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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 2025, USSOCOM consists of approximately 70,000 Active Duty, Reserve Component, 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 Forces Special Operations Command (MARSOC). The Joint Special Operations Command (JSOC) is a USSOCOM sub-unified command.

USSOCOM also includes 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 the Administration's national security priorities, Army Special Forces force structure reductions, and Air Force Special Operations Power Projection Wings and a pause in Air Force reorganization.

Contents

Overview	1
Command Structures and Components	1
Title X USSOCOM Authorities	2
Additional USSOCOM Responsibilities.....	2
U.S. SOF Core Activities	3
USSOCOM Organization.....	4
Theater Special Operations Commands (TSOCs).....	4
Joint Special Operations Command (JSOC)	5
U.S. Army Special Operations Command (USASOC)	5
Air Force Special Operations Command (AFSOC).....	6
Naval Special Warfare Command (NSWC).....	7
U.S. Marine Corps Forces Special Operations Command (MARSOC).....	7
Considerations for Congress.....	8
The Administration’s National Security Priorities	8
Army SOF Force Structure Reductions	9
Congressional and DOD Reaction to Announced ARSOF Cuts.....	10
Air Force Special Operations Power Projection Wings and a Pause in Air Force Reorganization	10

Contacts

Author Information.....	12
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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 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. Mr. Colby Jenkins is currently performing the duties of ASD (SOLIC).¹ On February 3, 2025, President Trump nominated Mr. Michael Jensen to serve as ASD (SOLIC).²

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.³

As of 2025, USSOCOM consists of approximately 70,000 Active Duty, Reserve Component, and civilian personnel assigned to its headquarters, its four components, and sub-unified commands.⁴ USSOCOM's components are the U.S. Army Special Operations Command (USASOC), the Naval Special Warfare Command (NSWC), the Air Force Special Operations Command

¹ Department of Defense, ASD (SOLIC): <https://policy.defense.gov/OUSDP-Offices/ASD-for-Special-Operations-Low-Intensity-Conflict/>, accessed February 13, 2025.

² Congress.gov: <https://www.congress.gov/nomination/119th-congress/22/10>, accessed February 13, 2025.

³ Department of Defense, ASD (SOLIC): <https://policy.defense.gov/OUSDP-Offices/ASD-for-Special-Operations-Low-Intensity-Conflict/>, accessed February 13, 2025.

⁴ USSOCOM 2025 *Fact Book*, p. 6.

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

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).

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.⁵

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.⁶ In this regard, USSOCOM “receives, reviews, coordinates and prioritizes all DOD plans that support the global campaign against terror, and then makes recommendations to the Joint Staff regarding force and resource

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 8.

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

allocations to meet global requirements.”⁷ In 2008, USSOCOM was designated the DOD proponent for Security Force Assistance (SFA).⁸ In this role, USSOCOM performs a synchronizing function in global training and assistance planning similar to the previously described role of planning against terrorist networks. In 2018, USSOCOM was also assigned the mission to field a Trans Regional Military Information Support Operations (MISO) capability intended to “address the opportunities and risks of global information space.”⁹

U.S. SOF Core Activities

USSOCOM describes its core activities as

- **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 (UW):** Actions taken to enable a resistance movement or insurgency to coerce, disrupt, or overthrow a government or occupying power.
- **Foreign Internal Defense (FID):** 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 (CA):** Activities taken to enhance the relationship between military forces and civilian authorities in localities where military forces are present.
- **Counterterrorism (CT):** 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 (SFA):** Activities taken to enhance organizing, training, equipping, rebuilding, and advising various components of Foreign Security Forces.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Information in this section is from testimony given by Admiral Eric T. Olson, Commander, USSOCOM, to the House Terrorism, Unconventional Threats and Capabilities Subcommittee on the FY2010 National Defense Authorization Budget Request for the U.S. Special Operations Command, June 4, 2009.

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

- **Counterinsurgency:** Actions taken that blend civilian and military efforts designed to end insurgent violence and facilitate a return to peaceful political processes.
- **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.¹⁰

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.¹¹ 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

- 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.

¹⁰ USSOCOM Core Activities, <https://www.socom.mil/about/core-activities>, accessed February 13, 2025.

¹¹ Information in this section is taken from USSOCOM Information Paper, "Special Operations Forces: 2020: Theater Special Operations Commands," April 25, 2013.

- Special Operations Command Pacific (SOCPAC), Camp Smith, HI; supports U.S. Pacific Command; its CCSA is the Navy.
- Special Operations Command Korea (SOCKOR), Camp Humphries, Republic of Korea; supports U.S. Forces Korea; its CCSA is the Army.
- Special Operations Command U.S. Northern Command (SOCNORTH), Peterson Air Force Base, CO; supports U.S. Northern Command; its CCSA is the Air Force.¹²

Joint Special Operations Command (JSOC)¹³

From USSOCOM's 2025 *Fact Book*,

The Joint Special Operations Command, located at Fort Liberty, North Carolina [renamed Ft. Bragg in February 2025], 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 aboard.

U.S. Army Special Operations Command (USASOC)

USASOC includes approximately 36,000 soldiers from the Active Army, National Guard, and Army Reserve organized into Special Forces, Ranger, Special Operations Aviation units, along with Civil Affairs (CA) units, Psychological Operations (PSYOPS) units, and special operations training and support units.¹⁴ ARSOF Headquarters and other resources, such as the John F. Kennedy Special Warfare Center and School, are located at Fort Liberty, NC.¹⁵ On February 10, 2025, Secretary of Defense Pete Hegseth signed a memorandum renaming Fort Liberty to Fort Bragg, to “pay tribute to Pfc. Roland L. Bragg, a World War II hero who earned the Silver Star and Purple Heart for his exceptional courage during the Battle of the Bulge.”¹⁶ Five active duty Special Forces (SF) Groups (Airborne),¹⁷ consisting of about 1,400 soldiers each, are stationed at Fort Bragg, NC; 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.

¹² USSOCOM 2025 *Fact Book*, pp. 21-28.

¹³ *Ibid.*, p. 20.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 12.

¹⁵ 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 used 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).

¹⁶ DOD Press Release, “Secretary of Defense Pete Hegseth Renames Fort Liberty to Fort Bragg,” February 10, 2025, <https://policy.defense.gov/OUSDP-Offices/ASD-for-Special-Operations-Low-Intensity-Conflict/>, accessed February 13, 2025.

¹⁷ Airborne refers to “personnel, troops especially trained to effect, following transport by air, an assault debarkation, either by parachuting or touchdown.” Joint Publication 1-02, Department of Defense Dictionary of Military and Associated Terms, 12 April 2001 (as amended through 31 July 2010).

An elite airborne light infantry unit specializing in direct action operations,¹⁸ the 75th Ranger Regiment, is headquartered at Fort Moore, GA,¹⁹ and consists of three battalions of about 800 soldiers each, a regimental special troops battalion, and a regimental military intelligence battalion. On March 3, 2025 Secretary of Defense Pete Hegseth renamed Ft. Moore to Ft. Benning to “pay[s] tribute to Corporal Fred G. Benning, who was awarded the Distinguished Service Cross for his extraordinary heroism in action during World War I with the U.S. Army in France in 1918.”²⁰ The Army’s special operations aviation unit, the 160th Special Operations Aviation Regiment (Airborne) (SOAR), is headquartered at Fort Campbell, KY. The 160th SOAR features pilots trained to fly the most sophisticated Army rotary-wing aircraft in the harshest environments, day or night, and in adverse weather and supports all USSOCOM components, not just Army units.

Some of the most frequently deployed SOF assets are CA units, which provide experts in every area of civil government to help administer civilian affairs in operational theaters. The 95th CA Brigade (Airborne) is the only active CA unit that exclusively supports USSOCOM. Psychological operations (PSYOPS) units disseminate information to large foreign audiences through mass media. Two Active-Duty PSYOPS groups—the 4th PSYOPS Group and 8th PSYOPS Group—are stationed at Fort Bragg, 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.²¹ AFSOC units operate out of four major continental United States (CONUS) locations and two overseas locations. The headquarters for AFSOC is Hurlburt Field, FL.²² AFSOC units are stationed as follows:

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

¹⁸ 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.

¹⁹ 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 used 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).

²⁰ DOD Press Release, “Secretary of Defense Pete Hegseth Renames Fort Moore to Fort Benning,” March 3, 2025.

²¹ USSOCOM 2025 *Fact Book*, p. 16.

²²Ibid.

- 353rd Special Operations Group, Kadena Air Base, Japan.²³

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; foreign internal defense; and command, control, intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance.
- **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)²⁴

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-8, Virginia Beach, VA;
- NSWG-4, Virginia Beach, VA; and
- NSWG-11, San Diego, CA.²⁵

U.S. Marine Corps Forces Special Operations Command (MARSOC)²⁶

On November 1, 2005, DOD created MARSOC as a component of USSOCOM. MARSOC comprises approximately 3,500 personnel, including Critical Skills Operators (enlisted), Special

²³ Ibid., p. 17.

²⁴ Information in this section, unless otherwise noted, is taken from USSOCOM 2025 *Fact Book*, p. 14.

²⁵ Naval Special Warfare Components, <https://www.nsw.navy.mil/CONTACT/Components/>, accessed February 13, 2025.

²⁶ USSOCOM 2025 *Fact Book*, pp. 18-19.

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 1st, 2nd, and 3rd Marine Raider Battalions; the Marine Raider Support Group; 1st, 2nd, and 3rd 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

The Administration’s National Security Priorities

The Trump Administration has issued a series of executive orders, some of which address the Administration’s national security priorities. Two executive orders, “Clarifying the Military’s Role in Protecting the Territorial Integrity of the United States”²⁷ and “Designating Cartels and Other Organizations as Foreign Terrorist Organizations and Specially Designated Global Terrorists,”²⁸ could have implications for USSOCOM and U.S. SOF.

“Clarifying the Military’s Role in Protecting the Territorial Integrity of the United States” directs,

It is the policy of the United States to ensure that the Armed Forces of the United States prioritize the protection of the sovereignty and territorial integrity of the United States along our national borders.²⁹

Given this mandate, Congress might examine what role USSOCOM and U.S. SOF are expected to play in the protection of U.S. territorial integrity. Such an examination could include what USSOCOM units and capabilities are to be dedicated to this effort, how long they are expected to be involved in border security activities, whether the involvement of USSOCOM forces raises any readiness concerns, and the estimated costs of any USSOCOM involvement in border security operations.

“Designating Cartels and Other Organizations as Foreign Terrorist Organizations and Specially Designated Global Terrorists” designates a number of foreign drug cartels as “foreign terrorist organizations” and “Specially Designated Global Terrorists” and states,

It is the policy of the United States to ensure the total elimination of these organizations’ presence in the United States and their ability to threaten the territory, safety, and security of the United States through their extraterritorial command-and-control structures, thereby protecting the American people and the territorial integrity of the United States.³⁰

While this executive order does not contain any explicit directions to the Department of Defense (DOD) or USSOCOM, one of USSOCOM’s core functions is counterterrorism (CT). Congress could examine what role, if any, USSOCOM might play with other U.S. government agencies as

²⁷ White House, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/presidential-actions/2025/01/clarifying-the-militarys-role-in-protecting-the-territorial-integrity-of-the-united-states/>, accessed February 14, 2025.

²⁸ White House, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/presidential-actions/2025/01/designating-cartels-and-other-organizations-as-foreign-terrorist-organizations-and-specially-designated-global-terrorists/>, accessed February 14, 2025.

²⁹ White House, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/presidential-actions/2025/01/clarifying-the-militarys-role-in-protecting-the-territorial-integrity-of-the-united-states/>, accessed February 14, 2025.

³⁰ White House, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/presidential-actions/2025/01/designating-cartels-and-other-organizations-as-foreign-terrorist-organizations-and-specially-designated-global-terrorists/>, accessed February 14, 2025.

they develop plans and conduct activities to “ensure the total elimination of these organizations’ presence in the United States.” Another potential area for examination could be USSOCOM’s potential role regarding the cartel’s “extraterritorial command-and-control structures.”

Army SOF Force Structure Reductions

In 2023 it was reported that the Army was considering cutting 10% to 20% of its special operations forces.³¹ Reportedly, such cuts would be “most acute on SOF enablers like logistics and intelligence, but that some changes to force structure are also likely for Special Forces, civil affairs, psychological operations.”³² On February 8, 2024, it was reported that

[s]ervice 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.³³

The article further suggests,

The Army’s MISO operators, such as the 8th Psychological Operations Group based at Fort Liberty, N.C. [renamed Ft. Bragg in February 2025], which faces potential cuts, comprise most of the Pentagon’s front-line troops for influence and information warfare.³⁴ 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.³⁵

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.³⁶

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.”³⁷ In conjunction with this announcement, the Army published *Army White Paper: Army Force Structure Transformation*.³⁸

Regarding ARSOF reductions, the white paper stated,

³¹ Caitlin M. Kenney, “Army Mulls 10-20% Cut to Special Operations Forces,” *Defense One*, May 22, 2023.

³² *Ibid.*

³³ Patrick Turner, “US May Cut Info-Warfare Assets as China, Russia Expand Influence Ops,” *Defense One*, February 8, 2024.

³⁴ For additional information on information warfare, see CRS Report R45142, *Information Warfare: Issues for Congress*, by Catherine A. Theohary.

³⁵ *Ibid.*

³⁶ *Ibid.*

³⁷ 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.

³⁸ *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>.

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.³⁹

Congressional and DOD Reaction to Announced ARSOF Cuts

Some Members have opposed the Army's planned 3,000 soldier ARSOF reduction,⁴⁰ 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."⁴¹ 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.⁴²

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 a Pause in Air Force Reorganization⁴³

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 492nd Special Operations Wing into a power projection wing with

³⁹ *Army White Paper: Army Force Structure Transformation*, February 27, 2024.

⁴⁰ See, for example, Rep. 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;Rep.MikeWalz,https://waltz.house.gov/news/documentsingle.aspx?DocumentID=769;andMatthewBeinart,“SASCRepublicansPressSpecialOpsLeadersonPotentialBudgetCutsAmidGrowingRequirements,”DefenseDaily, March7,2023.>

⁴¹ 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.

⁴² 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, accessed October 4, 2024.

⁴³ 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.

all of AFSOC's mission capabilities (strike, mobility, ISR [intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance], air/ground integration)."⁴⁴ The Air Force noted that "standing up the new wing at Davis-Monthan AFB [Air Force Base] requires several relocations, planned throughout the next five years. The final decision is planned to be made following completion of the environmental impact analysis process."⁴⁵

Planned transitions include

- The 492nd Special Operations Wing at Hurlburt Field, FL, is to relocate to Davis-Monthan Air Force Base. The relocation includes the 492nd 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 492nd 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 492nd Special Operations Wing.
- An additional MC-130J squadron is to activate at Davis-Monthan Air Force Base.
- The 21st Special Tactics Squadron is to relocate from Pope Army Airfield, NC, to Davis-Monthan Air Force Base.
- The 22nd Special Tactics Squadron is to relocate from Joint Base Lewis-McChord, WA, to Davis-Monthan Air Force Base.
- The 492nd Theater Air Operations Squadron is to activate at Duke Field and transfer to Davis-Monthan Air Force Base.
- The 47th Fighter Squadron (24 A-10s), the 354th Fighter Squadron (26 A-10s), and the 357th Fighter Squadron (28 A-10s) at Davis-Monthan Air Force Base will inactivate, and their respective A-10s are to be retired. The 47th Fighter Squadron and 357th Fighter Squadron are to continue A-10 formal training until inactivation.
- The 34th Weapons Squadron and the 88th 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.⁴⁶

On February 6, 2025, Secretary of Defense Pete Hegseth reportedly directed the Air Force to pause all planning related to its "Re-Optimization for Great Power Competition" effort.⁴⁷ It was noted,

On February 6, the Secretary of Defense directed the Department of the Air Force to pause all planning actions connected to its Re-Optimizing for Great Power Competition efforts," the spokesperson said. "The planning pause remains in effect until a Senate-confirmed Secretary and Undersecretary of the Air Force are in place and have the opportunity to review the initiatives. The Department of the Air Force welcomes the opportunity for our

⁴⁴ Ibid.

⁴⁵ Ibid.

⁴⁶ Ibid.

⁴⁷ Greg Hadley, "Defense Secretary Orders Air Force to Pause All Reorg Planning," *Air & Space Forces Magazine*, February 10, 2025.

new leaders to assess all ongoing actions and ensure compliance with DOD directives. We will issue clarifying guidance, as necessary.⁴⁸

It is not known if the Air Force Power Projection Wing initiative will be affected by the Secretary of Defense-directed pause. It is also possible that new Air Force leadership might decide to modify or cancel the Air Force's 2023 AFSOC Power Projection Wing plans. In its oversight role, Congress could decide to engage with new Air Force leadership once they have had the opportunity to review the Air Force's Reorganization Initiative to determine the status of AFSOC Power Projection Wing transformation.

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⁴⁸ Ibid.