

A Wide World of War: Donald Trump's First Year Sets Record for US Special Operations

Elite Commandos Deployed to 149 Countries in 2017

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"We don't know exactly where we're at in the world, militarily, and what we're doing," [said](#) Senator Lindsey Graham, a member of the Senate Armed Services Committee, in October. That was in the wake of the combat deaths of four members of the Special Operations forces in the West African nation of Niger. Graham and other senators expressed shock about the deployment, but the global sweep of America's most elite forces is, at best, an open secret.

Earlier this year before that same Senate committee — though Graham was not in attendance — General Raymond Thomas, the chief of U.S. Special Operations Command (SOCOM), offered some clues about the planetwide reach of America's most elite troops.

"We operate and fight in every corner of the world," he [boasted](#). "Rather than a mere 'break-glass-in-case-of-war' force, we are now proactively engaged across the 'battle space' of the Geographic Combatant Commands... providing key integrating and enabling capabilities to support their campaigns and operations."

In 2017, U.S. Special Operations forces, including Navy SEALs and Army Green Berets, deployed to 149 countries around the world, according to figures provided to *TomDispatch* by U.S. Special Operations Command. That's about 75% of the nations on the planet and represents a jump from the 138 countries that saw such deployments in 2016 under the Obama administration. It's also a jump of nearly 150% from the last days of George W. Bush's White House. This record-setting number of deployments comes as American commandos are battling a plethora of terror groups in quasi-wars that stretch from Africa and the Middle East to Asia.

"Most Americans would be amazed to learn that U.S. Special Operations Forces have been deployed to three quarters of the nations on the planet," observes William Hartung, the director of the Arms and Security Project at the Center for International Policy. "There is little or no transparency as to what they are doing in these countries and whether their efforts are promoting security or provoking further tension and conflict."

Growth Opportunity



“Since 9/11, we expanded the size of our force by almost 75% in order to take on mission-sets that are likely to endure,” SOCOM’s Thomas told the Senate Armed Services Committee in May.

Since 2001, from the pace of operations to their geographic sweep, the activities of U.S. Special Operations forces (SOF) have, in fact, grown in every conceivable way. On any given day, about 8,000 special operators — from a command numbering roughly 70,000 — are deployed in approximately 80 countries.

“The increase in the use of Special Forces since 9/11 was part of what was then referred to as the Global War on Terror as a way to keep the United States active militarily in areas beyond its two main wars, Iraq and Afghanistan,” Hartung told TomDispatch. “The even heavier reliance on Special Forces during the Obama years was part of a strategy of what I think of as ‘politically sustainable warfare,’ in which the deployment of tens of thousands of troops to a few key theaters of war was replaced by a ‘lighter footprint’ in more places, using drones, arms sales and training, and Special Forces.”

The Trump White House has [attacked Barack Obama’s legacy](#) on nearly all fronts. It has undercut, renounced, or reversed actions of his ranging from [trade pacts](#) to [financial](#) and [environmental](#) regulations to rules that shielded transgender employees from [workplace discrimination](#). When it comes to Special Operations forces, however, the Trump administration has embraced their use in the style of the former president, while upping the ante even further. President Trump has also provided military commanders greater authority to [launch attacks](#) in quasi-war zones like Yemen and Somalia. [According to](#) Micah Zenko, a national security expert and Whitehead Senior Fellow at the think tank Chatham House, those forces conducted five times as many lethal counterterrorism missions in such non-battlefield countries in the Trump administration’s first six months in office as they did during Obama’s final six months.

A Wide World of War

U.S. commandos specialize in 12 core skills, from “unconventional warfare” (helping to stoke insurgencies and regime change) to “foreign internal defense” (supporting allies’ efforts to guard themselves against terrorism, insurgencies, and coups). Counterterrorism — fighting what SOCOM calls violent extremist organizations or VEOs — is, however, the specialty America’s commandos have become best known for in the post-9/11 era.

In the spring of 2002, before the Senate Armed Services Committee, SOCOM chief General Charles Holland [touted](#) efforts to

“improve SOF capabilities to prosecute unconventional warfare and foreign internal defense programs to better support friends and allies. The value of these programs, demonstrated in the Afghanistan campaign,” he said, “can be particularly useful in stabilizing countries and regions vulnerable to terrorist infiltration.”

Over the last decade and a half, however, there’s been little evidence America’s commandos have excelled at “stabilizing countries and regions vulnerable to terrorist infiltration.” This was reflected in General Thomas’s May testimony before the Senate

Armed Services Committee.

“The threat posed by VEOs remains the highest priority for USSOCOM in both focus and effort,” he explained.

However, unlike Holland who highlighted only one country — Afghanistan — where special operators were battling militants in 2002, Thomas listed a panoply of terrorist hot spots bedeviling America’s commandos a decade and a half later.

“Special Operations Forces,” he [said](#), “are the main effort, or major supporting effort for U.S. VEO-focused operations in Afghanistan, Syria, Iraq, Yemen, Somalia, Libya, across the Sahel of Africa, the Philippines, and Central/South America — essentially, everywhere Al Qaeda (AQ) and the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) are to be found.”

Officially, there are about [5,300 U.S. troops](#) in Iraq. (The real figure is thought to be higher.) Significant numbers of them are special operators training and advising Iraqi government forces and Kurdish troops. Elite U.S. forces have also played a crucial role in Iraq’s recent offensive against the militants of the Islamic State, providing artillery and airpower, including SOCOM’s AC-130W Stinger II gunships with 105mm cannons that allow them to serve as flying howitzers. In that campaign, Special Operations forces were “thrust into a new role of coordinating fire support,” [wrote](#) Linda Robinson, a senior international policy analyst with the RAND Corporation who spent seven weeks in Iraq, Syria, and neighboring countries earlier this year. “This fire support is even more important to the Syrian Democratic Forces, a far more lightly armed irregular force which constitutes the major ground force fighting ISIS in Syria.”

Special Operations forces have, in fact, played a key role in the war effort in Syria, too. While American commandos have been killed in battle there, Kurdish and Arab proxies — known as the [Syrian Democratic Forces](#) — have done the lion’s share of the fighting and dying to take back much of the territory once held by the Islamic State. SOCOM’s Thomas [spoke about](#) this in surprisingly frank terms at a security conference in Aspen, Colorado, this summer. “We’re right now inside the capital of [ISIS’s] caliphate at Raqqa [Syria]. We’ll have that back soon with our proxies, a surrogate force of 50,000 people that are working for us and doing our bidding,” he said. “So two and a half years of fighting this fight with our surrogates, they’ve lost thousands, we’ve only lost two service members. Two is too many, but it’s, you know, a relief that we haven’t had the kind of losses that we’ve had elsewhere.”

This year, U.S. special operators were killed in [Iraq](#), [Syria](#), [Afghanistan](#), [Yemen](#), [Somalia](#), and the Sahelian nations of [Niger](#) and [Mali](#) (although reports indicate that a Green Beret who died in that country was likely strangled by U.S. Navy SEALs). In [Libya](#), SEALs recently kidnapped a suspect in the 2012 attacks in Benghazi that killed four Americans, including Ambassador J. Christopher Stevens. In the [Philippines](#), U.S. Special Forces joined the months-long battle to recapture Marawi City after it was taken by Islamist militants earlier this year.

And even this growing list of counterterror hotspots is only a fraction of the story. In Africa, the countries singled out by Thomas — Somalia, Libya, and those in the Sahel — are just a handful of the nations to which American commandos were deployed in 2017. As

recently [reported](#) at *Vice News*, U.S. Special Operations forces were active in at least 33 nations across the continent, with troops heavily concentrated in and around countries now home to a growing number of what the Pentagon's Africa Center for Strategic Studies calls "active militant Islamist groups." While Defense Department spokeswoman Major Audricia Harris would not provide details on the range of operations being carried out by the elite forces, it's known that they run the gamut from conducting security assessments at U.S. embassies to combat operations.

Data provided by SOCOM also reveals a special ops presence in 33 European countries this year.

"Outside of Russia and Belarus we train with virtually every country in Europe either bilaterally or through various multinational events," Major Michael Weisman, a spokesman for U.S. Special Operations Command Europe, told TomDispatch.

For the past two years, in fact, the U.S. has [maintained](#) a Special Operations contingent in almost every nation on Russia's western border.

"[W]e've had persistent presence in every country — every NATO country and others on the border with Russia doing phenomenal things with our allies, helping them prepare for their threats," said SOCOM's Thomas, mentioning the Baltic states as well as Romania, Poland, Ukraine, and Georgia by name.

These activities represent, in the words of General Charles Cleveland, chief of U.S. Army Special Operations Command from 2012 to 2015 and now the senior mentor to the Army War College, "undeclared campaigns" by commandos. Weisman, however, balked at that particular language.

"U.S. Special Operations forces have been deployed persistently and at the invitation of our allies in the Baltic States and Poland since 2014 as part of the broader U.S. European Command and Department of Defense European Deterrence Initiative," he told TomDispatch. "The persistent presence of U.S. SOF alongside our Allies sends a clear message of U.S. commitment to our allies and the defense of our NATO Alliance."

Asia is also a crucial region for America's elite forces. In addition to Iran and Russia, SOCOM's Thomas singled out China and North Korea as nations that are "becoming more aggressive in challenging U.S. interests and partners through the use of asymmetric means that often fall below the threshold of conventional conflict." He went on to say that the "ability of our special operators to conduct low-visibility special warfare operations in politically sensitive environments make them uniquely suited to counter the malign activities of our adversaries in this domain."

U.S.-North Korean saber rattling has brought [increased attention](#) to Special Forces Detachment Korea (SFDK), the longest serving U.S. Special Forces unit in the world. It would, of course, be called into action should a war ever break out on the peninsula. In such a conflict, U.S. and South Korean elite forces would unite under the umbrella of the Combined Unconventional Warfare Task Force. In March, [commandos](#) —

including, [according](#) to some reports, members of the Army's Delta Force and the Navy's SEAL Team 6 — took part in Foal Eagle, a training exercise, alongside conventional U.S. forces and their South Korean counterparts.

U.S. special operators also were involved in training exercises and operations elsewhere across Asia and the Pacific. In June, in Okinawa, Japan, for example, airmen from the 17th Special Operations Squadron (17th SOS) carried out their annual (and oddly spelled) “Day of the Jakal,” the launch of five Air Force Special Operations MC-130J Commando II aircraft to practice, according to a military news release, “airdrops, aircraft landings, and rapid infiltration and exfiltration of equipment.” According to Air Force Lieutenant Colonel Patrick Dube of the 17th SOS,

“It shows how we can meet the emerging mission sets for both SOCKOR [Special Operations Command Korea] and SOCPAC [Special Operations Command Pacific] out here in the Pacific theater.”

At about the same time, members of the Air Force's 353rd Special Operations Group carried out Teak Jet, a joint combined exchange training, or JCET, mission meant to improve military coordination between U.S. and Japanese forces. In June and July, intelligence analysts from the Air Force's 353rd Special Operations Group took part in Talisman Saber, a biennial military training exercise conducted in various locations across Australia.

More for War

The steady rise in the number of elite operators, missions, and foreign deployments since 9/11 appears in no danger of ending, despite years of [worries](#) by think-tank experts and special ops supporters about the [effects](#) of such a [high operations tempo](#) on these troops.

“Most SOF units are employed to their sustainable limit,” General Thomas said earlier this year. “Despite growing demand for SOF, we must prioritize the sourcing of these demands as we face a rapidly changing security environment.”

Yet the number of deployments still grew to a record 149 nations in 2017. (During the Obama years, deployments reached 147 in 2015.)

At a recent conference on special operations held in Washington, D.C., influential members of the Senate and House armed services committees acknowledged that there were growing strains on the force.

“I do worry about overuse of SOF,” [said](#) House Armed Services Committee Chairman Mac Thornberry, a Republican. One solution offered by both Jack Reed, the ranking Democrat on the Senate Armed Services Committee, and Republican Senator Joni Ernst, a combat veteran who served in Iraq, was to bulk up Special Operations Command yet more. “We have to increase numbers and resources,” Reed [insisted](#).

This desire to expand Special Operations further comes at a moment when senators like Lindsey Graham continue to acknowledge how remarkably clueless they are about where those elite forces are deployed and what exactly they are doing in far-flung corners of the

globe. Experts point out just how dangerous further expansion could be, given the proliferation of terror groups and battle zones since 9/11 and the dangers of unforeseen blowback as a result of low-profile special ops missions.

“Almost by definition, the dizzying number of deployments undertaken by U.S. Special Operations forces in recent years would be hard to track. But few in Congress seem to be even making the effort,” said William Hartung. “This is a colossal mistake if one is concerned about reining in the globe-spanning U.S. military strategy of the post-9/11 era, which has caused more harm than good and done little to curb terrorism.”

However, with special ops deployments rising above Bush and Obama administration levels to record-setting heights and the Trump administration embracing the use of commandos in quasi-wars in places like Somalia and Yemen, there appears to be little interest in the White House or on Capitol Hill in reining in the geographic scope and sweep of America’s most secretive troops. And the results, say experts, may be dire.

“While the retreat from large ‘boots on the ground’ wars like the Bush administration’s intervention in Iraq is welcome,” said Hartung, “the proliferation of Special Operations forces is a dangerous alternative, given the prospects of getting the United States further embroiled in complex overseas conflicts.”

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