



October 2023

SPECIAL OPERATIONS FORCES

Enhanced Training, Analysis, and Monitoring Could Improve Foreign Language Proficiency

Accessible Version

GAO Highlights

Highlights of [GAO-24-105849](#), a report to the Committee on Armed Services, House of Representatives

Why GAO Did This Study

SOF play an integral part of activities carried out below the level of armed conflict. These activities often demand that SOF personnel be able to communicate in foreign languages when working with allies and partners.

House Report 117-118, accompanying a bill for the National Defense Authorization Act for Fiscal Year 2022 includes a provision that GAO review SOF foreign language capabilities and training. GAO's report evaluates the extent to which (1) SOCOM determines SOF foreign language capability requirements and associated training needs; and (2) relevant SOF Service Components have established standards and monitor training efforts to sustain and enhance foreign language skills.

GAO analyzed documents and interviewed officials regarding SOCOM's foreign language requirements' process; reviewed applicable training programs; and analyzed SOF foreign language proficiency and training data for fiscal years 2018 through 2022.

What GAO Recommends

GAO is making four recommendations to DOD to train personnel on how to determine SOF foreign language capability requirements; monitor the relevancy of assigned languages at deployment locations; establish and enforce consistent procedures that specify consequences when foreign language proficiency standards are not met; and hold unit commanders accountable for monitoring and reporting on completion of required foreign language training. DOD agreed with GAO's recommendations.

View [GAO-24-105849](#). For more information, contact Cary Russell at (202) 512-5431 or russellc@gao.gov.

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Enhanced Training, Analysis, and Monitoring Could Improve Foreign Language Proficiency

What GAO Found

Every 2 years the U.S. Special Operations Command (SOCOM) develops a 5-year forecast of foreign language capability training needs. However, a key element of this process on determining mission requirements is not consistently followed, leading to uncertainty on the validity of the resulting analysis. By providing training on the methodology personnel should use to determine foreign language capability requirements, SOCOM would have greater assurance that its process is consistent and effective. In addition, the U.S. Army Special Operations Command and the Marine Forces Special Operations Command have not analyzed the relevancy of assigned foreign languages during deployments to inform future training needs. By periodically monitoring and assessing relevance in the countries to which they deploy, the Commands would be able to adjust foreign language training plans accordingly.

The Army and Marine Corps Special Operations Commands have issued foreign language proficiency and training standards and provided resources and incentives to improve foreign language skills. However, GAO found that from fiscal years 2018 through 2022, most Army and Marine Corps Special Operations Forces (SOF) units did not meet foreign language proficiency goals. According to select Army and Marine Corps personnel, not meeting minimum proficiency levels has had limited consequences on service members. This is due in part to a lack of consistent procedures that specify consequences when SOF personnel do not achieve minimum foreign language proficiency standards.

Further, less than half of SOF personnel completed any foreign language training, and the average number of annual sustainment training hours completed was much less than required due primarily to competing training demands and priorities.

Average Number of Annual Foreign Language Training Hours Completed by Army and Marine Corps SOF Service Members, Fiscal Years 2018–2022



Source: GAO analysis of Army and Marine Corps Special Operations Forces (SOF) data. | GAO-24-105849

Accessible data for Average Number of Annual Foreign Language Training Hours Completed by Army and Marine Corps SOF Service Members, Fiscal Years 2018–2022

	Average number of hours	Annual foreign language training hours requirement per SOF service member
Army	17.6	80
Marine Corps	6.2	80

Source: GAO analysis of Army and Marine Corps Special Operations Forces (SOF) data. | GAO-24-105849

The Army and Marine Corps Special Operations Commands have not held unit commanders accountable for monitoring whether SOF personnel complete

annual foreign language training. By taking additional steps to ensure that unit commanders monitor and report whether SOF personnel are completing required annual foreign language training, the Commands would have greater assurance that SOF personnel and units are able to communicate with allies and partners.

Contents

GAO Highlights	ii
Why GAO Did This Study	ii
What GAO Recommends	ii
What GAO Found	ii
Letter	1
Background	4
Training and Analysis Could Improve SOCOM's Process for Determining Foreign Language Requirements	10
USASOC and MARSOC Have Foreign Language Standards, but Do Not Monitor Training Completion	22
Conclusions	37
Recommendations for Executive Action	38
Agency Comments and Our Evaluation	39
Appendix I: Objectives, Scope, and Methodology	41
Appendix II: Comments from the Department of Defense	46
Accessible text for Appendix II: Comments from the Department of Defense	49
Appendix III: GAO Contact and Staff Acknowledgments	52
GAO Contact	52
Staff Acknowledgments	52
Tables	
Table 1: Organizations Interviewed During Our Review	44
Table 2: Group Discussion Sessions with Army and Marine Corps Special Operations Units	45
Figures	
Average Number of Annual Foreign Language Training Hours Completed by Army and Marine Corps SOF Service Members, Fiscal Years 2018–2022	ii
Accessible data for Average Number of Annual Foreign Language Training Hours Completed by Army and Marine Corps SOF Service Members, Fiscal Years 2018–2022	ii
Figure 1: Foreign Language Training Expenditures for Special Operations Command and Service Special Operations	

Forces (SOF) Command, Fiscal Years 2018 through 2022	6
Accessible data for Figure 1: Foreign Language Training Expenditures for Special Operations Command and Service Special Operations Forces (SOF) Command, Fiscal Years 2018 through 2022 (Dollars (in millions))	6
Figure 2: Select Foreign Language Proficiency Levels and Descriptions for Speaking and Listening	7
Accessible text for Figure 2: Select Foreign Language Proficiency Levels and Descriptions for Speaking and Listening	8
Figure 3: Assigned Foreign Languages of Active-Duty Army Special Operations Forces, as of April 2023	9
Accessible text for Figure 3: Assigned Foreign Languages of Active-Duty Army Special Operations Forces, as of April 2023	9
Figure 4: Process for Determining Foreign Language Capability Requirements and Training Needs for Special Operations Forces (SOF)	11
Accessible text for Figure 4: Process for Determining Foreign Language Capability Requirements and Training Needs for Special Operations Forces (SOF)	11
Figure 5: Theater Special Operations Commands' Foreign Language Capability Requirements by Special Operations Forces Service Component, December 2020	12
Accessible data for Figure 5: Theater Special Operations Commands' Foreign Language Capability Requirements by Special Operations Forces Service Component, December 2020	12
Figure 6: Information Sources to Assess the Relevancy of Assigned Foreign Languages to Deployments	17
Accessible text for Figure 6: Information Sources to Assess the Relevancy of Assigned Foreign Languages to Deployments	17
Figure 7: Foreign Language Proficiency Levels by Active-Duty Army Special Operations Forces (SOF) Units Compared with Goal, End of Each Fiscal Year from 2018 through 2022	24
Accessible data for Figure 7: Foreign Language Proficiency Levels by Active-Duty Army Special Operations Forces (SOF) Units Compared with Goal, End of Each Fiscal Year from 2018 through 2022 (Proficiency goal ^a 80)	24

Figure 8: Foreign Language Proficiency Skills for Active-Duty Army Special Forces Operational Personnel Expected to Deploy Compared with All Personnel by Group, as of February 2023	26
Accessible data for Figure 8: Foreign Language Proficiency Skills for Active-Duty Army Special Forces Operational Personnel Expected to Deploy Compared with All Personnel by Group, as of February 2023	26
Figure 9: Approximate Percentage of Marine Corps Enlisted Special Operations Forces (SOF) Personnel with a Foreign Language Training Requirement Who Sustained the Minimum Level of Proficiency, Fiscal Years 2018 through 2022	27
Accessible data for Figure 9: Approximate Percentage of Marine Corps Enlisted Special Operations Forces (SOF) Personnel with a Foreign Language Training Requirement Who Sustained the Minimum Level of Proficiency, Fiscal Years 2018 through 2022	28
Figure 10: Average Number of Completed Army Special Operations Forces (SOF) Foreign Language Sustainment and Enhancement Training Hours per Service Member, Fiscal Years 2018–2022	31
Accessible data for Figure 10: Average Number of Completed Army Special Operations Forces (SOF) Foreign Language Sustainment and Enhancement Training Hours per Service Member, Fiscal Years 2018–2022	31
Figure 11: Average Number of Completed Marine Corps Special Operations Forces (SOF) Foreign Language Sustainment and Enhancement Training Hours per Service Member, Fiscal Years 2018–2022	33
Accessible data for Figure 11: Average Number of Completed Marine Corps Special Operations Forces (SOF) Foreign Language Sustainment and Enhancement Training Hours per Service Member, Fiscal Years 2018–2022	33

Abbreviations

DOD	Department of Defense
MARSOC	Marine Forces Special Operations Command
SOF	Special Operations Forces
TSOC	Theater Special Operations Command
USASOC	U.S. Army Special Operations Command
SOCOM	U.S. Special Operations Command

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October 31, 2023

The Honorable Mike Rogers
Chairman

The Honorable Adam Smith
Ranking Member
Committee on Armed Services
House of Representatives

The *2022 National Defense Strategy* directs the Department of Defense (DOD) to sustain and strengthen U.S. deterrence against Chinese and Russian influence and aggression both regionally and globally.¹

According to a recent congressional hearing, the skills, knowledge, and ability to develop and maintain relationships with foreign military partners make Special Operations Forces (SOF) well-positioned to contribute significantly to the shift to strategic competition with China and Russia.² SOF's ability to effectively communicate in a foreign language is important to building relationships, according to the U.S. Special Operations Command (SOCOM).

House Report 117-118, accompanying a bill for the National Defense Authorization Act for Fiscal Year 2022, includes a provision for us to review SOF capabilities and abilities to participate in foreign language training.³ Our report evaluates the extent to which (1) SOCOM determines SOF foreign language capability requirements and associated training needs; and (2) relevant SOF Service Component Commands with a foreign language training requirement have established standards and monitored training efforts to sustain and enhance SOF foreign language skills.

¹DOD, *2022 National Defense Strategy of the United States of America, Including the 2022 Nuclear Posture Review and the 2022 Missile Defense Review* (Washington, D.C.: Oct. 27, 2022).

²Committee on Armed Services United States Senate, *Hearing to Receive Testimony on the Posture of the United States Special Operations Command and United States Cyber Command* (Washington, D.C.: Mar. 7, 2023).

³H.R. Rep. No. 117-118, at 115-116 (2021).

For our first objective, we analyzed guidance and interviewed cognizant officials to identify the processes SOCOM uses to forecast and approve foreign language capability requirements. We reviewed Theater Special Operations Commands (TSOC) data from 2020 on SOF foreign language capability requirements because these were the most recent data available at the time of our review.⁴ We found these data to be sufficiently reliable based on manual data testing and interviews with DOD officials. We also reviewed guidance and interviewed officials with SOCOM and United States Army Special Operations Command (USASOC), and Marine Forces Special Operations Command (MARSOC) to identify the processes used to determine the quantities of SOF personnel that are trained in specific foreign languages annually.⁵ We assessed these processes against SOCOM and DOD guidance that establish responsibilities for the SOF foreign language requirements identification process.⁶

For our second objective, we reviewed SOCOM, USASOC, and MARSOC guidance and documentation and Command-sponsored studies from 2004 to 2023 on SOF training to sustain and enhance foreign language skills. We focused our analyses on USASOC and MARSOC because the Navy Special Warfare Command and the Air Force Special Operations Command discontinued or suspended their

⁴According to DOD, TSOCs are subordinate unified commands or functional components that perform planning for SOF missions, preparation of the environment activities, contingency operations, and specialized continuous missions suited to SOF capabilities. DOD has established seven TSOCs that are aligned with Geographic Combatant Commands or sub-unified commands (e.g., DOD established a TSOC for U.S. Forces Korea, which is a subordinate sub-unified headquarters under U.S. Indo-Pacific Command).

⁵SOCCOM oversees the SOF Service Component Commands of the Army (U.S. Army Special Operations Command); Marine Corps (Marine Forces Special Operations Command); Navy (Naval Special Warfare Command); and Air Force (Air Force Special Operations Command).

⁶Department of Defense Instruction 3305.06, *Special Operations Forces (SOF) Foreign Language Policy* (Nov. 19, 2008) (incorporating change 1, May 22, 2017). As this report was in its final processing, DOD issued a new instruction on Special Operations Forces foreign language policy that superseded DOD Instruction 3305.06. However, this report discusses DOD Instruction 3305.06, as that instruction was in effect at the time of our audit work. See Department of Defense Instruction 3902.02, *Special Operations Forces Foreign Language, Regional Expertise, and Culture Policy* (Aug. 17, 2023); United States Special Operations Command (USSOCOM) Directive 350-17, *The Special Operations Forces Language, Regional Expertise, and Culture Program* (Aug. 2, 2021).

respective foreign language training requirements.⁷ Our analysis focused on active-duty Army and Marine Corps SOF personnel because SOF officials told us that active-duty forces regularly deploy to countries where they work with and train partner forces.⁸

We analyzed USASOC and MARSOC data on SOF foreign language proficiency skill levels and SOF training hours to sustain and enhance foreign language skills from fiscal years 2018 through 2022. We found these data to be sufficiently reliable for our purpose based on our review of relevant documentation and interviews we conducted with DOD officials. We compared how SOCOM, USASOC, and MARSOC use this information to monitor SOF foreign language sustainment and enhancement training with USASOC and MARSOC guidance.⁹

To address both objectives, we interviewed command and unit leadership and conducted 13 group discussion sessions with SOF officers and senior and junior non-commissioned officers to obtain their perspectives on foreign language training efforts. Appendix I provides further details on our scope and methodology.

We conducted this performance audit from March 2022 to October 2023 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 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 our audit objectives.

⁷Specifically, the Navy discontinued its foreign language training requirement for its SOF personnel in 2021. Likewise, the Air Force suspended its foreign language training requirement in 2022, during which time it revised the roles and responsibilities of some of its SOF personnel. According to a SOCOM official, as of May 31, 2023, the Air Force Special Operations Command approved a requirement that SOF personnel in newly formed Theater Air Operations Squadrons are to sustain proficiency in a foreign language. This requirement was approved near the completion of our audit work.

⁸The 1st, 3rd, 5th, 7th, and 10th Special Forces Groups, the 4th and 8th Psychological Operations Groups, and the 95th Civil Affairs Brigades under the Army's 1st Special Forces Command comprise USASOC's active-duty SOF personnel. MARSOC's deployable Special Operations Officers and Critical Skills Operators are active-duty personnel.

⁹Army Regulation (AR) 11-6, *Army Foreign Language Program* (Feb. 25, 2022); and Marine Forces Special Operations Command Order (MARFORSOCO) 1550.1A, *Language, Regional Expertise, and Culture Program* (Oct. 27, 2019).

Background

Roles and Responsibilities for Determining SOF Foreign Language Skills

The SOCOM Directorate of Operations, assisted by the SOF Language Office, serves as the senior language authority and proponent on all matters related to the foreign language training and education of SOF personnel.¹⁰ It is responsible for the day-to-day operations of the SOF language, regional expertise, and culture program. SOCOM conducts and oversees a command-wide foreign language capability requirements process every 2 years. It also provides assistance to the TSOCs to facilitate the development of their foreign language capability requirements. SOCOM consolidates the foreign language capability requirements submitted by the TSOCs to ensure they meet standards.

TSOCs are responsible for identifying foreign language capability requirements to meet mission needs by reviewing plans relevant to their geographic areas of responsibility. The foreign language capability requirements developed by each TSOC are to consider the quantity of personnel that need specific foreign languages and proficiency skill levels, among other things, to meet mission needs.

SOF Service Component Commands consider foreign language capability requirements identified by each TSOC and propose a foreign language production mission. The foreign language production mission is the quantity of SOF personnel with specific foreign language capabilities that the SOF Service Component Commands propose to produce via training, recruiting, and other means. The foreign language production mission is to be achieved, in part, through foreign language training programs that define the standards such training should meet. This starts with initial training of SOF personnel in a new foreign language and includes sustainment and enhancement training of SOF personnel with proficiency in an existing foreign language.

SOF are responsible for completing training in an assigned foreign language to develop and sustain proficiency. Select SOF personnel develop proficiency in assigned foreign languages to build and strengthen

¹⁰USSOCOM Directive 350-17.

relationships with foreign partners and to meet mission needs.¹¹ For example, SOF personnel can use foreign language skills to conduct training and exercises with a foreign partner in their local language. They can also use their foreign language skills to communicate with the local population where deployed to perform day-to-day tasks such as buying provisions on the local economy, according to SOF personnel.

Upon completion of their initial qualification training for a SOF military occupational specialty, Army and Marine Corps SOF personnel are assigned a foreign language that they are expected to learn and sustain throughout their career.¹² Initial foreign language training ranges from 4 to 6 months for Army SOF and 4 months for Marine Corps SOF.¹³ Army and Marine Corps SOF personnel must demonstrate foreign language proficiency by achieving a minimum proficiency skill level upon completing initial training. Army and Marine Corps SOF personnel are also required to sustain or exceed their respective military service's minimum proficiency level on annual basis throughout their career.¹⁴

SOF Foreign Language Training Expenditures

SOCOM and the SOF Service Component Commands reported expenditures between \$42.6 million and \$49.4 million annually during fiscal years 2018 through 2022. According to data provided by SOCOM and the SOF Service Component Commands, these expenditures were used to provide resources, such as training materials and contract

¹¹Select SOF personnel are those who are required to sustain proficiency in a foreign language. In the Army, this refers to SOF service members classified as 18-series officers and non-commissioned officers or assigned to a Psychological Operations or Civil Affairs unit. In addition, in the Marine Corps, some Critical Skills Operators are required to sustain proficiency in a foreign language. When identifying Army and Marine Corps SOF personnel, this report refers to these SOF service members who have a foreign language training requirement.

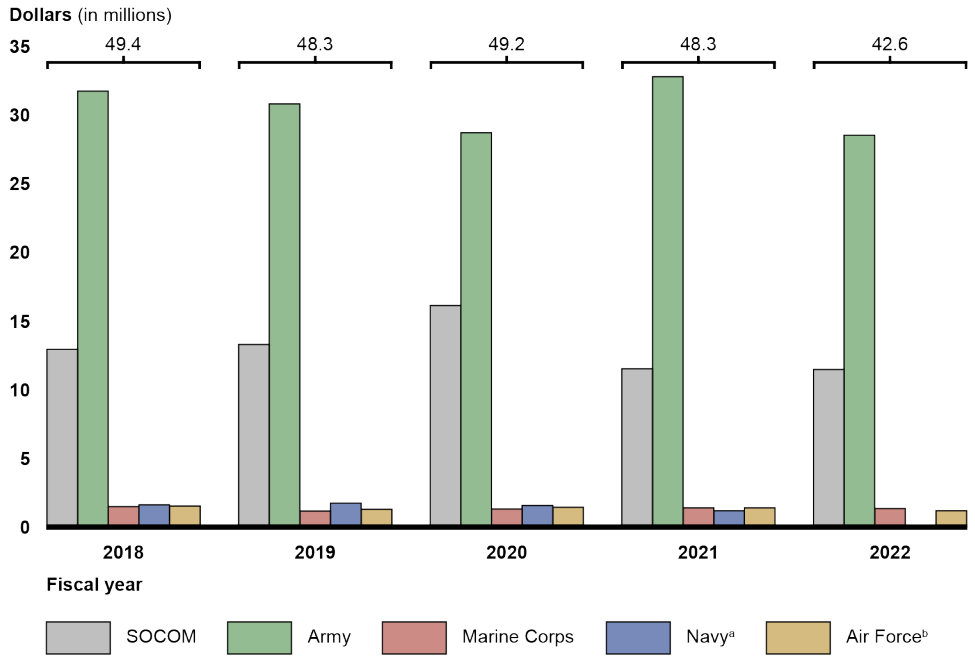
¹²The military services delineate their force structure through occupational specialties, which represent the jobs that are necessary to meet their specific missions.

¹³The 4-to-6-month range for Army SOF is dependent on the difficulty of the assigned language. Language difficulty is placed into four categories with Category 1 and 2 languages being less difficult and Category 3 and 4 languages being more difficult. Category 1 and 2 languages include French, Spanish, Portuguese, and German. Category 3 and 4 languages include Russian, Tagalog, Arabic, and Chinese.

¹⁴SOF service members may meet the annual foreign language proficiency assessment requirement by taking either the Defense Language Proficiency Test (a written exam that tests reading, listening, and speaking skills) or the Oral Proficiency Interview (an oral exam that tests listening and speaking skills).

instructors, to support initial training and sustainment and enhancement training to SOF personnel (see fig. 1).

Figure 1: Foreign Language Training Expenditures for Special Operations Command and Service Special Operations Forces (SOF) Command, Fiscal Years 2018 through 2022



Source: Funding data reported by Special Operations Command (SOCOM) and the SOF Service Component Commands. | GAO-24-105849

Accessible data for Figure 1: Foreign Language Training Expenditures for Special Operations Command and Service Special Operations Forces (SOF) Command, Fiscal Years 2018 through 2022 (Dollars (in millions))

Fiscal year	SOCOM	Army	Marine Corps	Navy ^a	Air Force ^b	Total
2018	12.95	31.746	1.5	1.629	1.536	49.4
2019	13.306	30.813	1.174	1.751	1.301	48.3
2020	16.142	28.72	1.319	1.574	1.455	49.2
2021	11.534	32.799	1.405	1.196	1.405	48.3
2022	11.484	28.541	1.354	0	1.189	42.6

Source: Funding data reported by Special Operations Command (SOCOM) and the SOF Service Component Commands. | GAO-24-105849

^aThe Naval Special Warfare Command incurred foreign language training expenditures until it discontinued its foreign language training requirement in fiscal year 2021.

^bThe Air Force Special Operations Command incurred foreign language training expenditures through fiscal year 2022. In October 2022, the Air Force suspended its foreign language training requirement while it revises the roles and responsibilities of its SOF personnel. According to a SOCOM official, as

of May 31, 2023, the Air Force Special Operations Command approved a requirement that SOF personnel in newly formed Theater Air Operations Squadrons are to sustain proficiency in a foreign language.

Foreign Language Proficiency Requirements Levels

SOF foreign language proficiency skill levels are based on the Interagency Language Roundtable scale rating system.¹⁵ Federal agencies use the Interagency Language Roundtable to assess the ability to communicate in a language (see fig. 2).

Figure 2: Select Foreign Language Proficiency Levels and Descriptions for Speaking and Listening

	Speaking	Listening
Level 0 No proficiency	Unable to speak or understand the language beyond some words.	
Level 1 Survival proficiency <i>Minimum training standard for select Marine Corps Special Operations Forces</i>	Can maintain very simple conversations such as those that involve introducing themselves and exchanging greetings and explaining routine tasks.	Able to understand simple instructions, statements, and questions.
Level 1+ Elementary proficiency <i>Minimum training standard for Army Special Operations Forces</i>	Can initiate and maintain a conversation and speak beyond basic survival needs. The person can meet most travel and accommodation needs and a limited range of social demands beyond basic needs.	Understands simple speech beyond survival needs to include main points and some details, such as those related to family, activities, and work.
Level 2 Limited working proficiency	Can ask and answer predictable questions and give straightforward instructions.	Can understand speech in everyday interactions such as straightforward instructions and narratives.
Level 3 General professional proficiency	Able to speak the language with sufficient accuracy and vocabulary to participate effectively in most formal and informal conversations in practical, social, and professional topics.	Able to understand formal and informal spoken language with accuracy on general social and professional topics and tasks.

Source: GAO analysis of Interagency Language Roundtable and Department of Defense information. | GAO-24-105849

¹⁵The Interagency Language Roundtable is an unfunded federal interagency organization established for the coordination and sharing of information about language-related activities at the federal level. It serves as the premier way for departments and agencies of the federal government to keep abreast of the progress and implementation of techniques and technology for language learning, language use, language testing, and other language related activities.

Accessible text for Figure 2: Select Foreign Language Proficiency Levels and Descriptions for Speaking and Listening

	Speaking	Listening
Level 0 No proficiency	Unable to speak or understand the language beyond some words.	Unable to speak or understand the language beyond some words.
Level 1 Survival proficiency Minimum training standard for select Marine Corps Special Operations Forces	Can maintain very simple conversations such as those that involve introducing themselves and exchanging greetings and explaining routine tasks.	Able to understand simple instructions, statements, and questions.
Level 1+ Elementary proficiency Minimum training standard for Army Special Operations Forces	Can initiate and maintain a conversation and speak beyond basic survival needs. The person can meet most travel and accommodation needs and a limited range of social demands beyond basic needs.	Understands simple speech beyond survival needs to include main points and some details, such as those related to family, activities, and work.
Level 2 Limited working proficiency	Can ask and answer predictable questions and give straightforward instructions.	Can understand speech in everyday interactions such as straightforward instructions and narratives.
Level 3 General professional proficiency	Able to speak the language with sufficient accuracy and vocabulary to participate effectively in most formal and informal conversations in practical, social, and professional topics.	Able to understand formal and informal spoken language with accuracy on general social and professional topics and tasks.

Source: GAO analysis of Interagency Language Roundtable and Department of Defense information. | GAO-24-105849

Foreign Language Training and Language Assignments

Certain military specialties within USASOC and MARSOC have a foreign language training requirement, as of March 2023.¹⁶ For example, USASOC has foreign language training requirements for 18 Series officers and non-commissioned officers, Psychological Operations, and Civil Affairs personnel. In addition, within the Marine Forces Special Operations Command, select Critical Skills Operators have a foreign language training requirement.¹⁷ The Air Force Special Operations

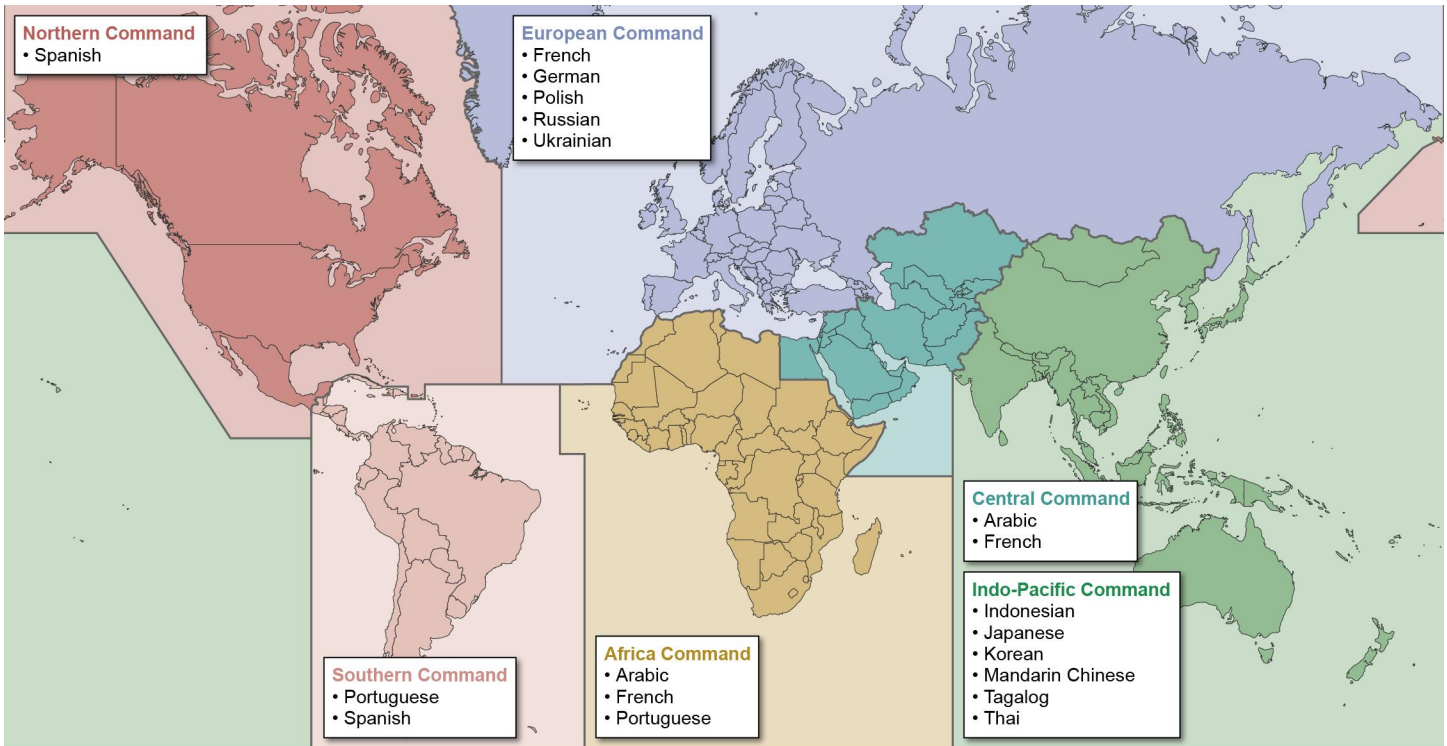
¹⁶USASOC prepares Army SOF to deploy and execute missions that require foreign language skills, such as unconventional warfare, foreign internal defense, information operations, and security force assistance. MARSOC prepares Marine Corps SOF to deploy and execute missions that require foreign language skills, such as foreign internal defense and security force assistance missions.

¹⁷Beginning in fiscal year 2023, about one-third of Marine Critical Skills Operators do not receive foreign language training as part of their initial training and instead receive training in another skill set.

Command and Naval Special Warfare Command did not have a foreign language training requirement, as of March 2023.¹⁸

Active-duty Army SOF units are regionally aligned to specific geographic areas. Army SOF personnel assigned to these units learn a foreign language that is appropriate to the region they are assigned (see fig. 3).

Figure 3: Assigned Foreign Languages of Active-Duty Army Special Operations Forces, as of April 2023



Source: GAO analysis of Department of Defense information; Map Resources. | GAO-24-105849

Accessible text for Figure 3: Assigned Foreign Languages of Active-Duty Army Special Operations Forces, as of April 2023

Africa Command	Arabic French Portuguese
Central Command	Arabic French

¹⁸The Air Force suspended its foreign language training requirement in fiscal year 2022 while it revises the roles and responsibilities of its SOF personnel. The Navy discontinued its foreign language training requirement for SOF personnel in fiscal year 2021.

European Command	French German Polish Russian Ukrainian
Indo-Pacific Command	Indonesian Japanese Korean Mandarin Chinese Tagalog Thai
Northern Command	Spanish
Southern Command	Portuguese Spanish

Source: GAO analysis of Department of Defense information; Map Resources. | GAO-24-105849

Note: Army Special Forces Groups, Army Psychological Operations, and Civil Affairs units are regionally aligned. These active-duty groups and units consist of the 1st, 3rd, 5th, 7th, and 10th Special Forces Groups as well as the 95th Civil Affairs Brigade and the 4th and 8th Psychological Operations Groups. Special Operations Forces personnel within these units are required to acquire and to sustain an assigned foreign language.

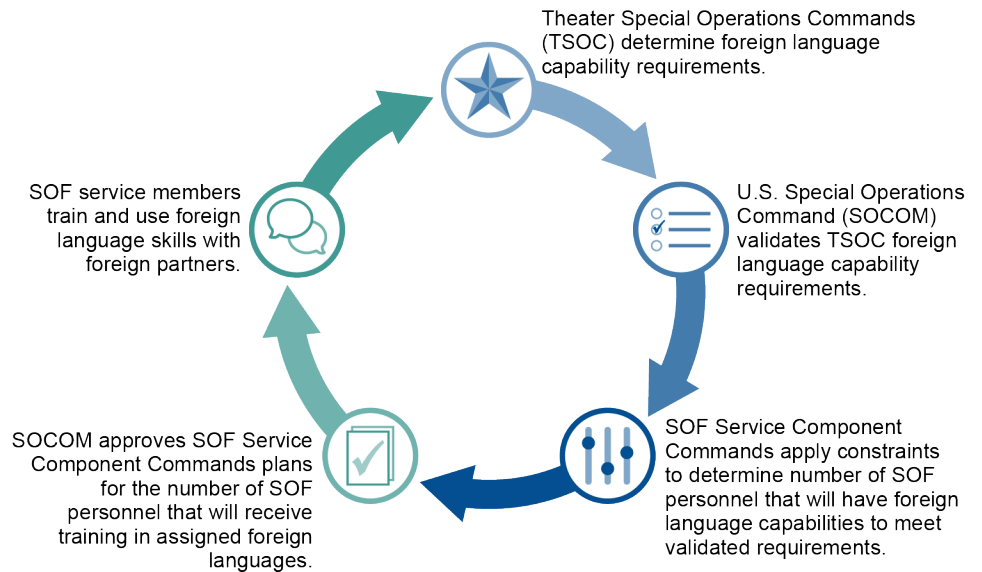
Active-duty Marine Corps SOF personnel that are assigned a language are regionally-focused, and that focus may shift based on current and anticipated missions, according to a Marine Corps SOF official. These Marine Corps SOF are required to acquire and to sustain proficiency in an assigned foreign language such as Arabic, French, or Mandarin Chinese, as of April 2023.

Training and Analysis Could Improve SOCOM's Process for Determining Foreign Language Requirements

SOCOM Determines Foreign Language Capability Requirements Biennially to Develop a 5-Year Forecast of Needs

Every 2 years, SOCOM initiates a process whereby it directs the TSOCs and SOF Service Component Commands to determine their respective 5-year forecast for foreign language capability requirements and training needs (see fig. 4).

Figure 4: Process for Determining Foreign Language Capability Requirements and Training Needs for Special Operations Forces (SOF)



Source: GAO analysis of Department of Defense information; GAO (design). | GAO-24-105849

Accessible text for Figure 4: Process for Determining Foreign Language Capability Requirements and Training Needs for Special Operations Forces (SOF)

- Theater Special Operations Commands (TSOC) determine foreign language capability requirements.
- U.S. Special Operations Command (SOCOM) validates TSOC foreign language capability requirements.
- SOF Service Component Commands apply constraints to determine number of SOF personnel that will have foreign language capabilities to meet validated requirements.
- SOCOM approves SOF Service Component Commands plans for the number of SOF personnel that will receive training in assigned foreign languages.
- SOF service members train and use foreign language skills with foreign partners.

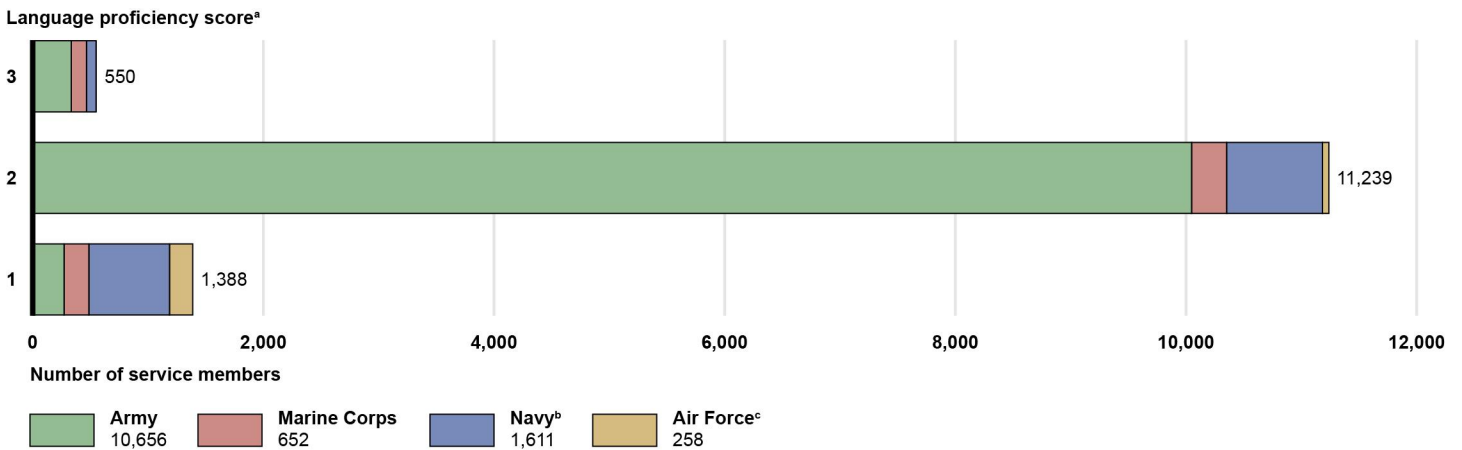
Source: GAO analysis of Department of Defense information; GAO (design). | GAO-24-105849

TSOCs determine foreign language capability requirements. As a first step in the process, the TSOCs review military plans that represent current mission needs, as well as plans that consider potential scenarios that would require the use of a foreign language. Following this review, each TSOC generates foreign language capability requirements by military service. The requirements are to detail the number of personnel,

the needed proficiency skill levels, and the specific languages the TSOCs project they need to meet mission needs. These requirements are referred to as “unconstrained requirements” because they do not consider limitations, such as available training resources and projected numbers of available SOF personnel.

Once the TSOCs generate the requirements, they send them to SOCOM for review and validation. As an example, in 2020 the TSOCs collectively identified foreign language capability requirements for more than 13,000 SOF personnel from across the SOF Service Component Commands at the language proficiency skills level 1 (survival) through level 3 (professional) (see fig. 5). These capability requirements represented over 80 foreign languages and every Geographic Combatant Command area of responsibility.¹⁹

Figure 5: Theater Special Operations Commands’ Foreign Language Capability Requirements by Special Operations Forces Service Component, December 2020



Source: United States Special Operations Command. | GAO-24-105849

Accessible data for Figure 5: Theater Special Operations Commands’ Foreign Language Capability Requirements by Special Operations Forces Service Component, December 2020

Language proficiency score ^a	Army	Marine Corps	Navy ^b	Air Force ^c	Total
3	335	132	83	0	550

¹⁹These requirements include the SOF Service Component Commands’ assigned foreign languages taught in their school houses. Also included are foreign languages that the SOF Service Component Commands do not train, such as Lithuanian in Europe, Swahili in Africa, and Vietnamese in Asia, among others.

Language proficiency score ^a	Army	Marine Corps	Navy ^b	Air Force ^c	Total
2	10,049	304	830	56	11,239
1	272	216	698	202	1,388
Total	10,656	652	1,611	258	

United States Special Operations Command. | GAO-24-105849

^aThe language proficiency score is a proficiency standard identified by the Interagency Language Roundtable. The language proficiency scores to support the foreign language capability requirements identified by the Theater Special Operations Commands (TSOCs) range from a survival level of proficiency (Level 1), through a limited working level of proficiency (Level 2), to a general professional level of proficiency (Level 3).

^bThe Navy discontinued its foreign language training requirement for Special Operations Forces (SOF) personnel in fiscal year 2021. This figure shows the number of foreign language capability requirements identified by the TSOCs in 2020.

^cThe Air Force suspended its foreign language training requirement in October 2022 while it revises the roles and responsibilities of its SOF personnel. This figure shows the number of foreign language capability requirements identified by the TSOCs in 2020.

SOCOM validates TSOC foreign language capability requirements.

According to guidance and officials within SOCOM’s foreign language program office, SOCOM’s validation process includes assessing capability requirements and reviewing submissions for compliance with applicable guidance.²⁰ SOCOM then sends the validated TSOC foreign language capability requirements to the SOF Service Component Commands.

SOF Service Component Commands apply constraints to determine the number of personnel that will have foreign language capabilities.

The SOF Service Component Commands review the validated TSOC foreign language capability requirements and determine the quantity of SOF personnel that are produced and maintained across different languages and proficiency levels. According to a SOCOM official, this determination process includes recruiting, training, and assigning new personnel into SOF units, among other considerations. The result is referred to as the language production mission, which represents the target for the quantity of SOF personnel that will be produced and maintained in specific foreign languages and proficiency levels, according to the official.²¹

²⁰USSOCOM Directive 350-17.

²¹The language production mission is also referred to as the “language, regional expertise, and culture capability production mission,” or simply the “production mission.” USSOCOM Directive 350-17.

SOCOM approves the SOF Service Component Command plans for personnel to receive language training. The language production missions produced by the SOF Service Component Commands are submitted to, and approved by, SOCOM.

SOF service members train and use foreign language skills with foreign partners. Once the language production missions are approved by SOCOM, according to a SOCOM official, the relevant SOF Service Component Commands have processes to implement those production missions. This includes language boards that meet to assign new foreign languages to SOF personnel. According to a SOCOM official, language boards consider factors such as language aptitude testing scores, service member experience in speaking a specific foreign language, service member preference, and SOF Service Component Command needs. SOF personnel then complete initial language training in their assigned language and use their language skills to communicate with foreign partners to meet deployment mission needs.

TSOCs Had Challenges with Determining Foreign Language Capability Requirements

Under SOCOM's process, each TSOC commander has the responsibility for planning and prioritizing the foreign language capabilities necessary to ensure that SOF forces deploy with the essential ability to understand and effectively communicate with native populations, local and government officials, and coalition partners when in theater.²² Specifically, SOCOM relies on the judgment, subject matter expertise, and experience of the TSOCs' planning staffs to translate military planning documents into a quantity of personnel in specific foreign languages and proficiency skill levels to meet ongoing and future military needs.

However, officials representing the five TSOCs we spoke with who are responsible for developing their respective TSOC's foreign language capability requirements were unable to explain or provide documentation of the mission analysis used to identify the requirements. For example:

- One TSOC official attempted to locate the mission analysis associated with the respective TSOC's 2020 foreign language capability requirements determination process and was unable to find

²²USSOCOM Directive 350-17.

any supporting information after reviewing available documentation and consulting with operations and planning officials.

- Officials with two TSOCs described the process as “more art than science.”
- Officials with another TSOC stated that they generate foreign language capability requirements because SOCOM requires it, but that they did not use a specific methodology, and they deferred to the SOF Service Component Commands to determine their respective foreign language needs.
- Another TSOC official discussed an entirely different and unrelated process in response to our questions about the foreign language capability requirements process outlined in SOCOM guidance.

Air Force Special Operations Command officials told us that the TSOCs assign someone to develop the foreign language capability requirements every two years, but it is not clear what analysis informs the quantity of personnel and foreign languages that are identified. According to these officials, given the lack of mission analysis from the TSOCs, the command performs the analysis to support their foreign language mission needs. These officials further told us that since there is a lack of analysis of mission plans by the TSOCs, opportunities to inform foreign language mission needs may not be fully realized.

In addition, MARSOC foreign language program officials told us the foreign language capability requirements developed by the TSOCs are not aligned with the foreign language capabilities that MARSOC personnel possess. For example, the 2020 submission by the TSOC responsible for the Middle East region had no foreign language capability requirements for MARSOC even though it routinely deploys SOF personnel to that region, and these personnel possess relevant foreign language capabilities, according to officials.

Although Joint Staff and SOCOM officials we met with stated that TSOC planners have faced challenges in implementing the guidance for determining foreign language capability requirements, neither the Joint Staff nor SOCOM have established a requirement to develop and administer training to TSOC planners to ensure the staff are able to reliably identify foreign language capability requirements. More specifically, SOCOM and Joint Staff officials told us that personnel who are assigned as planners in joint headquarters, such as a TSOC, are not provided with training on the foreign language capabilities requirements

determination process to include the methodological steps identified in Joint Staff guidance.

A SOCOM official told us that some of the methodological steps needed by the TSOCs to develop their foreign language capability requirements are outlined in Joint Staff and Army guidance.²³ The Joint Staff guidance sets forth certain methodological steps that can be used to inform foreign language capability requirements and the Army guidance acts as a starting point to determine the quantity of language capable forces needed to meet mission needs, according to the official.

Recognizing the difficulties that the TSOCs' planning staff have had in implementing DOD guidance, SOCOM has previously offered voluntary workshops to TSOC planners to identify their respective foreign language capability requirements, according to a SOCOM official. However, participation in these workshops has been limited. The official said that for the 2018 biennial process, officials from three of the seven TSOCs attended the workshops, but no TSOC officials participated in 2020 or 2023. For the 2018 workshops, the official said that SOCOM prepared briefing materials to educate the TSOC planners on the foreign language capability requirements process. The official told us that following these briefings, SOCOM organized additional sessions via video teleconference to train TSOC planners on how to develop foreign language capability requirements. According to the SOCOM official, in 2018 one TSOC went through the initial briefing, but not the follow-on sessions. The other two TSOC's sent personnel who were not responsible for determining foreign language capability requirements, so they stopped midway through the briefing and did not continue the workshops, according to the official.

A SOCOM official stated that training on the SOF foreign language capability determination process could be developed for TSOC planners by adding an additional module to the Joint Knowledge Online Platform.²⁴ Such training may include guidance that, according to SOCOM and Joint staff officials, can be used by TSOC planners to identify SOF foreign language capability requirements. By establishing a requirement to

²³Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff Instruction (CJCSI) 3126.01C, *Language, Regional Expertise, and Culture Capability Identification, Planning, and Sourcing* (Mar. 8, 2023); Department of the Army Pamphlet 11-8, *Army Foreign Language Program Handbook* (Feb. 22, 2022).

²⁴The Joint Knowledge Online Platform is a web-based program provided the by the Joint Staff to develop, deliver, track, report, and support online learning to enhance individual and staff proficiency in joint operations and improve operational readiness.

develop and administer training to the TSOC planners, SOCOM and the relevant SOF Service Component Commands would have greater assurance that the TSOCs' foreign language capability requirements are developed using a consistent methodological approach.

USASOC and MARSOC Do Not Assess the Relevancy of Assigned Foreign Languages during Deployments to Inform Training Needs

USASOC and MARSOC officials told us that they do not routinely assess if foreign languages assigned to SOF are relevant to the partner forces and local population they communicate with on deployments. Further, these SOF Service Component Commands do not consider the relevancy of the assigned foreign languages of SOF personnel to those spoken by the partner forces and the local population to inform decisions as to what languages will be identified for future training and assigned to SOF personnel.

Army SOF officials told us that an effort to assess the extent to which a SOF personnel's assigned language is relevant to the host nation languages spoken on deployments is feasible but would require accessing and consolidating information across different databases. This is not currently required (see fig. 6).

Figure 6: Information Sources to Assess the Relevancy of Assigned Foreign Languages to Deployments



Source: GAO analysis of Department of Defense information; Map Resources; GAO (design). | GAO-24-105849

Accessible text for Figure 6: Information Sources to Assess the Relevancy of Assigned Foreign Languages to Deployments

Assigned languages	Deployment locations	Partner force and local languages
Identify and monitor assigned languages of SOF with a foreign language training requirement.	Review locations where SOF with a foreign language training requirement have deployed.	Determine language(s) spoken by the partner force and local population where SOF with a foreign language training requirement deploy.

Source: GAO analysis of Department of Defense information; Map Resources; GAO (design). | GAO-24-105849

Assigned languages. Army, Marine Corps, and Air Force SOF officials told us that they identify and monitor the assigned languages of SOF personnel with a foreign language requirement.

Deployment locations. Army, Marine Corps, and Air Force SOF officials told us that the location(s) to which SOF deploy are tracked. Accordingly, each SOF Service Component Command has current and historical awareness of where SOF personnel have deployed.

Partner force and local languages. Prior to deployment, SOF conduct a pre-deployment site survey that includes an assessment of relevant foreign language capabilities that will be needed to meet mission needs. In addition, open-source data exists, such as the Central Intelligence Agency World Factbook, which provides information on the language(s) spoken in a foreign country.²⁵ SOF Service Component Commands may also document foreign language related issues in after action and lessons learned reports that may be stored in local databases or broader data systems.

Based on these types of data sources, an Army SOF foreign language subject matter expert performed an analysis to assess the relevance of assigned foreign languages to the countries Army SOF personnel deployed to in Europe for fiscal years 2018 through 2022. During this 5-year period, the official reviewed data for 198 deployments to 24 European countries and found the assigned foreign languages were of at least moderate relevance about 52 percent of the time, but were of low, very low, or no relevance about 48 percent of the time. In conducting the analysis, the official identified the foreign language spoken in each country as well as other foreign languages that may be spoken by the local population in determining how relevant the assigned languages were to the Army SOF personnel who participated in these deployments.²⁶

²⁵Central Intelligence Agency, The World Factbook, accessed May 9, 2023, <https://www.cia.gov/the-world-factbook/>.

²⁶The Army foreign language subject matter expert made relevancy determinations of “not relevant,” “very low relevancy,” “low relevancy,” and “moderate relevancy.” According to the expert, this determination was based on the percentage of the population in a given country that speaks a foreign language, how frequently that language is used by the local population, and how useful the assigned language of SOF is to communicate in each country.

Foreign Languages during Deployments

“Learning the language of our enemies instead of our allies, kind of makes it harder for us to use our language. One of my biggest complaints has been, why don’t we learn our allies’ languages?”

“In one Eastern European country, Russian is ‘unofficially’ the official language. The unit we worked with, they operated in Russian, so we used it every day, and we did not have a formal interpreter.”

“We are not just trainers when we deploy, we are also ambassadors, and even less senior non-commissioned officers will be in situations where they must interact with foreign officials in their native language and hold a high-level conversation.”

Source: Select comments from GAO group discussions with Army Special Operations Forces personnel. | GAO-24-105849

SOF personnel that we spoke with expressed a range of experiences related to the extent to which their assigned foreign language was relevant on recent deployments. Some indicated that their assigned foreign language had not been relevant while others found their foreign language skills more relevant while deployed (see sidebar). For example:

- An official from the Army’s 10th Special Forces Group that manages foreign language training said that although French is an assigned language for SOF personnel, it is not widely spoken in locations within Europe where SOF personnel are deployed, and there are limited opportunities to work with French forces. Further, the official said the current environment in Eastern Europe means that speaking Russian (another assigned language) has limited use.
- Army SOF personnel that have been assigned to speak Russian told us that, in some countries, speaking Russian is culturally offensive and limits their ability to use the language.
- Army SOF personnel that typically deploy to Central America and South America told us that they frequently use their Spanish language skills to interact with foreign partners to build rapport, perform briefings, and conduct training.

We asked Joint Staff, SOF Service Component Command, and SOCOM officials if assessing the relevancy of SOF personnel’s assigned foreign languages to deployments would be beneficial. Joint Staff and SOF Service Component Command officials were generally supportive of analyzing how assigned foreign languages were relevant and used when deployed to support the development of future training needs. For example:

- Army SOF foreign language program officials shared a variety of opinions. One official told us that assessing foreign language alignment to language(s) used in the host nation is relevant to inform training, operational considerations, and foreign language-related

decisions at present and for the future. Another official with Army 1st Special Forces Command said that analyzing how assigned foreign languages are relevant on deployments could be useful to inform future foreign language training requirements, but that aligning assigned languages to all deployments is not realistic.

- An Army SOF official also said that existing foreign language and deployment reports could inform such an effort, and that a new data tracking system could be a source from which to draw relevant information. Additionally, another foreign language program official said that analyzing the alignment of assigned languages with those spoken in countries where SOF personnel deploy could provide the ability to reassign assigned languages or be used to guide additional foreign language training to meet mission needs.
- A Marine Corps SOF foreign language program official told us that understanding how foreign languages aligned with deployment countries could help identify gaps where additional foreign language training would be beneficial, but it would have to align with an increased prioritization of foreign language skills.
- A Joint Staff official told us that considering the relationship between the relevancy of foreign language capabilities and deployments could inform training processes that are forward looking. Further, this type of analysis may inform decisions on which foreign languages should be trained and others that could be divested, according to the official.

A SOCOM official told us an effort to consider how the assigned foreign languages of SOF personnel are relevant to their deployments could inform recruiting efforts, for example by identifying specific languages that potential new recruits possess that address foreign language capability gaps. However, the official stated that it might require extensive resources to compile and analyze this information. As previously noted, an Army SOF foreign language subject matter expert performed an analysis to assess the relevance of assigned foreign languages to the countries Army SOF personnel deployed to in Europe. Using existing data sources, such as those located on a classified SOCOM network and another residing on a TSOC webpage, the official was able to develop an assessment of assigned foreign language relevancy to deployments for certain Army SOF personnel.

The SOCOM official also added that reviewing past deployment history may not necessarily support future foreign language training needs as future deployment needs may differ from past deployments. In addition, USASOC officials explained that planning for certain military operations

requires the need for capabilities in specific foreign languages, even if those operations are based on contingencies that may not occur.

DOD Instruction 3305.06 directs SOCOM to monitor the assignment of language-qualified SOF and promote utilization in assignments that capitalize on and enhance individual language and regional expertise.²⁷ Further, a 2023 study commissioned by the Army's 1st Special Forces Command recommended that as part of a future study, data on how assigned languages are used on deployments should be collected to better understand how soldiers and units manage and determine the efficacy of foreign language training.²⁸

However, SOCOM, USASOC, and MARSOC are not assessing the relevance of assigned foreign languages because they are not periodically monitoring the extent to which foreign languages assigned to SOF service members are relevant for the countries to which SOF deploy. As a result, they are unable to use these insights to adjust foreign language training plans to meet current and future mission needs.

By periodically monitoring the extent to which SOF personnel are assigned foreign languages that are relevant in the countries to which they deploy, the SOF Service Component Commands with a foreign language training requirement would have more complete information that can be used to assess foreign language training plans. Moreover, this type of information can support the identification of emerging or shifting language needs and bolster the ability of SOF to effectively communicate and build relationships with foreign partners as part of a broader strategic effort to combat the influence of China and Russia.

²⁷DOD Instruction 3305.06. As this report was in its final processing, DOD issued a new instruction on Special Operations Forces foreign language policy that superseded DOD Instruction 3305.06. However, this report discusses DOD Instruction 3305.06, as that instruction was in effect at the time of our audit work. See Department of Defense Instruction 3902.02, *Special Operations Forces Foreign Language, Regional Expertise, and Culture Policy* (Aug. 17, 2023).

²⁸Global Cognition, *Foreign Language Gains of ARSOF Soldiers in the LET/OLE Program* (Yellow Springs, Ohio: 2023).

USASOC and MARSOC Have Foreign Language Standards, but Do Not Monitor Training Completion

USASOC and MARSOC have efforts underway to improve the foreign language skills of SOF personnel. However, most Army and Marine Corps SOF units with a foreign language training requirement have not achieved their respective Component Command's minimum proficiency standard. In addition, Army and Marine Corps SOF personnel are not meeting directed sustainment and enhancement training standards, primarily due to competing demands and priorities. Notwithstanding these challenges, USASOC and MARSOC do not monitor the status of required foreign language training.

USASOC and MARSOC Have Ongoing Efforts to Improve the Foreign Language Skills of SOF Personnel

USASOC and MARSOC seek to improve the foreign language skills of SOF personnel through use of foreign language proficiency and training standards, training programs, and training incentives.

Issue foreign language proficiency and training standards. SOCOM, USASOC, and MARSOC have issued guidance designed to manage foreign language training for SOF personnel throughout their careers.²⁹ Specifically, these guidance documents provide minimum proficiency and training hour standards for each service member. They also require that SOF personnel demonstrate that minimum proficiency is achieved through passing an annual foreign language assessment.

In addition, the Army's 1st Special Forces Command commissioned two studies that were completed in 2022 and 2023 respectively. One study identified linkages to a minimum number of foreign language sustainment and enhancement training hours to be completed, categorized by the type of learner to achieve proficiency goals. Another study linked foreign language immersion experiences to gains in proficiency.

Provide foreign language training resources. SOCOM, USASOC, and MARSOC support foreign language proficiency by providing in-person

²⁹See, for example, USSOCOM Directive 350-17; AR 11-6; and MARFORSOCO 1550.1A.

classroom training, online tutoring and self-study applications, and overseas foreign language immersion experiences. According to USASOC and MARSOC officials, these resources are designed to provide SOF personnel with the flexibility to balance foreign language sustainment and enhancement training with other critical skills or competing demands on their time.

Implement language training incentives. DOD, SOCOM, USASOC, and MARSOC offer various incentives to encourage sustaining and enhancing foreign language proficiency. DOD provides foreign language proficiency bonus pay through USASOC and MARSOC to incentivize service members in maintaining their respective military service's minimum level of foreign language proficiency and where possible, enhance foreign language proficiency skills. Monthly proficiency bonus pay ranges from \$100 to \$500 for one language and up to \$1,000 for multiple languages, depending on achieved level of foreign language proficiency. Other incentives include advanced training opportunities (such as overseas language immersion experiences), assignments to work with senior foreign military and civilian partners, and additional consideration given during the promotion process for selected military specialties among some Army SOF units.

Most Army and Marine Corps SOF Units Have Not Achieved Minimum Foreign Language Proficiency Skill Levels

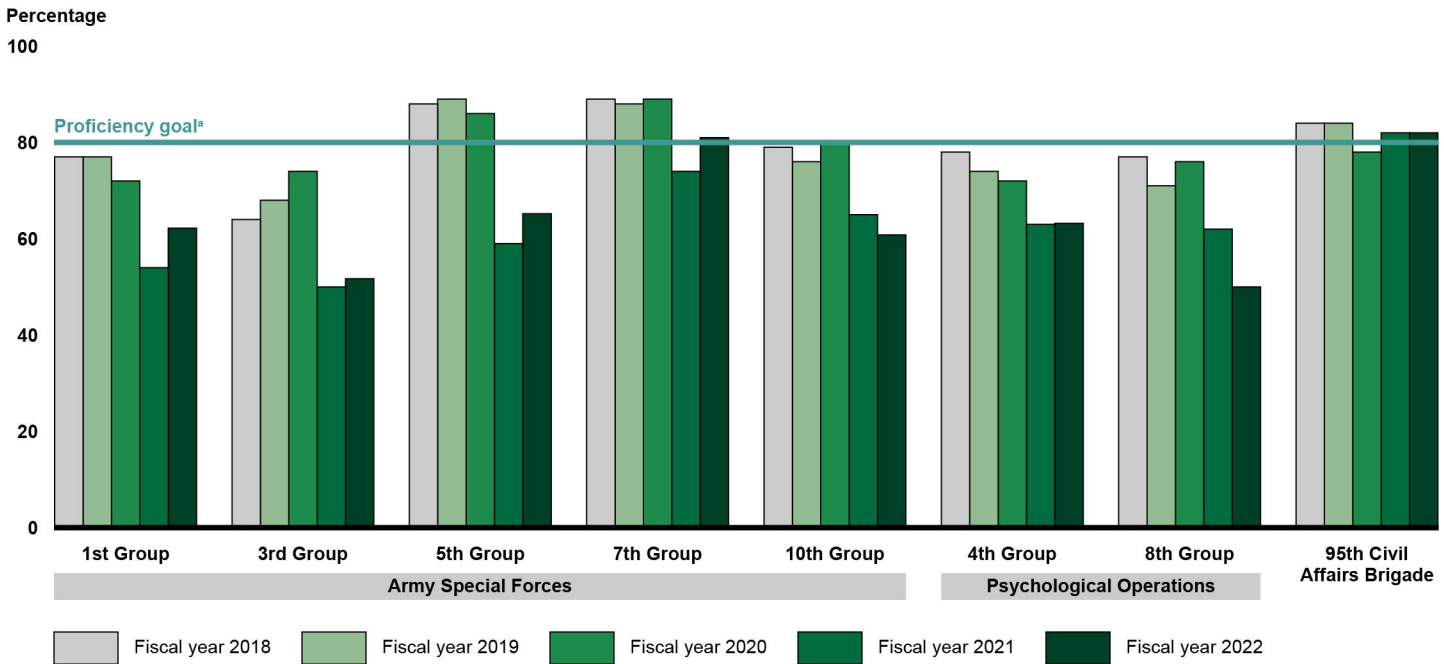
SOCOM, USASOC, and MARSOC guidance state that 80 percent of SOF personnel within a unit or formation shall achieve and sustain at least their respective military service's minimum level of foreign language proficiency requirements. Specifically in the areas of speaking and listening, Army SOF personnel are required to sustain an elementary level of foreign language proficiency, and Marine Corps SOF personnel are required to sustain a survival level of foreign language proficiency (see fig. 2 above).³⁰

³⁰USSOCOM Directive 350-17; MARFORSOCO 1550.1A; Department of the Army Headquarters 1st Special Forces Command (Airborne) [DA HQ 1st SFC(A)] Regulation 350-1, *First Special Forces Command Active and Army National Guard Component Training* (May 24, 2022).

However, most Army and Marine Corps SOF units have not achieved the minimum proficiency goals, according to our analysis.

Army. We found that no more than three of the eight active-duty Army SOF formations, under the control of 1st Special Forces Command, had 80 percent of personnel achieve the minimum proficiency goal for their assigned foreign languages in a given year during fiscal years 2018 through 2022 (see fig. 7).

Figure 7: Foreign Language Proficiency Levels by Active-Duty Army Special Operations Forces (SOF) Units Compared with Goal, End of Each Fiscal Year from 2018 through 2022



Source: GAO analysis of the Army's 1st Special Forces Command data. | GAO-24-105849

Accessible data for Figure 7: Foreign Language Proficiency Levels by Active-Duty Army Special Operations Forces (SOF) Units Compared with Goal, End of Each Fiscal Year from 2018 through 2022 (Proficiency goal^a 80)

	Fiscal Year 2018	Fiscal Year 2019	Fiscal Year 2020	Fiscal Year 2021	Fiscal Year 2022
Army Special Forces:					
1 st Group	77	77	72	54	62.2
Army Special Forces:					
3 rd Group	64	68	74	50	51.7

	Fiscal Year 2018	Fiscal Year 2019	Fiscal Year 2020	Fiscal Year 2021	Fiscal Year 2022
Army Special Forces: 5 th Group	88	89	86	59	65.2
Army Special Forces: 7 th Group	89	88	89	74	81
Army Special Forces: 10 th Group	79	76	80	65	60.8
Psychological Operations: 4 th Group	78	74	72	63	63.2
Psychological Operations: 8 th Group	77	71	76	62	50
95 th Civil Affairs Brigade	84	84	78	82	82

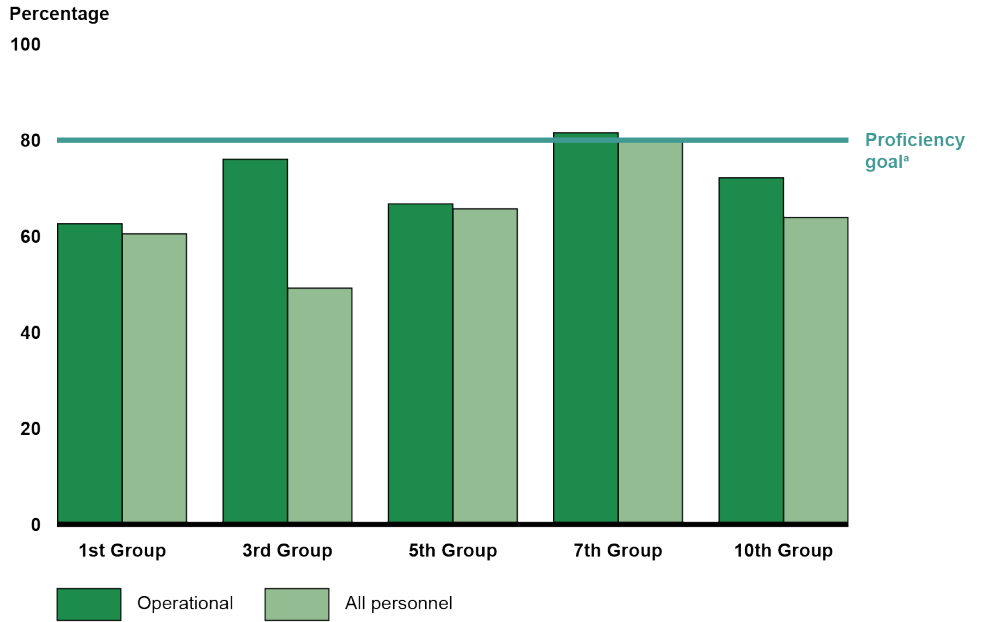
Source: GAO analysis of the Army's 1st Special Forces Command data. | GAO-24-105849

^aU.S. Army Special Operations Command guidance states that 80 percent of SOF personnel within a unit or formation shall achieve and sustain a minimum of an elementary level of foreign language proficiency.

While foreign language proficiency goals were not being met by most active-duty SOF formations during fiscal years 2018 through 2022, foreign language proficiency was generally higher among SOF personnel who are likely to deploy.³¹ For example, as of February 2023, in analyzing data on Army SOF operational forces, we found that foreign language proficiency skill levels were higher among active-duty Special Forces Group operational personnel relative to all personnel in each group who are required to sustain foreign language proficiency (see fig. 8).

³¹According to an Army SOF official, “forces likely to deploy” or “operational forces,” are soldiers who are assigned to operational detachments. Operational detachments are generally composed of teams of 12 soldiers including a captain, a warrant officer, and non-commissioned officers. Excluded from these forces are officers and enlisted personnel with a requirement to sustain foreign language proficiency, but who are assigned to headquarters organizations or other positions that are not likely to deploy. In addition, USASOC does not separately track and report data for “forces likely to deploy” for other Army SOF units that are assigned a foreign language, including Civil Affairs and Psychological Operations, according to Army SOF officials.

Figure 8: Foreign Language Proficiency Skills for Active-Duty Army Special Forces Operational Personnel Expected to Deploy Compared with All Personnel by Group, as of February 2023



Source: GAO analysis of the Army's 1st Special Forces Command data. | GAO-24-105849

Accessible data for Figure 8: Foreign Language Proficiency Skills for Active-Duty Army Special Forces Operational Personnel Expected to Deploy Compared with All Personnel by Group, as of February 2023

Percentage	Operational	All personnel	Proficiency goal ^a
1 st Group	62.59	60.5	80
3 rd Group	76.05	49.2	80
5 th Group	66.75	65.7	80
7 th Group	81.52	79.8	80
10 th Group	72.16	63.9	80

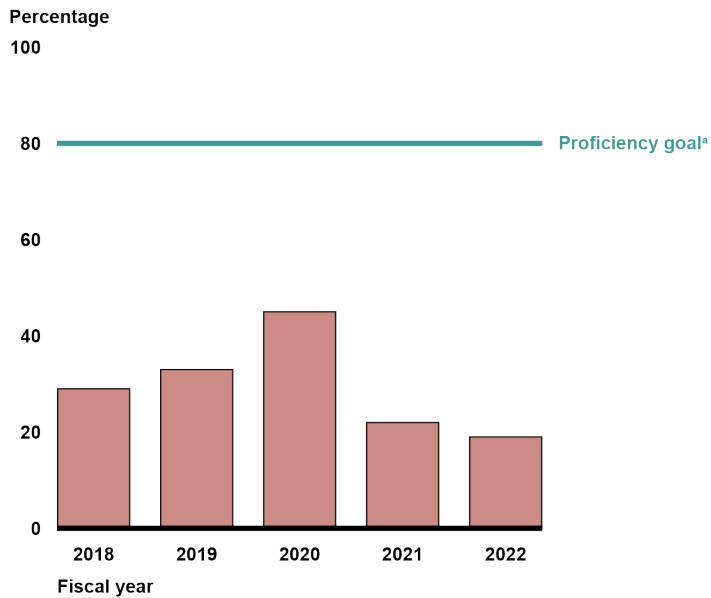
Source: GAO analysis of the Army's 1st Special Forces Command data. | GAO-24-105849

Note: According to an Army SOF official, “forces likely to deploy” or “operational forces” are soldiers who are assigned to operational detachments. Operational detachments are generally composed of teams of 12 soldiers, which include a captain, a warrant officer, and non-commissioned officers. Excluded from these forces are officers and enlisted personnel with a requirement to sustain foreign language proficiency, but who are assigned to headquarters organizations or other positions that are not likely to deploy. The U.S. Army Special Operations Command does not separately track and report data for “forces likely to deploy” for other Army SOF units that are assigned a foreign language, including Civil Affairs and Psychological Operations, according to an Army SOF official.

^aU.S. Army Special Operations Command guidance states that 80 percent of Special Operations Forces (SOF) personnel within a unit or formation should achieve and sustain a minimum of an elementary level of foreign language proficiency.

Marine Corps. No more than 45 percent of Marine Corps SOF personnel with a requirement to sustain proficiency in their assigned foreign language achieved the minimum level of proficiency in any year during fiscal years 2018 through 2022, according to our analysis of MARSOC data (see fig. 9).³² Generally, enlisted Marine Corps Critical Skills Operators are SOF personnel who are assigned a foreign language and are required to sustain it.³³

Figure 9: Approximate Percentage of Marine Corps Enlisted Special Operations Forces (SOF) Personnel with a Foreign Language Training Requirement Who Sustained the Minimum Level of Proficiency, Fiscal Years 2018 through 2022



Source: GAO analysis of Marine Forces Special Operations Command data. | GAO-24-105849

³²MARSOC provided us with data on the number of SOF personnel who have taken a foreign language proficiency assessment and achieved foreign language proficiency at a survival skill level or higher during fiscal years 2018 through 2022. According to SOCOM, foreign language proficiency levels identified in a foreign language proficiency assessment for speaking and listening range from 0 (no proficiency) to 3 (professional level). The Marine Corps' minimum required foreign language proficiency is level 1 (basic survival communication skills in speaking and listening).

³³According to a MARSOC official, from fiscal years 2018 through 2022 approximately 80 to 90 percent of enlisted SOF Critical Skills Operators were required to sustain proficiency in an assigned foreign language. In addition, beginning in fiscal year 2023, approximately one-third of incoming Critical Skills Officers were not assigned a foreign language and therefore are not subject to a foreign language training requirement.

Accessible data for Figure 9: Approximate Percentage of Marine Corps Enlisted Special Operations Forces (SOF) Personnel with a Foreign Language Training Requirement Who Sustained the Minimum Level of Proficiency, Fiscal Years 2018 through 2022

Fiscal year	Percentage	Proficiency goal ^a
2018	29	80
2019	33	80
2020	45	80
2021	22	80
2022	19	80

Source: GAO analysis of the Marine Forces Special Operations Command data. | GAO-24-105849

Note: We determined an approximate number of Marine Corps SOF personnel that were required to sustain the minimum level of foreign language proficiency. According to a MARSOC official, from fiscal years 2018 through 2022, approximately 80 to 90 percent of enlisted SOF Critical Skills Operators were required to sustain proficiency in an assigned foreign language. Based on this assertion, we determined a range of about 605 to 666 Critical Skills Operators during this 5-year period that were required to sustain proficiency in a foreign language. Marine Corps SOF Component Command data showed that over this same timeframe, 112 to 284 Marine Corps SOF Critical Skills Operators achieved the Marine Corps' minimum foreign language proficiency standard for SOF personnel. The percentages in the figure reflect the data and the assumptions we used.

^aMarine Forces Special Operations Command (MARSOC) guidance identifies a goal that 80 percent of SOF personnel within a unit or formation will achieve and sustain a minimum of an elementary level of foreign language proficiency.

SOCOM, USASOC, and MARSOC guidance state that 80 percent of SOF personnel within a unit or formation are to achieve and sustain at least their respective service's minimum level of foreign language proficiency requirements. However, these commands have not established procedures that specify the consequences of not achieving a SOF Service Component Command's minimum foreign language proficiency standard.

Army and Marine Corps SOF personnel in some formations told us that not achieving the minimum level of foreign language proficiency has limited consequences on service members. In other cases, we found the consequences were inconsistent across SOF formations. For example:

SOF Personnel Perspectives on Sustaining Foreign Language Skills

"Leadership monitors foreign language proficiency. Previously there were no consequences if you failed a foreign language proficiency exam, but now you can be denied other training opportunities if you don't meet the proficiency requirement."

"Sustaining foreign language skills is not what gets you promoted. The skill sets trained at Joint Combined Exchange Training events are what leadership focuses on."

"No one has been denied the ability to deploy due to not being proficient in their assigned foreign language."

Source: Select GAO interviews with Army and Marine Corps Special Operations Forces (SOF) personnel. | GAO-24-105849

- Training officials at one Army SOF formation said that while all SOF personnel are required to take an annual foreign language proficiency assessment prior to a deployment, they were not aware of any consequences, such as being denied the ability to deploy, if a service member did not pass the assessment.
- SOF service members may no longer be eligible to receive or participate in SOCOM and SOF Service Component Command provided incentives if they do not maintain foreign language proficiency. This includes foreign language proficiency bonus pay. However, some SOF personnel we spoke with stated that they are required to sustain proficiency in many other critical skills to be prepared for upcoming deployments. Furthermore, they said that the consequence of losing bonus pay for elementary or survival proficiency did not outweigh the necessary time spent in training or preparation to take an annual foreign language proficiency exam that could be used to focus on training other mission critical skills.
- Army SOF personnel in one group discussion session for another formation stated that soldiers remained eligible for deployment even with a lack of foreign language capabilities or proficiency in their assigned language.
- Marine Corps SOF personnel said that there were no ramifications, such as delayed deployment, for not meeting the requirement to sustain the proficiency skill level of their assigned foreign language.
- Marine Corps SOF personnel in a group discussion stated that they did not believe that sustaining foreign language proficiency was weighed on equal footing with other critical skills when service members were being considered for promotion. In contrast, Army SOF personnel from another group told us that their command places high value on foreign language proficiency, and SOF service members who do not sustain the minimum required level of proficiency are seen as a weak link on their deployment team. In addition, Army SOF service members in this group discussion said foreign language proficiency is a factor for promotion considerations.

By establishing and enforcing consistent procedures that specify the consequences to SOF personnel when minimum foreign language proficiency standards are not being met, SOF formations and their respective units would be more likely to achieve their 80 percent foreign language proficiency goal.

Army and Marine Corps SOF Personnel Are Not Meeting Directed Training Goals

Army and Marine Corps SOF personnel generally are not meeting SOCOM and applicable SOF Service Component Command directed annual training goals, according to our analysis of Army and Marine Corps training data. SOCOM guidance directs SOF personnel to participate in formal interactive foreign language sustainment and enhancement training courses for at least 80 hours annually for some languages, such as Spanish and French, and for at least 120 hours annually on more challenging languages to learn such as Russian and Chinese.³⁴ In addition, USASOC guidance reiterates this minimum 80-hour training standard, and MARSOC guidance reiterates the 80-hour and 120-hour training standards.³⁵

However, less than half of Army and Marine Corps SOF personnel recorded completing any of the foreign language sustainment and enhancement training, according to our analysis. Additionally, SOF personnel who did complete some training were on average not meeting the minimum standard of 80 hours of annual training. More specifically:

Army. Less than half of Army SOF personnel who have a foreign language training requirement recorded completing any foreign language sustainment and enhancement training each year from fiscal years 2018 through 2022. We found between 2,200 and 3,200 of more than 7,000 Army SOF personnel per year recorded completing sustainment and enhancement training. Of those personnel who completed training, between fiscal years 2018 and 2022, the average number of training hours per SOF service member ranged from a high of 56 in 2019 to a low of 35 in 2021.

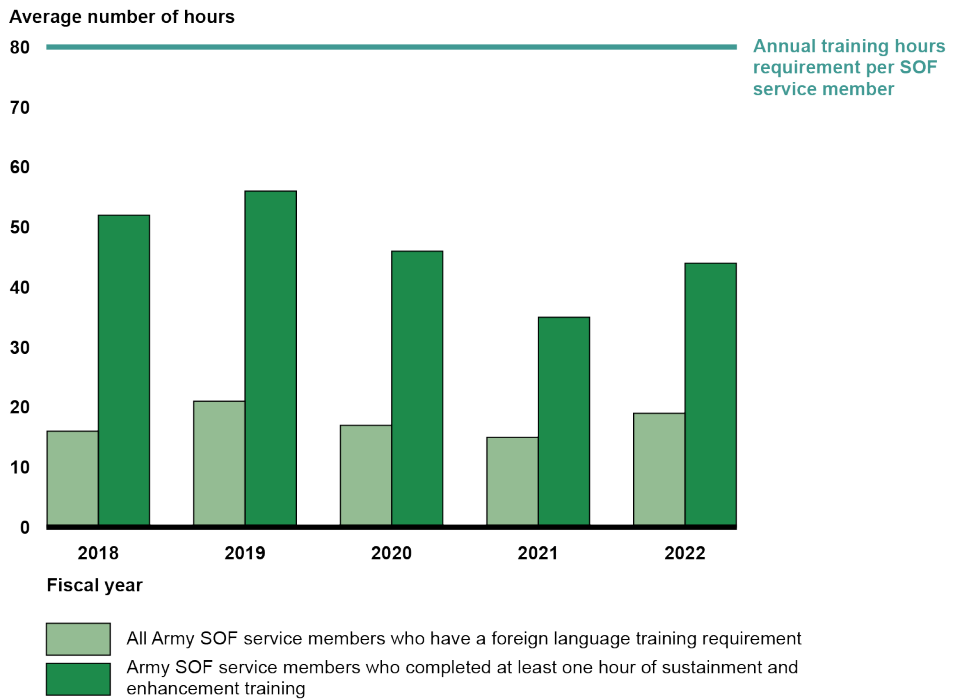
Additionally, when accounting for all Army SOF personnel with a foreign language requirement, the average number of completed training hours

³⁴DOD relies on language categories to group languages according to the difficulty for a native speaker of English to learn from least difficult (Category 1) to most difficult (Category 4). Category 1 and 2 languages include French, Spanish, Portuguese, and German. Category 3 and 4 languages include Russian, Tagalog, Arabic, and Chinese. SOCOM has directed SOF personnel to participate in formal interactive sustainment and enhancement training courses for at least 80 hours annually for category 1 and 2 languages and for at least 120 hours annually for category 3 and 4 languages. USSOCOM Directive 350-17.

³⁵AR 11-6 and MARFORSOCO 1550.1A.

decreased to between 15 hours and 21 hours per year from fiscal years 2018 through 2022. This includes the approximately 4,000 to 5,000 Army SOF personnel who were required to sustain proficiency in their assigned foreign language, but who recorded no hours of sustainment and enhancement training (see fig. 10).

Figure 10: Average Number of Completed Army Special Operations Forces (SOF) Foreign Language Sustainment and Enhancement Training Hours per Service Member, Fiscal Years 2018–2022



Source: GAO analysis of the Army's 1st Special Forces Command data. | GAO-24-105849

Accessible data for Figure 10: Average Number of Completed Army Special Operations Forces (SOF) Foreign Language Sustainment and Enhancement Training Hours per Service Member, Fiscal Years 2018–2022

Fiscal Year	All Army SOF service members who have a foreign language training requirement	Army SOF service members who completed at least one hour of sustainment and enhancement training	Annual training hours requirement per SOF service member
2018	16	52	80
2019	21	56	80
2020	17	46	80
2021	15	35	80
2022	19	44	80

Source: GAO analysis of the Army's 1st Special Forces Command data. | GAO-24-105849

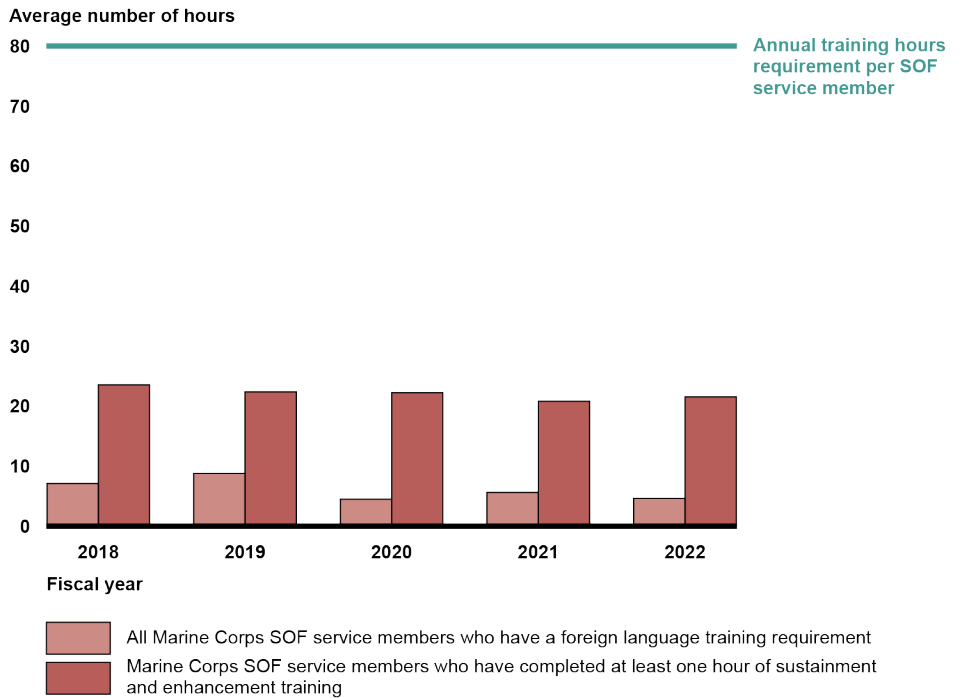
Note: This figure shows the difference between the average number of foreign language sustainment and enhancement training hours among Army SOF service members who recorded some amount of training versus the average number of foreign language sustainment and enhancement training hours across all Army SOF service members including those who have recorded no hours of training. As shown in the figure, on average Army SOF service members are not meeting the minimum standard of 80 hours of completed sustainment and enhancement foreign language training.

Marine Corps. Less than half of Marine Corps SOF personnel who have a foreign language training requirement recorded completing any foreign language sustainment and enhancement training each year during fiscal years 2018 through 2022.³⁶ We found that between 128 and 262 of more than 600 Marine Corps SOF personnel recorded completing sustainment and enhancement training. Of those who completed some sustainment and enhancement training, the average Marine Corps SOF service member recorded approximately 21 to 24 hours per year.

Additionally, when accounting for all Marine Corps SOF personnel with a foreign language requirement, the average number of training hours completed by Marine Corps SOF personnel decreased to between 4 and 9 hours per year during fiscal years 2018 and 2022. This includes all Marine Corps SOF personnel required to complete foreign language sustainment and enhancement, including those who did not record any hours of completed sustainment and enhancement training (see fig. 11).

³⁶Marine Forces Special Operations Command Order 1550.1A states that SOF personnel with language proficiency requirements shall receive at least 80 or 120 hours of training annually, depending on their language category.

Figure 11: Average Number of Completed Marine Corps Special Operations Forces (SOF) Foreign Language Sustainment and Enhancement Training Hours per Service Member, Fiscal Years 2018–2022



Source: GAO analysis of Marine Forces Special Operations Command data. | GAO-24-105849

Accessible data for Figure 11: Average Number of Completed Marine Corps Special Operations Forces (SOF) Foreign Language Sustainment and Enhancement Training Hours per Service Member, Fiscal Years 2018–2022

Fiscal year	All Marine Corps SOF service members who have a foreign language training requirement	Marine Corps SOF service members who have completed at least one hour of sustainment and enhancement training	Annual training hours requirement per SOF service member
2018	7.13	23.54	80
2019	8.81	22.38	80
2020	4.5	22.24	80
2021	5.63	20.82	80
2022	4.63	21.55	80

Source: GAO analysis of Marine Forces Special Operations Command data. | GAO-24-105849

Note: This figure shows the difference between the average number of foreign language sustainment and enhancement training hours among Marine Corps SOF service members who recorded some amount of training versus the average number of foreign language sustainment and enhancement training hours across all Marine Corps SOF service members including those who have recorded no hours of training. As shown in the figure, on average Marine Corps SOF service members are not meeting the minimum standard of 80 hours of completed sustainment and enhancement foreign language training.

SOF Personnel Perspectives on Priority of Completing Foreign Language Training

“Foreign language sustainment training is given a lower priority compared to training other critical skills.”

“The one resource that is not adequate is time. Keeping current on other critical skills and tasks to prepare for the next mission encroaches upon foreign language sustainment training time.”

“Often we do not know where we are deploying to until 3 or 4 months before the deployment. For example, if we knew well in advance that we were going to Indonesia, I would prioritize having at least a basic understanding of Indonesian.”

“Leadership provides sufficient training time, and being valued on a team is a motivator for improving foreign language skills.”

Source: Select GAO interviews with Army and Marine Corps Special Operations Forces (SOF) personnel. | GAO-24-105849

In our group discussion sessions with Army and Marine Corps SOF officers and senior and junior non-commissioned officers, SOF personnel told us that finding time to participate in foreign language sustainment and enhancement training can be challenging given all the critical skills training that SOF are required to complete. Some SOF personnel in these discussion sessions also explained that foreign language training is not always given the same priority as other critical skills training.

Officials from the Army’s 1st Special Forces Command and MARSOC said that while it is the unit commander’s responsibility, in coordination with a command language program manager or a unit language coordinator, to ensure that a service member’s required training hours are met, unit commanders oversee completion of training for a wide array of SOF critical skills. They said that a unit commander often prioritizes training based on what a SOF team may do on the next deployment. If foreign language skills are not seen as a high priority, a unit commander may not put much emphasis on foreign language training.

An official with the Army’s 10th Special Forces Group also said that if unit commanders do not make foreign language sustainment and enhancement training a priority, SOF personnel are less likely to participate. For example, the 10th Special Forces Group official said that one battalion was sending less than 50 percent of their SOF personnel for scheduled foreign language sustainment and enhancement training in fall 2022. SOF personnel from the 95th Civil Affairs Brigade and MARSOC said that the likelihood personnel complete required foreign language sustainment and enhancement training is based on the priorities of the group or unit commander. If foreign language training is perceived as a lower priority, SOF personnel said that they are less likely to engage in that training.

USASOC and MARSOC Do Not Monitor the Status of Required Foreign Language Training

USASOC and MARSOC have identified training as important to achieving their objective of developing and sustaining foreign language proficiency to communicate with foreign partners. However, USASOC and MARSOC do not monitor whether their respective SOF service members complete required sustainment and enhancement foreign language training. Further, these Service Component Commands do not ensure that SOF unit commanders monitor and report this information.

Officials with the Army's 1st Special Forces Command and MARSOC told us that unit commanders generally are not expected to report SOF personnel's completion of sustainment and enhancement training hours to higher levels of leadership. Furthermore, we found that unit commanders were not consistently viewing completion of SOF personnel's sustainment and enhancement training hours as a priority, and thus were unable to assess any training gaps.

Some SOF officials we met with stated that the number of training hours needed to achieve SOCOM and SOF service-specific proficiency goals was unique to the individual, notwithstanding the number of training hours set forth as the standard by SOCOM and required by USASOC and MARSOC guidance. These officials also stated that the focus on monitoring and reporting of SOF service members' foreign language proficiency skill levels and their required annual testing date, rather than the number of training hours service members complete is due, in part, to differences among service members in the number of training hours it takes to sustain foreign language proficiency.

However, the results of a SOF-sponsored study underscore the importance of the relationship between training hours and foreign language proficiency. Specifically, a study sponsored by the Army's 1st Special Forces Command determined that the number of training hours completed was a highly significant factor in foreign language proficiency gains observed.³⁷ Depending on how a service member performed on prior foreign language proficiency examinations, the study found that SOF personnel who had achieved an elementary level of proficiency need to participate in between 35 and 180 hours of foreign language sustainment

³⁷Global Cognition, *Foreign Language Gains of Soldiers in the ARSOF LREC Program: Analysis of 1st SFC Units* (2022).

and enhancement training annually to sustain this level of foreign language proficiency.³⁸ The study also found that SOF personnel who had achieved a survival level of proficiency on two prior foreign language assessments, on average needed to complete a minimum of 270 hours of foreign language sustainment and enhancement training to improve their foreign language proficiency to the elementary level.

Army foreign language training guidance requires group and unit-level commanders to ensure that SOF personnel with a requirement to sustain proficiency in an assigned foreign language complete training and annual retesting requirements.³⁹ Marine Corps foreign language training guidance also states that commanders will ensure that Marine Corps SOF personnel with a requirement to sustain proficiency in a foreign language will balance required skills by maintaining language capabilities as a readiness requirement. This includes Marine Corps SOF personnel receiving at least 80 or 120 hours of language training annually.⁴⁰

Army and Marine Corps SOF officials told us that unit commanders respond to areas of interest to which Service Component Command leadership hold them accountable. For example, command leadership across Army SOF formations and MARSOC meet regularly with unit commanders and receive updates on units' abilities to perform certain missions and tasks, according to Army and Marine Corps SOF officials. In addition, a MARSOC official said that command leadership will receive briefings on some aspects of individual SOF critical skills training and readiness that can affect a service member's ability to deploy, but meeting foreign language training standards does not fall into this category.

In contrast, unit commanders may not respond to areas that senior command leadership do not hold them accountable. Although USASOC

³⁸The 1st Special Forces Group's study identified the number of hours of sustainment and enhancement training that would be required of a SOF service member to sustain or enhance foreign language proficiency levels based on whether a service member is a "newer tester," "stable performer," "rising performer," or a "falling performer." A "newer tester" is defined as someone who has only taken two foreign language proficiency examinations. A "stable performer" is defined as someone whose foreign language proficiency levels have remained stable. A "rising performer" is defined as someone whose foreign language proficiency levels have improved. A "declining performer" is defined as someone whose foreign language proficiency levels have declined.

³⁹AR 11-6.

⁴⁰MARFORSOCO 1550.1A.

and MARSOC have identified training as important, completion of this training has lagged because unit commanders are not held accountable for it. For example, Army and Marine Corps SOF officials said that senior leadership across Army SOF formations and MARSOC generally do not request updates on the completion of required foreign language training in their regular briefings with unit commanders. Further, these Service Component Commands do not ensure that unit commanders monitor and report information on the extent to which SOF personnel are completing annual sustainment and training hours, including instances where no training hours have been completed. Consequently, unit commanders have not made monitoring the completion of foreign language sustainment and enhancement training a priority.

By holding unit commanders accountable for training completion and ensuring they monitor and report quality information on the extent to which SOF personnel are completing required foreign language sustainment and enhancement training hours to component command officials, the relevant SOF Service Component Commands with a foreign language training requirement would have greater assurance that SOF personnel are sustaining required foreign language proficiency levels. As a result, SOF units will be better positioned to achieve the Service Component Commands' objective of developing and sustaining foreign language proficiency to communicate with foreign partners.

Conclusions

SOF play an integral part of U.S. military activities carried out below the level of armed conflict. SOF personnel's ability to effectively communicate with foreign partners is vital to building relationships and to fostering communication between SOF personnel and the military and civilian partners they work with in a host country.

SOCOM has a recurring process intended to enable it to forecast foreign language capability requirements globally. However, the TSOC planners responsible for developing requirements have received little training on the methodology they should use to identify these requirements. This raises the risk that SOF personnel will not receive the language training they need to effectively partner with personnel overseas, limiting their ability to successfully complete their assigned missions. By developing and administering training to the TSOC planners, SOCOM and the relevant SOF Service Component Commands would have greater

assurance they have identified foreign language capability requirements using a consistent methodological approach.

The relevant SOF Service Component Commands with a foreign language training requirement have not periodically assessed information regarding the relevancy of assigned foreign languages that SOF personnel possess to the locations they have deployed. Periodically monitoring and assessing the extent to which SOF personnel's assigned foreign languages are relevant to the countries to which they deploy can inform foreign language training plans to meet future mission needs. More specifically, this type of information can support the identification of emerging or shifting language needs and bolster the ability of SOF to effectively communicate and build relationships with foreign partners as part of a broader strategic effort to combat the influence of China and Russia.

USASOC and MARSOC have issued language training standards, provided foreign language training resources, and implemented foreign language training incentives to improve the foreign language skills of SOF personnel. However, Army and Marine Corps SOF personnel with a foreign language training requirement are often not meeting the SOCOM and applicable SOF Service Component Command-directed foreign language proficiency goals. This is due in part to a lack of consistent procedures that specify the consequences when SOF personnel do not achieve the minimum foreign language proficiency standard. Moreover, these personnel have fallen far short in completing the number of required training hours to sustain and enhance foreign language skills on an annual basis. By ensuring that unit commanders monitor and report the extent to which SOF personnel are completing required foreign language sustainment and enhancement training hours to command officials, the Service Component Commands could clearly communicate to unit commanders and SOF personnel that completing sustainment and enhancement training is a priority. Command leadership would also have greater assurance that SOF personnel are achieving foreign language proficiency goals.

Recommendations for Executive Action

The Secretary of Defense should ensure that the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, in coordination with SOCOM, develops and administers training for TSOC planners on the methodology they should use to

determine their foreign language capability requirements. (Recommendation 1)

The Secretary of Defense should ensure that the Commanders of the relevant SOF Service Component Commands with a foreign language training requirement, in coordination with SOCOM, 1) periodically monitor the extent to which foreign languages assigned to SOF service members are relevant in the countries to which SOF deploy and 2) use this information to assess foreign language training plans to ensure they meet current and future mission needs. (Recommendation 2)

The Secretary of Defense should ensure that the Commanders of the relevant SOF Service Component Commands with a foreign language training requirement establish and enforce consistent procedures that specify the consequences for SOF personnel that do not meet minimum foreign language proficiency standards. (Recommendation 3)

The Secretary of Defense should ensure that the Commanders of the relevant SOF Service Component Commands with a foreign language training requirement hold unit commanders accountable for monitoring and reporting quality information about the extent to which SOF personnel are completing required annual sustainment and enhancement training hours, including instances where a service member completes no hours of sustainment and enhancement training. (Recommendation 4)

Agency Comments and Our Evaluation

We provided a draft of this report to DOD for comment. In its written comments, reproduced in appendix II, DOD concurred with all four of our recommendations.

We are sending copies of this report to the appropriate congressional committees; the Secretaries of Defense, Army, Navy, and Air Force; the Chairman of the Joint Chief of Staff; the Commandant of the Marine Corps; the Assistant Secretary of Defense for Special Operations and Low-intensity Conflict; the Commander of 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>.

If you or your staff have questions about this report, please contact me at (202) 512-5431 or RussellC@gao.gov. Points of contact for our Offices of Congressional Relations and Public Affairs may be found on the last page

Letter

of this report. GAO staff who made key contributions to this report are listed in appendix III.

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Cary Russell". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style.

Cary Russell
Director, Defense Capabilities and Management

Appendix I: Objectives, Scope, and Methodology

Objectives

This report evaluates the extent to which (1) U.S. Special Operations Command (SOCOM) has determined Special Operations Forces (SOF) foreign language capability requirements and associated training needs; and (2) the relevant SOF Service Component Commands with a foreign language training requirement have established standards and monitored training efforts to sustain and enhance SOF foreign language skills.

Scope and Methodology

We focused on active-duty SOF because these forces make up the majority of SOF personnel and deploy to countries where they work with and train partner forces. Specifically, we focused on active-duty forces across the U.S. Army Special Operations Command (USASOC) and the Marine Forces Special Operations Command (MARSOC) that provide foreign language training to select SOF personnel who are required to sustain proficiency in a foreign language.¹ We excluded from our analyses SOF personnel from the Naval Special Warfare Command and the Air Force Special Operations Command because they discontinued their SOF foreign language proficiency goals and sustainment and enhancement training requirements as of 2021 and 2022 respectively.²

To address our first objective, we analyzed SOCOM Directive 350-17, which provides guidance to SOCOM and the Theater Special Operations Commands (TSOC) to forecast and approve foreign language capability

¹Active-duty SOF with a foreign language requirement within USASOC fall under the command and control of the Army's 1st Special Forces Command (Airborne) which is composed of five Special Forces groups, two Psychological Operations groups, and one Civil Affairs brigade. In addition, some Critical Skills Operators within MARSOC are required to sustain proficiency in a foreign language. See Table 2 for additional information.

²According to a SOCOM official, as of May 31, 2023, the Air Force Special Operations Command approved a requirement that SOF personnel in newly formed Theater Air Operations Squadrons are to sustain proficiency in a foreign language. This requirement was approved near the completion of our audit work.

requirements.³ In addition, we analyzed Department of Defense Instruction 3305.06 that provides guidance on SOF foreign language policy and responsibilities.⁴

To determine how foreign language capability requirements are identified, we reviewed the most recent data available from December 2020, which shows the forecasted foreign language needs by military service and proficiency levels submitted by the TSOCs and approved by SOCOM. We also interviewed officials from across SOCOM and the TSOCs to understand how the specific numbers of SOF personnel were developed for each foreign language and proficiency level included in the data.

To determine the extent to which the SOF Service Component Commands assess the relevancy of assigned languages to the language(s) spoken in the countries they deploy to, we held 13 group discussion sessions with a non-generalizable sample of four-12 service members in each group that have deployed to work with foreign partners. We also interviewed the language managers at each of the SOF Service Component Commands. In addition, we sent written questions related to this topic to USASOC and MARSOC. In the case of USASOC, the questionnaire was sent to each active-duty Special Forces Group, Civil Affairs, Psychological Operations, and Army's 1st Special Forces Command.

To assess the reliability of the data on approved foreign language capability requirements, we developed and sent a questionnaire to SOCOM and the Service SOF Component Commands requesting information that included how the data are collected, stored, and used as part of the biennial foreign language requirements process. Based on the

³United States Special Operations Command (USSOCOM) Directive 350-17, *The Special Operations Forces Language, Regional Expertise, and Culture Program* (Aug. 2, 2021). According to DOD, TSOCs are subordinate unified commands that perform planning for SOF missions, preparation of the environment activities, contingency operations, and specialized continuous missions suited to SOF capabilities. DOD has established seven TSOCs that are aligned with Geographic Combatant Commands or sub-unified commands (e.g., DOD established a TSOC for U.S. Forces Korea, which is a subordinate sub-unified headquarters under U.S. Indo-Pacific Command).

⁴Department of Defense Instruction 3305.06, *Special Operations Forces (SOF) Foreign Language Policy* (Nov. 19, 2008) (incorporating change 1, May 22, 2017). As this report was in its final processing, DOD issued a new instruction on Special Operations Forces foreign language policy that superseded DOD Instruction 3305.06. However, this report discusses DOD Instruction 3305.06, as that instruction was in effect at the time of our audit work. See Department of Defense Instruction 3902.02, *Special Operations Forces Foreign Language, Regional Expertise, and Culture Policy* (Aug. 17, 2023).

responses provided, we determined that the data were sufficiently reliable for our purpose of analyzing and describing the foreign language capability requirements process. We assessed this process against a SOCOM directive that establishes responsibilities for the foreign language requirements identification process.⁵

To address our second objective, we reviewed SOCOM Directive 350-17, USASOC and MARSOC guidance and documentation, and studies sponsored by SOCOM and these SOF Service Component Commands on foreign language sustainment and enhancement training going back to 2004. We analyzed SOCOM, USASOC, and MARSOC data on SOF foreign language proficiency skill levels and SOF sustainment and enhancement training hours from fiscal years 2018 through 2022. Based on responses to our data reliability questionnaire, interviews with SOCOM and Army and Marine Corps SOF officials, and manual data testing, we found the data to be sufficiently reliable for our purpose of analyzing and describing trends in SOF foreign language proficiency and training. We compared how SOCOM, USASOC, and MARSOC monitor SOF foreign language sustainment and enhancement training with applicable guidance.⁶

We developed a site selection methodology to identify TSOC and SOF Service Component Command elements for the engagement team to conduct in-person site visits versus others where we planned to conduct video conferences and/or via written questionnaire. We considered unique factors such as geographical area of responsibility and the relevance of that area of responsibility to foreign language capabilities within the framework of great power competition. We also considered travel efficiencies that could be gained from visiting select locations where multiple SOF are present or that are near each other. Further, we identified limitations, such as units that are based overseas, that would be unfeasible to visit in person. See Table 1 for a complete list of the organizations we interviewed or obtained documentation during our audit:

⁵USSOCOM Directive 350-17.

⁶See, for example, Army Regulation 11-6, *Army Foreign Language Program* (Feb. 25, 2022), and Marine Forces Special Operations Command Order 1550.1A, *Language, Regional Expertise, and Culture Program* (Oct. 27, 2019).

Appendix I: Objectives, Scope, and Methodology

Table 1: Organizations Interviewed During Our Review

Office of the Assistant Secretary of Defense for Special Operations and Low Intensity Conflict
The Defense Language and National Security Education Office
The Joint Staff, Washington, DC
U.S. Special Operations Command, MacDill Air Force Base, FL
Special Operations Subordinate Commands
Air Force Special Operations Command, Hurlburt Field, FL
Marine Forces Special Operations Command, Camp Lejeune, NC
U.S. Army Special Operations Command, Fort Liberty, NC
John F. Kennedy Special Warfare Center and School, Fort Liberty, NC
1st Special Forces Command (Airborne), Fort Liberty, NC
1st Special Forces Group, Joint Base Lewis-McChord, WA
3rd Special Forces Group, Fort Liberty, NC
5th Special Forces Group, Fort Campbell, KY
7th Special Forces Group, Eglin Air Force Base, FL
10th Special Forces Group, Fort Carson, CO
4th Psychological Operations Group, Fort Liberty, NC
8th Psychological Operations Group, Fort Liberty, NC
95th Civil Affairs Brigade, Fort Liberty, NC
Special Operations Command—Africa, Stuttgart, Germany
Special Operations Command—Central, MacDill Air Force Base, FL
Special Operations Command—Europe, Stuttgart, Germany
Special Operations Command—Pacific, Camp H.M. Smith, HI
Special Operations Command—South, Homestead, FL.

Source: GAO. | GAO-24-105849

We also conducted 13 group discussion sessions with officers and senior and junior non-commissioned officers (E-5 - E9) who have a foreign language sustainment and enhancement training requirement to obtain their perspectives on foreign language training provided by the SOF Service Component Commands. We conducted 12 sessions with Army personnel and one with Marine Corps personnel. The number of participants in each group discussion session ranged from four to 12. We separated officer and non-commissioned officers into different discussion sessions and, when possible, split discussion sessions for non-commissioned officers into junior and senior groups as defined by their ranks.⁷ The purpose of grouping SOF personnel in this way was to encourage participants to speak freely among a cohort of service

⁷For the discussions with the Army's 4th and 8th Psychological Operations Groups and the 95th Civil Affairs Brigade, the group discussions were composed of a mixture of officers and non-commissioned officers.

members of a similar rank. Officials at the group and brigade levels within the Army and command officials at the Marine Corps identified available SOF personnel to participate based on these criteria to participate in the discussion sessions. We used the results from these discussion sessions to better understand the foreign language training experiences of SOF personnel. The results from these discussion sessions are not generalizable to other SOF personnel. We included quotations or paraphrased statements from SOF personnel in the report to provide sufficient context on the experiences and perspectives. Table 2 identifies the Army and Marine Corps Special Operations units with which we conducted group discussion sessions.

Table 2: Group Discussion Sessions with Army and Marine Corps Special Operations Units

U.S. Army Special Operations Command
 1st Special Forces Command (Airborne)
 1st Special Forces Group
 3rd Special Forces Group
 7th Special Forces Group
 10th Special Forces Group
 4th Psychological Operations Group
 8th Psychological Operations Group
 95th Civil Affairs Brigade

Marine Forces Special Operations Command

Source: GAO. | GAO-24-105849

We conducted this performance audit from March 2022 to October 2023 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 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 our audit objectives.

Appendix II: Comments from the Department of Defense



SPECIAL OPERATIONS /
LOW INTENSITY CONFLICT

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

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

13 OCT 2023

Dear Mr. Russell:

This is the Department of Defense (DoD) response to the GAO Draft Report, GAO-24-105849, "SPECIAL OPERATIONS FORCES: Enhanced Training, Analysis, and Monitoring Could Improve Foreign Language Proficiency," dated September 13, 2023 (GAO Code 105849).

We appreciate the analysis conducted by the GAO that supports our continued efforts to improve the foreign language proficiency of our Special Operations Forces.

Attached is DoD's response to the recommendations made in the subject report. My point of contact is Ms. Susan Groth, who can be reached at 571-372-5087 or via email at susan.e.groth.civ@mail.mil.

Sincerely,

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

Enclosure:
As stated



GAO DRAFT REPORT DATED SEPTEMBER 13, 2023
GAO-24-105849 (GAO CODE 105849)

“SPECIAL OPERATIONS FORCES: Enhanced Training, Analysis,
and Monitoring Could Improve Foreign Language Proficiency

DEPARTMENT OF DEFENSE COMMENTS
TO THE GAO RECOMMENDATION

RECOMMENDATION 1: The Secretary of Defense should ensure that the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, in coordination with SOCOM, develops and administers training for TSOC planners on the methodology they should use to determine their foreign language capability requirements.

DoD RESPONSE: Concur. The Department agrees that a consistent methodology for determining foreign language capability requirements is needed and that TSOC planners be trained on such methodology.

RECOMMENDATION 2: The Secretary of Defense should ensure that the Commanders of the relevant SOF Service Component Commands with a foreign language training requirement, in coordination with SOCOM, 1) periodically monitor the extent to which foreign languages assigned to SOF service members are relevant in the countries to which SOF deploy and 2) use this information to assess foreign language training plans to ensure they meet current and future mission needs.

DoD RESPONSE: Concur. The Department agrees that monitoring the relevancy of foreign languages assigned to SOF service members can assist in informing foreign language training plans to meet future mission needs. The Department will monitor the relevancy of foreign languages assigned to SOF service members to ensure foreign language training plans meet current and future needs.

RECOMMENDATION 3: The Secretary of Defense should ensure that the Commanders of the relevant SOF Service Component Commands with a foreign language training requirement establish and enforce consistent procedures that specify the consequences for SOF personnel that do not meet minimum foreign language proficiency standards.

DoD RESPONSE: Concur. The Department agrees there should be consistent, enforced procedures with consequences for SOF personnel that do not meet minimum foreign language proficiency standards. The Department will review and assess its current procedures and consequences for ensuring SOF personnel meet minimum foreign language proficiency standards to ensure consistency across the SOF enterprise.

RECOMMENDATION 4: The Secretary of Defense should ensure that the Commanders of the relevant SOF Service Component Commands with a foreign language training requirement hold unit commanders accountable for monitoring and reporting quality information about the

**Appendix II: Comments from the Department
of Defense**

2

extent to which SOF personnel are completing required annual sustainment and enhancement training hours, including instances where a service member completes no hours of sustainment and enhancement training.

DoD RESPONSE: Concur. The Department will review current reporting requirements for sufficiency and consider additional reporting requirements, if necessary.

Accessible text for Appendix II: Comments from the Department of Defense

OFFICE OF THE ASSISTANT SECRETARY OF DEFENSE
SPECIAL OPERATIONS/LOW INTENSITY CONFLICT
2500 DEFENSE PENTAGON
WASHINGTON, D.C. 20301-2500

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

Enclosure:
As stated

**GAO DRAFT REPORT DATED SEPTEMBER 13, 2023
GAO-24-105849 (GAO CODE 105849)**

“SPECIAL OPERATIONS FORCES: Enhanced Training, Analysis, and Monitoring Could Improve Foreign Language Proficiency”

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DoD RESPONSE: Concur. The Department agrees that a consistent methodology for determining foreign language capability requirements is needed and that TSOC planners be trained on such methodology.

RECOMMENDATION 2: The Secretary of Defense should ensure that the Commanders of the relevant SOF Service Component Commands with a foreign language training requirement, in coordination with SOCOM, 1) periodically monitor the extent to which foreign languages assigned to SOF service members are relevant in the countries to which SOF deploy and 2) use this information to assess foreign language training plans to ensure they meet current and future mission needs.

DoD RESPONSE: Concur. The Department agrees that monitoring the relevancy of foreign languages assigned to SOF service members can assist in informing foreign language training plans to meet future mission needs. The Department will monitor the relevancy of foreign languages assigned to SOF service members to ensure foreign language training plans meet current and future needs.

RECOMMENDATION 3: The Secretary of Defense should ensure that the Commanders of the relevant SOF Service Component Commands with a foreign language training requirement establish and enforce consistent procedures that specify the consequences for SOF personnel that do not meet minimum foreign language proficiency standards.

DoD RESPONSE: Concur. The Department agrees there should be consistent, enforced procedures with consequences for SOF personnel that do not meet minimum foreign language proficiency standards. The Department will review and assess its current procedures and consequences for ensuring SOF personnel meet minimum foreign language proficiency standards to ensure consistency across the SOF enterprise.

RECOMMENDATION 4: The Secretary of Defense should ensure that the Commanders of the relevant SOF Service Component Commands with a foreign

language training requirement hold unit commanders accountable for monitoring and reporting quality information about the extent to which SOF personnel are completing required annual sustainment and enhancement training hours, including instances where a service member completes no hours of sustainment and enhancement training.

DoD RESPONSE: Concur. The Department will review current reporting requirements for sufficiency and consider additional reporting requirements, if necessary.

Appendix III: GAO Contact and Staff Acknowledgments

GAO Contact

Cary Russell (202) 512-5431 or RussellC@gao.gov

Staff Acknowledgments

In addition to the contact name above, Matthew Ullengren (Assistant Director), Richard Winsor (Analyst in Charge), Christopher Gezon, Alexandra Gonzalez, Chad Hinsch, Matthew Jacobs, Clarice Ransom, and Michael Silver all made key contributions to this report.

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