

Video: The Expanding Global Footprint of US Special Operations

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Global Research, March 21, 2019

[South Front](#) 20 March 2019

Region: [USA](#)

Theme: [Intelligence](#), [Militarization and WMD](#)

Introduction

With the possible U.S. military withdrawal from Syria in the news on a daily basis, the mainstream media has been quick to parrot the DOD's claim that 2,000 troops, mostly special operations forces, are to be withdrawn from the country. Although the total number of U.S. special operators deployed to Syria may have approached as many as 5,000, the current headlines have not mentioned that the United States has special operations units deployed not just in Syria, but in a majority of the nations of the world. Over the past seventeen years, the forces at the disposal of U.S. Special Operations Command (SOCOM) have grown exponentially, more than doubling in size in numbers, with a budget that has also expanded four fold in that same period of time.

If U.S. SOF troops do pull out of Syria, they will still have a physical presence in over 70 nations on any given day. Although the public has an often vague and incomplete, unofficial explanation of the reasons behind these deployments, the Pentagon seems totally unwilling to explain the national defense rationale or legality of these missions to anyone, including the U.S. Congress or the White House. Not only has SOCOM expanded in numbers, funding and weaponry since 2001 and the advent of the Global War on Terror (GWOT), but has acquired no small amount of political influence as well.

The U.S. special operations forces have become the darling of the military, praised by Congress, the White House, and the Media. They have willingly adopted a mythos that has been formulated and propagated by Hollywood on many levels. The U.S. public seems to worship this new class of soldier, while having little to no understanding of exactly what they do, nor any concept of how their actions might aid or hinder national security. An act has even been proposed by one state Representative to afford special income tax breaks to all SOF members.

Amidst all the praise about their prowess and successes on the battlefield, the media purposefully steers clear of reporting on their many failures. Although the U.S. has built the largest force of special operations in the world, this very fact has arguably proven to have only weakened the U.S. military as a whole. The White House, State Department and Pentagon have increasingly relied on special operations forces to bear the brunt of any and all military operations or covert actions in both acknowledged and secret areas of conflict across the globe. This over-emphasis on special operations as a military solution to all challenges has only weakened traditional, conventional forces.

While most of the public assumes that these new Spartans act to protect U.S. interests and “freedom and democracy” whenever and wherever it is deemed necessary, they have little to no understanding of how the SOF have changed since 2001, nor the increasing military and political influence that they now hold. Even fewer Americans have stopped to ponder the illegality of much of what this expanding military force is doing on a global scale, not to mention the constitutional implications of a new Praetorian class in its midst that is growing in power and influence. If history teaches us anything, it is that shadowy and unaccountable paramilitary forces do not strengthen societies that embrace democratic or constitutional governments.

The Expansion of SOF and the Rise of SOCOM

Since the inception of the “Global War on Terror” shortly following September 11, 2001, U.S. SOF have more than doubled from approximately 33,000 to almost 70,000 today. Today, Special Operations Command (SOCOM) has roughly twice the personnel at its disposal, but also four times the budget as it did in 2001. Joint Special Operations Command (JSOC), comprising perhaps the most elite and specialized of the SOF forces, numbered some 1,800 in 2001. Although quite secretive in nature, it is surmised by many analysts that JSOC may have grown to the size of SOCOM circa 2001, over the same 18 year period. If realistic, this estimation means that JSOC added its original number of 1,800 men each year, for eighteen years.

What reason was given by the U.S. DOD to justify such an expansion in a traditionally small and highly selective sub-set of conventional military forces? Special operations forces have existed since at least the Second World War. All major military powers, and even smaller nations that have not historically prioritized robust national defense postures, have invested in special operations forces to complement conventional military establishments. Special operations units are useful as a significant force multiplier in any conventional conflict, and are vital in responding to special circumstances such as anti-terrorism, hostage rescue, reconnaissance deep behind enemy lines, sabotage, and kill or capture missions.

The Pentagon has argued that terrorism has grown, with the number of internationally recognized terrorist organizations roughly doubling from 2001 to today, mostly due to the explosion of both al Qaeda and ISIS. Regardless of the facts that point to the CIA origins of al Qaeda, there is little argument that the organization has grown in concert with U.S. military intervention in the Middle East and Africa. The same can be said for the origin and spread of ISIS. There is also ample circumstantial evidence to support the theory that the CIA and SOCOM have both directly and indirectly supported both of these terrorist organizations in Syria. Regardless of whether SOCOM is directly or indirectly complicit in aiding the Islamic terrorist organizations it declares it is defending the nation against, there is a clear correlation between the growths of both, and surely SOCOM has benefitted on many levels from this relationship.

The annual declared budget for SOCOM is in the range of \$12.3 billion today, up from just \$3.1 billion in 2001. There is little doubt that a healthy slice of the annual Overseas Contingency Operations and Support (OCO) budget is consumed by SOCOM, as the organization is the most heavily engaged in operations on foreign soil. In 2018, U.S. Congress approved \$67 billion USD for OCO, and a further \$7 billion USD in mandatory appropriations. It is unclear how much funding SOCOM receives on an annual basis, as the Pentagon has proven to be largely beyond financial questioning or audit by any office of the civilian government. After failing its first audit in decades in 2018, the Pentagon shrugged

off the event with humor, and no one seemed to notice.

SOCOM numbers roughly 70,000 soldiers, marines, airmen and sailors and has a declared budget of at least \$12.3 billion USD. To put these numbers in perspective, SOCOM has more personnel than the entire national militaries of 120 of the 193 UN member states. Only 20 nations (including the U.S.) have a greater total defense budget than that of SOCOM. A simple cost benefit analysis would reveal that the U.S. is not making much headway in “winning” the GWOT militarily. The growth of SOCOM has done little to reduce the prevalence of terrorism in the world. It begs the question, is there any correlation at all, or is there another agenda afoot entirely?

Global Reach and Integration

The expansion in numbers and funding of America’s special operations forces is alarming in its own right, but their growing international footprint may be even more alarming. Not only were U.S. SOF deployed to at least 150 nations last year, but they have established professional alliances with national militaries in a majority of those nations. Nick Turse has documented and reported on the growing influence of SOCOM over the past few years, with his articles being widely published in major mainstream periodicals as well as online alternative media. He has established many reliable sources within the SOF community. In regular articles posted on *Tom’s Dispatch*, Nick has documented the growing influence of SOCOM, its expanding power, and it’s establishing of close ties to the special operations forces of nations across the globe.



U.S. Special Forces NCO instructing Malian counter-terrorism forces in patrolling and ambush small unit tactics in that West African nation.

It seems quite logical that the main area of focus for these forces immediately prior to the declaration of GWOT in 2001 would be in the Middle East; however, since as early as 2014 the United States began refocusing its deployment of special operations personnel to the African continent. More recently, since the coup in Ukraine and the civil war that erupted as a result, SOCOM has shifted much of its efforts to Europe. Although the DOD and State Department have stated that such deployments are directly connected to terrorist activities in Africa, in Europe the goal is confronting an “increasingly aggressive and assertive” Russia. In reality, deployments to Africa are largely responsive to an increased Chinese presence on the continent. Not publicly acknowledged until the official publication of the National Defense Strategy of the United States for 2018, the U.S. establishment had already come to view both Russia and China as the major threats to U.S. global hegemony.



U.S. special operations forces were deployed to an overwhelming majority of African nations in 2017.

In 2006, deployments to Africa accounted for a mere 1% of U.S. special operations foreign deployments. By the end of 2017 this number had jumped to almost 17%. What could account for such an increase? Spokesmen for the DOD have sighted the increased threat of Islamic militant groups such as Boko Haram and al Shabaab and their capability to disrupt and weaken local governments; however, SOCOM has not just deployed forces to Somalia, Libya, Mali, Burkina Faso, Nigeria and Cameroon, the traditional territories of operation of Boko Haram and African offshoots of al Qaeda. U.S. commandos deployed to 33 African

countries in 2017. 61% of the nations of Africa hosted a U.S. special operations military presence to some degree. There is little doubt that terrorist groups such as Boko Haram present a destabilizing threat to African governments whom are hanging on by a threat in their efforts to govern in the best of times, yet there is little evidence to support the idea that the U.S. military is in Africa for altruistic purposes. The U.S. military, just like the French Military, is increasing its activities in Africa to protect their respective financial interests and maintain influence over African nations, and to increasingly confront the growing influence of China in the region.



The Chinese and Afghan governments have been engaged in the highest level negotiations regarding infrastructure development, transit rights and even the establishment of a Chinese military facility on the Afghan side of the Wakhan Corridor since at least late 2018.

Between the years 2009 and 2012, Chinese overseas foreign direct investment (OFDI) grew at an annual rate of 20.5%. Chinese President Xi Jinping pledged \$60 billion USD in investments in Africa at the 4th Annual Investing in China Forum held in Beijing last September. The United States has often claimed that Chinese financial practices in Africa are predatory in nature. This is quite ironic coming from the country that has a controlling influence over the IMF and World Bank, two financial entities that have been responsible for indebting most of the developing world for the past half century. Neither nation is in Africa to help poor Africans, but to enrich themselves. The African continent is rich in rare earth minerals and metals used in the manufacture of modern electronics, batteries, cell phones and computers. China opened its first and largest overseas military base in Djibouti in August of 2017, located in the strategic Horn of Africa. It is just a stones throw from Camp Lemonnier, the largest U.S. military base on the continent. In a similar move, China is seeking to build a military base in Afghanistan, another nation rich in rare earth minerals where the U.S. military has struggled to maintain a viable presence for over 18 years. China plans to base at least one battalion of troops at a newly constructed facility in the northeastern province of Badakhshan, ostensibly to train Afghan security forces. Located close to the Wakhan Corridor, the base will help provide security to the One Belt One Road trade corridor through the region, and help solidify growing economic and security ties with the Central Asian nation. Coupled with the base in Djibouti and a planned PLAN naval base at Gwadar, Pakistan, China is establishing a viable defense infrastructure in the region. This directly undercuts long established U.S. interests in the region.



The Wakhan Corridor is a strategically important mountain pass, the control of which is of utmost importance to the Chinese government in securing the One Belt One Road logistics network.

While SOCOM has maintained a sizeable presence in Afghanistan and Africa to confront a growing Chinese presence in Central Asia and Africa, it has also increased operations in the European theatre as well. In 2006 only 3% of all SOF units were deployed to nations in Europe. By 2018 that percentage had grown to almost 17%. According to a statement made to *Tom's Dispatch*, a spokesman for SOCEUR, Major Michael Weisman stated,

“Outside of Russia and Belarus we train with virtually every country in Europe either bilaterally or through various multinational events. 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.”

Since the disastrous failure of Petro Poroshenko's Anti-terrorism Operation (ATO) to subdue the breakaway republics in eastern Ukraine, SOF deployments to nations bordering the Russian Federation have increased notably. As it was detailed in a [previous article](#), SOCOM has established very close ties with Ukrainian special operations forces.

Over the past four years SOCOM has repeatedly deployed forces to Latvia, Estonia, Lithuania, Poland, Romania, Bulgaria, Moldova, Georgia, and even Finland. In 2016 alone, U.S. Special Operations Command (SOCOM) conducted no less than 37 Joint Combined Exchange Training (JCET) exercises on the European continent, with 18 such exercises in nations bordering Russia. Is SOCOM sending a reassuring message to allies, or an ominous message to Russia, the holder of the world's largest nuclear arsenal? Is it wise defense policy to increasingly surround Russia, and back it into an increasingly tight corner? If Russian political and military leaders have learned one lesson throughout the centuries, it is that the concentration of foreign belligerent military forces on their national borders eventually leads to conflict and invasion.

U.S. Special Forces Deployed To 70% Of The World In 2016

Countries where U.S. special operations forces conducted operations in 2016*



Not only has SOCOM positioned itself in a majority of the nations across the globe, but increasingly along the borders of the Russian Federation and China.

The United States has become deeply entrenched in the conflict in Ukraine, having increased military aid to the ruling regime incrementally from 2014 to the present. After the disastrous Ukrainian Armed Forces winter offensive of 2015, culminating in the encirclement battle of Debaltseve, U.S. military aid kicked into high gear. Regular rotations of U.S. Army trainers teach UAF troops at the Yavoriv International Peace Keeping and Security Center modern combat skills with an increased emphasis on making the force more NATO interoperable. Ukrainian Special Forces have undergone a clear and striking transformation, and are now nearly indistinguishable from their U.S. and NATO counterparts. They are now wearing U.S. military issue Operational Camouflage Pattern (OCP) "multicam" battle dress uniforms and gear, and are increasingly using western manufactured firearm accessories, optics, and night vision equipment. More notably, the UAF special operations units have adopted a number of small arms and sniper weapons systems that utilize NATO standard ammunition such as the 5.56x45mm intermediate rifle round and the 7.62x51mm rifle round. Sniper rifles chambered in .308 Winchester and .338 Lapua have also been adopted in limited numbers.



U.S. Navy SEALs conducted a number of exercises with the Bulgarian military in the Black Sea in 2018, a clear message to Russia that the U.S. was prepared to escalate asymmetrical warfare targeting the Crimean Peninsula.

Speaking at a GEOInt (Geospatial Intelligence) annual symposium in 2014, former head of SOCOM, General Joseph Votel opined that “We want to be everywhere, know everything.” Clearly, SOCOM has increasingly pushed for the first part of his stated goal in the intervening years; however, the increased focus and funding of special operations over the past 18 years has left the U.S. military’s conventional forces in a state of atrophy and decline. The U.S. political establishment and military leadership have come to see SOCOM as the go-to solution provider for just about any scenario where military force is seen as an option. This has increased the reputation and clout of SOCOM, but this has increasingly come at the expense and detriment to more traditional conventional forces that chiefly serve the national interests of deterrence and defense.

Conventional Warfare Atrophy

In a detailed analysis posted late last year, [*“Why the U.S. Military is Woefully Unprepared for a Major Conventional Conflict”*](#), I outlined the causes and effects of the decline in U.S. conventional warfare capabilities. There is undoubtedly a direct correlation between the reliance upon and exponential growth of U.S. special operations forces, and the decline in conventional force readiness and capability. This is evident in all service branches and has had a negative effect on the ability of the U.S. Armed Forces to carry out future offensive and defensive combat operations against peer adversaries. The U.S. military will have very little hope of achieving decisive military victories in either Russia’s or China’s backyard. Any assertion to the contrary is delusory.

The U.S. military obsession with counterinsurgency and occupation stemming from one U.S. invasion or regime change operation after another, has left a once cutting edge, combined-arms conventional force gutted materially and low in morale. Special operations forces were leveraged in a fight against popular uprisings, Islamic terrorist organizations, and often an alliance between the two. The overwhelming majority of the growing names on the U.S. enemies list found their genesis as a result of U.S. military adventurism. These various insurgencies were a direct reaction to heavy-handed U.S. “foreign policy” delivered at the barrel of a gun. The resulting struggles in the so called GWOT depended greatly on an ever expanding pool of special operations forces. SOF were prioritized over other traditional,

conventional forces not meant for occupation and not skilled in counterinsurgency.

While the troops at the disposal of SOCOM ballooned to almost 70,000, the U.S. Army has struggled to replace armored vehicles first fielded in the 1960's, the Navy witnessed the utter deterioration and exhaustion of its carrier air wings, and the Air Force struggled to retain pilots to fly aircraft that fell deeper into a state of disrepair. Although achieving battlefield successes, the Armed Forces of the United States have yet to decisively win any of the numerous conflicts embarked upon since 2001. The intervening years have revealed the U.S. military of today to be an organization riddled with major material shortcomings and inferiorities, while plagued with a leadership lacking sound judgement and brimming with both hubris and an unfounded superiority complex. This leadership has repeatedly decided to invest in special operations forces that are unable to win wars on their own, at the expense of conventional forces designed solely for that purpose.

Growing Political Power

SOCOM has not restricted its influence to the many battlefields across the globe, or the forging of ties with foreign militaries through training and advisory programs. Just as the CIA has stationed personnel at most U.S. embassies overseas, SOCOM has followed suit. Special Operations Liaison Officers (SOLO) are stationed at a growing number of embassies, including the NATO member countries the United Kingdom, France, Poland, Italy, Turkey and Canada. SOLOS can also be found in U.S. embassies in Australia, Brazil, Colombia, El Salvador, Peru, Israel, Jordan, and Kenya. SOCOM's former head, General Joseph Votel, had announced the intention of putting a SOLO in at least forty U.S. embassies around the globe by 2019. This statement should be viewed with some skepticism, as SOCOM rarely speaks publicly about the extent of their operations and planning, so it is likely that SOLOs are already serving in many more U.S. embassies, especially those located in flash points or trouble spots in Africa, the Middle East, South America, and nations bordering the Russian Federation and China.

Not only should this development be worrying to host nations who may not be inclined to look at a foreign military presence on their soil as acceptable, but it also clearly exhibits closer ties between SOCOM and the Department of State. Not only has SOCOM fostered closer ties with the Department of State, but with the monolithic U.S. security apparatus as a whole. In an attempt to "be everywhere and know everything", SOCOM has moved further away from its subordinate position in the Department of Defense, and pursued a more independent and unaccountable path, similar to that of the CIA or NSA, two organizations that it has increasingly worked closely with. SOCOM has even forged close ties with the Federal Bureau of Investigation, whose pre-1970s focus was supposed to be limited to U.S. domestic crime investigations and the enforcement of federal laws.

There should be some apprehension at both the Pentagon and in the halls of Congress, of the growing power of this new military within the military. In a constitutional republic that clearly delineates, compartmentalizes, and limits government power, the growth of a largely unaccountable, secretive and influential new military organization should be viewed as a threat to the very foundations of political and social order. A number of former special operations members have run for political office in recent years and won. While electing retired soldiers into Congress and gubernatorial office will most likely bring a level of restraint to government military adventurism, with those individuals having seen and paid the price for war, there is also a chance that they will steer policy to aid the military industrial complex. The cautionary tale of Governor Eric Greitens is one such example that

also signals another problem effecting the special operations community as a whole.

Scandals Tarnish the Mythology

A number of scandals involving U.S. special operations soldiers have hit the headlines in recent years, corresponding with the exponential growth of the force. In an attempt to expand the SOF, the Pentagon seems to have lowered physical, cognitive and moral standards in order to fill the ranks. The Hollywood-Pentagon alliance that has worked tirelessly to create and perpetuate the image of the invincibility of the Navy SEALs, presenting them as modern day Spartans or Praetorians, has run into a minor set-back in recent years. The criminal conduct of the elite of the elite has recently tarnished a once proud and silent fraternity of soldiers.

On June 4, 2017 an Army Special Forces NCO was murdered by two Navy SEALs and two Marines "Raiders" in Mali. The original story put forward was that the soldiers accidentally killed their compatriot in an attempt to scare him into silence. The Green Beret, Staff Sergeant Logan Melgar, had uncovered gross criminal conduct by Chief Petty Officer Adam Matthews and Petty Officer Anthony DeDolph. The two SEALs had been embezzling money meant to pay off local informants, and had also been bringing local prostitutes back to the small unit's "secret" safe house . Staff Sergeant Melgar was ambushed in the safe house, beaten and choked to death. It took military investigators roughly a year and a half to finally charge all four perpetrators with felony murder, involuntary manslaughter, conspiracy, obstruction of justice, hazing and burglary. The investigation found that the men killed Staff Sergeant Melgar while engaged in an act of burglary; however, it is not known if they were attempting to steal back or destroy evidence that the Army Staff Sergeant had collected against them.

Perhaps no better example of the meteoric rise and fall of a former Navy SEAL exists as a greater cautionary tale than that of disgraced former Missouri Governor Eric Greitens. Greitens had ridden the reputation of the SEALs into fame and political office, only to fall victim to his own despicable criminal mind. Greitens never served in combat and was not highly regarded by most rank and file SEAL members with combat experience. Many such members speaking off the record, regarded him as an overly ambitious ladder climber that intended to ride the SEAL reputation as far as it would take him. It was largely theorized that before accusations of criminal conduct started coming to the fore, that he fully intended to launch a U.S. presidential campaign. Thankfully, investigations revealed gross corruption in his political dealings and his personal life. Geitens had been listed as one of the 100 most influential people in the world by Time Magazine in 2013, and made the list of Fortune Magazine's 50 greatest leaders in 2014. By May 29, 2017 he had resigned from political office in disgrace.

A vocal critic of the new trend in special operations personnel seeking the spotlight and financial gain is Navy SEAL Lieutenant Forrest Crowell, who even wrote his post graduate thesis at the Naval Postgraduate School regarding the issue. While writing a detailed story on Governor Greitens in *The New Yorker*, Phil Klay summarized Lt. Crowell's opinion put forward in his thesis:

"In it, he argued that the SEALs' celebrity status had diverted their culture "away from the traditional SEAL Ethos of quiet professionalism to a Market Ethos of commercialization and self-promotion." Crowell warned that the new approach incentivized "narcissistic and profit-oriented behavior" and

undermined healthy civil-military relations by using “the credibility of special operations to push partisan politics. “The people of this nation should be suspicious of SEALs who speak too loudly about themselves,” Crowell wrote.”

Reversing the Trend

Although it remains to be seen whether or not U.S. special operations troops will be withdrawn from Syria or not, it is highly unlikely. The timetable for withdrawal continues to stretch into the future. It is also highly unlikely that SOCOM will reduce its global footprint, slow the tempo of joint military training with foreign militaries, or request a smaller budget for 2020. Like all U.S. federal government entities, it will promote itself at the expense of all others, and will resist any demands to lessen its power and influence.

President Trump has proven himself either incapable of challenging the military industrial complex, or totally complicit in the aim of that complex to perpetuate endless military conflict. There is very little sign that anyone in either the civilian government or the military leadership of the United States has the integrity or is willing to make the political sacrifice to alter the current course that the U.S. Armed Forces are embarked upon. The U.S. military has misallocated funds and priorities for the past two decades, engaged in misguided and disastrous regime change operations that have cost the nation trillions of dollars and thousands of lives. These military adventures have gutted the armed forces materially and morally. A generation of Americans have been left scarred physically and mentally. Hundreds of thousands of combatants and civilians in countries across the Middle East and Africa have lost their lives, while millions of refugees have fled the resultant chaos.

By 2019, SOCOM has reached a pinnacle in power and influence within the military industrial complex. It has garnered and fostered an almost mythical status in U.S. society. Yet it has not won and is incapable of winning any conflict that the government of the United States has seen fit to employ it in. Perhaps that is the very point. Special operations forces deployed across the globe, in almost every country you can imagine can help initiate, maintain and perpetuate conflict as long as the United States stays in a position of relatively unrivaled power in the world. The U.S. military industrial complex does not desire large winnable wars, but “low-intensity” conflicts that last as long as possible. That is how the system retains power, maintains profits, and remains relevant.

A strengthened SOCOM, deployed across the planet, establishing relationships with the foreign militaries of most of the world’s nations, and stationed in an ever growing number of U.S. embassies is a dream come true for the Deep State. There is little chance that SOCOM will reverse its course of expansion and accumulation of power at the expense of U.S. national security anytime in the immediate future. Just as the FBI, NSA and CIA have grown in power, influence and unaccountability since their creation, SOCOM seems poised to follow the same model to the detriment of the Republic that it was created to serve.

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