United States Government Accountability Office

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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

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.

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.