



October 2022

# SPECIAL OPERATIONS FORCES

Better Data  
Necessary to Improve  
Oversight and  
Address Command  
and Control  
Challenges

# GAO Highlights

Highlights of [GAO-23-105163](#), a report to congressional committees

## Why GAO Did This Study

The Department of Defense has increased its reliance on SOF over the past 2 decades to advance and protect U.S. national security interests. The centerpiece of how SOF employs its forces is through the use of SOF mission command, and involves a variety of command and control structures. These are scalable organizations that allow USSOCOM to provide SOF to geographic combatant commanders based on an operational need.

House Report 116-442, accompanying a bill for the National Defense Authorization Act for Fiscal Year 2021, included a provision for GAO to conduct a review of USSOCOM's structure and organization. This report (1) describes the type and number of SOF C2 structures DOD used from calendar years 2018 through 2021 and evaluates the data used to oversee them, and (2) describes any challenges USSOCOM has identified with its oversight of SOF C2 structures and any actions taken to address them.

GAO analyzed data on SOF C2 structures for calendar years 2018 through 2021. GAO also reviewed studies and interviewed DOD officials on challenges in overseeing SOF C2 structures.

## What GAO Recommends

GAO is making two recommendations, including that DOD require the use of standard terminology and establish a centralized data collection mechanism to retain data on, for example, personnel assigned to SOF command and control structures. DOD concurred with the recommendations.

View [GAO-23-105163](#). For more information, contact Cary Russell at (202) 512-5431 or [russellc@gao.gov](mailto:russellc@gao.gov).

October 2022

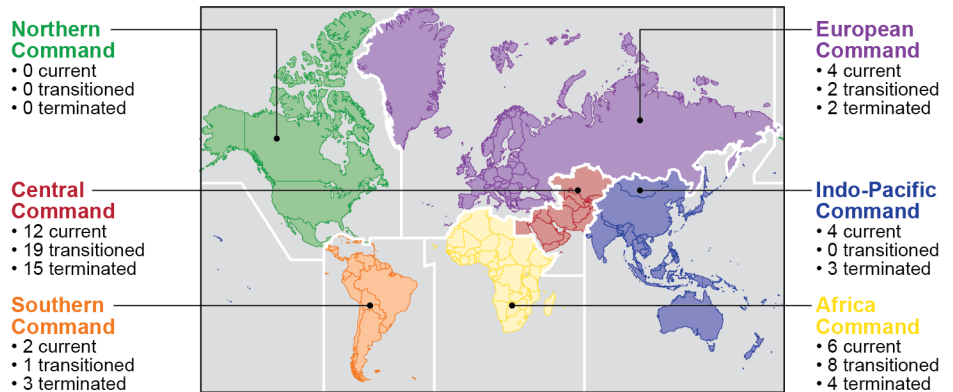
# SPECIAL OPERATIONS FORCES

## Better Data Necessary to Improve Oversight and Address Command and Control Challenges

## What GAO Found

U.S. Special Operations Command (USSOCOM) has established a variety of command and control (C2) structures to manage its Special Operations Forces (SOF). In calendar year 2021, USSOCOM reported that it had 28 active SOF C2 structures, primarily in the Middle East (Central Command) and Africa (Africa Command). (See figure). From calendar years 2018 through 2021, USSOCOM reported that it terminated or transitioned 57 SOF C2 structures.

**Status of Special Operations Command and Control Structures, by Geographic Combatant Commands from Calendar Years 2018 through 2021**



Source: GAO analysis of Department of Defense (DOD) information; Map Resources (map). | GAO-23-105163

Note: Terminated refers to C2 structures no longer in operation, while transitioned reflects a change in the level of command or in specific missions.

USSOCOM has identified three challenges with its oversight of SOF C2 structures, including: (1) appropriately sizing or terminating; (2) maintaining SOF training and preparedness; and (3) staffing. USSOCOM has taken actions to address these challenges, including mission and organizational changes; reviews of SOF requirements; and improving management of deployments. While these are positive steps, it is too soon for GAO to determine whether these changes, and USSOCOM's commitment to further improvements, are sufficient to address the challenges it faces with oversight of SOF C2 structures.

USSOCOM's oversight of its C2 structures is hindered by limited data such as a lack of a standard terminology to define C2 structures and no requirement to have a centralized data collection mechanism for readily available and complete information. As such, there is not a consistent way to determine the composition of SOF C2 structures across the enterprise and maintain accountability of personnel assigned to SOF C2 structures. Additionally, the decentralized data collected by the SOF C2 structures themselves may not be maintained. By using a standard terminology and establishing a centralized data collection mechanism, DOD could improve transparency of its SOF C2 structures, which would further enhance oversight conducted by DOD and other entities, such as the Congress.

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# Contents

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Letter		1
	Background	4
	USSOCOM Has Used a Variety of SOF C2 Structures, but Data Limitations Hinder Transparency	8
	USSOCOM Has Efforts Underway to Address Challenges Overseeing SOF C2 Structures	19
	Conclusions	29
	Recommendations for Executive Action	30
	Agency Comments and Our Evaluation	30
Appendix I	Objectives, Scope, and Methodology	33
Appendix II	Description of Command and Control Structures Used by Special Operations Forces	37
Appendix III	Overview of DOD's Global Force Management Processes for Special Operations Forces	39
Appendix IV	Comments from the Department of Defense	43
Appendix V	GAO Contact and Staff Acknowledgements	45
Table		
	Table 1: Special Operations Forces (SOF) Command and Control Structures, by Type, Level of Command, and Primary Military Service	37
Figures		
	Figure 1: Growth in U.S. Special Operations Command Military and Civilian Personnel, Fiscal Years 2001 through 2021	1
	Figure 2: U.S. Special Operations Command Structure	5

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Figure 3: Example of Command and Control (C2) Relationships and Special Operations Forces C2 Structures in a Geographic Combatant Command	9
Figure 4: Current, Transitioned, and Terminated Special Operations Command and Control Structures, by Geographic Combatant Commands, Calendar Years 2018 through 2021	12
Figure 5: Termination and Transition of Special Operations Command and Control Structures in U.S. Central Command, Calendar Years 2018 through 2021	14
Figure 6: Summary of DOD Reports on Oversight of SOF Command and Control Structures, Calendar Years 2018–2021	20
Figure 7: Global Special Operations Synchronization Process	41

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## Abbreviations

AFRICOM	U.S. Africa Command
C2	command and control
CENTCOM	U.S. Central Command
CJSOTF	Combined JSOTF
DOD	Department of Defense
FAD	Forward Air Detachment
GSOS	Global Special Operations Synchronization
JSOAC	Joint Special Operations Air Component
JSOTF	Joint Special Operations Task Force
JTF	Joint Task Force
MSOC	Reinforced-Marine Special Operations Company
NSWTU	Naval Special Warfare Task Unit
OASD (SO/LIC)	Office of the Assistant Secretary of Defense for Special Operations and Low-Intensity Conflict
SFODB	Special Forces Operational Detachment-Bravo
SOCENT	U.S. Special Operations Command, Central
SOC-FWD	Special Operations Command Forward
SOF	Special Operations Forces
SOJTF	Special Operations Joint Task Force
SOTF	Special Operations Task Force
TSOC	Theater Special Operations Command
USSOCOM	U.S. Special Operations Command

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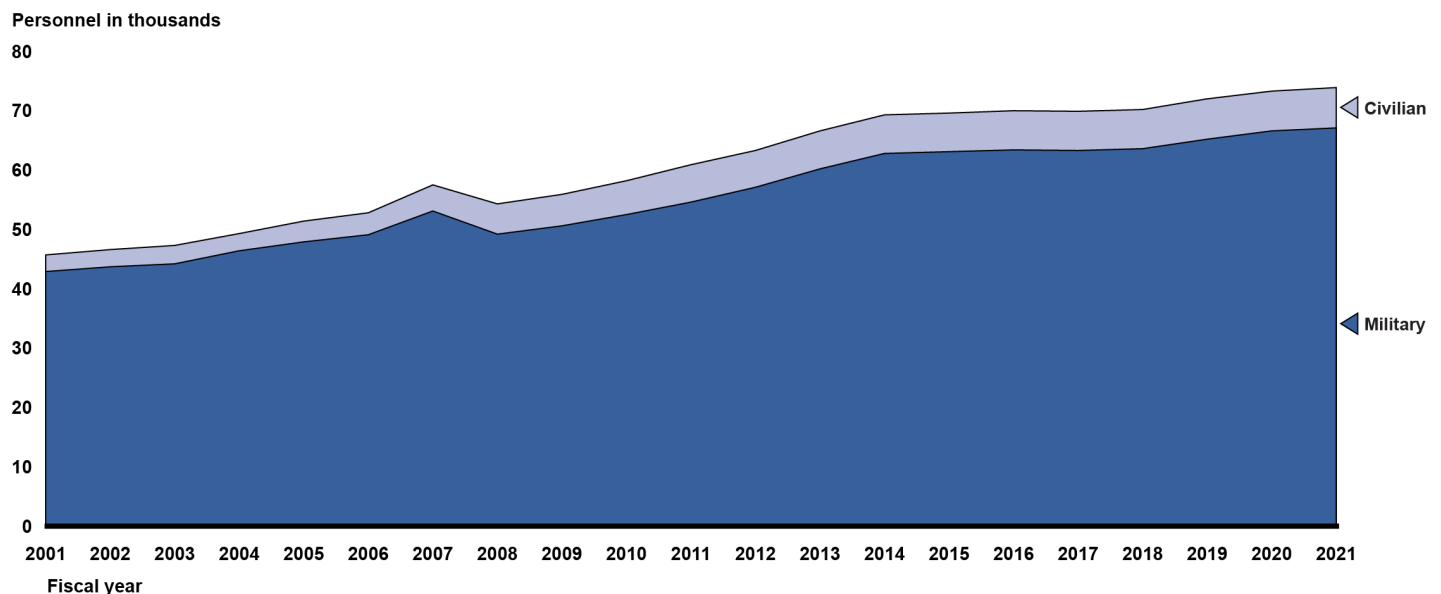


October 5, 2022

Congressional Committees

The Department of Defense (DOD) has increased its reliance on special operations forces (SOF) over the past 2 decades to advance and to protect the national security interests of the United States, including to combat the threat of violent extremist organizations. This has resulted in substantial growth in the number of U.S. Special Operations Command's (USSOCOM) military and civilian personnel, from about 45,700 personnel in fiscal year 2001 to about 73,900 personnel in fiscal year 2021. (See fig.1.)

**Figure 1: Growth in U.S. Special Operations Command Military and Civilian Personnel, Fiscal Years 2001 through 2021**



Source: GAO analysis of Department of Defense information. | GAO-23-105163

SOF provide a unique portfolio of capabilities to address the nation's most complex and sensitive security challenges, according to DOD. USSOCOM has focused on rebalancing its efforts and forces in recent

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years toward the *National Defense Strategy's* focus on strategic competition.<sup>1</sup>

The centerpiece of how SOF employs its forces is through the use of SOF mission command, and involves a variety of command and control (C2) structures. These are scalable organizations that allow USSOCOM to provide SOF to geographic combatant commanders based on an operational need.<sup>2</sup> These organizations facilitate the decentralized execution of SOF activities under mission command.

We have previously reported on the growth in demand for SOF and its effects on the force. In October 2018, we found that, though DOD and USSOCOM had taken actions to address readiness concerns resulting from the high pace of SOF operations, USSOCOM's efforts to better manage the availability of specific SOF units and individual service members to deploy were limited by unreliable operational and personnel tempo data.<sup>3</sup> In December 2021, we found that USSOCOM lacked clear data governance or management guidance to upgrade its data system for a program designed to improve the readiness and resilience of SOF and their families, among other issues.<sup>4</sup>

House Report 116-442, accompanying a bill for the National Defense Authorization Act for Fiscal Year 2021, included a provision for us to

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<sup>1</sup>DOD, *2018 National Defense Strategy: Sharpening the American Military's Competitive Edge* (Jan. 19, 2018) (SECRET). DOD, *2022 National Defense Strategy of the United States of America* (Mar. 28, 2022) (SECRET//NOFORN).

<sup>2</sup>For the purposes of our report, we are using the term "SOF C2 structures" to encompass terms DOD uses to describe them, such as units of action, command and control nodes, task forces, and other terms.

<sup>3</sup>GAO, *Special Operations Forces: Actions Needed to Manage Increased Demand and Improve Data for Assessing Readiness*, GAO-19-149C (Washington, D.C.: Oct. 12, 2018) (SECRET//NOFORN). We recommended that USSOCOM clarify its guidance to require a complete list of special operations forces (SOF) requirements and establish a resourcing plan that ensures the capacity to collect complete and reliable data on operational tempo. DOD concurred with our recommendations and as of June 2022, DOD had addressed three of the four recommendations.

<sup>4</sup>GAO, *Special Operations Forces: Additional Actions Needed to Effectively Manage the Preservation of the Force and Family Program*, [GAO-22-104486](#) (Washington, D.C.: Dec. 16, 2021). We made a total of five recommendations, including that USSOCOM develop guidance and strategies to better define and manage its program. DOD concurred with the recommendations, and as of April 2022, DOD is taking actions to address them.

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conduct a review of USSOCOM's structure and organization.<sup>5</sup> This report (1) describes the type and number of SOF C2 structures DOD used from calendar years 2018 through 2021 and evaluates the completeness of the data used to oversee them, and (2) describes any challenges USSOCOM has identified with its oversight of SOF C2 structures and any actions taken to address them.

For our first objective, we analyzed data on SOF C2 structures in operation from calendar years 2018 through 2021, which incorporates a shift in priorities under the 2018 National Defense Strategy from an emphasis on counterterrorism to a focus on great power competition. We also identified a number of key studies related to SOF and its C2 structures that included lists of specific SOF C2 structures.<sup>6</sup>

For our second objective, we identified and reviewed studies by DOD, USSOCOM, and others that identified challenges in USSOCOM's oversight of SOF C2 structures, and discussed these studies and specific challenges with relevant officials from USSOCOM and its components; and from the Office of the Assistant Secretary of Defense for Special Operations and Low-Intensity Conflict (OASD (SO/LIC)).<sup>7</sup> We reviewed documentation and interviewed officials from USSOCOM and the special operations component commands to discuss viewpoints of these specific approaches. See Appendix I for a more detailed discussion of our scope and methodology.

We conducted this performance audit from April 2021 to October 2022 in accordance with generally accepted government auditing standards. Those standards require that we plan and perform the audit to obtain sufficient, appropriate evidence to provide a reasonable basis for our

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<sup>5</sup>H.R. Rep. No. 116-442, at 185 (2020).

<sup>6</sup>These studies included: DOD, *Special Operations Forces Command and Control Review*, (July 19, 2018) (SECRET); USSOCOM, *United States Special Operations Command Comprehensive Review* (January 2020); and CNA, *Independent Assessment of Special Operations Force Structure*, DRM-2021-C-029130 (Arlington, VA.: February 2021) (SECRET//NOFORN).

<sup>7</sup>DOD, *Special Operations Forces Command and Control Review*, (July 19, 2018) (SECRET); U.S. Special Operations Command, *United States Special Operations Command Comprehensive Review* (January 2020); and CNA, *Independent Assessment of Special Operations Force Structure*, DRM-2021-C-029130 (Arlington, VA.: February 2021) (SECRET//NOFORN).



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findings and conclusions based on our audit objectives. We believe that the evidence obtained provides a reasonable basis for our findings and conclusions based on audit objectives.

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## Background

### USSOCOM's Responsibilities and Organizational Structure

In its role as a combatant command, USSOCOM's principal function is to prepare SOF to carry out assigned missions and activities under the command of the geographic combatant commander in the geographic area where the activity or mission is to be conducted.<sup>8</sup> These missions and activities range from strategic reconnaissance, to security force assistance, to direct action operations. Additionally, USSOCOM is responsible for planning (1) global operations against violent extremist organizations, and (2) DOD's efforts to counter weapons of mass destruction. Among other things, USSOCOM is designated as the joint force provider for SOF.<sup>9</sup> In this role, USSOCOM is to develop and to recommend prioritized and risk-informed sourcing solutions to the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, and is responsible for supervising the implementation of those sourcing solutions.<sup>10</sup> SOCOM identifies how SOF should be used to support joint operations, training, and exercises, in coordination with the military services and other combatant commanders.<sup>11</sup>

USSOCOM is comprised of a headquarters organization, four service component commands, and various sub-unified commands. Figure 2 illustrates USSOCOM's current command structure.

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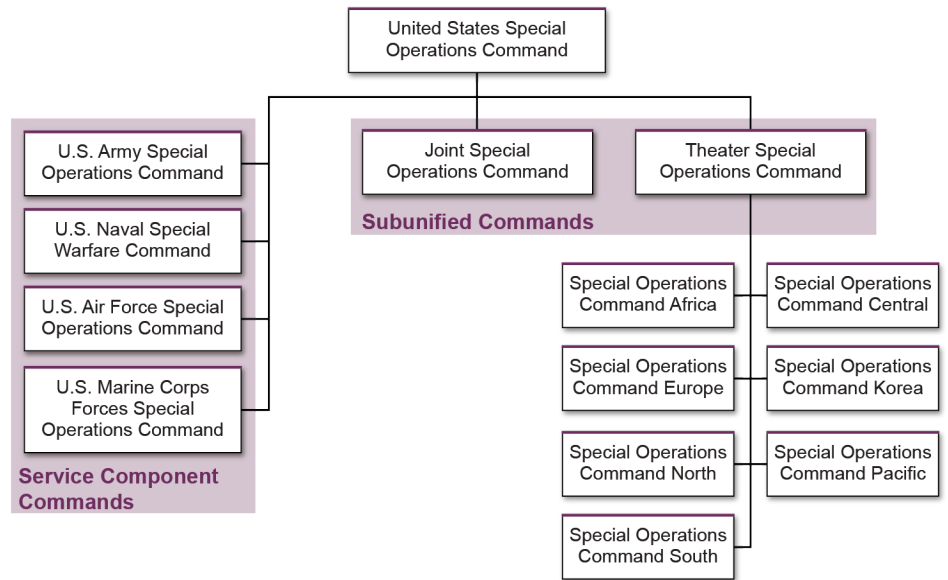
<sup>8</sup>See 10 U.S.C. § 167(a) and (d).

<sup>9</sup>Joint force providers are organizations responsible for recommending to the Chairman, Joint Chiefs of Staff trained and ready capabilities and forces for allocation by the Secretary of Defense to support combatant command requirements. U.S. Special Operations Command is the joint force provider for SOF.

<sup>10</sup>DOD defines sourcing as the identification of actual forces or capabilities that are made available to fulfill valid combatant commander requirements. See more about USSOCOM's role in informing DOD's Global Force Management Process in Appendix III.

<sup>11</sup>The White House, *Unified Command Plan* (Jan. 13, 2021) (CUI). The 2021 Unified Command Plan does not refer to geographic combatant commands or geographic combatant commanders, but notes that some combatant commanders will be designated physical areas of responsibility. In this report, for clarity, and to align with the language of our mandate, we continue to refer to these as geographic combatant commands.

**Figure 2: U.S. Special Operations Command Structure**



Source: Department of Defense. | GAO-23-105163

USSOCOM's service component commands are responsible for the organization, administration, equipping, training, maintenance, support, readiness, deployment, and education of their assigned forces, including those forces temporarily assigned to the operational control of other DOD commanders. Service component commands are also responsible for coordinating as necessary with their respective military services for service administrative and logistical matters.

The Secretary of Defense typically delegates operational control over SOF that are deployed overseas or forward stationed to the respective geographic combatant commander. In turn, the geographic combatant commanders typically exercise their operational control through the Theater Special Operations Commands (TSOC), which provide their combatant commands with staff expertise to plan, conduct, and support joint special operations. USSOCOM has combatant command over these TSOCs, while the respective geographic combatant commanders have operational control of them.

The Assistant Secretary of Defense (SO/LIC) is the principal staff assistant and civilian advisor to the Secretary of Defense for special operations, low-intensity conflict, and special operations peculiar

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administrative matters.<sup>12</sup> In this role, the Assistant Secretary of Defense (SO/LIC) exercises authority, direction, and control of all special operations peculiar administrative matters relating to the organization, training, and equipping of special operations forces, including resources and equipment, and civilian personnel.

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## DOD Doctrine and Guidance for SOF C2 Structures

DOD and USSOCOM have published doctrine and guidance that support SOF organizations in establishing and managing SOF C2 structures. Listed below are some of the key documents governing DOD's use of SOF C2 structures:

- **Joint Publication 3-05.** Joint Publication 3-05, *Joint Doctrine for Special Operations*, describes special operations and special operations core activities, and provides guidance for commanders to plan for, employ, and execute command and control and support of SOF.<sup>13</sup> Among other things, Joint Publication 3-05 discusses the role of TSOCs and other SOF C2 structures in planning and conducting operations. This guidance was updated in 2020 in part to clarify how special operations plans for command and control, and to note the difference between a special operations joint task force and a joint special operations task force.
- **Joint Publication 3-33.** Joint Publication 3-33, *Joint Force Headquarters*, discusses the use of joint C2 structures—such as SOF C2 structures—as options for command and control of joint forces.<sup>14</sup> Among other things, Joint Publication 3-33 discusses conditions and authorities for establishing joint C2 structures, types of joint C2

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<sup>12</sup>Special operations peculiar administrative matters refers to equipment, material, supplies, and services required for special operations missions for which there is no service-common requirement.

<sup>13</sup>Joint Publication 3-05, *Joint Doctrine for Special Operations* (Sept. 22, 2020).

Special operations core activities are direct action, special reconnaissance, countering weapons of mass destruction, counterterrorism, unconventional warfare, foreign internal defense, security force assistance, hostage rescue and recovery, counterinsurgency, foreign humanitarian assistance, military information support operations, and civil affairs operations.

<sup>14</sup>Joint Publication 3-33, *Joint Force Headquarters* (Jun 9, 2022).

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structures, and potential ways of organizing and resourcing joint C2 structures.<sup>15</sup>

- **USSOCOM Directive 350-12.** USSOCOM Directive 350-12, *Joint Special Operations Forces Headquarters*, describes training and readiness requirements, as well as roles and responsibilities for preparing personnel or units designated to form a joint SOF C2 structure.<sup>16</sup> Among other things, USSOCOM Directive 350-12 discusses processes in the establishment, training, and assessment of joint SOF headquarters. Specifically, it outlines an oversight process for certification, verification, and validation of all joint SOF headquarters generated from across the USSOCOM enterprise that are commanded at the O-6 level and above.<sup>17</sup>
- **USSOCOM Force Planning Guidance (Fiscal Years 2022 to 2024).** USSOCOM's Force Planning Guidance provides direction for implementing USSOCOM's campaign plan through the Global Special Operations Synchronization process (GSOS).<sup>18</sup> Specifically, USSOCOM's Force Planning Guidance directs SOF commanders to ensure that SOF activities are linked to USSOCOM or other campaign plans, and to challenge activities that lack milestones or measureable effects.<sup>19</sup> Among other things, it requires TSOCs and Joint Special Operations Command to brief USSOCOM headquarters staff about the sustainability and certification of certain headquarters requirements.

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<sup>15</sup>According to Joint Publication 3-05, SOF are inherently joint due to the frequent integration between SOF from various branches of the military.

<sup>16</sup>USSOCOM Directive 350-12, *Joint Special Operations Forces Headquarters* (May 31, 2019).

<sup>17</sup>According to USSOCOM Directive 350-12, certification refers to confirming and assessing that unit training has been conducted to standard and is mission capable. Verification refers to the confirmation of unit mission readiness for mission tasks and for the supported combatant commander's theater-specific training requirements. Validation refers to the act of endorsing the unit's mission readiness.

<sup>18</sup>USSOCOM, *Force Planning Guidance Fiscal Years 2022–2024* (August 4, 2021) (SECRET//NOFORN). We present more information on the GSOS process, and its role as a decision support tool for DOD's Global Force Management Process, in Appendix III.

<sup>19</sup>Specifically, the Force Planning Guidance refers to USSOCOM's *Campaign Plan for Global Special Operations*. USSOCOM, *Campaign Plan for Global Special Operations*, CP-GSO 7000-21 (October 17, 2020) (SECRET//NOFORN).

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## USSOCOM Has Used a Variety of SOF C2 Structures, but Data Limitations Hinder Transparency

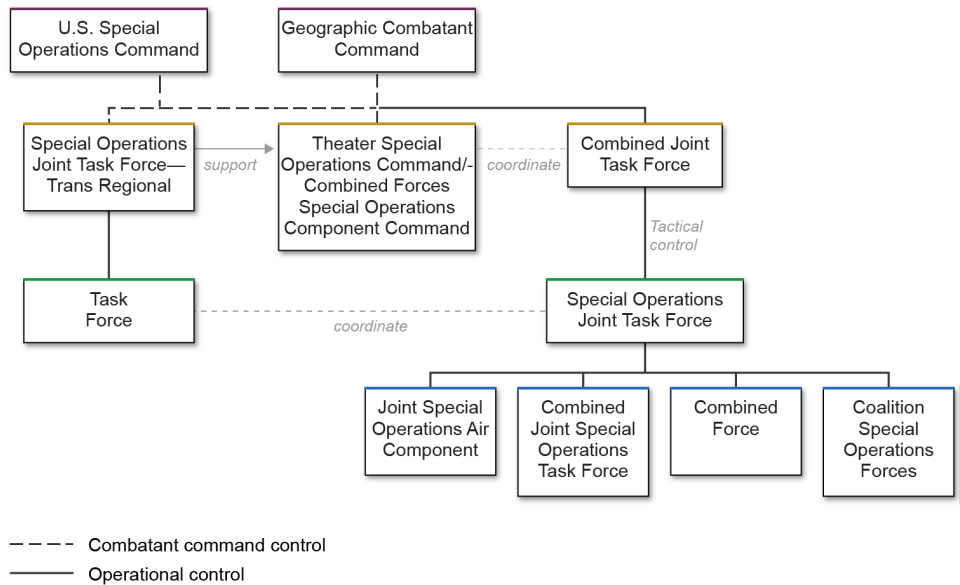
USSOCOM has established a variety of structures to conduct the command and control of its SOF C2 structures. In calendar year 2021, USSOCOM reported that it had 28 active SOF C2 structures primarily in the Middle East and Africa. From calendar years 2018 through 2021, USSOCOM reported that it terminated or transitioned to other command structures 57 SOF C2 structures. However, USSOCOM's data on its SOF C2 structures has limitations, as it does not use standard terminology for this data, the data is not readily available, and it does not maintain complete data.

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## USSOCOM Has Established a Variety of SOF C2 Structures

USSOCOM has established a variety of SOF C2 structures, which geographic combatant commanders adapt to the needs of a particular operating environment. An important aspect of SOF mission command is a scalable up-and-down command structure that grows with SOF activities that can transition from episodic, to persistent, and in some instances, to permanent engagements or combat conditions. Figure 3 shows an example of command and control relationships and notional SOF C2 structures in a generic theater of operations.

**Figure 3: Example of Command and Control (C2) Relationships and Special Operations Forces C2 Structures in a Geographic Combatant Command**



Source: GAO analysis of Department of Defense information. | GAO-23-105163

Note: Combatant command control is the nontransferable command authority established by section 164 of title 10, U.S. Code, exercised only by commanders of unified or specified commands unless otherwise directed by the President or the Secretary of Defense. This refers to the authority of a combatant commander to perform those functions of command over assigned forces involving organizing and employing commands and forces, assigning tasks, designating objectives, and giving authoritative direction over all aspects of military operations, joint training, and logistics necessary to accomplish the missions assigned to the command. Operational control is the command authority to perform those functions of command over subordinate forces involving organizing and employing commands and forces, assigning tasks, designating objectives, and giving authoritative direction over all aspects of military operations and joint training necessary to accomplish missions assigned to the command. Tactical control is command authority over assigned or attached forces that is limited to the detailed direction and control of movements and maneuver within the operational area necessary to accomplish missions or tasks. It provides sufficient command authority for controlling or directing the application of force or tactical use of combat support assets within the assigned mission or task.

As shown in the figure 3 above, examples of these SOF C2 structures, including their relationships to commanders in a geographic combatant command, theater special operations command, and other command entities, typically include:

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### Special Operations Joint Task Force–Levant (SOJTF-Levant)

As military operations in Iraq and Syria drew down in 2020, U.S. Central Command (CENTCOM) redirected its focus on the threat posed by Iran. According to CENTCOM officials, the decision was made to transition the SOJTF-Operation Inherent Resolve, led by a major general, into SOJTF-Levant led by a brigadier general under the operational control of Special Operations Command-Central.

Headquartered in Kuwait, the main mission for SOJTF-L is the defeat of ISIS in Iraq and Syria. Additionally, SOJTF-Levant exercises command of SOF units in Jordan, Lebanon, and Egypt as they engage with key partners and allies to advance national and CENTCOM objectives.

According to SOJTF-Levant, it has changed over time, both in headquarters and overall composition, according to its mission. Recently, SOJTF-Levant started and continued an effort to optimize its operations, resulting in a reduction of about 270 personnel prior to the effort, to a current inventory of 230 personnel.



Source: GAO analysis of Department of Defense (DOD) information; DOD (photo). | GAO-23-105163

- **Special Operations Joint Task Force (SOJTF).** SOJTFs are a modular, tailorable, and scalable SOF organization that provides joint SOF capability in support of a Geographic Combatant Commander or Joint Task Force (JTF) commander.<sup>20</sup> The TSOC commander may establish a SOJTF, typically with an O-7 or O-8 commander, in

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<sup>20</sup>Joint Publication 3-05. *Joint Doctrine for Special Operations* (Sept. 22, 2020). Additionally, a JTF, one of several command and control options for conducting joint operations, may be established when the scope, complexity, or other factors of the operation require capabilities from at least two military departments. JTFs operate under a single joint force commander and can operate across all domains, and involve conventional forces and special operations forces. Joint Publication 3-33, *Joint Task Force Headquarters* (Jan. 31, 2018).

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response to a crisis or major combat operations.<sup>21</sup> A Geographic Combatant Commander may also request a SOJTF. The SOJTF generally supports the JTF commander in a support role and remains under the operational control of the TSOC commander.

- **Joint Special Operations Task Forces (JSOTFs).** JSOTFs plan and conduct specific special operations missions, or special operations in support of campaigns or other operations. Established by the Geographic Combatant Commander, TSOC, or SOJTF commander, JSOTFs are typically led by O-6 commanders.<sup>22</sup> Multiple JSOTFs may be established under a single TSOC or SOJTF depending on mission requirements.
- **Special Operations Command Forwards (SOC-FWDs).** SOC-FWDs are more common and typically smaller than a SOJTF or JSOTF. The TSOC commander may establish these to provide a forward deployed command and control capability for military engagement, security cooperation, and deterrence operations. Based on the scale of SOF involvement, among other factors, SOC-FWD commanders may vary from O-4 to O-6.<sup>23</sup>
- **Joint Special Operations Air Components (JSOACs).** Provide O-6 command of SOF aviation and ensures intelligence, maneuver, and fires integration with SOF ground elements.

See Appendix II for additional examples of SOF C2 structures.

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## USSOCOM Had 28 SOF C2 Structures in Operation during 2021 and Terminated or Transitioned 57 Since 2018

USSOCOM reported it had 28 SOF C2 structures in operation during calendar year 2021, primarily in the Middle East (12 in U.S. Central Command (CENTCOM)) and Africa (6 in U.S. Africa Command

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<sup>21</sup>Military officer grades O-7 and O-8 refer to brigadier and major generals in the Army, Air Force, and Marine Corps and lower-half and upper-half rear admirals in the Navy.

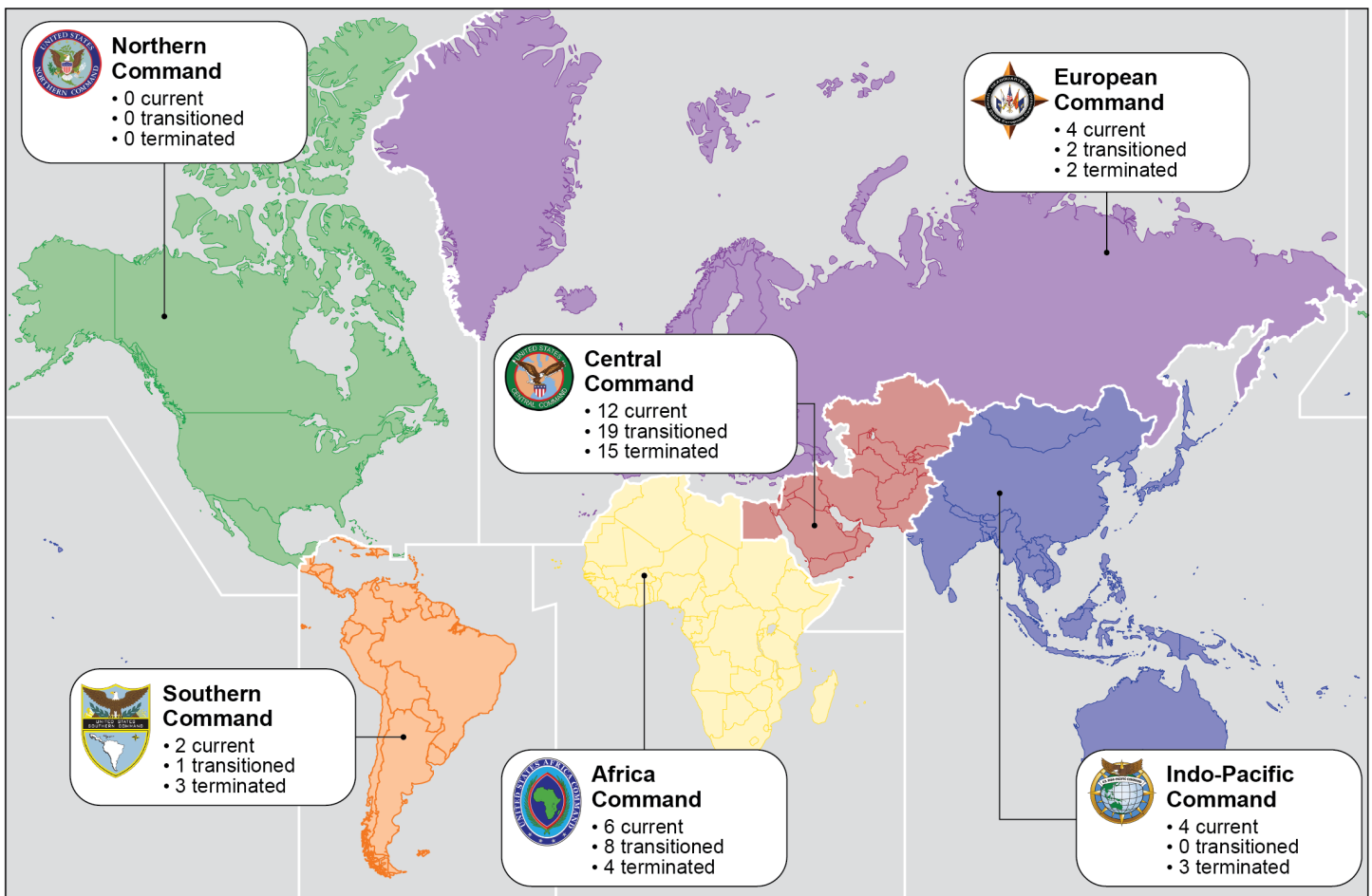
<sup>22</sup>Military officer grade O-6 refers to a colonel in the Army, Air Force, and Marine Corps, and a captain in the Navy.

<sup>23</sup>Military officer grades O-4 and O-5 refers to a major and lieutenant colonel in the Army, Air Force, and Marine Corps and a lieutenant commander and commander in the Navy.



(AFRICOM)).<sup>24</sup> It also reported terminating or transitioning a total of 57 SOF C2 structures to other command levels or mission types during calendar years 2018 through 2021. Figure 4 shows a map of SOF C2 structure locations by geographic combatant command, from calendar years 2018 through 2021.

**Figure 4: Current, Transitioned, and Terminated Special Operations Command and Control Structures, by Geographic Combatant Commands, Calendar Years 2018 through 2021**



Source: GAO analysis of Department of Defense (DOD) information; Map Resources (map). | GAO-23-105163

<sup>24</sup>Each of DOD's six geographic combatant commands has defined areas of responsibility and a distinct regional military focus. CENTCOM is responsible for conducting military operations in 20 countries in the Middle East, North Africa, and Central and South Asia. AFRICOM is responsible for all the countries on the African continent except for Egypt.

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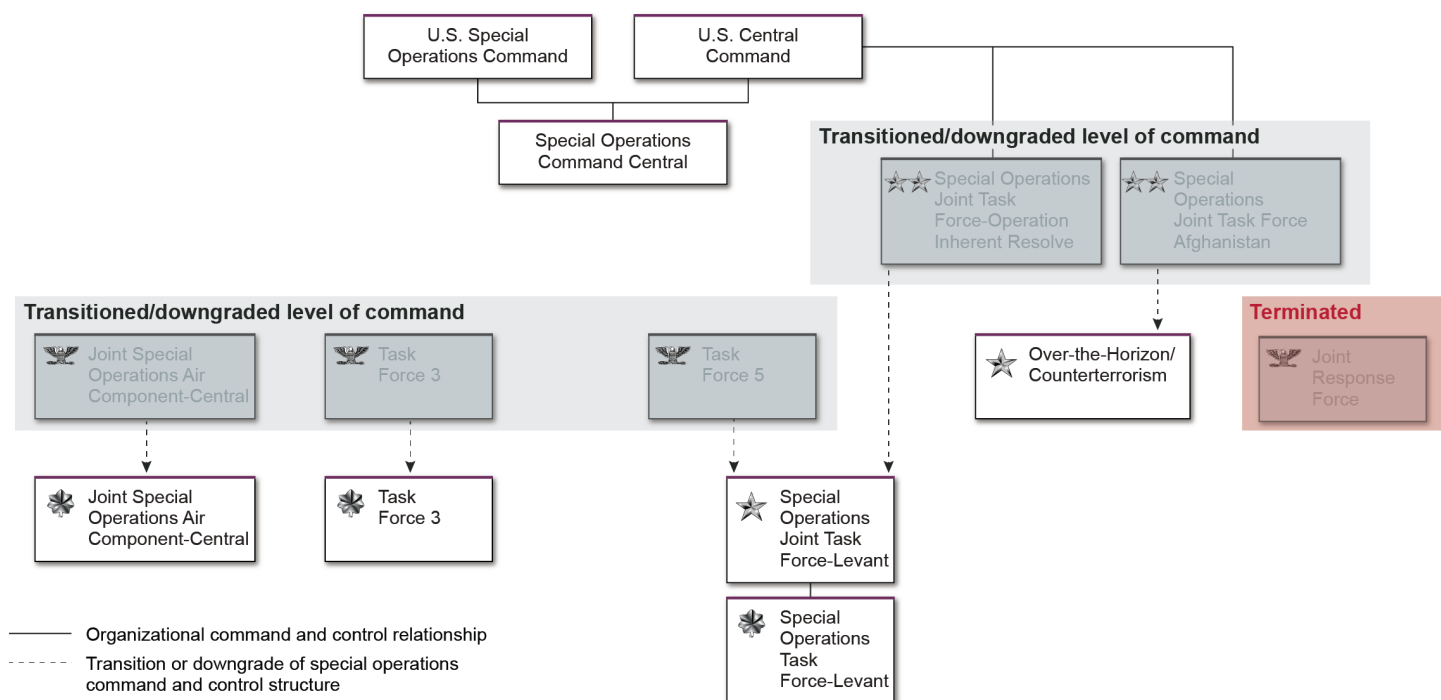
Note: Terminated refers to C2 structures no longer in operation, while transitioned reflects a change in the level of command or in specific missions.

For example:

- Special Operations Task Force – North/West Africa is an O-5-led Army Special Operations Task Force conducting counterterrorism operations in North and West Africa.
- Special Operations Task Force 511 is an O-5 led task force with a mission to counter ISIS expansion and deny safe haven in the Philippines and is headquartered in Okinawa, Japan.

Task forces can be terminated or transitioned to other command levels or mission types for a variety of reasons, according to USSOCOM officials. These include the end of a military mission, a downgrade in the command level of a task force (e.g. moving from an O-6 led task force to an O-5); and changes in task force names due to operational security concerns. For example, USSOCOM terminated or transitioned several C2 structures due to the end of U.S. military missions in Afghanistan and Iraq, the changing views of threats in the region, and the subsequent revision to the number and type of SOF assigned in CENTCOM. See figure 5 below for examples of terminated and transitioned C2 structures in CENTCOM.

**Figure 5: Termination and Transition of Special Operations Command and Control Structures in U.S. Central Command, Calendar Years 2018 through 2021**



Source: U.S. Special Operations Command Central. | GAO-23-105163

Note: Terminated refers to C2 structures no longer in operation, while transitioned reflects a change in the level of command or in specific missions.

In describing these terminations and transitions in its area of responsibility, officials from U.S. Special Operations Command, Central (SOCCENT) noted that following the end of mission in Iraq, SOJTF-Operation Inherent Resolve transitioned from an O-8-led task force under Combined Joint Task Force-Operation Inherent Resolve to an O-7-led SOJTF in June 2020. SOJTF-Operation Inherent Resolve further assumed the duties of Task Force 5 and was subsequently named SOJTF-Levant, led by an O-7 commander.<sup>25</sup>

In Afghanistan, these officials stated that while the O-8-led SOJTF-Afghanistan concluded its mission in August 2021, much of its personnel formed the nucleus of an O-7-led mission focused on Over-The-Horizon/Counterterrorism capabilities. In January 2022, Over-The-

<sup>25</sup>According to DOD, the Levant refers to Iraq, Syria, Jordan, Egypt, and Lebanon, and excludes Israel.

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Horizon/Counterterrorism assumed responsibility of these missions in the greater Central and South Asia nations in addition to their focus on Afghanistan, according to the same officials.

Other transitions in SOF C2 structures in the region noted by SOCCENT officials include the disestablishment of the Joint Response Force in early 2020 following the invalidation of the requirement by USSOCOM. Additionally, several smaller SOF task force components underwent or planned changes in command level in response to the changes in the region, such as JSOAC-Central downgrading its command level from an O-6 to an O-5 commander. Finally, as part of an effort by Naval Special Warfare Command to sustain requirements for its forces in the region, it downgraded Task Force 3 from an O-6 command to an O-5, including the staff supporting the commander. The task force will also rotate the O-5 commander every six months, where previously the O-6 commander served 2 years. We discuss efforts to address challenges in staffing SOF C2 structures by managing SOF deployments later in this report.

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## USSOCOM's Data on SOF C2 Structures Has Limitations

We identified three limitations that have affected USSOCOM's ability to promote greater transparency. These limitations include (1) not having a standard terminology for SOF C2 structures, (2) data on SOF C2 structures not being readily available, and (3) incomplete data on personnel assigned to SOF C2 structures during calendar years 2018 through 2021.

*"Special operations forces' highly trained and mature operators are uniquely able to capitalize on the potential of a decentralized approach to mission command. With that approach comes a dispersed command and control network—one which must be understood not only within the SOF enterprise, but also by conventional, international, and interagency partners. SOF must continue to build trust across the network by communicating a consistent, comprehensible, and accurate command and control picture, as well as by presenting the force in a unified, cohesive and consistent manner—a force that achieves integrated effects over time across the spectrum of conflict."*

-Joseph I. Votel  
General, U.S. Army  
Commander, USSOCOM, 2014–2016

Source: USSOCOM, White Paper, SOF Mission Command and Command & Control (Sept. 22, 2015). | GAO-23-105163

### **Data did not have a standard terminology to define C2 structures.**

SOF C2 structures do not use a standard terminology to define SOF command and control. DOD officials from multiple levels of the SOF community noted that many are called by different task force names for operational security reasons, while some are named according to a commander's preferences. Finally, other terminology differences reflect different combatant command practices— Task Groups for those under U.S. European Command, SOC-FWDs for SOF C2 structures operating under CENTCOM and AFRICOM, and Task Forces for those under U.S. Indo-Pacific Command.

DOD's 2018 *SOF Command and Control Review* found there was no simple and consistent way to determine the composition and structure of

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SOF C2 structures across the enterprise.<sup>26</sup> The review noted the need for a common set of terms that conveys the missions and scope of responsibility for what constitutes a task force or mission command. A 2021 review by CNA have also noted the lack of a standard terminology for defining SOF C2 structures. However, a previous USSOCOM commander stated that increased understanding of SOF command and control will lead to increased trust in the SOF enterprise and more effective integration.

**Data were not readily available or centrally located.** Data on SOF C2 structures was not readily available or centrally located during calendar years 2018 through 2021, according to our review. USSOCOM collects information on its SOF C2 structures through ad hoc data collection requests with special operations components and TSOCs. For example, O-4 SOF C2 structures rarely retain any data after a mission unless they are directed to do so, which is rare, according to USSOCOM officials. Further, USSOCOM decentralizes much of its data collection and relies on other organizations, such as the TSOCs, to collect and to present information to them, according to special operations officials. DOD's 2018 SOF Command and Control Review and CNA's review noted similar limitations on the availability of data that stalled or delayed their respective reviews.<sup>27</sup>

**Data on staffing of C2 structures were incomplete.** Data on SOF C2 structures during calendar years 2018 through 2021 were incomplete, such as the number and type of personnel assigned to specific C2 structures over time. These limitations have hindered efforts to maintain oversight of their deployed SOF personnel, according to USSOCOM service component command officials. For example, officials from the Naval Special Warfare Command noted that incomplete data on personnel assigned to SOF C2 structures reduced transparency and limited accountability. According to these officials, the Naval Special Warfare Command was initially unaware it had personnel assigned to Joint Task Force Indo-Pacific until USSOCOM officials learned of the

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<sup>26</sup>DOD, *Special Operations Forces Command and Control Review*, (July 19, 2018) (SECRET) and CNA, *Independent Assessment of Special Operations Force Structure*, DRM-2021-C-029130 (Arlington, VA.: February 2021) (SECRET/NOFORN). We discuss the sources and purposes of these reviews later in our report.

<sup>27</sup>DOD, *Special Operations Forces Command and Control Review* and CNA, *Independent Assessment of Special Operations Force Structure*.

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deployment when reviewing personnel reports, due to informal staffing assignments by SOF commanders.<sup>28</sup>

DOD has not established a requirement, whether through updated doctrine, or other means, for USSOCOM and the geographic combatant commands to use standard terminology for SOF C2 structures. USSOCOM officials stated that terminology for SOF C2 structures is defined in doctrine, including Joint Publication 3-05.<sup>29</sup> According to USSOCOM officials, USSOCOM staffs, trains, and equips SOF, and in consultation with the Joint Staff, provides them to the geographic combatant commands. However, the geographic combatant commander is solely responsible for how SOF C2 structures are organized to conduct their operations and what terminology is used to refer to the particular SOF C2 structures after these geographic combatant commands take operational control of the SOF C2 structures, these officials said. However, USSOCOM, OASD (SO/LIC), and Joint Staff officials acknowledged the need for their respective offices, along with the geographic combatant commands, to maintain information on, for example, the assignment of personnel to specific C2 structures and officials stated that a standard terminology for these structures would increase transparency and assist in the management of SOF, as well as for other entities to conduct their oversight role.

The 2022 Special Operations Forces Vision & Strategy emphasizes that the effective management of our nation's resources requires that SOF continuously increase transparency in administering resources, auditability, and capability development.<sup>30</sup> Moreover, Joint Publication 3-05 states that planning for the command and control of SOF requires an understanding of the differences of SOF components and their respective C2 structures, and that this contributes to the ability to articulate requirements and to enhance USSOCOM's role in validating requirements and in working with the Joint Staff for requests for SOF from a geographic combatant commander.<sup>31</sup> By using standard terminology for

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<sup>28</sup>According to USSOCOM and Naval Special Warfare Command officials, such deployments can result in additional unplanned costs, such as per diem costs for personnel.

<sup>29</sup>Joint Publication 3-05.

<sup>30</sup>DOD, *Special Operations Forces Vision & Strategy* (2022).

<sup>31</sup>Joint Publication 3-05.

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defining SOF C2 structures, DOD could improve transparency of its C2 structures and further enhance oversight conducted by entities, such as Congress.

Furthermore, USSOCOM has not established a centralized data collection mechanism or process to collect and to retain data on a regular basis about the composition of all of its SOF C2 structures—regardless of the command level—such as the number of personnel and duration of the C2 structures, according to officials. USSOCOM also lacks a requirement to maintain data that are centrally available on personnel assigned to specific SOF C2 structures, particularly for C2 structures at the O-4 level of command, officials noted. As such, the decentralized data collected by the SOF C2 structures themselves may not be maintained.

USSOCOM Policy Memorandum 19-22 establishes policy on maintaining accountability of units and personnel, including the collection of data on assigned and deployed units for purposes of maintaining required deployment durations and Secretary of Defense—approved deployment-to dwell-ratios.<sup>32</sup> Further, *Standards for Internal Control in the Federal Government* states that management should use quality information to support its oversight activities.<sup>33</sup> Management’s use of quality information should include identifying information requirements, obtaining timely data from reliable sources, and processing data into quality information. Without establishing a requirement for USSOCOM to have a centralized data collection mechanism or process to collect and to retain more readily available and complete on its SOF C2 structures, USSOCOM may not have full visibility and accountability of personnel assigned to SOF C2 structures.

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<sup>32</sup>USSOCOM Policy Memorandum 19-22, *Force Rotation Duration and Deployment-to-Dwell/Mobilization-to-Dwell Ratio Thresholds* (October 2, 2019). The ratio of time a unit, detachment, or individual is operationally deployed to the time the unit, detachment, or individual is at home station is called the deployment-to-dwell ratio. This is the metric DOD uses to measure operational tempo.

<sup>33</sup>[GAO-14-704G](#). Quality information is information that is appropriate, current, complete, accurate, accessible, and provided on a timely basis.

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## USSOCOM Has Efforts Underway to Address Challenges Overseeing SOF C2 Structures

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### USSOCOM Faces Challenges with Providing Oversight of SOF C2 Structures








USSOCOM faces three challenges in overseeing SOF C2 structures: (1) appropriately sizing and terminating SOF C2 structures, (2) maintaining SOF training and preparedness, and (3) staffing SOF C2 structures. We reviewed a number of DOD and other reports that noted these challenges in overseeing SOF C2 structures, as shown in figure 6 below.<sup>34</sup> We corroborated these challenges in interviews with DOD, USSOCOM headquarters, and USSOCOM component officials.

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<sup>34</sup>DOD, *Special Operations Forces Command and Control Review*, (July 19, 2018) (SECRET); USSOCOM, *United States Special Operations Command Comprehensive Review* (January 2020); and CNA, *Independent Assessment of Special Operations Force Structure*, DRM-2021-C-029130 (Arlington, VA.: February 2021) (SECRET//NOFORN).



**Figure 6: Summary of DOD Reports on Oversight of SOF Command and Control Structures, Calendar Years 2018–2021**

	 <b>Department of Defense Special Operations Forces Command and Control Review</b> July 2018	 <b>U.S. Special Operations Command Comprehensive Review</b> January 2020	 <b>CNA Independent Assessment of Special Operations Force Structure</b> February 2021
 <b>Purpose of report</b>	Provides a comprehensive picture of SOF command and control, identifying issues and opportunities related to sustainability.	Assesses SOF culture, ethics, recruitment, and training, in response to incidents of misconduct and unethical behavior within SOF.	Provides a congressionally-mandated independent assessment of special operations roles, responsibilities, and force structure.
<b>Oversight challenges:</b>	<b>Relevant findings:</b>		
 <b>Appropriately sizing or terminating Special Operations command and control structures</b>	TSOCs have doubled in size and other very senior level SOF command and control structures have been created without a consistent model or an understanding of their sustainment.	SOF re-missioned to retain in theater. USSOCOM biased toward continuation of existing requirements.	SOF has increased its numbers of SOF task forces to historic highs.
 <b>Maintaining training and preparedness</b>	—	Training cycles routinely interrupted by ad-hoc deployments, regardless of impact.	Support for operations in Iraq, Afghanistan, and Africa resulted in USSOCOM trying to deploy as many forces as it could. This negatively impacted deploy-to-dwell ratios, and began to compromise the readiness of USSOCOM's forces by 2012.
 <b>Staffing Special Operations command and control structures</b>	More O-6 headquarters deployed than USSOCOM can sustain.	USSOCOM experienced continuous global demand for SOF. Along with a SOF culture of employing forces, this resulted in a sustained high operational tempo which erodes readiness.	Demand for SOF will grow over time.

SOF  
TSOC

Special Operations Forces  
Theater Special Operations Command

Source: GAO analysis of U.S. Special Operations Command (USSOCOM) information. | GAO-23-105163

**Appropriately sizing and terminating SOF C2 structures.** USSOCOM has faced a core challenge in appropriately sizing and terminating SOF C2 structures. For example, in 2020, USSOCOM reviewed 179 deployed SOF “force packages” and found that 21 of these (11.7 percent)—across every geographic combatant command except for U.S. Northern Command—were deployed for requirements that were no longer valid.<sup>35</sup>

<sup>35</sup>SOF force packages are how USSOCOM tracks deployed forces and capabilities provided to support missions. The SOF “force packages” reviewed by USSOCOM are not necessarily SOF C2 structures as defined in this report. These force packages are tracked to SOF allocations in the Global Force Management Allocation Plan, and include items such as Army Special Forces teams and CV-22 Osprey aircraft. For purposes of this report, the invalidation of these force packages is representative of USSOCOM challenges in appropriately sizing SOF C2 structures.

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According to the 2021 CNA study, in an effort to provide enabling capabilities (e.g., intelligence) to deployed forces engaged in combating violent extremist organizations, the SOF enterprise has far more C2 structures today than it has historically.<sup>36</sup> However, as USSOCOM noted in its January 2020 *United States Special Operations Command Comprehensive Review* of SOF culture and ethics (“2020 Comprehensive Review”):<sup>37</sup>

- Deployed SOF were often re-missioned in order to retain them in theater—or to support different sets of requirements—and used for purposes other than those for which they were deployed. For example, according to the 2020 Comprehensive Review, a requirement for a deployed force may be specific to one SOF activity—such as counterterrorism—while the intended activity for that force may actually be another SOF activity, such as foreign internal defense.
- USSOCOM was biased toward assuming that requirements previously validated in the Global Force Management process remained valid in subsequent years, rather than confirming the continued need for a SOF requirement.

DOD’s 2018 SOF Command and Control Review identified similar inconsistencies. For example, OASD (SO/LIC) officials told us they observed a number of instances in the 2018 review where SOF C2 structures had more personnel in its headquarters than the personnel under their control.<sup>38</sup> One of the reasons for this imbalance is that command of SOF task force headquarters can provide opportunities for career advancement, so there is an incentive to continue these higher-command SOF C2 structures, according to officials from special operations component commands. Another reason, identified by the 2020 Comprehensive Review, was that the USSOCOM process for managing

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<sup>36</sup>CNA, *Independent Assessment of Special Operations Force Structure* (SECRET//NOFORN).

<sup>37</sup>U.S. Special Operations Command, *United States Special Operations Command Comprehensive Review* (Jan 23, 2020).

<sup>38</sup>DOD’s *Special Operations Forces Command and Control Review* (SECRET) was conducted by DOD’s Office of the Assistant Secretary of Defense for Special Operations and Low-Intensity Conflict, DOD’s Office of Cost Assessment and Program Evaluation, and the U.S. Special Operations Command. Its objectives were to provide a comprehensive picture of SOF command and control, in order to determine the level at which deployed SOF command and control structures were sustainable given their force structure at the time (2018).

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SOF was not sufficient to accurately account for valid requirements and actual deployed forces, according to the review.

**Maintaining SOF training and preparedness.** USSOCOM has experienced challenges with maintaining SOF training and preparedness as a result of its lack of oversight of SOF C2 structures. According to the 2020 Comprehensive Review:

- SOF training cycles were routinely interrupted.
- Deployments were expected to occur regardless of the impact on training cycles.
- The SOF enterprise habitually broke up SOF units to support ad hoc SOF C2 structures, rather than deploying the SOF unit as whole.

More specifically, ad hoc creation of SOF C2 structures breaks training cycles, resulting in reduced specialized unit training for the assigned mission, as well as additional administrative overhead, according to officials from U.S. Army Special Operations Command and Naval Special Warfare Command. For example, the Army's Special Forces Groups had to break their traditional regional alignment to support operational requirements, noted officials from the U.S. Army Special Operations Command.<sup>39</sup> Meanwhile, requirements for O-4 level SOF C2 structures sometimes required customized organization structures and equipment, while Naval Special Warfare units were tasked with operational missions on top of their regular role of providing administrative and logistical support to their assigned units, according to an official from Naval Special Warfare Command.

Moreover, units in all four SOF service commands we spoke with experienced negative impacts to training as a result of key personnel being split from the remainder of their unit in order to deploy to a command or staff a SOF C2 structure. These officials noted the difficulty for commanders to address the needs of their operational and administrative/training commands while deployed away from their home station. For example, U.S. European Command previously deployed an O-6 level task force headquarters built around the 10th Special Forces Group commander. According to officials from U.S. European Command and Special Operations Command Europe, they found that the Army

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<sup>39</sup>The Army's Special Forces Groups are aligned to operate in certain region of the globe. For example, the Army's 3<sup>rd</sup> Special Forces Group supports special operations in Africa while the 10<sup>th</sup> Special Forces Group supports special operations in Europe.

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could not sustain this on a rotational basis. Specifically, the 10th Special Forces Group commander had difficulty exercising continuing responsibility over the remainder of 10th Special Forces Group, which was not deployed, according to European Command officials.

According to SOF officials, a particular training and preparedness challenge for the SOF community is the relatively high preparedness of the force for counterterrorism and countering violent extremist organizations, and the relatively lower preparedness of SOF for roles in the emerging strategic competition environment with China and Russia. For example, the 2020 Comprehensive Review noted that leadership training and development in SOF was often focused on tactical skills best suited for countering violent extremist organizations.<sup>40</sup>

**Staffing SOF C2 structures.** USSOCOM has experienced challenges with staffing its SOF C2 structures. For example, USSOCOM deployed more O-6 level SOF headquarters than it could adequately source, according to the 2018 SOF Command and Control Review.<sup>41</sup> Several DOD officials across the SOF enterprise confirmed that sourcing personnel to staff such O-6 level headquarters remains a challenge. Additionally, according to the 2021 CNA study, demand for SOF capabilities across DOD will continue to grow into the future, while growth in supply—if any—is unlikely to keep up with demand.

DOD has experienced challenges in meeting specific personnel requirements of the various SOF C2 structures, according to USSOCOM officials. Officials reported that some required support, such as military information support operations personnel, may not be available because of the high demand for these limited assets.<sup>42</sup> In other cases, they noted that there may be challenges in obtaining conventional force personnel, or in obtaining the most qualified person for a position. For example, a USSOCOM briefing noted that disparate TSOC programs sometimes led to the continuous shifting of positions that impacted the ability of the military services to fill those positions. However, USSOCOM has not

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<sup>40</sup>U.S. Special Operations Command, *United States Special Operations Command Comprehensive Review* (January 2020).

<sup>41</sup>DOD, *Special Operations Forces Command and Control Review* (SECRET).

<sup>42</sup>U.S. Army Special Operations Command categorizes personnel and units who conduct military information support operations as “psychological operations.” We are using the term “military information support operations personnel” to be inclusive of psychological operations personnel in our report.

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standardized C2 structures in a way that is supportable, sustainable, and predictable without the reliance on ad-hoc sourcing of both SOF and conventional forces, according to officials from Special Operations Command-Central.

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## USSOCOM Has Taken Actions since 2020 to Address SOF Challenges

In response to internal and external reviews, USSOCOM has taken a number of actions to address oversight challenges with managing its SOF C2 structures, including mission and organizational changes, an annual review of SOF requirements, and improving the management of deployments.

**Mission and organizational changes.** DOD and USSOCOM have made, or are planning to make, mission and organizational changes to SOF force structures that may help to address some staffing challenges. In April 2021, the President announced the end of operational missions in Afghanistan by September of that year.<sup>43</sup> As a result, USSOCOM terminated SOJTF-Afghanistan, and the forces assigned to the SOF task force were redirected to Qatar to undertake the Over-the-Horizon/Counterterrorism mission.<sup>44</sup> As of April 2022, the Over-the-Horizon/Counterterrorism mission was still in development in accordance with the new 2022 *National Defense Strategy* released in March 2022.<sup>45</sup> DOD also increased the availability of SOF units that are used to staff C2 structures by eliminating most SOF crisis response forces in 2020, allowing those units to be used to meet other requirements.<sup>46</sup>

Further, USSOCOM has undertaken efforts to optimize its TSOCs. Specifically, USSOCOM is in the process of defining the SOF-specific capabilities that a TSOC would need to function in support of its geographic combatant command. USSOCOM envisions this process will result in the standardization of the TSOCs size and force structure—with TSOCs that have the same core functions with staff sections with the same duty descriptions. In lieu of a TSOC capability to form its own joint

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<sup>43</sup>This end of operations was later changed to August 2022.

<sup>44</sup>Special Operations Joint Task Force-Afghanistan numbered approximately 570 personnel in July 2021. After DOD operations in Afghanistan ended in August 2021, USSOCOM has retained around 200 personnel in Qatar for the Over-the-Horizon/Counterterrorism mission, according to USSOCOM officials.

<sup>45</sup>DOD, *2022 National Defense Strategy* (Mar. 28, 2022) (SECRET//NOFORN).

<sup>46</sup>According to DOD officials, two crisis response forces remain.

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task force, USSOCOM intends for TSOCs to be capable of command and control of an O-4 level SOF task force conducting regional contingency operations for up to 90 days. According to USSOCOM officials, the command is working to build this optimization effort into the budgeting process for fiscal year 2023, which is expected to result in—on average—staffing reductions of 8 to 10 percent for each TSOC.<sup>47</sup>

Finally, USSOCOM is looking at providing new capabilities to improve the SOF enterprise's ability to provide web-based military information support operations, and to staff, train, and equip personnel for these operations. To centralize regionally-focused efforts in this area, USSOCOM is developing a Joint Military Information Support Operations Web Operations Center to replace regionally-focused efforts, such as CENTCOM's Joint WebOps Center.<sup>48</sup>

**Annual review of SOF requirements.** USSOCOM conducted a Zero Baseline Review in 2020 to address issues identified by its own 2020 Comprehensive Review, and to ensure SOF are deployed to meet properly validated requirements.<sup>49</sup> Following this review, our analysis of recent SOF C2 structures suggests that at least six SOF C2 structures were eliminated or transitioned as part of the Zero Baseline Review, though we could not determine an exact number due to data limitations addressed earlier in this report. For example, USSOCOM transitioned the previously mentioned O-6 level task force headquarters built around the 10th Special Forces Group commander to an O-5 level task force headquarters. This freed up the O-6 level commander to focus on their primary responsibilities while continuing to provide a task force headquarters—at the O-5 level—for effective command and control of

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<sup>47</sup>USSOCOM did not include Special Operations Command North and Special Operations Command Korea in its analysis, as both commands are small and unique. According to USSOCOM officials, Special Operations Command North is mostly an interagency organization, and Special Operations Command Korea is a SOJTF-in-waiting, its role being primarily to form a SOJTF on the outbreak of war on the Korean Peninsula.

<sup>48</sup>The U.S. Central Command Joint WebOps Center was transferred to USSOCOM to support the creation of the new USSOCOM Joint Military Information Support Operations Web Operations Center. USSOCOM established this center in 2019, and expects it to be fully operational by 2025.

<sup>49</sup>USSOCOM, *United States Special Operations Command Comprehensive Review*.

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SOF that work with local partners in Europe, according to officials from U.S. European Command and Special Operations Command Europe.<sup>50</sup>

USSOCOM made changes to its Global Special Operations Synchronization (GSOS) process that informs global force management of SOF in response to recommendations from our prior report, as well as findings from the 2020 Comprehensive Review and the Zero Baseline Review.<sup>51</sup> Specifically, in December 2020, the USSOCOM commander directed that, among other actions, USSOCOM staff implement an annual review and validation of SOF requirements—to include SOF C2 structures—as a permanent part of its GSOS process.

As part of this annual review, TSOCs must provide geographic combatant command campaign plans and concepts of operations for each requested force. Specifically, USSOCOM's 2024 GSOS instructions require a concept of operations for each unit of action or force tracking number. The process seeks to link concepts of operations to desired effects and to determine a return-on-investment of allocating forces toward a requirement. A group of senior USSOCOM officials evaluates proposed activities toward that end. USSOCOM has worked to ensure that planned requirements are all included in this process by including those of Joint Special Operations Command.<sup>52</sup>

According to USSOCOM officials, the annual review of requirements has forced TSOCs to ensure that their concepts of operations are up-to-date.

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<sup>50</sup>The 10<sup>th</sup> Special Forces Group has four operational battalions. According to U.S. European Command officials and Special Operations Command Europe officials, the O-5 level task force is built around one of the 10th Special Forces Group's battalions. Officials stated that battalion headquarters staff this O-5 level SOF C2 structure on a rotational basis, while the 10<sup>th</sup> Special Force Group commander retains awareness of the task force. European Command officials stated that they have not experienced negative impacts resulting from the transition of the task force from an O-6 level commander to an O-5 level commander.

<sup>51</sup>GAO-19-149C. Specifically, we made four recommendations, including that USSOCOM clarify its requirements prioritization guidance to require a complete list of SOF requirements from all organizations that request SOF and establish a resourcing plan that ensures the capacity to collect complete and reliable operational tempo data. DOD concurred with the recommendations and as of June 2022, DOD had addressed three of the four recommendations.

<sup>52</sup>We previously reported on concerns with the Global Special Operations Synchronization process. See GAO, *Special Operations Forces: Actions Needed to Manage Increased Demand and Improve Data for Assessing Readiness*, GAO-19-149C (Washington, D.C.: Oct. 12, 2018).

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For USSOCOM's most recent GSOS cycle, requirements that have been closed without sourcing since fiscal year 2020 will not be considered valid unless the combatant command can provide justification, or proof of sourcing from outside USSOCOM.<sup>53</sup>

**Managing deployments.** USSOCOM's Zero Baseline Review is beginning to restore training and preparedness, and USSOCOM components have taken efforts to limit the impact of deployments to training, according to USSOCOM officials. USSOCOM officials noted that this effort will also address related issues with training and preparedness, including key personnel being split from their command—and pulled away from their training responsibilities—while deployed to command or staff a SOF C2 structure. This effort, among other actions, establishes a goal for a deployment-to-dwell ratio of no more than 1:3, which gives components more time to train and improve preparedness. USSOCOM has also required that some forces be retained to meet emergent requirements.

In addition, three of the four service component commands had efforts underway to better manage deployments or implemented at the time of our review, according to our analysis and interviews with officials. For example, the U.S. Army Special Operations Command has restored regional alignment to its Special Forces Groups, according to officials from its 1st Special Forces Command. In 2022, Air Force Special Operations Command developed a concept for replacing their JSOACs with an O-5 level command to provide a more tailorable solution for providing air capabilities in support of SOF C2 structures without the same level of command needed for a traditional JSOAC.<sup>54</sup> Further, an official from the Marine Corps Forces Special Operations Command told us that their command has increased the ability of Marine Raider

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<sup>53</sup>USSOCOM, *U.S. Special Operations Command Fiscal Year 2024 Global Special Operations Synchronization Instructions* (MacDill Air Force Base, FL: Aug. 13, 2021).

<sup>54</sup>Specifically, Air Force Special Operations Command intends to deploy special operations task group headquarters—battalion/squadron equivalent, O-5 led mission command elements—that the command will be able to regularly offer to operational commands as part of its 5-month force generation cycle. Air Force Special Operations Command currently expects to generate four such special operations task group headquarters each cycle.



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companies to engage in command and control at their level, reducing the number of battalion-level staff that have to deploy with a company.<sup>55</sup>

**SOF enterprise views on actions taken.** Special operations officials across the SOF enterprise expressed varying opinions about these actions and noted that it will take time for the full effects to become apparent. TSOC officials had mixed viewpoints on USSOCOM's mission and organizational changes and its efforts to optimize TSOCs. Although officials from Special Operations Command South believed optimized TSOCs were sufficiently resourced, provided that adequate augmentation is provided when needed, officials from three other TSOCs expressed concerns about the sufficiency of resourcing. For example, officials from Special Operations Command Central noted that their theater had continuing combat operations, and expressed concern that—instead of recognizing the need for augmentation—USSOCOM would see the end of operations in Afghanistan as a reason for withdrawing additional resources from the region.

USSOCOM officials expressed confidence that the actions it has taken on annual reviews of SOF requirements and managing deployments—particularly through the Zero Baseline Review and GSOS improvements—have ensured deployed SOF requirements are appropriate for the respective mission, and will remain so. USSOCOM officials told us in that the command overall was well below its sustainable rate of deployment, and had no issue maintaining the Secretary of Defense-mandated deploy-to-dwell ratios.

Officials in the SOF enterprise voiced mixed viewpoints on annual reviews of SOF requirements and managing deployments. Some SOF officials were optimistic about the recent changes in GSOS. For example, officials from the Army's First Special Forces Command told us that its SOF C2 requirements had declined over time. Additionally, the Army's Special Forces Groups had recently been able to restore their traditional regional alignment. Other USSOCOM service component officials, however, expressed greater uncertainty or skepticism. For example, an official from Naval Special Warfare Command stated concerns that GSOS still had insufficient accountability and was hampered by poor data.

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<sup>55</sup>Naval Special Warfare Command also has a force generation model for its forces that makes a fixed number of units available for deployment while ensuring that the remaining units are kept unavailable so they can complete their required training, according to a Naval Special Warfare Command official. However, the official noted that this is an ongoing initiative in place prior to our review.

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Meanwhile, other officials from the Army Special Operations Command were concerned that GSOS did not sufficiently address the previously-mentioned bias for assuming that previously validated requirements remained valid in subsequent years.

USSOCOM officials agreed with the concerns raised by the service components and noted that USSOCOM made key changes in the GSOS process since 2020 and have only had the opportunity to undergo one complete annual GSOS cycle since these key changes were implemented. USSOCOM officials stated that the concerns expressed by service components may reflect the additional time needed to experience the impact of actions USSOCOM has taken in response to the challenges identified. Further, according to USSOCOM officials, their command has continuously improved the GSOS process since it was first implemented in 2014, and officials expect further improvements as the GSOS process continues to mature.<sup>56</sup> While these are positive steps, it is too soon for us to evaluate whether the changes to the GSOS process, and USSOCOM's commitment to further improvements, are sufficient to address the challenges it faces with oversight of SOF C2 structures.

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## Conclusions

USSOCOM has experienced substantial growth, with the number of military and civilian personnel increasing from about 45,700 personnel in fiscal year 2001 to an excess of 73,000 in fiscal year 2021. While it has ongoing efforts to optimize SOF, USSOCOM's expanding growth, to include SOF C2 structures, presents some challenges. USSOCOM has used a variety of structures to command and control its forces, but data on its SOF C2 structures had limitations, such as USSOCOM not having standard and consistent terminology, and not establishing a centralized data collection mechanism or process to readily maintain data. These data limitations obscure the understanding of how C2 structures are deployed in theater and thus the investments needed to bolster and support the force. Given both internal and external reviews that have noted similar issues with its information on its SOF C2 structures, it is likely USSOCOM will continue to face these challenges. USSOCOM has also identified a number of challenges with oversight of SOF C2 structures and has efforts in progress to address them. While many of these efforts are ongoing, and their intended results are yet to be confirmed, it is critical that USSOCOM continue its commitment to

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<sup>56</sup>For example, USSOCOM officials noted that many elements of the annual review process had existed previously, but additional rigor and levels of review were added to the process.

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improving the process for sourcing SOF C2 requirements in order to resolve challenges and to enhance oversight of SOF C2 structures.

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## Recommendations for Executive Action

We are making a total of 2 recommendations to DOD.

The Secretary of Defense should ensure the Commander, U.S. Special Operations Command, and the Geographic Combatant Commands, together with the Joint Staff and in consultation with the Office of the Assistant Secretary of Defense for Special Operations and Low-Intensity Conflict, develop and employ a standard and consistent terminology on SOF command and control structures, whether through updated doctrine, guidance, or other means. (Recommendation 1)

The Secretary of Defense should ensure the Commander, U.S. Special Operations Command, in consultation with the USSOCOM service component commands, as well as the Joint Staff and the Office of the Assistant Secretary of Defense for Special Operations and Low-Intensity Conflict, establish a centralized data collection mechanism or process to collect and to retain data on a regular basis about the composition of all of its SOF command and control structures—regardless of the command level—such as the number of personnel and duration of the C2 structures. (Recommendation 2)

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## Agency Comments and Our Evaluation

We provided a draft of this report to DOD for review and comment. DOD concurred with both of our recommendations. DOD's concurrence is reprinted in its entirety in appendix IV.

We are sending copies of this report to appropriate congressional committees; the Secretaries of Defense, Army, Navy, and Air Force; the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, the Commandant of the Marine Corps; the Commander of the U.S. Special Operations Command; and other interested parties. The report is also available at no charge on the GAO website at <http://www.gao.gov>.

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If you or your staff have any questions about this report, please contact me at (202) 512-5431 or [RussellC@gao.gov](mailto:RussellC@gao.gov). Contact points for our Offices of Congressional Relations and Public Affairs may be found on the last page of this report. GAO staff who made key contributions to this report are listed in appendix V.

A handwritten signature in black ink, reading "Cary Russell". The signature is fluid and cursive, with the first name "Cary" and the last name "Russell" clearly distinguishable.

Cary B. Russell  
Director, Defense Capabilities and Management

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# Appendix I: Objectives, Scope, and Methodology

Objectives	<p>This report (1) describes the type and number of SOF C2 structures DOD used from calendar years 2018 through 2021 and evaluates the completeness of the data used to oversee them, and (2) describes challenges USSOCOM has identified with its oversight of SOF C2 structures and actions taken to address them.</p>
Scope and Methodology	<p>For our first objective, we analyzed data on SOF C2 structures in operation from calendar years 2018 through 2021. This time period incorporates a shift in priorities under the <i>2018 National Defense Strategy</i> from an emphasis on counterterrorism to a focus on great power competition. To further define the scope of SOF C2 structures, we noted through interviews with DOD officials that the minimum level of command for SOF C2 structures was at the O-4 level of command.<sup>1</sup> To identify sources for information on SOF C2 structures, we interviewed officials from the Office of the Assistant Secretary of Defense for Special Operations and Low-Intensity Conflict (OASD (SO/LIC) and confirmed these sources with officials from USSOCOM. We also analyzed three studies related to SOF and its C2 structures that included lists of specific SOF C2 structures.<sup>2</sup> USSOCOM reported to us an initial list of SOF C2 structures in operation from calendar years 2018 through 2021.</p> <p>To corroborate the list of SOF C2 structures provided by USSOCOM, we reviewed the studies we identified, and solicited input on the accuracy and completeness of the data from USSOCOM. We also received feedback on the status of SOF C2 structures from Joint Special</p>

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<sup>1</sup>Military officer grades O-4 refers to a major in the Army, Air Force, and Marine Corps and a lieutenant commander in the Navy.

<sup>2</sup>These studies included: DOD, *Special Operations Forces Command and Control Review*, (July 19, 2018) (SECRET); USSOCOM, *United States Special Operations Command Comprehensive Review* (January 2020); and CNA, *Independent Assessment of Special Operations Force Structure*, DRM-2021-C-029130 (Arlington, VA: February 2021) (SECRET//NOFORN).

Operations Command,<sup>3</sup> the Theater Special Operations Commands,<sup>4</sup> and service special operations component commands.<sup>5</sup> USSOCOM officials then confirmed the final list of SOF C2 structures in operation from calendar years 2018 through 2021 at the time of our review.

To assess the reliability of the data on SOF C2 structures, we interviewed knowledgeable DOD officials about their data collection efforts, reviewed documentation, and corroborated our information with other special operations component officials. We determined that the data were sufficiently reliable for the purposes of our reporting on the number, type, status, and location of SOF C2 structures. We compared these aspects of SOF C2 structure data with federal law,<sup>6</sup> Joint Staff doctrine and USSOCOM policies on managing SOF,<sup>7</sup> and with principles established

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<sup>3</sup>Joint Special Operations Command is a subordinate unified command of USSOCOM. It studies special operations requirements and techniques, ensures interoperability and equipment standardization, plans and conducts special operations exercises and training, and develops joint special operations tactics.

<sup>4</sup>USSOCOM's sub-unified commands also include seven Theater Special Operations Commands (TSOCs). The Secretary of Defense typically delegates operational control over SOF that are deployed overseas or forward stationed to the respective geographic combatant commander. In turn, the geographic combatant commanders typically exercise their operational control through the TSOCs, which provide their combatant commands with staff expertise to plan, conduct, and support joint special operations. USSOCOM has combatant command over these TSOCs, while the respective geographic combatant commanders have operational control of them. We did not include Special Operations Command-Korea in the scope of this review.

<sup>5</sup>USSOCOM's service component commands include U.S. Army Special Operations Command, U.S. Naval Special Warfare Command, U.S. Air Force Special Operations Command, and U.S. Marine Corps Forces Special Operations Command. USSOCOM's service component commands are responsible for the organization, administration, equipping, training, maintenance, support, readiness, deployment, and education of their assigned forces, including those forces temporarily assigned to the operational control of other DOD commanders. USSOCOM's service component commands are also responsible for coordinating as necessary with their respective military services for service administrative and logistical matters.

<sup>6</sup>See 10 U.S.C. § 167(a) and (d).

<sup>7</sup>Joint Publication 3-05 *Joint Doctrine for Special Operations* (Sept. 22, 2020) and USSOCOM Policy Memorandum 19-22, *Force Rotation Duration and Deployment-to-Dwell/Mobilization-to-Dwell Ratio Thresholds* (Oct. 2, 2019).

in the *Standards for Internal Control in the Federal Government* related to management's use of quality information.<sup>8</sup>

For our second objective, we reviewed studies by DOD, USSOCOM, and a federally funded research and development center that identified challenges in USSOCOM's oversight of SOF C2 structures. We discussed these studies and specific challenges with relevant officials from USSOCOM and from OASD (SO/LIC).<sup>9</sup> To determine actions USSOCOM has taken to address these challenges, we reviewed documentation and interviewed officials from USSOCOM and the special operations component commands to discuss viewpoints of these specific approaches.

To address all of our objectives, we interviewed officials and where appropriate, obtained documentation, from the following organizations:

- Department of Defense
  - Office of the Assistant Secretary of Defense for Special Operations and Low-Intensity Conflict
- Joint Staff
  - J-35, Readiness
  - J-37, Deputy Directorate for Special Operations
- U.S. Special Operations Command
  - Joint Special Operations Command
  - Special Operations Command-Africa
  - Special Operations Command-Central
    - Special Operations Joint Task Force-Levant
  - Special Operations Command-North

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<sup>8</sup>GAO, *Standards for Internal Control in the Federal Government*, [GAO-14-704G](#) (Washington, D.C.: September 2014).

<sup>9</sup>DOD, *Special Operations Forces Command and Control Review*, (July 19, 2018) (SECRET); U.S. Special Operations Command, *United States Special Operations Command Comprehensive Review* (January 2020); and CNA, *Independent Assessment of Special Operations Force Structure*, DRM-2021-C-029130 (Arlington, VA.: February 2021) (SECRET/NOFORN).



- Special Operations Command-South
- Special Operations Command-Pacific
- Special Operations Command-Europe
- U.S. Army Special Operations Command
  - 1st Special Forces Command
- U.S. Air Force Special Operations Command
  - 24th Special Operations Wing
- U.S. Naval Special Warfare Command
  - N35 Future Operations
- U.S. Marine Corps Special Operations Command
  - G-3, Operations
- U.S. Central Command
  - J-3
- U.S. European Command
  - J-3 Special Operations Branch
- U.S. Indo-Pacific Command
  - J-3 Counterterrorism
  - J-35 Future Operations
- CNA

# Appendix II: Description of Command and Control Structures Used by Special Operations Forces

Appendix II provides information on the types of structures used by Special Operations Forces (SOF) to command and control (C2) its units.<sup>1</sup> Table 1 shows these types of structures, including the level of command, the primary military service that sources personnel for these SOF C2 structures, and examples of the various types from recent operations.<sup>2</sup>

**Table 1: Special Operations Forces (SOF) Command and Control Structures, by Type, Level of Command, and Primary Military Service**

Type of command and control structure <sup>a</sup>		Level of command <sup>b</sup>	Joint or military service	Description	Examples
Permanent Organization	Theater Special Operations Command (TSOC)	O-6 to O-8	Joint	Primary theater SOF organization capable of performing broad continuous missions uniquely suited to SOF capabilities. Geographic Combatant Commands (GCC) typically provides C2 over SOF through the TSOC commander.	Special Operations Command-Africa, Special Operations Command-Central
	Special Operations Joint Task Force (SOJTF)	O-7+	Joint	Modular, tailorable, and scalable organization composed of forces from two or more Military Departments designed to provide C2 of integrated, capable, and enabled joint special operations forces.	SOJTF-Operation Inherent Resolve, SOJTF-Afghanistan
	Joint Special Operations Task Force (JSOTF)	O-6+	Joint	Joint task force composed of special operations units from more than one Service, formed to carry out a specific special operation or prosecute special operations in support of a combatant command campaign or other operations.	JSOTF-Somalia
Temporary Organizations	Combined JSOTF (CJSOTF)	O-6	Joint	JSOTF established and combined with elements for one or more foreign countries.	CJSOTF-Afghanistan
	Joint Special Operations Air Component (JSOAC)	O-6	Joint	Task-organized unit providing C2 functions for all SOF aviation units under the operational command of the joint special operations air component commander. Normally the only SOF component command under a TSOC or JSOTF.	JSOAC-Africa
	Special Operations Task Force (SOTF)	O-5	Service-centric	An O-5 level task for employing SOF to conduct specific operations or enduring missions. It is built around a SOF service component battalion-sized	SOTF-EA, SOTF-NWA

<sup>1</sup>The centerpiece of how SOF employs its forces is through the use of SOF mission command, and involves a variety of command and control (C2) structures. These are scalable organizations that allow USSOCOM to provide SOF to geographic combatant commanders based on an operational need. For the purposes of our report, we are using the term "SOF C2 structures" to encompass terms DOD uses to describe them, such as units of action, command and control nodes, task forces, and other terms.

<sup>2</sup>This table does not represent the full universe of task force structures used by SOF to command and control its units.

**Appendix II: Description of Command and Control Structures Used by Special Operations Forces**

<b>Force Elements</b>				headquarters, and uses organic and attached forces.	
	Special Operations Command-Forward (SOCFWD)	O-4 to O-6	Joint	Scalable, forward deployed extension of TSOC headquarters providing SOF C2.	SOCFWD-NWA
	Special Forces Operational Detachment-Bravo (SFODB)	O-4	Army	Operational command element normally employed to (a) establish of an advanced operations base; (b) establish an isolation and planning facility within the framework of the SOTF to isolate and prepare up to six SF operational detachments alpha; or (c) establish an element to facilitate liaison with other military forces. The SFODB usually exercises command over one-to-six Special Forces teams.	Advanced Operations Base–Southern Cone Andean Ridge (SFODB operating as an advanced operations base)
	Naval Special Warfare Task Unit (NSWTU)	O-4	Navy	Consists of a small headquarters element, one or more Navy special operations platoons, and other operational forces as required. The NSWTU includes support and elements for intelligence, communications, mobility, and logistics.	NSWTU-INDOPACOM
	Forward Air Detachment (FAD)	O-4/O-5	Air Force	Supports special operations activities or missions by providing C2 to SOF peculiar aviation assets that are supporting a higher SOF headquarters, and integrating SOF air assets with SOF operational ground requirements. FADs can be are subordinate to JSOACs.	N/A
	Reinforced-Marine Special Operations Company (MSOC)	O-4	Marine Corps	A task-organized company headquarters section and four Marine special operations teams. Provides combat support (e.g. intelligence, communications, and joint terminal attack controllers) and coordinates limited logistical support.	N/A

Source: GAO analysis of DOD information. | GAO-23-105163

<sup>a</sup>Temporary organizations exist to support specific objectives and campaigns, while force elements are manned, trained, and equipped by SOF service components to source temporary organizations, according to DOD officials.

<sup>b</sup>Military officer grades O-8 through O-4 refer to a major general, brigadier general, colonel, lieutenant colonel, and major in the Army, Air Force, and Marine Corps and an upper-half rear admiral, lower-half rear admiral, captain, commander and lieutenant commander in the Navy.

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# Appendix III: Overview of DOD's Global Force Management Processes for Special Operations Forces

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Appendix III provides information on the Department of Defense's (DOD) use of its Global Force Management process to make risk-informed decisions on how to employ both conventional and special operations forces. It also discusses how U.S. Special Operations Command (USSOCOM) uses its own Global Special Operations Synchronization (GSOS) process to help develop prioritized and risk-informed sourcing recommendations to the Secretary of Defense, via the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff.

DOD relies on Global Force Management to distribute forces belonging to the military services among competing requirements from combatant commanders. Each combatant command documents its requirements for forces and capabilities, and the Joint Staff then validates the requirements before assigning each request to a joint force provider.<sup>1</sup> DOD uses the Global Force Management process to meet identified needs by:

- Assigning a portion of DOD's operational forces to be positioned in the geographic combatant commanders' theaters of operations. The geographic combatant commanders have combatant command authority over forces assigned to them.<sup>2</sup>
- Allocating additional forces to the combatant commanders to supplement their assigned forces. These forces are temporarily transferred to a combatant commander to meet operational demands

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<sup>1</sup>Joint force providers are organizations responsible for recommending to the Chairman, Joint Chiefs of Staff trained and ready capabilities and forces for allocation by the Secretary of Defense to support combatant command requirements. U.S. Special Operations Command (USSOCOM) is the joint force provider for SOF.

<sup>2</sup>Although each geographic combatant command has a TSOC, USSOCOM retains combatant command authority over the TSOCs, while the geographic combatant commander has operational control. According to USSOCOM officials, this arrangement applies to SOF in general, who remain under the combatant command of USSOCOM even if they are based in a geographic combatant commander's area of responsibility. Generally, DOD defines combatant command authority established by U.S.C. section 164 of Title 10, §164 U.S. Code, exercised only by commanders of unified or specified commands unless otherwise directed by the President or the Secretary of Defense. This refers to the authority of a combatant commander to perform those functions of command over assigned forces involving organizing and employing commands and forces, assigning tasks, designating objectives, and giving authoritative direction over all aspects of military operations, joint training, and logistics necessary to accomplish the missions assigned to the command.

for both rotational requirements planned in advance and emergent needs that arise after the initial allocation plan has been approved.<sup>3</sup>

- Generating ready forces to provide an estimate of the services' capacity to provide capabilities along general time lines to help combatant commanders in their planning.<sup>4</sup>

The Joint Staff relies upon USSOCOM, as the joint force provider for SOF, to develop and to provide prioritized and risk-informed sourcing solutions, among other things.<sup>5</sup> To prioritize the global demand for SOF, USSOCOM implemented the Global Special Operations Synchronization process in 2014 as a decision support tool to inform the USSOCOM Commander's annual recommendations to the Joint Staff and the Secretary of Defense on sourcing SOF to the geographic combatant commands. GSOS was designed to supplement DOD's Global Force Management process by providing a prioritization of steady state, rotational activities, and the subsequent allocation of SOF resources. As the SOF joint force provider, USSOCOM developed the GSOS process to prioritize the high demand for SOF and capabilities against the limited supply of SOF. The annual GSOS process consists of a three-phased approach—"Ends, Ways, and Means"—that is focused on validating requirements 2 years into the future. Figure 7 provides an illustrative example of the process.

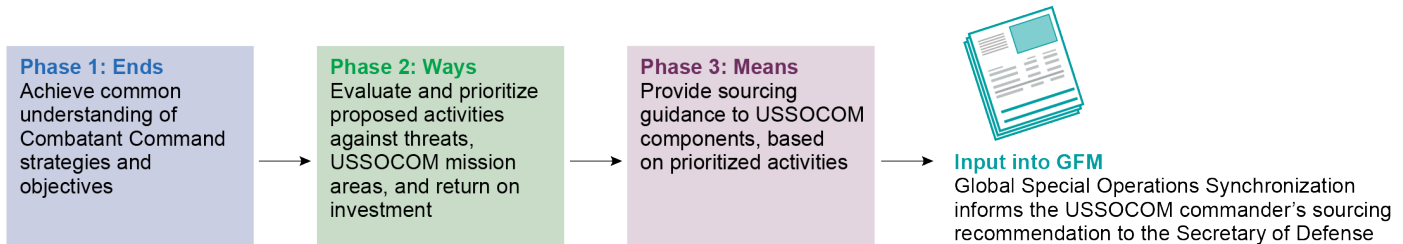
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<sup>3</sup>Rotational requirements are requirements included in the annual submission that endure from year to year and are allocated forces to execute tasks as assigned by the combatant commander for a specified time period. Between annual submissions, combatant commanders may request additional forces and joint individual augmentees as emergent requirements.

<sup>4</sup>These are the forces that a combatant commander can reasonably expect to be made available, but not necessarily the actual forces that will be allocated for use when a contingency plan or crisis response plan transitions to execution.

<sup>5</sup>Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff Manual 3130.06C, *Global Force Management Allocation Policies and Procedures* (May 7, 2021) (SECRET). DOD defines sourcing as the identification of actual forces or capabilities that are made available to fulfill valid combatant commander requirements.

Figure 7: Global Special Operations Synchronization Process



Source: GAO analysis of U.S. Special Operations Command (USSOCOM) information. | GAO-23-105163

The process begins when the USSOCOM commander issues guidance to Joint Special Operations Command, the TSOCs, and the service components on global SOF employment and areas in which the USSOCOM commander is willing to assume risk.<sup>6</sup> The three-phased process includes:

- **Phase 1: Ends.** TSOCs outline their geographic combatant commands' strategy and begin to develop SOF campaign activities to achieve the objectives of their respective geographic combatant command.<sup>7</sup> SOF service components provide updates on the capabilities and force structure available to inform TSOC operational approaches and requirements submissions.
- **Phase 2: Ways.** USSOCOM assigns a numerical priority to each campaign activity in each TSOC's proposed plan.<sup>8</sup> The GSOS prioritization process uses a model that encompasses a variety of assessment factors, including SOF suitability to address the priority challenges and the application of the unique capabilities of SOF through special operations core activities as they relate to national priorities. USSOCOM staff review and validate requirements and their associated campaign activities. Phase 2: Ways results in a prioritized

<sup>6</sup>USSOCOM, *Force Planning Guidance Fiscal Years 2022–2024* (Aug. 4, 2021) (SECRET//NOFORN).

<sup>7</sup>A campaign activity is an event or collection of events with a common objective, purpose, or unifying theme that supports a Theater Campaign Plan, Security Cooperation Plan, Campaign Support Plan, or other similar approved plan or operation, and which requires a USSOCOM sourcing decision. Theater special operations commands begin development of operations, actions, and investments to help develop campaign activities.

<sup>8</sup>GSOS calculates scores for campaign activities by considering threats, the importance of activities in relation to threats, and the anticipated return on investment of sourcing the campaign activity.

list of all of the campaign activities that have been submitted. This prioritization is then provided to the SOF service components as guidance for sourcing decisions.<sup>9</sup>

- **Phase 3: Means.** USSOCOM uses this prioritization to inform Joint Staff, geographic combatant commands and TSOCs of which requirements are supportable and provide formal input to the Global Force Management process.

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<sup>9</sup>An initial prioritized list is reviewed by USSOCOM staff to identify discrepancies. It is then adjudicated as part of a process involving USSOCOM headquarters, theater special operations commands (TSOC), Joint Special Operations Command, and SOF components. Requirements are validated, gaps in policies or authorities are identified, and disagreements are resolved by the USSOCOM commander, before the list is finalized.

# Appendix IV: Comments from the Department of Defense



SPECIAL OPERATIONS/  
LOW-INTENSITY CONFLICT

OFFICE OF THE ASSISTANT SECRETARY OF DEFENSE  
WASHINGTON, D.C. 20301-2500

20 SEP 2022

Mr. Cary Russell  
Director, Acquisition and Sourcing Management  
U.S. Government Accountability Office  
441 G Street, NW  
Washington DC 20548

Mr. Russell,

This is the Department of Defense (DoD) response to the GAO Draft Report GAO-22-105163C "SPECIAL OPERATIONS: BETTER DATA NECESSARY TO IMPROVE OVERSIGHT AND ADDRESS COMMAND AND CONTROL CHALLENGES," dated July 11, 2022 (GAO Code 105163C).

The Department concurs with the recommendations contained in the report.

Attached is DoD's response to the subject report. My point of contact is Eric Bartch who can be reached at [eric.d.bartch.civ@mail.mil](mailto:eric.d.bartch.civ@mail.mil) and (703) 692-1979.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "EL", is located below the "Sincerely," text.

Erin M. Logan  
Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defense  
Special Operation Policy and Programs



**GAO DRAFT REPORT DATED JULY 11, 2022  
GAO-22-105163C (GAO CODE 105163C)**

**“SPECIAL OPERATIONS: BETTER DATA NECESSARY TO IMPROVE  
OVERSIGHT AND ADDRESS COMMAND AND CONTROL CHALLENGES”**

**DEPARTMENT OF DEFENSE COMMENTS  
TO THE GAO RECOMMENDATION**

**RECOMMENDATION 1:** The GAO recommends that the Secretary of Defense should ensure the Commander, U.S. Special Operations Command, and the Geographic Combatant Commands, together with the Joint Staff and in consultation with the Office of the Assistant Secretary of Defense for Special Operations and Low-Intensity Conflict, develop and employ a standard and consistent terminology on SOF command and control structures, whether through updated doctrine, guidance, or other means.

**DoD RESPONSE:** Concur with the recommendation.

**RECOMMENDATION 2:** The GAO recommends that the Secretary of Defense should ensure the Commander, U.S. Special Operations Command, in consultation with the USSOCOM service component commands, as well as the Joint Staff and the Office of the Assistant Secretary of Defense for Special Operations and Low-Intensity Conflict, establish a centralized data collection mechanism or process to collect and to retain data on a regular basis about the composition of all of its SOF command and control structures—regardless of the command level—such as the number of personnel and duration of the C2 structures....

**DoD RESPONSE:** Concur with the recommendation.

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# Appendix V: GAO Contact and Staff Acknowledgements

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## GAO Contact

Cary B. Russell, (202) 512-5431 or [RussellC@gao.gov](mailto:RussellC@gao.gov)

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## Staff Acknowledgments

In addition to the contact named above, Marcus Oliver (Assistant Director), Adam Hatton (Analyst-in-Charge), Tracy Barnes, Pamela Davidson, Amie Lesser, Clarice Ransom, James Reynolds, Yee Wong, and Edwin Yuen made key contributions to this report.

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