

GAO Highlights

Highlights of [GAO-19-386](#), a report to congressional committees

Why GAO Did This Study

As DOD increased its reliance on special operations forces, SOCOM's budget has increased from \$5.2 billion in 2005 to \$12.3 billion in 2018. Section 922 of the NDAA for Fiscal Year 2017 included provisions to enhance the Assistant Secretary of Defense for Special Operations and Low-Intensity Conflict's responsibilities to be similar to those of a military department secretary regarding the organization, training, and equipping of special operations forces.

The Joint Explanatory Statement accompanying the fiscal year 2018 NDAA included a provision for GAO to assess DOD's actions in response to section 922. This report assesses (1) the extent to which DOD has identified and taken actions to implement section 922; (2) what, if any, challenges it faces in completing implementation; and (3) the extent to which its hiring approach for the office of the ASD-SO/LIC has incorporated strategic workforce planning principles. GAO reviewed relevant documents and interviewed DOD officials.

What GAO Recommends

GAO is making three recommendations to DOD to establish time frames for section 922 actions; update applicable guidance to clarify roles and responsibilities for the ASD-SO/LIC and SOCOM; and develop a strategic workforce plan that incorporates key principles. DOD partially concurred with the recommendations and GAO continues to believe the recommendations are valid, as discussed in the report. GAO also modified one recommendation to address DOD concerns regarding its applicability.

View [GAO-19-386](#). For more information, contact Cary Russell at (202) 512-5431 or russellc@gao.gov.

May 2019

SPECIAL OPERATIONS FORCES

Additional Actions Are Needed to Effectively Expand Management Oversight

What GAO Found

Since 2017 the Department of Defense (DOD) has made recommendations, developed actions, and taken steps to address requirements in section 922 of the National Defense Authorization Act (NDAA) for Fiscal Year 2017 to expand the Assistant Secretary of Defense for Special Operations and Low-Intensity Conflict's (ASD-SO/LIC) roles and responsibilities. DOD officials noted that they have taken an incremental implementation approach to addressing section 922. In 2018, DOD identified 166 recommendations to change the ASD-SO/LIC's oversight of special operations forces (SOF). These recommendations were used to develop 87 actions that were necessary to implement section 922. Since February 2019, DOD has implemented 56 of these actions. For example, the Deputy Secretary of Defense approved a new Special Operations Policy and Oversight Council directive that identified the ASD-SO/LIC as the lead for that council. The Deputy Secretary of Defense also delegated the ASD-SO/LIC with authority to approve waivers to hire civilian personnel during a civilian hiring freeze.

Although the office of the ASD-SO/LIC has taken many actions to implement section 922, DOD faces two key challenges in completing its implementation of the ASD-SO/LIC's new roles and responsibilities:

- **Lack of time frames.** As of February 2019, 28 out of 31 unimplemented actions associated with section 922 did not have clear time frames for implementation. According to ASD-SO/LIC and U.S. Special Operations Command (SOCOM) officials, they did not prioritize establishing time frames because they took an incremental approach to implementing actions and addressed them on a case-by-case basis. Without clear time frames for implementation, ASD-SO/LIC and SOCOM may be less effective in implementing section 922.
- **Unclear guidance.** Current guidance about ASD-SO/LIC responsibilities is outdated: for example, it states that the ASD-SO/LIC shall report directly to the Under Secretary of Defense for Policy. However, section 922 states that special operation forces-related administrative matters are managed directly by the Secretary of Defense to the ASD-SO/LIC. The special operations force enterprise is a complex system, and unless roles and responsibilities are clarified in guidance, other DOD stakeholders, such as the military services, may not know the extent of the ASD-SO/LIC's and SOCOM's authorities and responsibilities. DOD officials expressed some concerns that until these matters are clarified in guidance, it will remain unclear whether the ASD-SO/LIC and SOCOM should work together—for example, on personnel issues—and how their relationships with stakeholders with oversight authority will be managed. DOD partially concurred, and based on its comments, GAO modified one recommendation.

The office of the ASD-SO/LIC has made efforts to develop a workforce plan, including commissioning a manpower study and taking steps to develop a hiring plan; however, these efforts do not fully incorporate some leading principles for a strategic workforce plan. For example, ASD-SO/LIC did not share the hiring plan with its staff, including key officials from the office of the ASD-SO/LIC and SOCOM. Without completing a comprehensive strategic workforce plan that includes key principles, the office of the ASD-SO/LIC may not know what gaps exist in skills and competencies in order to develop effective workforce strategies to fill those gaps. These issues could put the office of the ASD-SO/LIC at risk of hiring personnel who may not adequately meet its needs as defined by section 922.