

GAO Highlights

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

Why GAO Did This Study

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

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

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

What GAO Recommends

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

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

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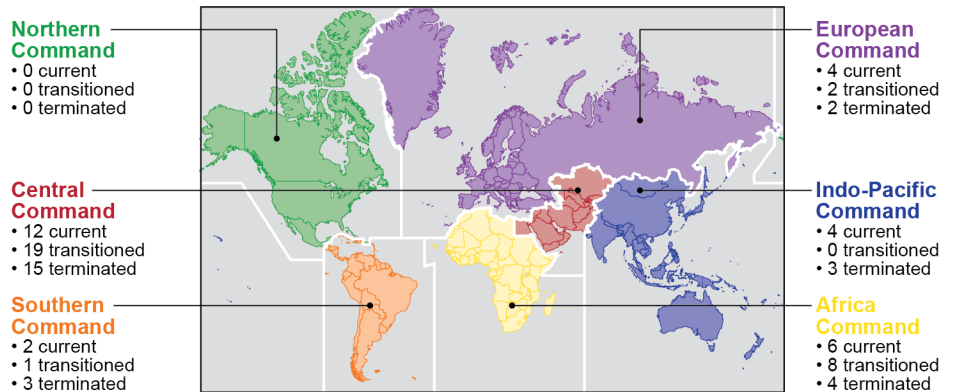
SPECIAL OPERATIONS FORCES

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

What GAO Found

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

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



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

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

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

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