



441 G St. N.W.
Washington, DC 20548

September 5, 2024

The Honorable Jack Reed
Chairman
The Honorable Roger Wicker
Ranking Member
Committee on Armed Services
United States Senate

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

Special Operations Forces: Summary of Armed Overwatch Reports

U.S. Special Operations Command (SOCOM) is responsible for acquiring a new aircraft called Armed Overwatch and plans to invest over \$2 billion in the aircraft through Fiscal Year (FY) 2029. With the Armed Overwatch program, SOCOM seeks to acquire an aircraft capable of conducting strike, close-air support missions in austere environments, and some intelligence, surveillance and reconnaissance missions.

House Report 117-118, accompanying a bill for the National Defense Authorization Act for Fiscal Year 2022, included a provision that we assess SOCOM's Armed Overwatch program.¹ In response to this provision, we provided information in two reports.² To complete these reports we interviewed officials from SOCOM, Air Force Special Operations Command, and Theater Special Operations Commands, among others. We also analyzed information they provided.

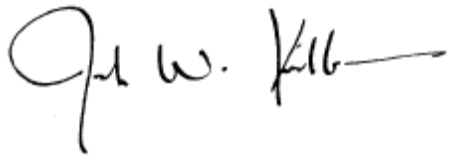
Our reports address the extent to which the Department of Defense has 1) evaluated SOCOM's analysis to support the number of Armed Overwatch aircraft to acquire and 2) determined the capabilities Armed Overwatch needs to support SOF operations and meet mission needs. In our first report we found that SOCOM was limited in its ability to justify the acquisition of the Armed Overwatch aircraft for three reasons. First, because SOCOM decided on the size of the fleet before conducting required analyses. Second, SOCOM did not assess how changes in the aircraft's capabilities could affect the number needed for operations. And third, that SOCOM has

¹H.R. Rep. No. 117-118, at 36-37 (2021).

²GAO, *Special Operations Forces: DOD Should Slow Acquisition of Armed Overwatch Aircraft Until It Conducts Needed Analysis*, [GAO-24-106283](#), (Washington, D.C.: December 14, 2023) and GAO, *Special Operations Forces: DOD Should Reassess Its Need to Acquire Armed Overwatch Aircraft*, [GAO-24-106993C](#), (Washington D.C.: September 4, 2024).

not reevaluated its needs despite changes to operational missions. In our second report, which is classified, our findings highlighted concerns related to risks associated with the capabilities of the Armed Overwatch aircraft, concepts surrounding the types of operations the aircraft will conduct, deployment and operating challenges, and affordability.

We made seven recommendations to DOD that address our findings. DOD concurred with one recommendation and partially concurred with six recommendations. The enclosure to this letter summarizes our findings and recommendations from these reports and omits classified information related to specific details of the Armed Overwatch effort.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Joe W. Kirschbaum", with a horizontal line extending to the right from the end of the signature.

Joseph W. Kirschbaum
Director, Defense Capabilities and Management

Enclosure(s) – 1

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SUMMARY OF ARMED OVERWATCH REPORTS

SEPTEMBER 2024

THE BIG PICTURE

Within the Department of Defense, U.S. Special Operations Command (SOCOM) is acquiring a new aircraft called Armed Overwatch. However, Congress has expressed concerns about the Armed Overwatch program. It has delayed the reprogramming of funds for the aircraft and required the Department of Defense to provide information about its plans.

SOCOM's responsibilities and plans. SOCOM is responsible for deterring threats from violent extremist groups (e.g., al-Qaeda and al-Shabaab) in addition to supporting efforts to deter China and Russia. As SOCOM works to balance these responsibilities, it plans to spend over \$2 billion through fiscal year 2029 to purchase a fleet of new aircraft through the Armed Overwatch program. The aircraft is intended to provide capabilities to special operations forces that enable them to address threats from violent extremist groups in permissive and semi-permissive environments. As it

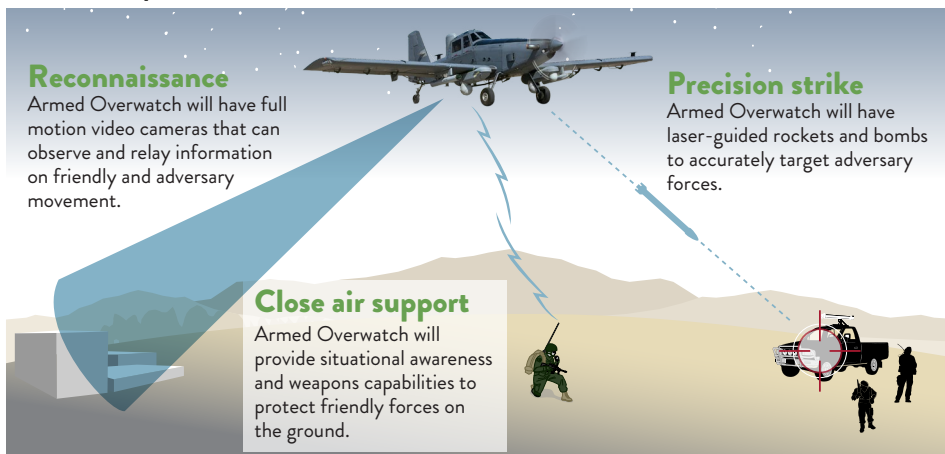
Commands conducting special operations missions have said they need platforms that allow them to **“do more with less.”**

fields the Armed Overwatch aircraft, SOCOM plans to divest two other platforms that provide similar capabilities.

Aircraft capabilities. SOCOM describes the Armed Overwatch aircraft as a cost-effective platform that will have capabilities currently provided by a combination of other aircraft. As shown below, these capabilities include

- close air support;
- precision strike; and
- intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance (ISR).

Selected Capabilities of the Armed Overwatch Aircraft



Source: GAO analysis of Department of Defense information. | GAO-24-107556

To position itself to help deter China and Russia, respond to violent extremists, and address congressional concerns, it is important for SOCOM to invest resources wisely and ensure it is acquiring aircraft with capabilities designed for future fights.



RELEVANT GAO WORK

GAO issued two reports on the Armed Overwatch program and identified issues to support decision-makers in Congress and the Department of Defense.

Analysis of needs. GAO found in December 2023 that SOCOM did not complete analyses of its operational needs to justify its purchase of 75 Armed Overwatch aircraft. SOCOM reduced that amount to 62 aircraft in March 2024, but as of September 2024 had not completed these analyses.







Plans for divested aircraft. SOCOM plans to divest two ISR platforms. Subsequently, some personnel and resources from the platforms will be used to support Armed Overwatch. However, GAO found that SOCOM has not taken steps to plan for, or add, critical ISR capabilities provided by soon-to-be divested aircraft. Also, SOCOM has not addressed risks associated with the loss of these capabilities if the new aircraft does not provide them.

Operational challenges. Special operations commands identified logistical and operational challenges that could inhibit SOCOM's ability to effectively deploy and operate the aircraft as intended. Users said that the Armed Overwatch aircraft may not meet their mission needs because of these challenges.

GAO RECOMMENDATIONS

GAO made seven recommendations to the Department of Defense to address challenges that face the Armed Overwatch program.

Armed Overwatch-Related Recommendations and Agency Responses

Recommendation	Agency response
 Re-evaluate the number of aircraft that are needed.	▶ Concur
 Limit aircraft procurement to the minimum needed for testing until the fleet size is determined.	▶ Partial concur
 1) Assess risks to special operations missions based on the intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance capabilities that may or may not be added to the Armed Overwatch aircraft and 2) report these risks to Congress.	▶ Partial concurs
 Update concepts for types of operations that the aircraft might conduct.	▶ Partial concur
 Identify challenges to deploying and operating the aircraft at various locations.	▶ Partial concur
 Assess whether the acquisition program remains an affordable priority.	▶ Partial concur

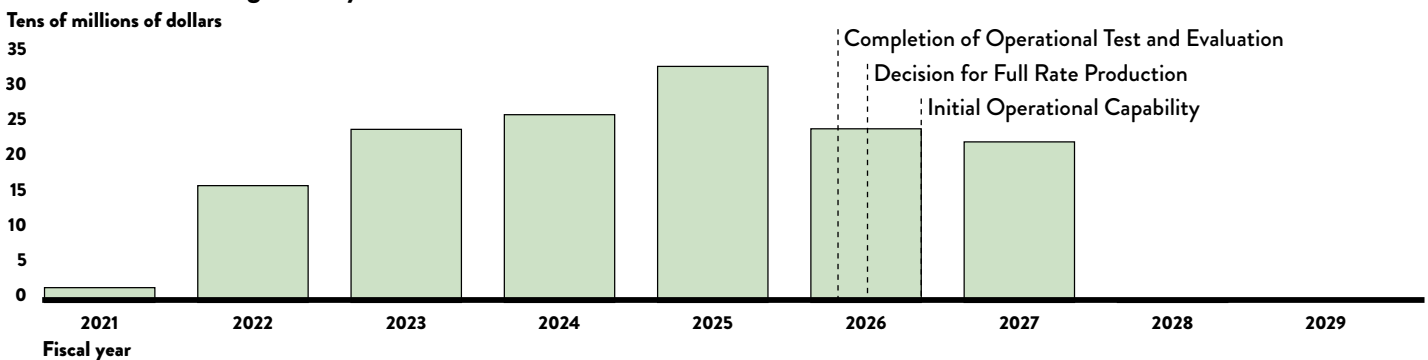
Source: GAO. | GAO-24-107556

IMPLICATIONS

The Department of Defense plans to spend about 85 percent of its procurement funding before completing testing of the Armed Overwatch aircraft. Such testing would enable the department to determine how the aircraft could be used.

It is essential that the Department of Defense act quickly to fully address GAO's open recommendations. Otherwise, it risks buying more aircraft than it needs. In addition, it may not be able to fully utilize the aircraft because it has not addressed identified challenges. See the figure below for the Armed Overwatch funding schedule and key-decision timelines.

Procurement Funding and Key-Decision Timelines for Armed Overwatch Aircraft



Source: GAO analysis of Department of Defense information. | GAO-24-107556

ABOUT GAO

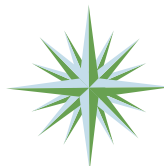
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The underlying work supporting this product was conducted in accordance with Generally Accepted Government Auditing Standards.

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