



March 2024

SPECIAL OPERATIONS FORCES

Documented Policies and Workforce Planning Needed to Strengthen Civilian Oversight

GAO Highlights

Highlights of [GAO-24-106372](#), a report to the Committee on Armed Services, U.S. Senate

Why GAO Did This Study

Congress established the ASD-SO/LIC in 1986 to oversee SOCOM's special operations activities. Section 922 of the National Defense Authorization Act for Fiscal Year 2017 strengthened the ASD-SO/LIC's service secretary-like role in overseeing SOCOM's activities, such as budgeting and programming.

Senate Report 117-130 includes a provision for GAO to review DOD's implementation of section 922. GAO examined the extent to which the Secretariat for Special Operations has (1) hired the staff needed to oversee SOCOM, (2) reported on its implementation of section 922 reforms and documented its oversight policies, and (3) faced challenges related to obtaining administrative support services.

GAO analyzed fiscal years 2019–2023 Secretariat staffing levels. GAO also compared the Secretariat's staffing plan with strategic workforce planning principles, and ASD-SO/LIC's policies and practices with leading principles for interagency collaboration.

What GAO Recommends

GAO recommends that the (1) ASD-SO/LIC develop a staffing plan that incorporates workforce planning principles, (2) ASD-SO/LIC implement a systematic approach for identifying areas that require documented policies, and (3) ASD-SO/LIC and Under Secretary of Defense for Policy document an agreement that clarifies their respective administrative roles. DOD concurred with these recommendations.

View [GAO-24-106372](#). For more information, contact Diana Maurer at (202) 512-9627 or maurerd@gao.gov.

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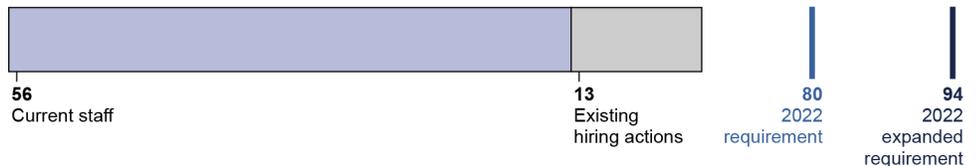
Documented Policies and Workforce Planning Needed to Strengthen Civilian Oversight

What GAO Found

Since 2019, the Department of Defense (DOD) has increased the Assistant Secretary of Defense for Special Operations and Low-Intensity Conflict's (ASD-SO/LIC) oversight responsibilities for U.S. Special Operations Command (SOCOM). DOD has also increased resources for the Secretariat for Special Operations, which assists the ASD-SO/LIC in conducting oversight. However, as of September 2023, the Secretariat's staffing levels remained below the 80–94 full-time equivalent levels the Secretariat identified as required to oversee SOCOM.

Comparison of Secretariat Staffing Levels with Required Levels, as of September 2023

Number of full-time equivalents



Source: GAO analysis of Department of Defense information. | GAO-24-106372

Note: Per the 2022 staffing assessment, the expanded requirement includes a 20-percent adjustment for unanticipated workload and staff availability (e.g., leave and training) for some functions.

In November 2023, the Secretariat finalized a staffing plan required by statute, including milestones to reach 69 full-time equivalents by early 2024. However, the finalized plan does not fully incorporate some key principles for strategic workforce planning, such as aligning with long-term goals, identifying critical skill gaps, and developing strategies to address them. Developing a staffing plan that incorporates these principles would help ensure that the Secretariat hires the personnel required to meet its future needs for overseeing SOCOM.

Section 922 of the National Defense Authorization Act for Fiscal Year 2017 strengthened the ASD-SO/LIC's service secretary-like role for overseeing SOCOM's activities. The Secretariat developed 57 benchmarks for implementing section 922 and reported completing 49 of them as of January 2023. However, according to officials, the respective work process policies for the Secretariat and SOCOM are not always documented for two reasons. First DOD's Office of the Director of Administration and Management has concerns about ASD-SO/LIC's authority to issue guidance. However, the ASD-SO/LIC has broad statutory and regulatory authority under its charter to establish DOD-wide policy. Second, the Secretariat does not have a systematic approach for identifying and documenting its oversight policies. Implementing a systematic approach for documenting policies would help ensure consistent oversight.

The Secretariat has at times had limited input into how its hiring, office space, and IT needs are met because of confusion about ASD-SO/LIC's administrative role, given ASD-SO/LIC's unique position within DOD. Until the ASD-SO/LIC and the Under Secretary of Defense for Policy clarify that administrative role, the Secretariat will continue to have limited input into its administrative services— affecting its ability to effectively oversee SOCOM.

Contents

Letter		1
	Background	4
	The Secretariat Reported Mostly Implementing Section 922, but Has Not Fully Documented Oversight Policies	9
	The Secretariat's Staffing Gaps Remain, and Staffing Plan Does Not Fully Incorporate Workforce Planning Principles	20
	The Secretariat Has Faced Hiring, Office Space, and IT Challenges	28
	Conclusions	32
	Recommendations for Executive Action	33
	Agency Comments	33
Appendix I	Objectives, Scope, and Methodology	35
Appendix II	U.S. Special Operations Command's Organizational Structure	40
Appendix III	Reported Status of Implementation Benchmarks	41
Appendix IV	List of the Secretariat's Oversight Functions	44
Appendix V	Comments from the Department of Defense	46
Appendix VI	GAO Contact and Staff Acknowledgments	48
Tables		
	Table 1: Selected Section 922 Congressional Requirements and Implementation Milestones	9
	Table 2: Status of Benchmarks the Secretariat for Special Operations Reported as Partially or Not Implemented in January 2023, as of October 2023	11

Table 3: Status of Benchmarks the Secretariat for Special Operations Reported as In Progress in January 2023, as of October 2023	12
Table 4: Examples of Areas Where DOD Officials Report That Policies Are Not Documented	17
Table 5: Secretariat for Special Operations' Directorates with the Largest Staffing Level Gaps, as of March 2023	23
Table 6: Number of Oversight Functions by Directorate for Which Secretariat for Special Operations' Staffing Gaps Pose Risk of the Directorate Being Unable to Perform Necessary Tasks, as of March 2023	24
Table 7: Reported Status of Implementation Benchmarks, by Category, as of January 2023	41

Figures

Figure 1: Secretariat for Special Operations' Organizational Structure	7
Figure 2: Secretariat for Special Operations' Reported Status of Implementation Benchmarks, as of January 2023	10
Figure 3: Changes to the Secretariat for Special Operations' Structure from October 2022 through July 2023	15
Figure 4: Comparison of the Secretariat for Special Operations' Staffing Levels with Required Levels, Fiscal Years 2019–2023	21
Figure 5: Functional Areas Where Office of the Under Secretary of Defense for Policy Supports the Secretariat for Special Operations	28
Figure 6: U.S. Special Operations Command's Organizational Structure	40

Abbreviations

ASD-SO/LIC	Assistant Secretary of Defense for Special Operations and Low-Intensity Conflict
DOD	Department of Defense
FTE	full-time equivalents
IT	information technology
OUSD (Policy)	Office of the Under Secretary of Defense for Policy
SAP	Special Access Programs
SOCOM	U.S. Special Operations Command
SOF	special operations forces
SOPOC	Special Operations Policy and Oversight Council

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March 4, 2024

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

The principle of civilian oversight of the military places ultimate authority over U.S. armed services in the hands of democratically elected civilian leadership to ensure that American democracy occurs without fear of military intervention. In 1986, Congress created the Assistant Secretary of Defense for Special Operations and Low-Intensity Conflict (ASD-SO/LIC) to provide civilian oversight for U.S. Special Operations Command (SOCOM), which is responsible for training and equipping special operations forces (SOF) drawn from four of the military services.¹ Special operations require unique techniques, equipment, and training, including for operating in hostile, denied, or politically sensitive environments. To support these activities, from fiscal years 2001 through 2023, the number of SOF increased from approximately 45,700 to 73,900, and SOCOM’s annual funding more than tripled to \$14 billion.²

Section 922 of the National Defense Authorization Act for Fiscal Year 2017 included reforms to strengthen the oversight role of the ASD-SO/LIC.³ Section 922 gave the ASD-SO/LIC responsibilities similar to a military department Secretary (“service secretary-like” responsibilities) for certain special operations-peculiar administrative matters, such as budgeting, program planning and execution, and personnel matters

¹Pub. L. No. 99-661, § 1311 (1986). SOCOM comprises personnel assigned to SOCOM headquarters, its four service component commands, and subunified commands. SOCOM’s four service component commands are the U.S. Army Special Operations Command, the Naval Special Warfare Command, the Air Force Special Operations Command, and the Marine Corps Forces Special Operations Command.

²Adjusting for inflation, SOCOM’s funding increased from approximately \$3.7 billion (in fiscal year 2022 dollars) to \$13.4 billion (in fiscal year 2022 dollars) from fiscal years 2001 through 2023. The increase in nominal dollars was from about \$2.4 billion in fiscal year 2001 to about \$14 billion in fiscal year 2023.

³Pub. L. No. 114-328, § 922 (2016) and codified at 10 U.S.C. § 138(b).

related to the organizing, training, and equipping of SOF.⁴ After the enactment of section 922, the ASD-SO/LIC established the Secretariat for Special Operations to focus on the organize, train, and equip functions for special operations. The Secretariat assists the ASD-SO/LIC in carrying out its roles and responsibilities.

Senate Report 117-130 accompanying a bill for the National Defense Authorization Act for Fiscal Year 2023 includes a provision for us to review the Department of Defense's (DOD) efforts to implement section 922 and provide an update to our prior report.⁵ We examined the extent to which the Secretariat has (1) reported on its implementation of section 922 reforms and documented its policies for providing oversight; (2) hired the number of staff it determined it needs to oversee SOCOM; and (3) faced challenges related to administrative services, such as hiring, office space, and IT.

For objective one, we reviewed the Secretariat's implementation status reports for October 2018 through January 2023 and analyzed the implementation status of the 57 benchmarks included in the January 2023 report—the Secretariat's final report to Congress. We also reviewed DOD policy, including DOD Directive 5111.10 (the ASD-SO/LIC's charter), and materials from the Special Operations Policy and Oversight Council (SOPOC) and SOPOC Senior Steering Committee.⁶ Additionally, we observed a SOPOC Senior Steering Committee meeting. Finally, we compared the Secretariat's efforts to document its oversight policies against GAO's *Standards for Internal Control in the Federal Government*,

⁴The conference report accompanying the National Defense Authorization Act for Fiscal Year 2017 uses the phrase "service secretary-like" to describe the ASD-SO/LIC's responsibility for the oversight and advocacy of SOCOM and organizing, training, and equipping SOF. This includes the ASD-SO/LIC's role in the administrative chain of command for SOCOM.

⁵S. Rep. No. 117-130 at 228-229 (2022). GAO previously reported on these issues in May 2019. See GAO, *Special Operations Forces: Additional Actions Are Needed to Effectively Expand Management Oversight*, [GAO-19-386](#) (Washington, D.C.: May 13, 2019).

⁶DOD Directive 5111.10, *Assistant Secretary of Defense for Special Operations and Low-Intensity Conflict (ASD-SO/LIC)* (May 5, 2021); DOD Instruction 3901.01, *Special Operations Policy and Oversight Council* (Dec. 26, 2023). The ASD-SO/LIC leads the SOPOC, which serves as a supporting tier governance forum and focal point for developing and improving policy, joint processes, and procedures relating to special operations forces and capabilities within DOD, pursuant to DODD 5105.79. See also 10 U.S.C. § 139b which codified the SOPOC.

selected leading practices for interagency collaboration, and DOD Instruction 5025.01.⁷

For objective two, we analyzed the Secretariat's staffing levels from October 2018 through September 2023. We determined the staffing data were sufficiently reliable for our reporting objective by comparing staffing numbers across implementation reports and obtaining clarification from Secretariat officials on discrepancies. We compared the Secretariat's staffing levels with its 2017 and 2022 staffing assessments. We also reviewed the Secretariat's March 2023 risk assessment, which assessed risk posed by staffing gaps. Finally, we compared the Secretariat's staffing plan against selected principles from *GAO's Key Principles for Effective Strategic Workforce Planning* and DOD's guidance on civilian strategic human capital planning.⁸

For objective three, we reviewed documentation relating to the Secretariat's office space and IT access. We interviewed officials in the Office of the Under Secretary of Defense for Policy (OUSD (Policy)), Washington Headquarters Services, and Joint Service Provider about the Secretariat's hiring, office space, and IT challenges. We compared DOD's efforts to clarify the ASD-SO/LIC's administrative role against the *Standards for Internal Control in the Federal Government* and selected leading practices for interagency collaboration.⁹

For all objectives, we interviewed or obtained written responses from DOD officials in the Office of the ASD-SO/LIC, the Secretariat, SOCOM, and the Army. See appendix I for a more detailed discussion of our scope and methodology.

⁷GAO, *Standards for Internal Control in the Federal Government*, [GAO-14-704G](#) (Washington, D.C.: Sept. 10, 2014) and *Government Performance Management: Leading Practices to Enhance Interagency Collaboration and Address Crosscutting Challenges*, [GAO-23-105520](#) (Washington, D.C.: May 24, 2023). DOD Instruction 5025.01 establishes policy, assigns responsibilities, and provides procedures for the development, coordination, approval, publication, and review of DOD issuances. See DOD Instruction 5025.01, *DoD Issuances Program*. (Aug. 1, 2016) (incorporating Change 4, June 7, 2023).

⁸GAO, *Human Capital: Key Principles for Effective Strategic Workforce Planning*, [GAO-04-39](#) (Washington, D.C.: Dec. 11, 2003); and DOD Instruction 1400.25, Vol. 250, *DoD Civilian Personnel Management System: Civilian Strategic Human Capital Planning* (SHCP) (June 7, 2016).

⁹[GAO-14-704G](#); [GAO-23-105520](#).

We conducted this performance audit from November 2022 to March 2024 in accordance with generally accepted government auditing standards. Those standards require that we plan and perform the audit to obtain sufficient, appropriate evidence to provide a reasonable basis for our findings and conclusions based on our audit objectives. We believe that the evidence obtained provides a reasonable basis for our findings and conclusions based on our audit objectives.

Background

SOCOM's Responsibilities and Organization

SOCOM is the functional combatant command responsible for organizing, training, equipping, and providing fully capable SOF to defend the United States and its interests.¹⁰ Subject to the authority, direction and control of the Secretary of Defense, the Commander of SOCOM is responsible for, and has the authority to conduct, all affairs of command for the following special operations activities: (1) direct action, (2) strategic reconnaissance, (3) unconventional warfare, (4) foreign internal defense, (5) civil affairs, (6) military information support operations, (7) counterterrorism, (8) humanitarian assistance, (9) theater search and rescue, (10) countering weapons of mass destruction, and (11) other activities such as may be specified by the President or the Secretary of Defense.

In addition, SOCOM is responsible for developing special operations strategy, doctrine, and tactics; the employment of forces of the command to carry out assigned missions; requirements validation; acquisition of special operations-peculiar equipment; and formulating and submitting requirements for intelligence support, among other things. For additional information on the organizational structure of SOCOM, see appendix II.

The ASD-SO/LIC's Service Secretary-Like and Policy Roles and Responsibilities

Congress established the position of the ASD-SO/LIC in the National Defense Authorization Act for Fiscal Year 1987 in order to provide oversight of special operations activities.¹¹ To strengthen the oversight of SOF and SOCOM, section 922 of the National Defense Authorization Act for Fiscal Year 2017 included reforms to enhance the service secretary-

¹⁰A combatant command is a unified or specified command with a broad continuing mission under a single commander established and so designated by the President, through the Secretary of Defense and with the advice and assistance of the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff. See *DOD Dictionary of Military and Associated Terms* (September 2023).

¹¹See Pub. L. No. 99-661, § 1311 (1986).

like role of the ASD-SO/LIC.¹² Prior to section 922, ASD-SO/LIC coordinated regularly with SOCOM on administrative matters, such as reviewing SOCOM's budget materials. Currently, the ASD-SO/LIC's service secretary-like responsibilities include, among other things, leading development of the SOF program objective memorandum and budget estimate, as well as issuing programming and fiscal guidance to SOCOM.¹³ Section 922 also changed the administrative chain of command for SOF-related matters to place the ASD-SO/LIC directly under the Secretary of Defense for all special operations-peculiar administrative matters relating to the organization, training, and equipping of SOF. Finally, section 922 codified the SOPOC in section 139b of title 10, U.S. Code.

The ASD-SO/LIC's statutory responsibilities under section 922 comprise both service secretary-like and policy roles and responsibilities.¹⁴ Specifically:

- **Service secretary-like role.** The ASD-SO/LIC has overall supervision responsibilities, including related to policy and resources, for special operations activities. In addition, the ASD-SO/LIC exercises authority, direction, and control of all special operations-peculiar administrative matters relating to organizing, training, and equipping SOF. For this role, the ASD-SO/LIC reports directly to the Secretary of Defense.
- **Policy role.** The ASD-SO/LIC assists the Secretary of Defense and OUSD (Policy) in developing and supervising policy, program planning and execution, and allocation and use of resources for irregular warfare, combating terrorism, and special operations activities. For this role, the ASD-SO/LIC reports to OUSD (Policy).

In November 2020, the Acting Secretary of Defense designated the ASD-SO/LIC as a Principal Staff Assistant and advisor to the Secretary and Deputy Secretary of Defense for special operations policy and special

¹²Pub. L. No. 114-328, § 922 (2016) and codified at 10 U.S.C. § 138(b).

¹³Implementation of the "service secretary-like" role was further reinforced in section 917 of the John S. McCain National Defense Authorization Act for Fiscal Year 2019, Pub. L. No. 115-232, § 917 (2018) which directed the Secretary of Defense to ensure implementation of section 922.

¹⁴The conference report accompanying the National Defense Authorization Act for Fiscal Year 2017 uses the phrase "service secretary-like" to describe the ASD-SO/LIC's responsibility for the oversight and advocacy of SOCOM and organizing, training, and equipping SOF.

operations-peculiar administrative matters.¹⁵ The Acting Secretary of Defense also (1) gave the ASD-SO/LIC budget authority similar to that of the Secretaries of the military departments, (2) designated the ASD-SO/LIC as a member of various DOD senior leadership forums, and (3) removed the ASD-SO/LIC and its offices from OUSD (Policy). In May 2021, the Secretary of Defense returned the ASD-SO/LIC to OUSD (Policy). In addition, the Secretary of Defense reaffirmed the ASD-SO/LIC's, (1) participation in senior leadership forums; (2) status as a Principal Staff Assistant; and (3) direct reporting to the Secretary of Defense in his service secretary-like role.¹⁶

DOD also updated, in May 2021, DOD Directive 5111.10, referred to by DOD officials as the ASD-SO/LIC's charter.¹⁷ This update was to further prescribe the service secretary-like roles and responsibilities under section 922. Under the updated charter, these responsibilities include (1) performing a budgetary role and responsibility similar to those of the Secretaries of the military departments; (2) establishing a Special Access Programs Central Office and serving as cognizant authority for all SOCOM Special Access Programs (SAP); and (3) conducting oversight to determine whether the SOCOM Commander's acquisition programs are consistent with budget and required capability priorities.¹⁸

The Secretariat's Roles and Responsibilities

After the enactment of section 922, the ASD-SO/LIC established the Secretariat to focus on the organize, train, and equip functions for special operations. Congress then codified the role of the Secretariat in section 139b of title 10, in the William M. (Mac) Thornberry National Defense

¹⁵The Principal Staff Assistants provide advice, assistance, and support to the Secretary of Defense in managing the department and in carrying out such duties as may be prescribed by the Secretary or by law. See DOD Directive 5100.01, *Functions of the Department of Defense and Its Major Components* (Dec. 21, 2010) (Incorporating Change 1, Sep. 17, 2020).

¹⁶Secretary of Defense Memorandum, *Organizational Role of the Assistant Secretary of Defense for Special Operations and Low Intensity Conflict* (Nov. 18, 2020) and Secretary of Defense Memorandum, *Organizational Role of the Assistant Secretary of Defense for Special Operations and Low-Intensity Conflict* (May 5, 2021).

¹⁷DOD Directive 5111.10.

¹⁸SAPs are programs established for a specific class of classified information that impose safeguarding and access requirements that exceed those normally required for information at the same classification level. The Deputy Secretary of Defense designates certain DOD component heads or agency heads—for example, the Secretary of a military department—as cognizant authorities to manage and execute their respective SAPs. See DOD Directive 5205.07, *Special Access Program (SAP) Policy* (July 1, 2020)(incorporating Change 2, Feb. 4, 2020); DOD Directive 5111.10; and [GAO-19-386](#).

Authorization Act for Fiscal Year 2021. The Secretariat assists the ASD-SO/LIC in carrying out its service secretary-like oversight roles and responsibilities under section 922.¹⁹ The Secretariat’s responsibilities include developing policy and providing oversight and guidance on special operations and irregular warfare resources, requirements, programs, policies, strategies, and plans through active collaboration across DOD and integration into DOD processes.²⁰ Figure 1 shows the Secretariat’s organizational structure.

Figure 1: Secretariat for Special Operations’ Organizational Structure



Source: GAO analysis of Department of Defense information. | GAO-24-106372

^aIn March 2023, the Deputy Secretary of Defense approved a new senior executive to focus on ASD-SO/LIC’s service secretary-like responsibilities. Previously, the Principal Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defense was responsible for both ASD-SO/LIC’s service secretary-like and policy roles, according to Secretariat officials.

^bIn July 2023, the Deputy Secretary of Defense approved a new senior executive allocation to serve as Principal Director. The Principal Director position was not previously a senior executive position.

^cIn May 2023, the Deputy Secretary of Defense shifted the Irregular Warfare Technical Support Directorate from OUSD (Policy) to the Secretariat.

¹⁹See Pub. L. No. 116-283, § 902 (2021).

²⁰Assistant Secretary of Defense for Special Operations and Low-Intensity Conflict, “Secretariat for Special Operations (SSO) 101 Briefing,” (Sept. 12, 2023).

GAO's May 2019 Report and Congressional Requirements on Section 922 Implementation

In May 2019, we reported on the status of section 922 implementation and challenges the department faced in implementing the reforms.²¹ We found that DOD and the ASD-SO/LIC took various actions to implement section 922, including implementing most of the identified action items from the implementation report, conducting a staffing assessment, and developing a hiring plan. However, we recommended that DOD (1) define implementation time frames for completing action items necessary to implement the ASD-SO/LIC's expanded responsibilities under section 922; (2) clarify the roles and responsibilities of the ASD-SO/LIC's relationships with DOD components that have vested interests in the SOF enterprise; and (3) develop a strategic workforce plan that aligns with long-term mission goals, fully involves stakeholders, and includes strategies to address critical competency gaps and identify related personnel requirements. DOD and the ASD-SO/LIC fully addressed our recommendations by adding time frames for completing the remaining action items, updating the ASD-SO/LIC's charter, and updating their strategic workforce plan.

Since our 2019 report, Congress codified the Secretariat in statute and placed additional requirements for DOD to further implement section 922. For example, it required DOD to conduct an updated "manpower study" (staffing assessment) for the Secretariat and create a staffing plan based on that staffing assessment.²² See table 1 for a timeline of selected section 922 congressional requirements and implementation milestones.

²¹[GAO-19-386](#).

²²Joint Explanatory Statement accompanying the National Defense Authorization Act for Fiscal Year 2022, Committee print No. 2 at 1116 (2021); Pub. L. No. 117-263, § 1089 (2022). The Joint Explanatory Statement requires DOD to conduct an updated "manpower study" for the Secretariat, which we refer to as a "staffing assessment."

Table 1: Selected Section 922 Congressional Requirements and Implementation Milestones

Date	Event
December 2016	Section 922 of the NDAA for FY 2017 is enacted
June 2018	Senate Report accompanying a bill for the NDAA for FY 2019 requires DOD to report regularly on section 922 implementation
November 2020	Acting Secretary of Defense expands the ASD-SO/LIC's role and removes it from OUSD (Policy)
January 2021	Congress codifies the Secretariat's role in Title 10, U.S. Code in the NDAA for FY 2021
May 2021	Secretary of Defense returns the ASD-SO/LIC to OUSD (Policy) and the ASD-SO/LIC's charter is updated
December 2021	Joint Explanatory Statement for NDAA for FY 2022 requires DOD to conduct an updated staffing assessment for the Secretariat
December 2022	Section 1089 of the NDAA for FY 2023 requires DOD to create a staffing plan based on updated staffing assessment

Legend:

ASD-SO/LIC = Assistant Secretary of Defense for Special Operations and Low-Intensity Conflict

DOD = Department of Defense

FY = fiscal year

NDAA = National Defense Authorization Act

OUSD (Policy) = Office of the Under Secretary of Defense for Policy

Source: GAO analysis of congressional and DOD information. | GAO-24-106372

The Secretariat Reported Mostly Implementing Section 922, but Has Not Fully Documented Oversight Policies

In its final report on section 922 implementation, the Secretariat reported completing most of its implementation benchmarks. Our interviews with officials highlighted examples of DOD providing the ASD-SO/LIC with increased responsibilities and the Secretariat with increased resources to support the ASD-SO/LIC. However, the Secretariat has not fully documented its policies for overseeing SOCOM.

The Secretariat Reported Having Completed Most of the 57 Implementation Benchmarks

In its January 2023 implementation report, the Secretariat reported on the status of its 57 implementation benchmarks and grouped them into the following six categories: (1) SOF programs and requirements; (2) SOF acquisition, technology, and logistics; (3) SOF budgeting processes; (4) SOF personnel; (5) SAPs and sensitive activities; and (6) other matters (e.g., legislative affairs, public affairs, general counsel, and inspector general-type functions). The Secretariat reported regularly to Congress on benchmark implementation status from September 2018 through January 2023. The Secretariat stated that January 2023 would be the

final report because the implementation actions were largely complete.²³ Secretariat officials stated that the reports constitute the most comprehensive lists of actions taken to implement section 922, including the most significant.

The January 2023 report states that the Secretariat completed 49 benchmarks to implement section 922; the remaining eight benchmarks were either not implemented or were in various stages of completion, as shown in figure 2.²⁴ (See appendix III for a full list of implementation benchmarks, by category, and their reported status.)

Figure 2: Secretariat for Special Operations' Reported Status of Implementation Benchmarks, as of January 2023



Source: DOD report on section 922 implementation. | GAO-24-106372

Note: Benchmarks are (1) "complete" when objectives have been met and no further actions are required, (2) "partially implemented" when objectives have been partially met and no further actions are required, (3) "in progress" when additional actions are required and ongoing, and (4) "not implemented" when objectives have not been met and no further actions are required.

The one **partially implemented** and two **not implemented** benchmarks in the Secretariat's January 2023 report relate to public affairs. Secretariat officials told us in October 2023 that they are accomplishing the intent of these benchmarks through the work of the Secretariat's External Affairs directorate, and now consider these benchmarks complete. Additional information about the status of these three benchmarks is provided in table 2.

²³Secretariat for Special Operations, *Report on Implementation of Requirements for the Management of Special Operations Forces and Special Operations* (Jan. 1, 2023).

²⁴Secretariat for Special Operations, *Report on Implementation of Requirements for the Management of Special Operations Forces and Special Operations*.

Table 2: Status of Benchmarks the Secretariat for Special Operations Reported as Partially or Not Implemented in January 2023, as of October 2023

Reported status in January 2023	Category	Benchmark	Additional information as of October 2023
Partially implemented ^a	Other matters	The Assistant Secretary of Defense for Special Operations and Low-Intensity Conflict (ASD-SO/LIC) coordinates on congressional engagement plans relevant to special operations forces (SOF) public affairs issues.	The Secretariat coordinated on engagement plans for some high-profile public affairs issues, according to the Secretariat’s January 2023 report. As of October 2023, Secretariat officials stated that they are accomplishing the intent of this recommendation through the External Affairs directorate and considered the benchmark complete. For example, the External Affairs directorate coordinates continuously with the Office of the Secretary of Defense’s and SOCOM’s legislative and public affairs offices, according to Secretariat officials.
Not implemented ^b	Other matters	The ASD-SO/LIC coordinates on public affairs guidance relevant to SOF.	As of January 2023, the Secretariat reported that it is notified of public affairs guidance, though potential changes were under consideration that could strengthen the ASD-SO/LIC’s involvement in public affairs. As of October 2023, Secretariat officials stated that they were accomplishing the intent of this recommendation through the External Affairs directorate and considered the benchmark complete. For example, the External Affairs directorate shares planning documents on upcoming external engagements and public affairs opportunities with the Office of the Secretary of Defense’s and SOCOM’s public affairs offices.
		The ASD-SO/LIC is notified of SOF-related public affairs guidance approved by the military departments.	As of October 2023, Secretariat officials stated that they were accomplishing the intent of this recommendation through the External Affairs directorate and considered the benchmark complete. For example, the External Affairs directorate has contributed to planning media engagements and reviewed talking points and guidance on issues affecting the ASD-SO/LIC’s service secretary-like role.

Source: GAO analysis of DOD documents. | GAO-24-106372

^aObjectives have been partially met and no further actions are required.

^bObjectives have not been met and no further actions are required.

According to the Secretariat’s January 2023 report, five benchmarks were in progress, meaning the Secretariat would continue taking actions to implement them. However, as of October 2023, Secretariat officials said that two of the benchmarks were partially implemented—meaning no further actions would be taken on them—and three benchmarks remained in progress (see table 3).

Table 3: Status of Benchmarks the Secretariat for Special Operations Reported as In Progress in January 2023, as of October 2023

Reported status in January 2023	Category	Benchmark	Additional information as of October 2023
In progress ^a	Special operations forces (SOF) programs and requirements	Establish a new DOD directive for the Special Operations Policy and Oversight Council (SOPOC).	DOD published an updated DOD directive in February 2018, but another update was in progress as of January 2023. In October 2023, Secretariat officials told us that they expected to publish the update in December 2023 and considered the benchmark partially implemented. On December 26, 2023, the Assistant Secretary of Defense for Special Operations and Low-Intensity Conflict (ASD-SO/LIC) published an updated DOD instruction for the SOPOC. ^b
		Establish and fill senior leadership positions with rank and seniority commensurate with Secretariat functions.	The ASD-SO/LIC had requested two billets for senior executives to support the Secretariat as of January 2023. The Deputy Secretary of Defense approved these billets in March and July 2023. As of October 2023, Secretariat officials considered the benchmark partially implemented while they work with Washington Headquarters Services to fill these billets.
	SOF acquisition, technology, and logistics	Document changes as necessary in DOD issuances and strategic guidance documents.	DOD will revise directives, instructions, and manuals through the normal update cycle, according to the Secretariat's January 2023 report. Secretariat officials stated in October 2023 that this benchmark remains in progress as revisions would be ongoing.
	Other matters	Long-term organization construct developed for the Secretariat.	The Secretariat's organizational structure is under regular reevaluation, according to the Secretariat's January 2023 report and Secretariat officials in October 2023, so the benchmark remains in progress.
The ASD-SO/LIC and the Commander of U.S. Special Operations Command prescribe their respective roles with regard to legislative affairs, as well as the appropriate organization, coordination, and staffing of legislative affairs support.		Officials stated in October 2023 that this benchmark was pending publication of formal guidance on legislative affairs functions for the SOF enterprise, so the benchmark remains in progress.	

Source: GAO analysis of DOD documents. | GAO-24-106372

^aAdditional actions are required and are ongoing.

^bThe ASD-SO/LIC published DOD Instruction 3901.01 (Special Operations Policy and Oversight Council) on December 26, 2023, which canceled DOD Directive 3801.01 (Special Operations Policy and Oversight Council (SOPOC)) (Feb. 12, 2018).

The ASD-SO/LIC's Responsibilities and the Secretariat's Resources Have Increased

Our interviews with officials highlighted examples of the ASD-SO/LIC's expanded responsibilities, as well as increases in the Secretariat's resources over time to assist the ASD-SO/LIC in performing those responsibilities. Specifically:

- **Involvement in senior leadership forums.** In November 2020, the Acting Secretary of Defense designated the ASD-SO/LIC either as an advisor or member of 19 senior leadership forums, such as the Deputy's Management Action Group and Defense Acquisition Board.²⁵ A senior SOCOM official described the ASD-SO/LIC's participation in senior leadership forums as a significant benefit because it has led to useful feedback to SOCOM leadership.
- **Designation as the cognizant authority for SAPs.** In December 2020, the Deputy Secretary of Defense designated the ASD-SO/LIC as the cognizant authority for SAPs in lieu of the Commander of SOCOM.²⁶ Secretariat officials told us that it was challenging to conduct oversight when the SOCOM Commander was the cognizant authority for SAPs. Since becoming the cognizant authority, the ASD-SO/LIC continues to delegate some functions to SOCOM, and SOCOM officials perform operational (day-to-day) tasks, according to Secretariat and SOCOM officials.²⁷
- **Publication of updated ASD-SO/LIC charter.** In May 2021, DOD published an update to the ASD-SO/LIC's charter to reflect the ASD-SO/LIC's expanded authorities under section 922.²⁸ Secretariat officials told us that this update was essential for codifying the ASD-SO/LIC's authority.

²⁵Secretary of Defense Memorandum, *Organizational Role of the Assistant Secretary of Defense for Special Operations and Low Intensity Conflict* (Nov. 18, 2020). In May 2021, the Secretary of Defense reaffirmed the ASD-SO/LIC's participation in these forums. Secretary of Defense Memorandum, *Organizational Role of the Assistant Secretary of Defense for Special Operations and Low-Intensity Conflict* (May 5, 2021).

²⁶Deputy Secretary of Defense Memorandum, *Organizational Role of the Assistant Secretary of Defense for Special Operations and Low Intensity Conflict with Respect to U.S. Special Operations Command* (Dec. 30, 2020). The Deputy Secretary of Defense designates certain DOD component heads or agency heads—for example, the Secretary of a military department—as cognizant authorities to manage and execute their respective SAPs, according to DOD Directive 5205.07. The ASD-SO/LIC's role as cognizant authority was later detailed in DOD Directive 5111.10.

²⁷Assistant Secretary of Defense for Special Operations and Low-Intensity Conflict Memorandum, *Delegation of Cognizant Authority* (Apr. 22, 2021).

²⁸DOD Directive 5111.10.

Special Operations Policy and Oversight Council (SOPOC)

The SOPOC serves as a supporting tier governance forum and focal point for developing and improving policy, joint processes, and procedures relating to special operations forces and capabilities within DOD.

For example, the Assistant Secretary of Defense for Special Operations and Low-Intensity Conflict engaged U.S. Special Operations Command and the Navy through the SOPOC about the future of the Naval Small Craft Instruction and Technical Training School in Mississippi (see photo).

Additionally, the Office of the Undersecretary of Defense (Intelligence and Security) told us that participating in the SOPOC increases collaboration and coordination across stakeholders. Finally, Navy officials told us that the SOPOC is effective at focusing attention on specific issues and driving leaders toward decisions.



Source: GAO (text); U.S. Navy/Michael Williams (photo). | GAO-24-106372

- **Approval of SOCOM's programming and budget.** The Secretariat reviews and approves SOCOM's program objective memorandums and budget, per the ASD-SO/LIC's charter.²⁹ Secretariat and SOCOM officials told us that SOCOM prepares budget documents and that Secretariat officials review and evaluate their work and then make recommendations to the ASD-SO/LIC on the approval of the budget. Secretariat officials told us that the Secretariat would need significantly more staff to develop the budget for SOF.
- **Resumption of the SOPOC.** The SOPOC, which is led by the ASD-SO/LIC, resumed meeting in May 2022 (see sidebar). Congress codified the SOPOC through section 922, and DOD published the SOPOC's initial charter in February 2018. However, the SOPOC had not met for over 5 years.³⁰ Secretariat officials attributed the lack of meetings to the absence of Senate-confirmed leadership, and a senior SOCOM official attributed it to the Secretariat's staffing limitations. The ASD-SO/LIC published an updated DOD instruction for the SOPOC in December 2023.³¹
- **Approval of additional senior leadership positions.** In March and July 2023, the Deputy Secretary of Defense approved two additional Senior Executive Service positions to support the ASD-SO/LIC's service secretary-like responsibilities—despite limitations on Senior Executive Service billets department-wide.³² In a March 2023 hearing, the Assistant Secretary of Defense for Special Operations and Low-Intensity Conflict testified that the Office of the ASD-SO/LIC needed additional leadership billets to participate in DOD meetings at the appropriate level of seniority. Secretariat officials similarly told us that there were too few senior leaders to support the Secretariat's work. As a result, the Secretariat did not have representation at all relevant meetings. In addition, Secretariat officials said that the lack of senior

²⁹The program objective memorandum is the final product of the programming process within DOD. A component's program objective memorandum displays the resource allocation decisions of the military department in response to, and in accordance with, the Defense Planning Guidance. The program objective memorandum shows programmed needs 5 years hence (for example, in fiscal year 2016, POM 2018–2022 would be submitted). *Defense Acquisition University Glossary of Defense Acquisition Acronyms and Terms* (September 2023).

³⁰DOD Directive 3801.01, *Special Operations Policy and Oversight Council (SOPOC)* (Feb. 12, 2018).

³¹See DOD Instruction 3901.01, which canceled DOD Directive 3801.01.

³²According to officials in the Office of the Director of Administration and Management, there were 80 requests for six available Senior Executive Service billets DOD-wide, and the Secretariat received two billets.

leaders could create challenges for oversight, such as Secretariat staff providing oversight to higher ranking officials, such as general and flag officers at SOCOM.

- Expansion of the Secretariat.** The Secretariat’s staffing has increased notably in recent years. Specifically, it increased from 22 full-time staff in October 2018 to 56 in September 2023, though there are ongoing limitations as we discuss later in this report.³³ From October 2022 through July 2023, the Secretariat also added directorates focused on (1) external affairs, (2) irregular warfare technical support, and (3) manpower and force resiliency (see fig. 3).

Figure 3: Changes to the Secretariat for Special Operations’ Structure from October 2022 through July 2023



Source: GAO analysis of Department of Defense information. | GAO-24-106372

^aIn March 2023, the Deputy Secretary of Defense approved a new senior executive to focus on the Assistant Secretary of Defense for Special Operations and Low-Intensity Conflict’s (ASD-SO/LIC) service secretary-like responsibilities. Previously, the Principal Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defense for Special Operations was responsible for both ASD-SO/LIC’s service secretary-like and policy roles, according to Secretariat officials.

^bIn July 2023, the Deputy Secretary of Defense approved a new senior executive allocation to serve as Principal Director. The Principal Director position was not previously a senior executive position.

^cIn May 2023, the Deputy Secretary of Defense shifted the Irregular Warfare Technical Support Directorate from the Office of the Under Secretary of Defense for Policy to the Secretariat.

³³The Secretariat’s reported staffing figures do not include the Irregular Warfare Technical Support Directorate, which was shifted to the Secretariat from OUSD (Policy) in May 2023. Secretariat officials stated that the directorate had over 130 staff as of November 2023, but that these staff could not be used to support the rest of the Secretariat’s workforce.

The Secretariat Has Not Fully Documented Policies for Overseeing SOCOM in Key Areas

The Secretariat assists the ASD-SO/LIC in performing its service secretary-like responsibilities, but it has not fully documented policies for how it performs this oversight. There are instances where the Secretariat and SOCOM have documented some oversight policies, such as for SAPs, acquisitions, and requirements. For example, the ASD-SO/LIC issued a memorandum in April 2021 detailing SAP responsibilities for the Secretariat and SOCOM.³⁴ The ASD-SO/LIC also issued a memorandum in March 2022 designating two of SOCOM's acquisitions as "special interest programs" and establishing reporting and other requirements for SOCOM.³⁵ SOCOM Directive 71-4 documents responsibilities for the ASD-SO/LIC related to requirements, including serving as a member of the Special Operations Command Requirements Evaluation Board, and SOCOM Directive 10-12 requires quarterly program reviews with the Secretariat about SOCOM's Preservation of the Force and Family.³⁶

However, Secretariat and SOCOM officials told us that the Secretariat's and SOCOM's respective work processes are often personality driven and not always based on documented policies. Examples of areas that do not have fully documented policies include (1) budget and programming, (2) legislative affairs, (3) operations, (4) personnel, and (5) public affairs activities (see table 4).

³⁴Assistant Secretary of Defense for Special Operations and Low-Intensity Conflict Memorandum, *Delegation of Cognizant Authority (CA)* (April 22, 2021).

³⁵Assistant Secretary of Defense for Special Operations and Low-Intensity Conflict Memorandum, *Assistant Secretary of Defense for Special Operations and Low Intensity Conflict Special Interest Programs Designation* (Mar. 14, 2022).

³⁶U.S. Special Operations Command Directive 71-4, *Special Operations Forces Capabilities Integration and Development System* (Jan. 22, 2020); U.S. Special Operations Command Directive 10-12, *U.S. Special Operations Command Preservation of the Force and Family* (Jan. 7, 2023).

Table 4: Examples of Areas Where DOD Officials Report That Policies Are Not Documented

Area	Description
Budget and programming	The Assistant Secretary of Defense for Special Operations and Low-Intensity Conflict (ASD-SO/LIC) is responsible for approving U.S. Special Operations Command's (SOCOM) program objective memorandums and annual budget. ^a However, SOCOM officials were unaware of guidance for programming or documentation detailing the roles of the ASD-SO/LIC and the Secretariat for Special Operations. The Secretariat also performs a number of budget-related actions, such as participating in budget rollout briefings and leading development and justification of budget estimate submission materials. However, SOCOM and the Secretariat have not documented how they collaborate on the budget, according to SOCOM officials.
Legislative affairs	The ASD-SO/LIC coordinates with the Commander of SOCOM on legislative matters and conducts engagements with Congress jointly when appropriate. ^a Secretariat and SOCOM officials said they have positive working relationships with their legislative affairs counterparts. However, a Secretariat official expressed concern that this dynamic could change in the future due to staff turnover. Both Secretariat and SOCOM officials supported further documentation of legislative affairs processes.
Operations	According to a SOCOM official, SOCOM's Directorate of Operations provides quarterly briefings to the ASD-SO/LIC on readiness and other topics, and the ASD-SO/LIC approves SOCOM's contribution to readiness reports to Congress. However, there is no document defining the interactions between SOCOM's operations directorate and the Secretariat. Instead, interactions are personality driven and guided by what had been previously agreed to, rather than by documented processes.
Personnel	The ASD-SO/LIC and SOCOM collaborate on a variety of personnel-related issues, such as recruiting guidance, ethics and professionalism, and valor notifications. For example, the Secretariat's January 2023 report on section 922 implementation states that the ASD-SO/LIC is informed of high-level valor notifications (Silver Star and above) and death notifications. However, a SOCOM official was unaware of any documentation requiring SOCOM to send information to the Office of the ASD-SO/LIC, but the official told us that SOCOM sends the information anyway for situational awareness. For example, the official told us that SOCOM informs the Office of the ASD-SO/LIC about valor notifications but there was no set process as of March 2023.
Public affairs	The ASD-SO/LIC's charter authorizes the ASD-SO/LIC to perform public affairs activities. The Secretariat's External Affairs directorate coordinates continuously with SOCOM's public affairs office, according to Secretariat officials. However, a SOCOM official told us there is not documentation on the relationship between SOCOM and the Secretariat for public affairs.

Source: GAO interviews with DOD officials and analysis of DOD documentation. | GAO-24-106372

^aDOD Directive 5111.10, Assistant Secretary of Defense for Special Operations and Low-Intensity Conflict (May 5, 2021).

The Secretariat has not fully documented its policies for providing oversight for two reasons:

1. **DOD's Office of the Director of Administration and Management has concerns about the ASD-SO/LIC's authority to issue guidance.** The ASD-SO/LIC approved two new DOD instructions in August 2023 and November 2023.³⁷ Secretariat officials told us they

³⁷DOD Instruction 3902.02, *Special Operations Forces Foreign Language, Regional Expertise, and Culture Policy* (Washington, D.C.: Aug. 17, 2023); DOD Instruction 3902.01, *Special Operations Forces: Joint Combined Exchange Training Program* (Nov. 16, 2023).

are also working to develop another option—special operations instructions—that would provide guidance from the ASD-SO/LIC to the SOF enterprise. However, in October 2023, a senior official in the Office of the Director of Administration and Management told us that the ASD-SO/LIC’s service secretary-like responsibilities under section 922 were ambiguous. Specifically, the senior official said it was unclear whether the ASD-SO/LIC could establish both DOD-wide policy and policy applying only to SOCOM.³⁸

As of October 2023, the Secretariat had not yet published any special operations instructions. Secretariat officials told us they were working first to clarify the ASD-SO/LIC’s authority and develop an issuance on how to publish special operations instructions.³⁹ The ASD-SO/LIC has broad statutory and regulatory authority under its charter to establish DOD-wide policy through DOD issuances, or through other policy guidance such as DOD instructions, directive-type memorandums, and policy memorandums.⁴⁰

- 2. Lack of a systematic approach for documenting oversight policies.** Directors and action officers are currently responsible for establishing policies in their areas of responsibility, but documenting these policies has not been a priority, according to Secretariat officials. As a result, the Secretariat and SOCOM have documented some policies through memorandums, SOCOM directives, and two DOD instructions, but other areas lack documented policies. While the Secretariat is working to establish special operations instructions, it

³⁸A senior official in the Office of the Director of Administration and Management told us the ASD-SO/LIC’s authority to issue DOD-wide policy is unlike the authority that Secretaries of the military departments have because the military departments are responsible for organizing, training, and equipping special operations forces. The Secretaries of the military departments cannot establish DOD-wide policy, but instead issue implementing guidance for their departments, such as Army regulations.

³⁹Secretariat officials identified the Administrative Procedures Act and its requirement to publish guidance as an example of administrative requirements that they will address through this initial guidance. They aim to publish this initial guidance by the end of 2023.

⁴⁰Specifically, the ASD-SO/LIC is delegated authority to establish DOD policy regarding those matters identified in 10 U.S.C. § 167(f) and for which the ASD-SO/LIC is designated a Principal Staff Assistant, through DOD instructions, directive-type memorandums, and rules published in the Federal Register, within the authorities and responsibilities assigned in the charter directive and in accordance with DOD Instruction 5025.01 or Administrative Instruction 102. In addition, the ASD-SO/LIC may approve other DOD instructions, directive-type memorandums, and DOD manuals in areas of assigned responsibilities and functions to implement previously established policy issued by the Secretary or Deputy Secretary of Defense. See DOD Directive 5111.10.

has not identified areas requiring additional guidance, according to Secretariat officials.

DOD Instruction 5025.01 states that Office of the Secretary of Defense components must maintain an accurate policy framework within their functional area of responsibility that is updated to reflect changes as they occur to ensure the effective and efficient functioning of DOD and its components.⁴¹ While the ASD-SO/LIC is not the head of an Office of the Secretary of Defense component, it is the Principal Staff Assistant for matters relating to special operations activities.⁴² Standards for Internal Control in the Federal Government states that management should establish an organizational structure, assign responsibility, and delegate authority to achieve the entity's objectives.⁴³ In addition, the federal internal control standards state that management should implement control activities through policies. Moreover, clarifying roles and responsibilities and developing and updating written guidance and agreements are two of eight leading practices we have identified in prior work to enhance interagency collaboration.⁴⁴ While not all collaborative arrangements need formal written guidance or agreements, such documentation can provide consistency in the long term.

Implementing a systematic approach to documenting policies could help ensure consistency in how the ASD-SO/LIC and the Secretariat oversee SOCOM in the long term, particularly during leadership transitions or changes in personnel. Secretariat officials agreed that documenting oversight policies through issuances, such as special operations instructions, is important to ensure that policies can be implemented, enforced, and maintained.

⁴¹DOD Instruction 5025.01, *DOD Issuances Program*, (Aug. 1, 2016) (Change 4, June 7, 2023).

⁴²DOD Directive 5111.10.

⁴³[GAO-14-704G](#).

⁴⁴"Interagency" collaboration involves collaboration or coordination between two or more federal entities, or within components of the same entity. "Collaboration" can be broadly defined as any joint activity that is intended to produce more public value than can be produced when the entities act alone. See [GAO-23-105520](#).

The Secretariat's Staffing Gaps Remain, and Staffing Plan Does Not Fully Incorporate Workforce Planning Principles

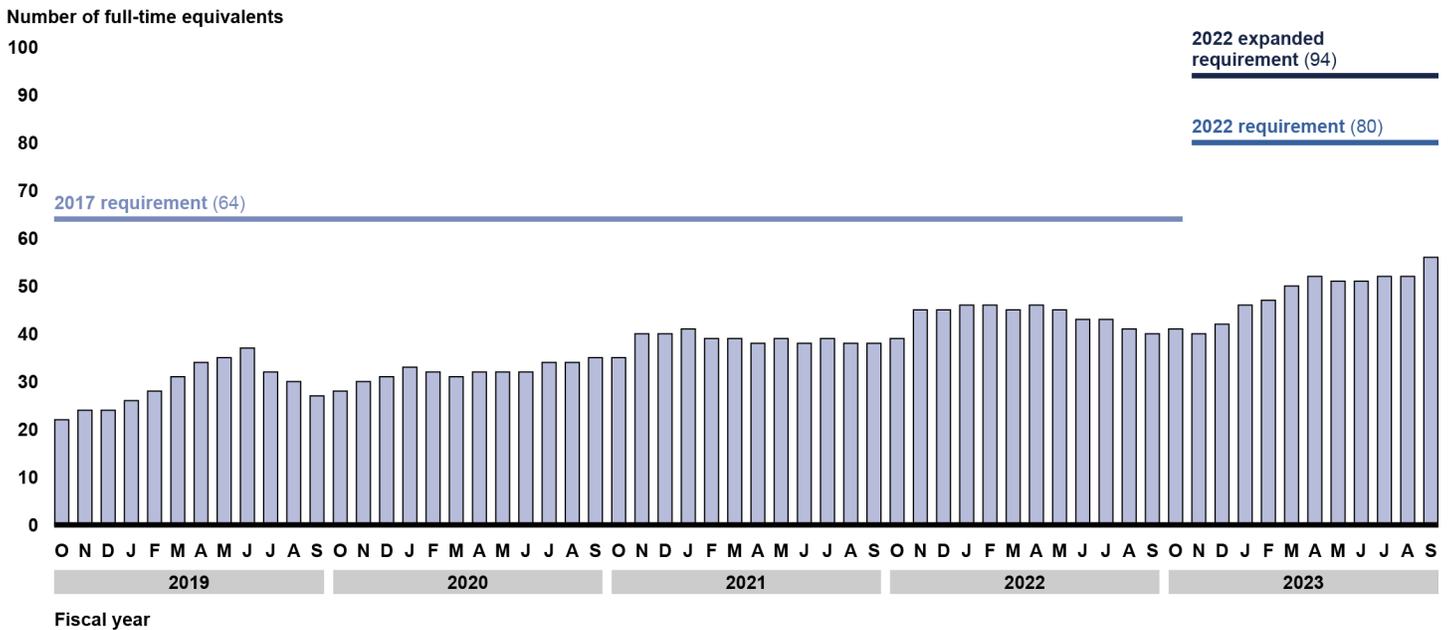
The Secretariat more than doubled its staffing levels since October 2018. However, as of September 2023, staffing remained below the levels required to fully oversee SOCOM, according to the Secretariat's staffing assessments. In November 2023, the Secretariat finalized the staffing plan required by Congress, including milestones to reach 69 FTEs by early 2024. However, the staffing plan does not fully incorporate some key principles for strategic workforce planning, such as aligning with long-term goals, identifying critical skill gaps, and developing strategies to address them.

Secretariat Staffing More Than Doubled Since Fiscal Year 2019, but Staffing Gaps Remain

The Secretariat's staffing increased from 22 full-time equivalents (FTE) in October 2018 to 56 FTEs by September 2023. However, the Secretariat's staffing remains below the levels required to fully oversee SOCOM, as shown in figure 4.⁴⁵

⁴⁵FTEs are calculated by dividing the number of regular hours employees worked, not including overtime or holiday hours, by the total working hours for each fiscal year.

Figure 4: Comparison of the Secretariat for Special Operations' Staffing Levels with Required Levels, Fiscal Years 2019–2023



were required to implement the ASD-SO/LIC's section 922 oversight responsibilities.

The Joint Explanatory Statement accompanying the National Defense Authorization Act for Fiscal Year 2022 required the Secretariat to update the October 2017 staffing assessment to validate the number and types of personnel necessary to support the Secretariat.⁴⁸ In the updated November 2022 assessment, the Secretariat determined that 80 FTEs (with an expanded target of 94 FTEs) are required for the Secretariat to conduct all of its oversight functions.⁴⁹ According to Secretariat officials, the Secretariat used the same methodology as in the 2017 assessment. However, in its 2022 assessment, the Secretariat identified 28 necessary oversight functions using the ASD-SO/LIC's updated May 2021 charter. Secretariat officials told us that the 2022 assessment included additional oversight functions, such as force resiliency; advising the Joint Requirements Oversight Council; and additional work on readiness, strategic communications, and special operations logistics policy, among other things. See appendix IV for a full list of the Secretariat's 28 oversight functions.

Secretariat officials stated that staff attrition has made it challenging to increase and maintain staffing levels. For example, Secretariat officials said that nine personnel left after the Secretariat's move from the Pentagon to the Mark Center in 2019.⁵⁰ Therefore, many of the Secretariat's hiring actions since then have been to backfill positions. In addition, Secretariat officials told us that there were limited opportunities for professional development and growth within the Secretariat. For example, Secretariat leadership must limit staff details to OUSD (Policy) to 6 months because the Secretariat cannot have more than one person

⁴⁸Joint Explanatory Statement accompanying the National Defense Authorization Act for Fiscal Year 2022, Committee print No. 2 at 1116 (2021).

⁴⁹The November 2022 staffing assessment included functions and responsibilities outlined in the updated DOD Directive 5111.10 and determined that 80 FTEs were required to conduct current oversight requirements. The assessment also included an expanded target of 94 FTEs, which includes a 20-percent adjustment for unanticipated workload and staff availability (e.g., leave and training) for some functions. However, officials from the Air Force Manpower Analysis Agency who reviewed the Secretariat's methodology said additional support is needed to justify these additional 14 FTEs. See Assistant Secretary of Defense for Special Operations and Low-Intensity Conflict, "Manpower Requirements and Assessment Report for the Secretariat for Special Operations (SSO)" (Nov. 30, 2022); Department of the Air Force Memorandum, "Validation of the Secretariat for Special Operations (SSO) Manpower Assessment" (Oct. 21, 2022).

⁵⁰Secretariat staff were subsequently moved back to the Pentagon in May 2020.

per directorate absent for a long period of time due to staffing constraints, according to Secretariat officials.

As of March 2023, the three largest directorates within the Secretariat did not have the required number of staff to perform all identified oversight functions. Specifically, the Secretariat identified a staffing gap of about 32 FTEs for these directorates. The largest staffing gaps are in the Programs, Budget, and Acquisition and the Special Programs directorates. Table 5 lists the (1) assigned staffing levels, (2) required staffing levels, and (3) resulting staffing gap for the Secretariat’s three largest directorates.

Table 5: Secretariat for Special Operations’ Directorates with the Largest Staffing Level Gaps, as of March 2023

In full-time equivalents

Directorate (description)	Assigned	Required	Gap
Programs, Budget, and Acquisition <i>Program and financial management; acquisition execution and policy; and science and technology development</i>	11	26.7	15.7
Special Programs <i>Sensitive activity and Special Access Programs funding and organization, including Special Access Program Central Office activities</i>	8	20.6	12.6
Strategy, Requirements, and Force Management <i>Readiness; force resiliency; policy and strategic guidance; personnel policy; and the Special Operations Policy and Oversight Council</i>	13	15.1	2.1
Other <i>External Affairs; Legal Audit and Compliance; and Leadership, Directors, and Executive Support Directorates</i>	16	17.8	1.8
Total	48	80.2	32.2

Source: GAO analysis of DOD information. | GAO-24-106372

Note: The Deputy Secretary of Defense moved the Irregular Warfare Technical Support Directorate from the Office of the Under Secretary of Defense for Policy to the Secretariat after the completion of the staffing assessment.

In March 2023, a Secretariat-conducted risk assessment concluded that staffing level gaps posed a high risk to the Secretariat’s ability to conduct two of its oversight functions: (1) leading efforts related to SOF strategy, force design, and development and (2) managing SAPs by establishing a Special Access Programs Central Office. As a result, according to the Secretariat’s assessment, the Secretariat is unable to perform all necessary oversight tasks and has a limited ability to represent SOF and participate in DOD-wide decision-making processes. In addition, staffing gaps posed a moderate risk for six of 28 oversight functions, meaning the

Secretariat could perform all high-priority tasks but may not be able to perform low-priority tasks for those functions.⁵¹ Table 6 lists, for the Secretariat’s three largest directorates, the number of oversight functions for which staffing gaps pose a high, moderate, or low risk of the directorate’s being unable to perform necessary tasks.

Table 6: Number of Oversight Functions by Directorate for Which Secretariat for Special Operations’ Staffing Gaps Pose Risk of the Directorate Being Unable to Perform Necessary Tasks, as of March 2023

Directorate	High ^a	Moderate ^b	Low ^c
Strategy, Requirements, and Force Management	1	3	9
Programs, Budget, and Acquisition	0	2	5
Special Programs	1	1	1
Other ^d	0	0	5
Total	2	6	20

Source: GAO analysis of DOD information. | GAO-24-106372

^aHigh risk: Secretariat is unable to perform some or all high-priority tasks for a function, resulting in critical mission impact.

^bModerate risk: Secretariat can perform all high-priority tasks but may not be able to perform low-priority tasks for a function.

^cLow risk: Secretariat can cover the functional tasks by sharing responsibilities within current staff.

^dOther: This comprises (1) External Affairs; (2) Legal, Audit, and Compliance; and (3) Cross Cutting Organizational Support.

The Secretariat determined that the specific functions requiring additional FTEs include budget oversight and financial management, personnel policy and oversight, and the Special Access Programs Central Office. Due to limited staffing, Secretariat officials told us that the Secretariat defers tasks for some of these functions to SOCOM.⁵² For example, as of June 2023, the Secretariat delegated authority for some tasks for SAP activities to SOCOM, which diminished oversight, according to Secretariat

⁵¹Secretariat officials identified the following oversight functions as being at moderate risk because of staffing gaps: (1) directing and coordinating activities related to SOF-specific issues raised in the Joint Capabilities Integration and Development System; (2) providing oversight, guidance, and advocacy for SOF-peculiar force resiliency initiatives; (3) conducting oversight of SOF education initiatives; (4) conducting oversight of SOF financial management; (5) conducting oversight of SOF program development; and (6) conducting oversight and policy guidance of SOF SAPs.

⁵²The Secretariat’s March 2023 risk assessment identified four additional options to mitigate risk besides deferring tasks to SOCOM: (1) hiring more staff; (2) sharing tasks across current staff; (3) not performing low-priority tasks; and (4) not performing some or all high-priority tasks. These options reduce high-risk functions from two to one and moderate risk functions from six to three, according to the risk assessment.

officials. In addition, the Secretariat defers budget execution tasks to SOCOM and identified financial management oversight as at moderate risk. SOCOM officials told us that, unlike the military service Secretariats, the Secretariat for Special Operations does not submit SOCOM's budget because of limited staff capacity and expertise to provide in-depth oversight. SOCOM officials told us additional Secretariat staff to focus on SOCOM's budget would be helpful.

Secretariat Staffing Plan Does Not Fully Incorporate Strategic Workforce Planning Principles

In November 2023, the Secretariat finalized the staffing plan required by statute and includes milestones for completing current hiring actions by early 2024.⁵³ Despite staffing limitations within the Office of the Secretary of Defense, the Secretariat received authorization to hire 15 new staff in fiscal year 2023, bringing the Secretariat's total authorized positions to 69 FTEs.⁵⁴ As of November 2023, the Secretariat filled seven of these positions and had twelve ongoing hiring actions, including eight for new positions and four to backfill vacant positions, as well as two new Senior Executive Service members. A senior Secretariat official told us that the Secretariat requested additional FTEs for future years and aspires to have around 90 FTEs by the end of fiscal year 2029.

However, the Secretariat could be better positioned to manage current and future hiring with a staffing plan that incorporates some key principles for strategic workforce planning. Strategic workforce planning addresses two critical needs: aligning an organization's human capital program with current and emerging mission and objectives, and developing long-term strategies for acquiring, developing, and retaining staff to achieve program goals. GAO's prior work on workforce planning identified the following five key principles: (1) involve top management, employees, and other stakeholders in developing the strategic workforce plan; (2) determine the critical skills and competencies needed to achieve long-term goals; (3) develop strategies that are tailored to address critical competency gaps; (4) build the capability needed to address

⁵³Section 1089 of the James M. Inhofe National Defense Authorization Act for Fiscal Year 2023 required the ASD-SO/LIC to submit a staffing plan no later than 30 days after completing the updated staffing assessment. The staffing plan is required to include, among other things, (1) a validated number of necessary personnel; (2) a hiring plan with milestones for gradually increasing the number of required personnel; (3) a breakdown of the optimal mix of required military, civilian, and contractor personnel; and (4) an identification of any anticipated funding shortfalls for personnel supporting the Secretariat across the Future Years Defense Program—the department's funding plan for the budget year and subsequent 4 fiscal years. See Pub. L. No. 117-263, § 1089 (2022).

⁵⁴The Office of the Secretary of Defense, of which the Secretariat is part, is limited by statute to no more than 4,300 personnel. See 10 U.S. Code § 143.

requirements important to supporting workforce strategies; and (5) monitor and evaluate the agency's progress toward human capital goals.⁵⁵

In addition, DOD guidance on civilian strategic human capital planning specifies that the strategic workforce planning process should identify critical skill gaps and develop strategies to manage the civilian workforce to address those gaps.⁵⁶ However, we found that the Secretariat's staffing plan does not fully incorporate the following two principles:

- **The staffing plan is not fully aligned with mission and goals.** As we previously reported, a key principle in strategic workforce planning is strategic alignment, which occurs when an agency's human capital program is linked with its mission and goals.⁵⁷ However, we found that the Secretariat has not clearly linked its staffing plan with its overall mission needs and long-term goals. Specifically, long-term goals in the Secretariat's staffing plan include completing the remaining fiscal year 2023 hiring, including hiring for analytics and manpower, personnel, and Special Programs oversight positions, among other functions. However, the plan does not specify how newly hired staff in fiscal year 2023 and ongoing hiring actions will help the Secretariat fully meet these goals.

In addition, the ASD-SO/LIC expects to request additional billets in the future to meet emerging requirements and gaps, such as establishing the Center for Special Operations Analytics and managing more administrative functions. However, the staffing plan includes no long-term plan for these additional billets or milestones for reaching the 80 FTEs requirement to fully oversee SOCOM, as identified in the Secretariat's staffing assessment. Furthermore, the staffing plan does not identify any anticipated funding shortfalls for personnel supporting the Secretariat across the Future Years Defense Program, as required by Congress. Although the Deputy Secretary of Defense shifted the Irregular Warfare Technical Support Directorate from OUSD (Policy) to the Secretariat in May 2023, the staffing plan does not address whether additional billets to support this directorate are needed.

⁵⁵[GAO-04-39](#).

⁵⁶DOD Instruction 1400.25, Vol. 250.

⁵⁷[GAO-19-386](#).

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- **The staffing plan does not identify or include strategies to address critical skill gaps.** GAO's strategic workforce planning principles and DOD's guidance on civilian strategic human capital planning specify that the strategic workforce planning process should identify critical skill gaps and develop strategies to address those gaps.⁵⁸ The Secretariat's 2022 staffing assessment, on which the staffing plan is based, identifies necessary tasks to fulfill its oversight responsibilities, but does not identify the skills needed to perform these tasks or assess any current competency or skill gaps. As a result, the staffing plan does not discuss whether there are skill or competency gaps among current staff or identify any needed skills for ongoing hiring actions. Secretariat officials told us that their leadership identified and discussed needed skills during the hiring process, but they have not conducted a systematic or formal skill assessment.

Furthermore, to address congressional requirements, the staffing plan stated that the Secretariat should increase the number of military staff but did not specify how many or identify strategies to do so. Finally, Secretariat officials told us that staff attrition and a lack of professional development opportunities made it challenging to increase and maintain staffing levels. However, the staffing plan does not include a discussion of other strategies, such as training, staff development and retention programs, performance management, or other human capital strategies, to address staffing and skill gaps.

A Secretariat official told us that the congressionally required staffing plan is a starting point as the Secretariat's role continues to evolve over time. However, without a staffing plan that is linked to long-term goals, such as establishing the Center for Special Operations Analytics, the Secretariat may not be able to systematically plan and develop strategies for future growth. In addition, without assessing critical skill gaps, the Secretariat may not know what gaps exist in skills and competencies and how to fill those gaps. Developing a staffing plan that incorporates the strategic workforce principles outlined above would help ensure the Secretariat hires personnel that adequately meet its future needs for overseeing SOCOM.

⁵⁸Strategies include the programs, policies, and practices that will enable an agency to recruit, develop, and retain the critical staff needed to achieve program goals. See [GAO-04-39](#); DOD Instruction 1400.25, Vol. 250.

The Secretariat Has Faced Hiring, Office Space, and IT Challenges

Because the Secretariat is part of the ASD-SO/LIC and the ASD-SO/LIC is part of OUSD (Policy), the Secretariat has received support from OUSD (Policy) across twelve functional areas (see fig. 6). Specifically, OUSD (Policy) has served as a liaison between the Secretariat and defense agencies providing administrative services, such as the Defense Information Systems Agency Joint Service Provider and Washington Headquarters Services, according to DOD officials.⁵⁹

Figure 5: Functional Areas Where Office of the Under Secretary of Defense for Policy Supports the Secretariat for Special Operations



Source: GAO analysis of Department of Defense information; GAO (design). | GAO-24-106372

^aIncludes property, parking, and records management

^bIncludes staffing/recruitment, on-boarding, and awards, among other services

^cIncludes managing the organizational structure, among other services

^dIncludes serving as the point of contact for all time and attendance and payroll-related matters

⁵⁹The Joint Service Provider provides IT services to Pentagon customers, and Washington Headquarters Services provides a broad range of administrative, management, and common support services, such as human resources and security clearance services, facilities and facility operations, and financial management. In this report, we use the term “administrative services” to encompass all such services, and “administrative role” to refer to the ASD-SO/LIC’s and Under Secretary of Defense for Policy’s roles in relation to such services, such as requesting or providing input on services. DOD Directive 5110.04, *Washington Headquarters Services* (March 27, 2013) (Incorporating Change 1, March 3, 2023)

However, this has at times limited the Secretariat's input into the administrative services received. As a result, the Secretariat has faced the challenges described below with its hiring, office space, and IT services, which have limited its ability to provide effective oversight. OUSD (Policy) has faced related challenges.

Hiring challenges. The Secretariat had limited input into its hiring until July 2022, according to DOD officials. Washington Headquarters Services officials told us that the OUSD (Policy) human resources liaison office would determine the priority of all OUSD (Policy)'s vacant billets, including those in the Secretariat. As a result of this approach, the Secretariat had limited input into how many new billets it could fill, as well as on the timeline for onboarding staff. A Washington Headquarters Services official told us that the Secretariat was concerned that its billets were not being prioritized. According to DOD officials, in July 2022, Secretariat, OUSD (Policy), and Washington Headquarters Services officials informally agreed that the Secretariat would instead coordinate directly with Washington Headquarters Services regarding the Secretariat's vacancies.

Office space challenges. The ASD-SO/LIC and Secretariat have at times had limited input into their office spaces, contributing to other challenges. For example, in August 2019, the Secretariat began moving offices from the Pentagon to the Mark Center in Alexandria, Virginia.⁶⁰ The Secretariat's move to the Mark Center was coordinated between Washington Headquarters Services and OUSD (Policy), not the Secretariat, according to DOD officials. Nine personnel left the Secretariat as a result, according to a Secretariat official, and members of Congress expressed concern about the move. According to Washington Headquarters Services officials, they now coordinate directly with the Secretariat's Chief of Staff about the Secretariat's office spaces.⁶¹

In May 2020, at the direction of the Secretary of Defense, the Secretariat completed its move back to the Pentagon. The Secretariat's new Pentagon office spaces are spread across multiple locations within the

⁶⁰The office move was completed in November 2019.

⁶¹For example, the Secretariat's Chief of Staff completed a survey about the Secretariat's facility needs in December 2021 as part of a Pentagon-wide reorganization. However, the ASD-SO/LIC did not have the opportunity to formally coordinate on the implementation plan, despite his status as a Principal Staff Assistant. See Assistant Secretary of Defense for Special Operations and Low-Intensity Conflict Memorandum, *Actions to Finalize the DoD POSAS II Implementation Plan* (March 20, 2023).

Pentagon, according to Secretariat officials. Further, the office spaces were intended as an interim measure, but it was still in them as of September 2023. The office spaces have limited workspaces, requiring some staff to share desks, according to a Secretariat official. Furthermore, Secretariat officials told us that the lack of a consolidated space hurts team functioning and complicates onboarding. Washington Headquarters Services officials said it is typical for offices to be split across multiple locations due to space constraints at the Pentagon.

The Secretariat was previously scheduled to move to new temporary office spaces in August 2023, but the move was then delayed to December 2023, according to Secretariat officials. As of September 2023, Secretariat officials did not expect to move into the permanent office space identified by Washington Headquarters Services for another 3 to 5 years.

IT challenges. Until August 2023, Secretariat staff had limited access to SOCOM's IT networks, which hindered their ability to directly access information when performing oversight. For example, Secretariat officials told us that when they required access to information on SOCOM's networks, they had to send a request for information to SOCOM officials, walk to SOCOM's office in the Pentagon, or use an inefficient virtual desktop.⁶² This caused the Secretariat to rely on emailing SOCOM officials rather than accessing information directly, according to Secretariat officials.

The Secretariat requested direct access to SOCOM's networks in October 2019 but did not receive access to SOCOM's unclassified network until September 2022 and its SECRET network until August 2023. Access was delayed by the Secretariat's facility moves, uncertainty regarding future moves, COVID-19, and supply chain issues, according to project documentation and DOD officials. For example, in both March 2020 and March 2021, the Secretariat suspended the project due to uncertainty over future moves. We discussed this IT challenge with a senior SOCOM official in March 2023, and the Secretariat received

⁶²The Special Operations Washington Office is located at the Pentagon and provides support to the Vice Commander and staff of SOCOM in planning, coordinating, and executing actions with the Office of the Secretary of Defense, the Joint Staff, and the military services on behalf of the Commander of SOCOM. Secretariat officials told us that using virtual desktops created issues, such as problems accessing SOCOM's networks after SOCOM IT updates. Other Secretariat officials described this arrangement as inefficient. SOCOM officials told us that using remote desktops was cumbersome and not user friendly.

access to SOCOM's SECRET systems in August 2023. Secretariat officials told us this access has been helpful, such as allowing them to access SOCOM's networks without having to walk to SOCOM's Pentagon office.

OUSD (Policy) challenges. Because the Secretariat's staff and budget have been included under OUSD (Policy), the Secretariat's growth made OUSD (Policy) look larger and better resourced than it is, according to a senior OUSD (Policy) official. Furthermore, the official stated that because Washington Headquarters Services classifies the Secretariat as part of OUSD (Policy), keeping the Secretariat's offices in the Pentagon has forced OUSD (Policy) to move other staff to the Mark Center.

The Secretariat and OUSD (Policy) have faced these challenges because of confusion about the ASD-SO/LIC's administrative role due to ASD-SO/LIC's unique position within DOD. Specifically, Washington Headquarters Services and Joint Service Provider officials told us they have worked with OUSD (Policy) regarding administrative services for the Secretariat because the Under Secretary of Defense for Policy is a Principal Staff Assistant and has supported the Secretariat across a variety of functions.⁶³ However, the ASD-SO/LIC has also been a Principal Staff Assistant since November 2020 and has sought an increased role in the Secretariat's administrative services, according to Washington Headquarters Services officials.⁶⁴

As of October 2023, officials in the Secretariat, OUSD (Policy), Office of the Director of Administration and Management, and Washington Headquarters Services were negotiating the administrative roles of the ASD-SO/LIC and Under Secretary of Defense for Policy, such as for the Secretariat's hiring, office space, and IT needs. DOD officials said this demarcation between the Secretariat and OUSD (Policy) would have several benefits, such as providing the Secretariat more autonomy and providing more transparency into OUSD (Policy)'s resourcing needs.

⁶³The Defense Information Systems Agency Joint Service Provider provides IT services to the Pentagon and National Capital Region.

⁶⁴In November 2020, Acting Secretary of Defense Christopher Miller designated ASD-SO/LIC as a Principal Staff Assistant and removed ASD-SO/LIC and OASD-SO/LIC from OUSD (Policy). However, in May 2021, Secretary of Defense Lloyd Austin III reaffirmed ASD-SO/LIC as a Principal Staff Assistant but returned ASD-SO/LIC to OUSD (Policy). See Secretary of Defense Memorandum, *Organizational Role of the Assistant Secretary of Defense for Special Operations and Low Intensity Conflict* (Nov. 18, 2020); Secretary of Defense Memorandum, *Organizational Role of the Assistant Secretary of Defense for Special Operations and Low-Intensity Conflict* (May 5, 2021).

Secretariat officials told us in October 2023 that Washington Headquarters Services had separated the Secretariat’s budget and personnel from OUSD (Policy). OUSD (Policy)’s liaison role requires particular skillsets, and shifting responsibilities to the Secretariat would require it to hire and train additional personnel. Thus, OUSD (Policy) may continue to provide some support to the Secretariat, according to DOD officials.⁶⁵

Clarifying roles and responsibilities is one of eight leading practices we have identified to enhance interagency collaboration in prior work.⁶⁶ Specifically, collaborating agencies should work together to define and agree on their respective roles and responsibilities. Another leading practice is developing and updating written guidance and agreements, which can provide consistency in the long term. In addition, *Standards for Internal Control in the Federal Government* states that management should establish an organizational structure, assign responsibility, and delegate authority to achieve the entity’s objectives.⁶⁷

Until the ASD-SO/LIC and OUSD (Policy) clarify their respective administrative roles by finalizing an agreement, the Secretariat could again have limited input into administrative services affecting the Secretariat, such as hiring, office space, and IT—ultimately limiting its ability to effectively oversee SOCOM. A documented agreement may also help ensure consistency for the Secretariat in relation to administrative services, including during leadership changes.

Conclusions

The Secretariat provides critical support for the ASD-SO/LIC’s civilian oversight of SOCOM. In implementing section 922, DOD has increased the ASD-SO/LIC’s oversight responsibilities and provided the Secretariat with increased resources, including two new Senior Executive Service positions. However, incomplete documentation of oversight policies limits the ASD-SO/LIC and Secretariat’s ability to effectively oversee SOCOM. Furthermore, the Secretariat continues to experience staffing gaps that limit its ability to fully perform all identified oversight functions. Updating

⁶⁵The Secretariat’s updated staffing plan estimated the demarcation from OUSD (Policy) would require an additional eight billets to perform administrative functions. Assistant Secretary of Defense for Special Operations and Low-Intensity Conflict, “Personnel Supporting the Office of the Assistant Secretary of Defense for Special Operations and Low-Intensity Conflict” (Nov. 3, 2023).

⁶⁶[GAO-23-105520](#).

⁶⁷[GAO-14-704G](#).

its staffing plan to incorporate key strategic workforce planning principles—including aligning with mission and goals, identifying critical skill gaps, and developing strategies to address gaps—would help ensure that the Secretariat hires personnel that adequately meet its future needs for overseeing SOCOM. Finally, the Secretariat has faced challenges due to an unclear administrative role. Unless the ASD-SO/LIC and Under Secretary of Defense for Policy clarify their respective administrative roles, the Secretariat could again have limited input into processes that affect its ability to provide oversight, such as for hiring, office space, and IT needs.

Recommendations for Executive Action

We are making the following three recommendations to DOD:

The Secretary of Defense should ensure that the Assistant Secretary of Defense for Special Operations and Low-Intensity Conflict implements a systematic approach for identifying and addressing areas that require documented policies. (Recommendation 1)

The Secretary of Defense should ensure that the Assistant Secretary of Defense for Special Operations and Low-Intensity Conflict develops a staffing plan for the Secretariat for Special Operations that incorporates strategic workforce planning principles, including aligning with the Secretariat's mission and goals, identifying critical skill gaps, and developing strategies to address any gaps. (Recommendation 2)

The Secretary of Defense should ensure that the Assistant Secretary of Defense for Special Operations and Low-Intensity Conflict and the Under Secretary of Defense for Policy finalize their ongoing efforts by documenting an agreement that clarifies their respective administrative roles, including those related to the Secretariat's hiring, office space, and IT needs. (Recommendation 3)

Agency Comments

We provided a draft of this report to DOD for review and comment. In its comments, reproduced in appendix V, DOD concurred with our three recommendations. DOD also provided technical comments, which we incorporated as appropriate.

We are sending copies of this report to the appropriate congressional committees, the Secretary of Defense, the Under Secretary of Defense for Policy, the Assistant Secretary of Defense for Special Operations and Low-Intensity Conflict, the Commander of U.S. Special Operations Command, and other interested parties. In addition, the report is available at no charge on the GAO website at <https://www.gao.gov>.

If you or your staff have any questions about this report, please contact me at maurerd@gao.gov or (202) 512-9627. Contact points for our Offices of Congressional Relations and Public Affairs may be found on the last page of this report. GAO staff who made key contributions to this report are listed in appendix VI.

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Diana Maurer". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style.

Diana Maurer
Director, Defense Capabilities and Management

Appendix I: Objectives, Scope, and Methodology

This report examines the extent to which the Secretariat for Special Operations has (1) reported on its implementation of section 922 reforms and documented its policies for providing oversight; (2) hired the number of staff it determined it needs to oversee U.S. Special Operations Command (SOCOM); and (3) faced challenges related to administrative services, such as hiring, office space and IT.

For objective one, we reviewed reports submitted by the Secretariat to Congress for October 2018 through January 2023 describing steps taken to implement section 922 of the National Defense Authorization Act for Fiscal Year 2017.¹ These reports provide information on implementation benchmarks and actions taken to implement the Assistant Secretary of Defense for Special Operations and Low-Intensity Conflict's (the ASD-SO/LIC) role across the Department of Defense (DOD). According to Secretariat officials, these reports are the most comprehensive list of benchmarks and actions taken to implement section 922. We analyzed the implementation status of the 57 benchmarks included in the January 2023 report—the Secretariat's final report to Congress.² For benchmarks reported as **partially implemented, not implemented, or in progress** as of January 2023, we received an update from Secretariat officials about their status as of October 2023.

We examined the extent to which the ASD-SO/LIC's oversight responsibilities are documented. First, we reviewed guidance for the ASD-SO/LIC's oversight responsibilities, including the updated DOD Directive 5111.10 (the ASD-SO/LIC's charter) and DOD Instruction 3901.01.³ We also compared the Secretariat's efforts to document oversight policies for SOCOM against (1) DOD Instruction 5025.01; (2) GAO's Standards for Internal Control in the Federal Government, which states that management should implement control activities through policies and establish an organizational structure, assign responsibility, and delegate authority to achieve the entity's objectives; and (3) the two

¹See S. Rep. No. 115-262, at 251-52 (2018) which, among other things, required DOD to submit monthly progress reports on section 922 implementation, starting in July 2018 and ending upon "full implementation."

²The Secretariat submitted its final implementation report to Congress in January 2023, stating that its actions to implement section 922 were "largely complete." Secretariat for Special Operations, *Report on Implementation of Requirements for Management of Special Operations Forces and Special Operations* (Jan. 1, 2023).

³DOD Directive 5111.10, *Assistant Secretary of Defense for Special Operations and Low-Intensity Conflict (ASD-SO/LIC)* (May 5, 2021); DOD Instruction 3901.01, *Special Operations Policy and Oversight Council* (Dec. 26, 2023).

leading practices for interagency collaboration we selected as most relevant: Clarify roles and responsibilities and develop and update written guidance and agreements.⁴

Section 922 also codified the Special Operations Policy and Oversight Council (SOPOC). To better understand the SOPOC's role and operations, we attended the SOPOC Senior Steering Committee's meeting held on July 19, 2023, and reviewed meeting materials, such as minutes from the two SOPOC and two SOPOC Senior Steering Committee meetings held in 2022. Lastly, we obtained the perspectives of member organizations on their participation in the SOPOC, its effectiveness, and any opportunities for improvement. We requested information regarding all three levels of the SOPOC, including the SOPOC, the Senior Steering Committee, and the Working Group. We selected the following three organizations to provide perspectives based on their repeated participation in SOPOC meetings, according to Secretariat officials:

- Department of the Navy
- Under Secretary of Defense for Intelligence and Security
- SOCOM

These organizations' responses are not generalizable and may not reflect the perspectives of other organizations that participate in the SOPOC.⁵

⁴DOD Instruction 5025.01, *DoD Issuances Program*. (Aug. 1, 2016) (incorporating Change 4, June 7, 2023) and GAO, *Standards for Internal Control in the Federal Government*, [GAO-14-704G](#) (Washington, D.C.: Sept. 10, 2014) and *Government Performance Management: Leading Practices to Enhance Interagency Collaboration and Address Crosscutting Challenges*, [GAO-23-105520](#) (Washington, D.C.: May 24, 2023).

⁵The SOPOC includes the ASD-SO/LIC, who chairs the SOPOC, and senior representatives designated by the following officials: (1) Commander of SOCOM; (2) the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff; (3) the Under Secretary of Defense for Acquisition and Sustainment; (4) the Under Secretary of Defense (Comptroller) and Chief Financial Officer of DOD; (5) the Under Secretary of Defense for Intelligence and Security; (6) the Under Secretary of Defense for Personnel and Readiness; (7) the Under Secretary of Defense for Policy; (8) the Under Secretary of Defense for Research and Engineering; (9) the General Counsel of DOD; (10) the Director of Cost Assessment and Program Evaluation; (11) the Assistant to the Secretary for Privacy, Civil Liberties, and Transparency; (12) the Assistant Secretaries of Defense under the authority, direction, and control of the Under Secretary of Defense for Policy; (13) the Secretaries of the military departments; and (14) additional DOD officials, potentially including Defense Agency directors or commanders of additional combatant commands, on a case-by-case basis as the ASD-SO/LIC determines based on policy or functional responsibilities for a specific SOPOC agenda item. See DOD Instruction 3901.01.

However, they provided information on how three active SOPOC participants perceive the SOPOC's effectiveness.

For objective two, we analyzed trends in the Secretariat's staffing levels from October 2018 through September 2023. To conduct the analysis, we compiled staffing data from the monthly reports the Secretariat submitted to Congress from October 2018 through January 2023. Secretariat officials provided monthly staffing numbers for the remaining months. We assessed the reliability of these data by comparing staffing numbers across implementation reports for consistency and obtaining clarification from Secretariat officials on any discrepancies. We determined these data were sufficiently reliable for the purposes of presenting staffing numbers over this time period.

We then compared the Secretariat's staffing levels during this time period with the recommended levels in the Secretariat's 2017 and 2022 staffing assessments.⁶ We interviewed Air Force Manpower Analysis Agency officials who reviewed the methodology of the Secretariat's 2022 staffing assessment.⁷ We also analyzed the Secretariat's March 2023 risk assessment, which assessed the risk posed by staffing gaps identified in the 2022 manpower assessment on the Secretariat's ability to conduct its oversight functions.

In addition, we reviewed the Secretariat's staffing plan that was required by section 1089 of the James M. Inhofe National Defense Authorization Act for Fiscal Year 2023.⁸ Lastly, we compared the contents of the staffing plan against selected *GAO Key Principles for Effective Strategic Workforce Planning*, as well as DOD's guidance on civilian strategic human capital planning.⁹

⁶See Department of the Army, "Manpower Analysis to Transform the Special Operations and Irregular Warfare Directorate to Align with Section 922" (Oct. 24, 2017); Assistant Secretary of Defense for Special Operations and Low-Intensity Conflict, "Manpower Requirements and Assessment Report for the Secretariat for Special Operations (SSO)" (Nov. 30, 2022).

⁷See Department of the Air Force Memorandum, "Validation of the Secretariat for Special Operations (SSO) Manpower Assessment" (Oct. 21, 2022).

⁸Pub. L. No. 117-263, § 1089 (2022).

⁹GAO, *Human Capital: Key Principles for Effective Strategic Workforce Planning*, [GAO-04-39](#) (Washington, D.C.: Dec. 11, 2003) and DOD Instruction 1400.25, Vol. 250, *DoD Civilian Personnel Management System: Civilian Strategic Human Capital Planning* (SHCP) (June 7, 2016).

For objective three, we examined the extent to which the Secretariat has faced challenges relating to administrative services, such as for hiring, office space, and IT. We reviewed documentation related to the Secretariat's office spaces and IT access. We also interviewed officials in the Secretariat, SOCOM, Office of the Under Secretary of Defense for Policy (OUSD (Policy)), Washington Headquarters Services, and Joint Service Provider, about the Secretariat's hiring, office space, and IT challenges. We compared DOD's efforts to clarify the ASD-SO/LIC's administrative role with the *Standards for Internal Control in the Federal Government* and leading practices for interagency collaboration.¹⁰ We selected two of the eight leading practices as most relevant for this comparison: (1) Clarify roles and responsibilities and (2) develop and update written guidance and agreements.

To address all of our objectives, we interviewed officials and, where appropriate, obtained documentation from the following organizations:

- ASD-SO/LIC Front Office
 - ASD-SO/LIC
 - Principal Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defense for Special Operations and Low-Intensity Conflict
- The Secretariat
 - Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defense for Special Operations and Low-Intensity Conflict
 - External Affairs
 - Programs, Budget, and Acquisition
 - Special Programs/Special Access Programs Central Office
 - Strategy, Requirements, and Force Management
- SOCOM
 - Director of Command Support
 - J1 – Personnel
 - J3 – Operations
 - J5 – Plans, Policy, Strategy, Concepts, and Doctrine
 - J6 – Communication Systems
 - J8 – Resources and Requirements

¹⁰[GAO-14-704G](#); [GAO-23-105520](#).

- Public Affairs Office
- Special Access Program Management Office
- Special Operations Financial Management
- Special Operations Forces Acquisitions, Technology, and Logistics
- Special Operations Legislative Affairs
- Special Operations Washington Office
- Joint Staff
 - Office of the Deputy Director for Special Operations and Counterterrorism
- OUSD (Policy)
 - Chief of Staff
- Office of the Director of Administration and Management
 - Organizational Management and Policy
- Washington Headquarters Services
 - Human Resources Directorate
 - Facilities Services Directorate
- Defense Information Systems Agency
 - Joint Service Provider
- Department of the Army
 - Headquarters, Department of the Army
- Department of the Air Force
 - Air Force Manpower Analysis Agency
- U.S. Space Force
 - Chief Human Capital Office

We conducted this performance audit from November 2022 to March 2024 in accordance with generally accepted government auditing standards. Those standards require that we plan and perform the audit to obtain sufficient, appropriate evidence to provide a reasonable basis for our findings and conclusions based on our audit objectives. We believe that the evidence obtained provides a reasonable basis for our findings and conclusions based on our audit objectives.

Appendix II: U.S. Special Operations Command's Organizational Structure

The U.S. Special Operations Command (SOCOM) comprises a headquarters organization, four service component commands, and various subunified commands (see fig. 7).

Figure 6: U.S. Special Operations Command's Organizational Structure



Source: Department of Defense. | GAO-24-106372

SOCOM's service component commands are responsible for the organization, administration, equipping, training, maintenance, support, readiness, deployment, and education of their assigned forces, including those forces temporarily assigned to the operational control of other DOD commanders. Service component commands are also responsible for coordinating as necessary with their respective military services for service administrative and logistical matters.

The Secretary of Defense typically delegates operational control over special operations forces that are deployed overseas or forward stationed to their respective geographic combatant commander. In turn, the geographic combatant commanders typically exercise their operational control through the theater special operations commands, which provide their combatant commands with staff expertise to plan, conduct, and support joint special operations. SOCOM has combatant command over these theater special operations commands, while the respective geographic combatant commanders have operational control of them.

Appendix III: Reported Status of Implementation Benchmarks

In June 2018, the Senate Armed Services Committee directed the Department of Defense (DOD) to provide monthly updates on the implementation of section 922 of the National Defense Authorization Act for Fiscal Year 2017.¹ The Secretariat for Special Operations submitted its final report in January 2023 and concluded that it had completed 49 of 57 benchmarks to implement section 922.² The Secretariat grouped the 57 benchmarks in the following six categories: (1) special operations forces (SOF) programs and requirements; (2) SOF acquisition, technology, and logistics; (3) SOF budgeting processes; (4) SOF personnel; (5) Special Access Programs (SAPs) and sensitive activities; and (6) Other matters, such as legislative affairs, public affairs, general counsel, and inspector general-type functions. Table 7 lists the implementation benchmarks, by category, and their reported status as of January 2023.

Table 7: Reported Status of Implementation Benchmarks, by Category, as of January 2023

Category	Benchmark	Reported status
Special operations forces (SOF) programs and requirements	Establish new DOD Directive for Special Operations Policy and Oversight Council (SOPOC).	In progress ^a
	Formalize Assistant Secretary of Defense for Special Operations and Low-Intensity Conflict's (ASD-SO/LIC) role in administrative chain of command for U.S. Special Operations Command (SOCOM).	Complete
	Establish, staff, and organize Secretariat dedicated to supporting ASD-SO/LIC in service secretary-like role.	Complete
	Establish and fill senior leadership positions with rank and seniority commensurate with Secretariat functions.	In progress
	Update relevant DOD directives (e.g., DOD Directive 5111.10 and/or DOD Directive 5100.01).	Complete
	Establish DOD issuance series for special operations.	Complete
	ASD-SO/LIC receives departmental fiscal guidance.	Complete
	ASD-SO/LIC co-chairs program-related commander conferences, and ASD-SO/LIC staff participate in integrated cross-functional teams as voting members.	Complete
	ASD-SO/LIC approves SOCOM's program objective memorandum.	Complete
	ASD-SO/LIC submits program budget review issues and participates in program budget review deliberations.	Complete
ASD-SO/LIC and Commander of SOCOM jointly approve capability and planning guidance.	Complete	

¹S. Rep. No. 115-262, at 251-52 (2018).

²See Secretariat for Special Operations, *Report on Implementation of Requirements for the Management of Special Operations Forces and Special Operations* (Jan. 1, 2023).

**Appendix III: Reported Status of
Implementation Benchmarks**

Category	Benchmark	Reported status
	ASD-SO/LIC and Commander of SOCOM jointly approve SOF strategic guidance documents.	Complete
	ASD-SO/LIC is designated as participant in department level requirements processes.	Complete
	ASD-SO/LIC is designated voting member of SOCOM's requirements evaluation board.	Complete
	ASD-SO/LIC is designated as advisor to Joint Requirements Oversight Council.	Complete
	ASD-SO/LIC is designated non-voting member of SOCOM's prioritization process for SOF global force management.	Complete
	ASD-SO/LIC is delegated authority from Secretary to approve execution of Joint Combined Exchange Training.	Complete
	ASD-SO/LIC is designated standing member of Global Force Management Board.	Complete
	ASD-SO/LIC co-chairs military construction summit.	Complete
	ASD-SO/LIC coordinates on military construction requests.	Complete
	ASD-SO/LIC is designated member of Global Posture Executive Council.	Complete
	ASD-SO/LIC coordinates on department level strategies and campaign plans.	Complete
	ASD-SO/LIC coordinates on annual SOCOM posture plan.	Complete
SOF acquisition, technology, and logistics	Establish and maintain full transparency within SOF acquisition, technology, and logistics that enables proactive engagement by ASD-SO/LIC.	Complete
	Establish informal and formal processes for developing positions and coordinating and/or approving them.	Complete
	Ensure Office of the Secretary of Defense, Joint Staff, and other DOD components understand and support revised management relationships.	Complete
	Document changes as necessary in DOD issuances and strategic guidance documents.	In progress
SOF budgeting processes	ASD-SO/LIC coordinates on President's budget justification materials and development of SOCOM's program objective memorandum.	Complete
	ASD-SO/LIC is notified of budget estimate submission adjustments.	Complete
	ASD-SO/LIC coordinates on reprogramming requests.	Complete
	ASD-SO/LIC coordinates on budget briefings to Congress.	Complete
	ASD-SO/LIC coordinates on selected congressional requests for information.	Complete
	ASD-SO/LIC notified of budget execution status.	Complete
	ASD-SO/LIC coordinates on unfunded requirements submissions.	Complete
SOF personnel	ASD-SO/LIC conducts liaison with military departments on relevant military personnel issues.	Complete
	ASD-SO/LIC coordinates on SOF military personnel-related policy issues.	Complete
	ASD SO/LIC is informed of high-level valor awards (Silver Star and above) and death notifications.	Complete
	ASD-SO/LIC approves and submits DOD- or military department-level reports on SOF readiness.	Complete
	ASD-SO/LIC develops military department-level policy guidance for SOF civilian personnel.	Complete

**Appendix III: Reported Status of
Implementation Benchmarks**

Category	Benchmark	Reported status
	ASD-SO/LIC exercises administrative chain-of-command authority on SOF civilian personnel-related policy issues.	Complete
	ASD-SO/LIC approves SOF-peculiar personnel initiatives.	Complete
	ASD-SO/LIC provides overarching guidance and coordinates on SOF-peculiar personnel initiatives.	Complete
Special Access Programs (SAPs) and sensitive activities	ASD-SO/LIC provides guidance and coordinates on the SAP annual report submitted with President's budget.	Complete
	ASD-SO/LIC participates in SAP periodic program reviews.	Complete
	ASD-SO/LIC designated as member of SAP Oversight Committee.	Complete
	ASD-SO/LIC designated as cognizant authority for SOCOM SAPs and conducts Secretariat SAP responsibilities.	Complete
	ASD-SO/LIC coordinates on establishment or disestablishment of SOCOM SAPs.	Complete
	ASD-SO/LIC co-chairs sensitive activities conference.	Complete
	ASD-SO/LIC notifies Congress of new sensitive activities capabilities and platforms.	Complete
Other matters	Establish initial organizational construct for Secretariat.	Complete
	Long-term organization construct developed for Secretariat.	In progress
	ASD-SO/LIC coordinates on public affairs guidance relevant to SOF.	Not implemented
	ASD-SO/LIC coordinates on congressional engagement plans relevant to SOF public affairs issues.	Partially implemented
	ASD-SO/LIC is notified of significant SOCOM events with international or interagency interest.	Complete
	ASD-SO/LIC notified of SOF-related public affairs guidance approved by military departments.	Not implemented
	ASD-SO/LIC and Commander of SOCOM prescribe their respective roles with regard to legislative affairs, as well as appropriate organization, coordination, and staffing of legislative affairs support.	In progress
	ASD-SO/LIC receives support from other Office of the Secretary of Defense offices to support oversight, audit, general counsel, legislative affairs, and public affairs functions.	Complete

Legend:

ASD-SO/LIC = Assistant Secretary of Defense for Special Operations and Low-Intensity Conflict

DOD = Department of Defense

SAPs = Special Access Programs

SOCOM = U.S. Special Operations Command

SOF = special operations forces

Source: GAO analysis of DOD documents. | GAO-24-106372

Note: Benchmarks are (1) "complete" when objectives have been met and no further actions are required, (2) "partially implemented" when objectives have been partially met and no further actions are required, (3) "in progress" when additional actions are required and ongoing, and (4) "not implemented" when objectives have not been met and no further actions are required.

^aThe ASD-SO/LIC published an updated DOD instruction for the SOPOC, DOD Instruction 3901.01 (Special Operations Policy and Oversight Council), on December 26, 2023.

Appendix IV: List of the Secretariat's Oversight Functions

In the 2022 staffing assessment required by the Joint Explanatory Statement accompanying the National Defense Authorization Act for Fiscal Year 2022, the Secretariat identified the following functions it needs to conduct to fulfill its oversight responsibilities under section 922 and Department of Defense (DOD) Directive 5111.10 (referred to by DOD officials as the Assistant Secretary of Defense for Special Operations and Low-Intensity Conflict's charter):

1. Direct and coordinate activities related to special operations forces (SOF) Global Force Management and SOF resource prioritization.
2. Direct and coordinate activities related to SOF strategic posture and plans.
3. Direct and coordinate activities related to SOF readiness.
4. Direct and coordinate activities related to SOF-specific issues raised in the Joint Capabilities Integration and Development System.
5. Lead the Special Operations Policy and Oversight Council.
6. Advise and coordinate with Under Secretary of Defense for Personnel and Readiness on matters related to civilian personnel in the SOF community.
7. Advise and coordinate with Under Secretary of Defense for Personnel and Readiness on matters related to military personnel in the SOF community.
8. Provide oversight, guidance, and advocacy for SOF-peculiar force resiliency initiatives.
9. Conduct oversight of SOF joint/combined and realistic military training.
10. Conduct oversight of SOF education initiatives.
11. Lead efforts related to SOF strategy, force design, and development.
12. Conduct oversight of SOF logistics requirements.
13. Conduct oversight of and coordinate SOF health policies.
14. Conduct oversight and policy guidance for SOF Special Access Programs (SAPs).
15. Manage SAPs by establishing a Special Access Programs Central Office.
16. Conduct oversight and management of SOF sensitive activities.
17. Develop public affairs guidance for SOF-related public information.

Appendix IV: List of the Secretariat's Oversight Functions

18. Lead legislative affairs, manage congressional correspondence, and coordinate legislative engagements.
19. Conduct legislative audits and compliance reviews.
20. Examine execution of certain SOF acquisition authority.
21. Establish and oversee SOF acquisition.
22. Conduct oversight of SOF financial management.
23. Conduct oversight of SOF program development.
24. Conduct routine SOF program management.
25. Conduct oversight of U.S. Special Operations Command's (SOCOM) science and technology portfolio.
26. Conduct oversight of SOCOM's military construction portfolio.
27. Draft and review issuances.
28. Support travel for senior leadership.

Appendix V: Comments from the Department of Defense

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SPECIAL OPERATIONS /
LOW INTENSITY CONFLICT

OFFICE OF THE ASSISTANT SECRETARY OF DEFENSE
2500 DEFENSE PENTAGON
WASHINGTON, D.C. 20301-2500

Mr. Cary Russell
Director, U.S. Government Accountability Office
441 G Street, N.W.
Washington, DC 20548

Mr. Russell,

This is the Department of Defense (DoD) response to GAO Draft Report, GAO 24-106372, "SPECIAL OPERATIONS FORCES; Documented Policies and Workforce Planning Needed to Strengthen Civilian Oversight," dated January 8, 2024 (GAO Code 106372)

The Department finds the information contained in the draft GAO Report 24-106372 to be accurate and concurs with the recommendations contained in the report. The complete DoD response to the recommendations accompanies this letter.

The Department appreciates the opportunity to comment on this draft report. Please direct any questions or comments you may have to Mr. Mike Lwin, at (703)372-5126 and michael.r.lwin.civ@mail.mil.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read "Erin Logan".

Erin Logan

UNCLASSIFIED

**GAO DRAFT REPORT DATED JANUARY 8, 2024
GAO-24-106372 (GAO CODE 106372)**

**“SPECIAL OPERATIONS FORCES: DOCUMENTED POLICIES AND WORKFORCE
PLANNING NEEDED TO STRENGTHEN CIVILIAN OVERSIGHT”**

**DEPARTMENT OF DEFENSE COMMENTS
TO THE GAO RECOMMENDATION**

RECOMMENDATION 1: The Secretary of Defense should ensure that the Assistant Secretary for Defense for Special Operations and Low-Intensity Conflict implements a systematic approach for identifying and addressing areas that require documented policies.

DoD RESPONSE: Concur.

RECOMMENDATION 2: The Secretary of Defense should ensure that the Assistant Secretary of Defense for Special Operations and Low-Intensity Conflict develops a staffing plan for the Secretariat for Special Operations that incorporates strategic workforce planning principles, including aligning with the Secretariat’s mission and goals, identifying critical skill gaps, and developing strategies to address any gaps.

DoD RESPONSE: Concur.

RECOMMENDATION 3: The Secretary of Defense should ensure that the Assistant Secretary of Defense for Special Operations and Low-Intensity Conflict and the Under Secretary of Defense for Policy (USD(P)) finalize their ongoing efforts by documenting an agreement that clarifies their respective administrative roles, including those related to the Secretariat’s hiring, office space, and IT needs.

DoD RESPONSE: Concur.

Appendix VI: GAO Contact and Staff Acknowledgments

GAO Contact

Diana Maurer, (202) 512-9627 or maurerd@gao.gov

Staff Acknowledgments

In addition to the contact named above, Marcus Oliver (Assistant Director), Matthew Kienzle (Analyst-in-Charge), Tracy Barnes, Lena Burleson, Bethany Cole, Brad Crofford, Christopher Gezon, Mae Jones, and Terry Richardson made key contributions to this report.

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