> The former Fort Bragg was renamed Fort Liberty on June 2, 2023, in accordance with the recommendation of the Naming Commission. For more on the commission, see CRS Insight IN10756, *Confederate Names and Military Installations*. CRS uses military installation names as listed on the Department of Defense's Military OneSource website at <https://installations.militaryonesource.mil/view-all> (last accessed April 26, 2023).

<sup>15</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>16</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.

<sup>17</sup> The former Fort Benning was renamed Fort Moore on May 11, 2023, in accordance with the recommendation of the Naming Commission. For more on the commission, see CRS Insight IN10756, *Confederate Names and Military Installations*. CRS uses military installation names as listed on the Department of Defense's Military OneSource website at <https://installations.militaryonesource.mil/view-all> (last accessed April 26, 2023).



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 Army units.

Some of the most frequently deployed SOF assets are CA units, which provide experts in every area of civil government to help administer civilian affairs in operational theaters. The 95<sup>th</sup> CA Brigade (Airborne) is the only active CA unit that exclusively supports USSOCOM. MISO (also known as psychological operations, or PSYOPS) units disseminate information to large foreign audiences through mass media. Two Active-Duty PSYOPS groups—the 4<sup>th</sup> PSYOPS Group and 8<sup>th</sup> PSYOPS Group—are stationed at Fort Liberty, NC, and their subordinate units are aligned with Geographic Combatant Commands.

## Air Force Special Operations Command (AFSOC)

AFSOC is one of the Air Force's major commands, comprising approximately 17,000 Active, Reserve, and civilian personnel.<sup>18</sup> AFSOC units operate out of four major continental United States (CONUS) locations and two overseas locations. The headquarters for AFSOC is Hurlburt Field, FL.<sup>19</sup> AFSOC units are stationed as follows:

- 1<sup>st</sup> Special Operations Wing, Hurlburt Field, FL;
- 24<sup>th</sup> Special Operations Wing, Hurlburt Field, FL;
- 27<sup>th</sup> Special Operations Wing, Cannon Air Force Base, NM;
- 137<sup>th</sup> Special Operations Wing (Air National Guard), Oklahoma City, OK;
- 193<sup>rd</sup> Special Operations Wing (Air National Guard), Harrisburg, PA;
- 352<sup>nd</sup> Special Operations Wing, Royal Air Force Mildenhall, UK;
- 492<sup>nd</sup> Special Operations Wing, Hurlburt Field, FL;
- 919<sup>th</sup> Special Operations Wing (Air Force Reserves), Duke Field, FL; and
- 353<sup>rd</sup> Special Operations Group, Kadena Air Base, Japan.<sup>20</sup>

AFSOC 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; MISO; 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, SFA, and Unconventional Warfare operations.

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<sup>18</sup> USSOCOM 2024 *Fact Book*, p. 17.

<sup>19</sup> Information in this section, unless otherwise noted, is taken from USSOCOM 2024 *Fact Book*, pp. 16-17.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 17.

- **Support Air Commandos:** A variety of Air Force specialties who serve in mission support, maintenance, and medical specialties in support of AFSOC units.

## **Naval Special Warfare Command (NSWC)<sup>21</sup>**

NSWC comprises approximately 11,000 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, San Diego, CA.<sup>22</sup>

## **U.S. Marine Corps Forces Special Operations Command (MARSOC)<sup>23</sup>**

On November 1, 2005, DOD created MARSOC as a component of USSOCOM. MARSOC comprises approximately 3,500 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. 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 Raider Training Center (MRTC). MARSOC headquarters and forces are stationed at Camp Lejeune, NC. MARSOC units 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.

## **Considerations for Congress**

Potential oversight questions Congress could consider include the following:

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<sup>21</sup> Information in this section, unless otherwise noted, is taken from USSOCOM 2024 *Fact Book*, pp. 14-15.

<sup>22</sup> <https://www.nsw.navy.mil/CONTACT/Components/>; accessed March 6, 2020.

<sup>23</sup> Information in this section is from USSOCOM 2024 *Fact Book*, pp. 18-19.

## Army Special Forces Recruiting

Reportedly, the Army has struggled to meet its goals to recruit Army Special Forces (Green Berets) soldiers since 2018.<sup>24</sup> According to an article,

Between 2018 and 2020, the service recruited an average of 1,011 new Special Forces soldiers, missing its goal of 1,540 each year. That data is strictly contract signups, not the total number of soldiers who make it all the way through Green Beret training.<sup>25</sup> Those who don't make it sometimes get second chances or are put into the regular Army infantry. In 2021, the Army scaled back its recruiting goals, seeking to bring in 1,250 new Green Berets. It exceeded its goals that year with 1,358 new Special Forces contracts, but dropped again with 779 recruits in 2022. So far this year [2023], 527 new applicants have signed on to try for the Green Beret.<sup>26</sup>

The article further implies “the quality of Green Beret applicants is also on the decline,” noting, regarding the Special Forces Qualification Course (SFQC),

That pass rate was between 60% and 80% in the early 2010s, but has plummeted to around 45% and 60% in recent years. It's unclear what led to that lower pass rate, though failing land navigation accounts for roughly 70% of all failures.

As a result, it was reported that

Amid a low rate of soldiers making it through the initial selection process and overall recruiting woes, the Army considered shortening the Special Forces training pipeline by about half to get new operators in to fill units faster, according to an internal 2018 briefing.

It is not known publicly if the SFQC pass rate and numbers of applicants for SFQC has improved from 2023 through 2024. According to the Green Beret Foundation, currently about 40% to 50% of incoming SFQC candidates are coming directly from civilian life with no previous military experience.<sup>27</sup> While many are able to successfully pass SFQC and serve in operational units, they lack Army experience and small unit tactical and leadership skills that SFQC candidates who are serving in the Army typically possess. This also suggests fewer serving soldiers and junior non-commissioned officers (NCOs) are volunteering for Army SOF, which could result in a less experienced, less knowledgeable, and less mature Army SOF, which could prove problematic in the highly complex and dynamic security environment where Army SOF currently operates. Given these supposed trends in recruiting and successful SFQC completion, Congress might decide to further examine the issue of recruiting and SFQC completion to determine if the Army is recruiting the appropriate mix of currently serving soldiers and NCOs and civilian candidates with the requisite maturity and experience to successfully serve as SOF operators.

## Army SOF Force Structure Reductions

In 2023 it was reported that the Army was considering cutting 10% to 20% of its special operations forces.<sup>28</sup> Reportedly, such cuts would be “most acute on SOF enablers like logistics

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<sup>24</sup> Information in this section, unless otherwise noted, is taken from Steve Beynon, “Green Berets Have Struggled for Years with Recruiting, Internal Data Shows,” *Military.com*, June 8, 2023.

<sup>25</sup> It should be noted that many soldiers already serving in the Army also volunteer for special forces testing and selection and are not new recruits (sign-ups).

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>27</sup> Green Beret Foundation, <https://www.facebook.com/GreenBeretFoundation/videos/the-demographics-of-a-special-forces-team-are-shifting-the-18x-program-allows-ca/770372474992994/>, accessed October 4, 2024.

<sup>28</sup> Caitlin M. Kenney, “Army Mulls 10-20% Cut to Special Operations Forces,” *Defense One*, May 22, 2023.

and intelligence, but that some changes to force structure are also likely for Special Forces, civil affairs, psychological operations.”<sup>29</sup> On February 8, 2024, it was reported that

Service leaders are eyeing cuts to Military Information Support Operations, or MISO—perhaps better known as Psychological Operations—in order to spare “shooter” special operators such as Green Berets or Rangers.<sup>30</sup>

The article further suggests

The Army’s MISO operators, such as the 8<sup>th</sup> Psychological Operations Group based at Fort Liberty, N.C., which faces potential cuts, comprise most of the Pentagon’s front-line troops for influence and information warfare.<sup>31</sup> They are far outnumbered by the influence-and-information warfare teams mounted by near-peer adversaries. Russian tactics include using troll farms to mold discussions on American social media platforms, misattributing attacks on the battlefield, and making fake news articles to convince local populations to turn against NATO troops. China also has sophisticated information operations, which it recently brought to bear against the Taiwanese election.<sup>32</sup>

It is possible the cuts were considered necessary due to the recruiting crisis at the time and exacerbated by fewer soldiers volunteering for and passing Army Special Forces selection, but it was also noted that “changes to force structure are needed both to address those impacts to the overall end strength of the Army and to ensure that the Army can compete with China and Russia, and fight and win America’s wars,” suggesting that Army Special Forces reductions are a part of overall Army force reductions.<sup>33</sup>

On February 27, 2024, the Army announced “changes to its force structure that will modernize and continue to transform the service to better face future threats. Under the plan, the Army will reorganize over the next decade to ensure it can deliver trained, cohesive and lethal forces to meet future challenges in increasingly complex operational environments.”<sup>34</sup> In conjunction with this announcement, the Army published *Army White Paper: Army Force Structure Transformation*.<sup>35</sup>

Regarding ARSOF reductions, the white paper stated,

Working closely with the Assistant Secretary of Defense for Special Operations and Low-Intensity Conflict and U.S. Special Operations Command, the Secretary of Defense determined the Army could reduce Army special operations forces by approximately 3,000 authorizations.... Positions and headquarters elements that are historically vacant or hard to fill will be prioritized for reduction.<sup>36</sup>

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<sup>29</sup> Ibid.

<sup>30</sup> Patrick Turner, “US May Cut Info-Warfare Assets as China, Russia Expand Influence Ops,” *Defense One*, February 8, 2024.

<sup>31</sup> For additional information on information warfare, see CRS Report R45142, *Information Warfare: Issues for Congress*, by Catherine A. Theohary.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid.

<sup>34</sup> U.S. Army Public Affairs, “Army Changes Force Structure for Future Warfighting Operations,” February 27, 2024, [https://www.army.mil/article/274003/army\\_changes\\_force\\_structure\\_for\\_future\\_warfighting\\_operations](https://www.army.mil/article/274003/army_changes_force_structure_for_future_warfighting_operations).

<sup>35</sup> *Army White Paper: Army Force Structure Transformation*, February 27, 2024, <https://api.army.mil/e2/c/downloads/2024/02/27/091989c9/army-white-paper-army-force-structure-transformation.pdf>.

<sup>36</sup> *Army White Paper: Army Force Structure Transformation*, February 27, 2024.

## **Congressional and DOD Reaction to Announced ARSOF Cuts**

Some Members have opposed the Army's planned 3,000 soldier ARSOF reduction,<sup>37</sup> with most citing the threats posed by China and Russia and growing ARSOF requirements as issues of concern. In 2024, legislative language was included in Section 1044 of H.R. 8070, the Servicemember Quality of Life Improvement and National Defense Authorization Act for Fiscal Year 2025, which prohibits the "realignment or reduction of special operations forces end strength authorizations."<sup>38</sup> In a letter to the Chairman and Ranking Member of the House Armed Services Committee, Secretary of Defense Llyod Austin stated,

The department strongly objects to section 1044 of the House-passed bill, which would prevent reducing or realigning SOF end-strength authorizations for all of calendar years 2025 and 2026. The Army conducted extensive analysis indicating that the existing Army SOF force structure meets or exceeds demands in large-scale conflict relative to other capabilities. As a result, the Secretary of Defense directed ASD for Special Operations/Low-Intensity Conflict (SO/LIC) to reduce Army SOF by approximately 3,000 billets. This provision would constrain the ability of the Department's leadership to organize, train, and equip forces in support of the NDS [National Defense Strategy]. Further, this provision would limit DOD's ability to shape the Force in response to emerging threats and dynamic needs and require the Army to consider reductions to other parts of the Force.<sup>39</sup>

Given congressional and Army/DOD positions on proposed Army SOF force structure reductions, it can be assumed that the issue Army SOF force structure is likely to remain a point of contention as well as of congressional concern. It is possible this issue could be subject additional examination and action by Congress in the future.

## **Air Force Special Operations Power Projection Wings and Planned Future Unit Relocations<sup>40</sup>**

On August 2, 2023, the Air Force announced it had selected Davis-Monthan Air Force Base, AZ, as the preferred location to host AFSOC's third power projection wing. Under this plan, the Air Force plans to "transform the 492<sup>nd</sup> Special Operations Wing into a power projection wing with all of AFSOC's mission capabilities (strike, mobility, ISR [intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance], air/ground integration)."<sup>41</sup> The Air Force noted that "standing up the new wing at Davis-Monthan AFB [Air Force Base] requires several relocations, planned throughout the

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<sup>37</sup> See, for example, Representative Richard Hudson, <https://hudson.house.gov/press-releases/hudson-statement-on-us-armys-proposed-cuts-to-special-operations-forces#:~:text=WASHINGTON%2C%20D.C.%20%E2%80%93%20Today%2C%20Congressman,worst%20recruiting%20crisis%20in%20decades>; Representative Mike Walz, <https://waltz.house.gov/news/documentsingle.aspx?DocumentID=769>; and Matthew Beinart, "SASC Republicans Press Special Ops Leaders on Potential Budget Cuts Amid Growing Requirements," *Defense Daily*, March 7, 2023.

<sup>38</sup> Rules Committee Print 118-36 Text of H.R. 8070, Servicemember Quality of Life Improvement and National Defense Authorization Act for Fiscal Year 2025, May 24, 2024, p. 497.

<sup>39</sup> Letter from the Secretary of Defense to the Chairman of the House Armed Services Committee, dated September 26, 2024, at [https://insidedefense.com/sites/insidedefense.com/files/documents/2024/oct/10022024\\_heartburn.pdf](https://insidedefense.com/sites/insidedefense.com/files/documents/2024/oct/10022024_heartburn.pdf), accessed October 4, 2024.

<sup>40</sup> Information in this section is taken from Secretary of the Air Force Public Affairs, "Davis-Monthan AFB Identified as AFSOC's Next Power Projection Wing," August 2, 2023.

<sup>41</sup> Ibid.

next five years. The final decision is planned to be made following completion of the environmental impact analysis process.”<sup>42</sup>

Planned transitions include the following:

- The 492<sup>nd</sup> Special Operations Wing at Hurlburt Field, FL, is to relocate to Davis-Monthan Air Force Base. The relocation includes the 492<sup>nd</sup> Special Operations Wing’s transition from support wing into a power projection wing.
- The U-28 Draco fleets at Cannon Air Force Base, NM, and Hurlburt Field is to be replaced by the OA-1K Armed Overwatch aircraft. As part of the 492<sup>nd</sup> Special Operations Wing’s transition to a power projection wing, one OA-1K Armed Overwatch squadron is to relocate from Hurlburt Field to Davis-Monthan Air Force Base.
- An MC-130J Commando II squadron is to relocate from Cannon Air Force Base to Davis-Monthan Air Force Base to join the 492<sup>nd</sup> Special Operations Wing.
- An additional MC-130J squadron is to activate at Davis-Monthan Air Force Base.
- The 21<sup>st</sup> Special Tactics Squadron is to relocate from Pope Army Airfield, NC, to Davis-Monthan Air Force Base.
- The 22<sup>nd</sup> Special Tactics Squadron is to relocate from Joint Base Lewis-McChord, WA, to Davis-Monthan Air Force Base.
- The 492<sup>nd</sup> Theater Air Operations Squadron is to activate at Duke Field and transfer to Davis-Monthan Air Force Base.
- The 47<sup>th</sup> Fighter Squadron (24 A-10s), the 354<sup>th</sup> Fighter Squadron (26 A-10s), and the 357<sup>th</sup> Fighter Squadron (28 A-10s) at Davis-Monthan Air Force Base will inactivate, and their respective A-10s are to be retired. The 47<sup>th</sup> Fighter Squadron and 357<sup>th</sup> Fighter Squadron are to continue A-10 formal training until inactivation.
- The 34<sup>th</sup> Weapons Squadron and the 88<sup>th</sup> Test and Evaluation Squadron are to relocate from Nellis Air Force Base, NV, to Davis-Monthan Air Force Base, transferring five HH-60W Jolly Green IIs.<sup>43</sup>

This appears to be a major AFSOC reorganization for units based in the United States, which could have oversight implications for Congress. A fundamental consideration arguably is how this planned transition and relocation improves AFSOC’s ability to support the National Security Strategy and Combatant Commanders. Another consideration is the total estimated cost for this planned five-year transition, including related Military Construction (MILCON) costs. Also related to cost is how this planned transition affects overall Air Force modernization and readiness efforts. The potential economic, infrastructure, and social impacts on local communities near bases both gaining and losing units under this plan might also be of critical interest to Congress.

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<sup>42</sup> Ibid.

<sup>43</sup> Ibid.



In testimony to the Senate Armed Services Committee in April 2024, no mention was made about the status of the aforementioned planned transitions,<sup>44</sup> and beyond the Air Force's original August 2023 announcement, there appears to be little public information on the progress of transforming the 492<sup>nd</sup> Special Operations Wing into a power projection wing. In its oversight capacity, Congress could decide to review the Air Force's progress to date establishing the power projection wing and if there are any issues affecting the Air Force's plans.

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<sup>44</sup> Statement for the Record, The Honorable Christopher P. Maier, Assistant Secretary of Defense for Special Operations and Low-Intensity Conflict and General Bryan P. Fenton, U.S.A., Commander, United States Special Operations Command, Before The Committee on Armed Services, United States Senate, April 10, 2024.