

# GAO Highlights

Highlights of [GAO-24-105849](#), a report to the Committee on Armed Services, House of Representatives

## Why GAO Did This Study

SOF play an integral part of activities carried out below the level of armed conflict. These activities often demand that SOF personnel be able to communicate in foreign languages when working with allies and partners.

House Report 117-118, accompanying a bill for the National Defense Authorization Act for Fiscal Year 2022 includes a provision that GAO review SOF foreign language capabilities and training. GAO's report evaluates the extent to which (1) SOCOM determines SOF foreign language capability requirements and associated training needs; and (2) relevant SOF Service Components have established standards and monitor training efforts to sustain and enhance foreign language skills.

GAO analyzed documents and interviewed officials regarding SOCOM's foreign language requirements' process; reviewed applicable training programs; and analyzed SOF foreign language proficiency and training data for fiscal years 2018 through 2022.

## What GAO Recommends

GAO is making four recommendations to DOD to train personnel on how to determine SOF foreign language capability requirements; monitor the relevancy of assigned languages at deployment locations; establish and enforce consistent procedures that specify consequences when foreign language proficiency standards are not met; and hold unit commanders accountable for monitoring and reporting on completion of required foreign language training. DOD agreed with GAO's recommendations.

View [GAO-24-105849](#). For more information, contact Cary Russell at (202) 512-5431 or [russellc@gao.gov](mailto:russellc@gao.gov).

October 2023

# SPECIAL OPERATIONS FORCES

## Enhanced Training, Analysis, and Monitoring Could Improve Foreign Language Proficiency

### What GAO Found

Every 2 years the U.S. Special Operations Command (SOCOM) develops a 5-year forecast of foreign language capability training needs. However, a key element of this process on determining mission requirements is not consistently followed, leading to uncertainty on the validity of the resulting analysis. By providing training on the methodology personnel should use to determine foreign language capability requirements, SOCOM would have greater assurance that its process is consistent and effective. In addition, the U.S. Army Special Operations Command and the Marine Forces Special Operations Command have not analyzed the relevancy of assigned foreign languages during deployments to inform future training needs. By periodically monitoring and assessing relevance in the countries to which they deploy, the Commands would be able to adjust foreign language training plans accordingly.

The Army and Marine Corps Special Operations Commands have issued foreign language proficiency and training standards and provided resources and incentives to improve foreign language skills. However, GAO found that from fiscal years 2018 through 2022, most Army and Marine Corps Special Operations Forces (SOF) units did not meet foreign language proficiency goals. According to select Army and Marine Corps personnel, not meeting minimum proficiency levels has had limited consequences on service members. This is due in part to a lack of consistent procedures that specify consequences when SOF personnel do not achieve minimum foreign language proficiency standards.

Further, less than half of SOF personnel completed any foreign language training, and the average number of annual sustainment training hours completed was much less than required due primarily to competing training demands and priorities.

**Average Number of Annual Foreign Language Training Hours Completed by Army and Marine Corps SOF Service Members, Fiscal Years 2018–2022**



Source: GAO analysis of Army and Marine Corps Special Operations Forces (SOF) data. | [GAO-24-105849](#)

The Army and Marine Corps Special Operations Commands have not held unit commanders accountable for monitoring whether SOF personnel complete annual foreign language training. By taking additional steps to ensure that unit commanders monitor and report whether SOF personnel are completing required annual foreign language training, the Commands would have greater assurance that SOF personnel and units are able to communicate with allies and partners.