

GAO Highlights

Highlights of [GAO-15-571](#), a report to congressional committees

Why GAO Did This Study

SOF are specially organized, trained, and equipped to conduct operations in hostile or politically sensitive environments. Since 2001, DOD has increased the size and funding of SOF and emphasized SOF's importance to meet national security needs. SOF deployments have focused on the Middle East and placed significant demand on the force during this period.

The National Defense Authorization Act for Fiscal Year 2014 included a provision that GAO review SOF force structure. This report examines (1) trends since FY 2001 in authorized special operations military positions; (2) the extent to which DOD has determined total funding for SOF; and (3) the extent to which DOD has taken steps to manage the pace of SOF deployments, among other issues.

GAO analyzed data for FYs 2001 through 2014 on SOF authorized positions, funding, and deployment data. GAO reviewed data on service-provided SOF funding and policies and other documentation and interviewed officials regarding processes for managing SOF deployments.

What GAO Recommends

GAO recommends that DOD improve visibility in total funding to support SOF and determine whether opportunities exist to balance deployments across the joint force. DOD partially concurred, stating that existing processes that guide funding and force allocation decisions are appropriate, but that it would review these processes and consider opportunities for improvement. GAO continues to believe that actions are needed, as discussed in the report.

View [GAO-15-571](#). For more information, contact John Pendleton at (202) 512-3489 or pendletonj@gao.gov.

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SPECIAL OPERATIONS FORCES

Opportunities Exist to Improve Transparency of Funding and Assess Potential to Lessen Some Deployments

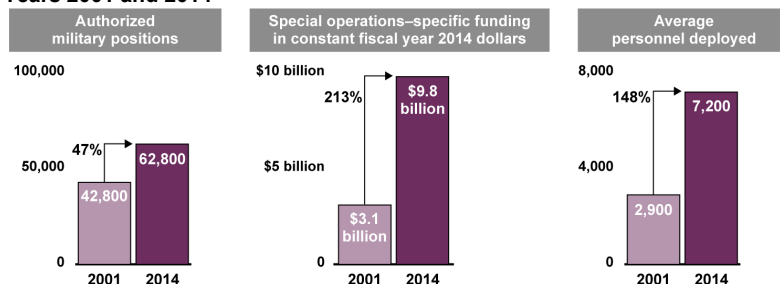
What GAO Found

GAO analysis of the resources devoted to U.S. Special Operations Command (SOCOM) found that the number of authorized special operations military positions increased from about 42,800 in fiscal year (FY) 2001 to about 62,800 in FY 2014, which includes combat and support personnel. Even with this growth, special operations military positions constituted less than 3 percent of the military services' FY14 total authorized force levels.

Special operations-specific funding has increased markedly, but the Department of Defense (DOD) has not determined the total funding used to support special operations forces (SOF). Funding provided to SOCOM for special operations-specific needs has more than tripled from about \$3.1 billion in FY 2001 to about \$9.8 billion in FY 2014 constant dollars, including supplemental funding for contingency operations. However, these totals do not include funding provided by the services, which SOCOM estimates is more than \$8 billion annually. GAO found that DOD has little visibility over total funding to support SOF, primarily because it has not established a requirement or methodology to capture and report this information. Until DOD has more complete information on total funding to support SOF, decision makers will be unable to effectively identify and assess resource needs or weigh priorities and assess budget trade-offs.

DOD has taken some steps to manage the increased pace of special operations deployments, but opportunities may exist to better balance the workload across the joint force because activities assigned to SOF can be similar to activities assigned to conventional forces. Average weekly deployments of SOF personnel have increased from about 2,900 in FY 2001 to about 7,200 in FY 2014. SOCOM has taken steps to manage the effect of SOF deployments, but DOD reported that some portions of the force are still heavily deployed. GAO identified two factors that inhibit DOD's ability to potentially share the burden of SOF deployments with the conventional force. First, DOD has not evaluated since 2003 whether activities performed by SOF could be conducted by conventional forces. Second, DOD's current force-allocation process provides the Joint Staff with criteria to validate force requests, but does not systematically consider whether conventional forces could serve as an appropriate alternative to meet some requests for SOF. Unless the department more fully assesses whether opportunities exist to better balance demands across the joint force, the demand for SOF and the high pace of deployments that results is likely to continue.

Increases in Special Operations Military Positions, Funding, and Personnel Deployed, Fiscal Years 2001 and 2014



Source: GAO analysis of Department of Defense (DOD) and U.S. Special Operations Command (SOCOM) data. | GAO-15-571