

Commandos Sans Frontières

The Global Growth of U.S. Special Operations Forces

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Early last month, at a tiny military post near the tumbledown town of Jamaame in Somalia, small arms fire began to ring out as mortar shells [crashed](#) down. When the attack was over, one Somali soldier had been [wounded](#) — and had that been the extent of the casualties, you undoubtedly would never have heard about it.

As it happened, however, American commandos were also operating from that outpost and four of them were wounded, three badly enough to be evacuated for further medical care. Another special operator, Staff Sergeant [Alexander Conrad](#), assigned to the U.S. Army's Special Forces (also known as the Green Berets), was [killed](#).

If the story sounds vaguely familiar — combat by U.S. commandos in African wars that America is technically not fighting — it should. Last December, Green Berets operating alongside local forces in Niger [killed](#) 11 Islamic State militants in a firefight. Two months earlier, in October, an ambush by an Islamic State terror group in that same country, where few Americans (including members of [Congress](#)) even knew U.S. special operators were stationed, [left](#) four U.S. soldiers dead — Green Berets among them. (The military first [described](#) that mission as providing “advice and assistance” to local forces, then as a “[reconnaissance patrol](#)” as part of a broader “train, advise, and assist” mission, before it was finally exposed as a [kill or capture](#) operation.) Last May, a Navy SEAL was [killed](#) and two other U.S. personnel were wounded in a raid in Somalia that the Pentagon described as an “advise, assist, and accompany” mission. And a month earlier, a U.S. commando reportedly killed a member of the Lord's Resistance Army (LRA), a brutal militia that has terrorized parts of Central Africa for decades.

And there had been, as the *New York Times* [noted](#) in March, at least 10 other previously unreported attacks on American troops in West Africa between 2015 and 2017. Little wonder since, for at least five years, as *Politico* recently [reported](#), Green Berets, Navy SEALs, and other commandos, operating under a little-understood legal authority known as Section 127e, have been involved in reconnaissance and “direct action” combat raids with African special operators in Somalia, Cameroon, Kenya, Libya, Mali, Mauritania, Niger, and Tunisia.

None of this should be surprising, since in Africa and across the rest of the planet America's Special Operations forces (SOF) are [regularly](#) engaged in a wide-ranging set of missions including special reconnaissance and small-scale offensive actions, unconventional warfare, counterterrorism, hostage rescue, and security force assistance (that is, organizing, training, equipping, and advising foreign troops). And every day, almost everywhere, U.S.

commandos are involved in various kinds of training.

Unless they end in [disaster](#), most missions remain in the shadows, unknown to all but a few Americans. And yet last year alone, U.S. commandos [deployed](#) to 149 countries — about 75% of the nations on the planet. At the halfway mark of this year, according to figures provided to *TomDispatch* by U.S. Special Operations Command (USSOCOM or SOCOM), America's most elite troops have already carried out missions in 133 countries. That's nearly as many deployments as occurred during the last year of the Obama administration and more than double those of the final days of George W. Bush's White House.

Going Commando

"USSOCOM plays an integral role in opposing today's threats to our nation, to protecting the American people, to securing our homeland, and in maintaining favorable regional balances of power," General Raymond Thomas, the chief of U.S. Special Operations Command, [told](#) members of the House Armed Services Committee earlier this year. "However, as we focus on today's operations we must be equally focused on required future transformation. SOF must adapt, develop, procure, and field new capabilities in the interest of continuing to be a unique, lethal, and agile part of the Joint Force of tomorrow."



Members of the U.S. Air Force Special Operations Command, assigned to the 23rd Special Tactics Squadron, provide security of a landing zone during a combat search and rescue exercise in support of Eager Lion 2017. Eager Lion is an annual U.S. Central Command exercise in Jordan designed to strengthen military-to-military relationships between the U.S., Jordan and other international partners.

(Source: Public Domain)

Special Operations forces have actually been in a state of transformation ever since September 11, 2001. In the years since, they have grown in every possible way — from their budget to their size, to their pace of operations, to the geographic sweep of their missions. In 2001, for example, an average of [2,900](#) commandos were deployed overseas in any given week. That number has now soared to 8,300, according to SOCOM spokesman Ken McGraw.

At the same time, the number of “authorized military positions” — the active-duty troops, reservists, and National Guardsmen that are part of SOCOM — has jumped from 42,800 in 2001 to 63,500 today. While each of the military service branches — the so-called parent services — provides funding, including pay, benefits, and some equipment to their elite forces, “Special Operations-specific funding,” at \$3.1 billion in 2001, is now at \$12.3 billion. (The Army, Navy, Air Force, and Marine Corps also provide their special operations units with about \$8 billion annually.)

All this means that, on any given day, more than [8,000](#) exceptionally well-equipped and well-funded special operators from a command numbering roughly [70,000](#) active-duty personnel, reservists, and National Guardsmen as well as civilians are deployed in approximately [90](#) countries. Most of those troops are Green Berets, Rangers, or other Army Special Operations personnel. According to Lieutenant General Kenneth Tovo, head of the U.S. Army Special Operations Command until his [retirement](#) last month, that branch [provides](#) more than 51% of all Special Operations forces and accounts for more than 60% of their overseas deployments. On any given day, just the Army’s elite soldiers are operating in around [70](#) countries.

In February, for instance, Army Rangers carried out several weeks of winter warfare training in Germany, while Green Berets practiced missions involving snowmobiles in Sweden. In April, Green Berets took part in the annual Flintlock multinational Special Operations forces training exercise conducted in Niger, Burkina Faso, and Senegal that involved Nigerien, Burkinabe, Malian, Polish, Spanish, and Portuguese troops, among others.

While most missions involve training, instruction, or war games, Special Forces soldiers are also regularly involved in combat operations across America’s expansive global war zones. A month after Flintlock, for example, Green Berets accompanied local commandos on a nighttime air assault raid in Nangarhar province, Afghanistan, during which a senior ISIS operative was reportedly “eliminated.” In May, a post-deployment awards ceremony for members of the 2nd Battalion, 10th Special Forces Group, who had just returned from six months advising and assisting Afghan commandos, [offered](#) some indication of the kinds of missions being undertaken in that country. Those Green Berets received more than 60 decorations for valor — including 20 Bronze Star Medals and four Silver Star Medals (the third-highest military [combat decoration](#)).

For its part, the Navy, [according](#) to Rear Admiral Tim Szymanski, [chief](#) of Naval Special Warfare Command, has about 1,000 SEALs or other personnel deployed to more than 35 countries each day. In February, Naval Special Warfare forces and soldiers from Army Special Operations Aviation Command conducted training aboard a French amphibious assault ship in the Arabian Gulf. That same month, Navy SEALs joined elite U.S. Air Force personnel in training alongside Royal Thai Naval Special Warfare operators during Cobra Gold, an annual exercise in Thailand.

The troops from U.S. Marine Corps Forces Special Operations Command, or [MARSOC](#), [deploy](#) primarily to the Middle East, Africa, and the Indo-Pacific regions on six-month rotations. At any time, on average, about 400 “Raiders” are engaged in missions across 18 countries.

Air Force Special Operations Command, which [fields](#) a force of 19,500 active, reserve, and civilian personnel, conducted 78 joint-training exercises and events with partner nations in 2017, according to Lieutenant General Marshall Webb, chief of Air Force Special Operations

Command. In February, for example, Air Force commandos conducted Arctic training — ski maneuvers and free-fall air operations — in Sweden, but such training missions are only part of the story. Air Force special operators were, for instance, recently deployed [to aid](#) the attempt to rescue 12 boys and their soccer coach trapped deep inside a cave in Thailand. The Air Force also has three active duty special operations wings assigned to Air Force Special Operations Command, including the 24th Special Operations Wing, a “special tactics” unit that integrates air and ground forces for “precision-strike” and personnel-recovery missions. At a change of command ceremony in March, it was noted that its personnel had conducted almost 2,900 combat missions over the last two years.

Addition Through Subtraction

For years, U.S. Special Operations forces have been in a state of seemingly unrestrained expansion. Nowhere has that been more evident than in Africa. In 2006, just 1% of all American commandos deployed overseas were operating on that continent. By 2016, that number had [jumped](#) above 17%. By then, there were more special operations personnel devoted to Africa — 1,700 special operators spread out across 20 countries — than anywhere else except the Middle East.

Recently, however, the *New York Times* [reported](#) that a “sweeping Pentagon review” of special ops missions on that continent may soon result in drastic cuts in the number of commandos operating there. (“We do not comment on what tasks the secretary of defense or chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff may or may not have given USSOCOM,” spokesman Ken McGraw told me when I inquired about the review.) U.S. Africa Command has apparently been asked to [consider](#) what effect cutting commandos there by 25% over 18 months and 50% over three years would have on its counterterrorism missions. In the end, only about 700 elite troops — roughly the same number as were stationed in Africa in 2014 — would be left there.

Coming on the heels of the October 2017 debacle in Niger that left those four Americans dead and apparent [orders](#) from the commander of United States Special Operations forces in Africa that its commandos “plan missions to stay out of direct combat or do not go,” a number of experts suggested that such a review signaled a reappraisal of military engagement on the continent. The proposed cuts also seemed to fit with the Pentagon’s latest national defense strategy that highlighted a coming shift from a focus on counterterrorism to the threats of near-peer competitors like Russia and China.

“We will continue to prosecute the campaign against terrorists,” said Secretary of Defense James Mattis in January, “but great power competition — not terrorism — is now the primary focus of U.S. national security.”

A wide range of analysts questioned or criticized the proposed troop reduction. Mu Xiaoming, from China’s National Defense University of the People’s Liberation Army, [likened](#) such a reduction in elite U.S. forces to the Obama administration’s drawdown of troops in Afghanistan in 2014 and noted the possibility of “terrorism making a comeback in Africa.” A former chief of U.S. commandos on the continent, Donald Bolduc, unsurprisingly echoed these same fears.

“Without the presence that we have there now,” he told [Voice of America](#), “we’re just going to increase the effectiveness of the violent extremist

organizations over time and we are going to lose trust and credibility in this area and destabilize it even further.”

David Meijer, a security analyst based in Amsterdam, [lamented](#) that, as Africa was growing in geostrategic importance and China is strengthening its ties there,

“it’s ironic that Washington is set to reduce its already minimal engagement on the continent.”

This is hardly a foregone conclusion, however. For years, members of SOCOM, as well as [supporters](#) in [Congress](#), at [think tanks](#), and [elsewhere](#), have been loudly [complaining](#) about the soaring operations tempo for America’s elite troops and the resulting strains on them.

“Most SOF units are employed to their sustainable limit,” General Thomas, the SOCOM chief, [told](#) members of Congress last spring. “Despite growing demand for SOF, we must prioritize the sourcing of these demands as we face a rapidly changing security environment.” Given how much clout SOCOM wields, such incessant gripes were certain to lead to changes in policy.

Last year, in fact, Secretary of Defense Mattis noted that the lines between U.S. Special Operations forces and conventional troops were blurring and that the latter would likely be taking on missions previously [shouldered](#) by the commandos, particularly in Africa.

“So the general purpose forces can do a lot of the kind of work that you see going on and, in fact, are now,” he [said](#). “By and large, for example in Trans-Sahel [in northwest Africa], many of those forces down there supporting the French-led effort are not Special Forces. So we’ll continue to expand the general purpose forces where it’s appropriate. I would... anticipate more use of them.”

Earlier this year, Owen West, the assistant secretary of defense for special operations and low-intensity conflict, referred to Mattis’s comments while [telling](#) members of the House Armed Services Committee about the “need to look at the line that separates conventional operating forces from SOF and seek to take greater advantage of the ‘common capabilities’ of our exceptional conventional forces.” He particularly highlighted the Army’s Security Force Assistance Brigades, recently [created](#) to conduct advise-and-assist missions. This spring, Oklahoma Senator James Inhofe, a senior member of the Senate Armed Services Committee, [recommended](#) that one of those units be dedicated to Africa.

Substituting forces in this way is precisely what Iowa Senator Joni Ernst, an Iraq War veteran and member of the Armed Services Committee, has also been advocating. Late last year, in fact, her press secretary, Leigh Claffey, [told](#) *TomDispatch* that the senator believed “instead of such heavy reliance on Special Forces, we should also be engaging our conventional forces to take over missions when appropriate, as well as turning over operations to capable indigenous forces.” Chances are that U.S. commandos will continue carrying out their shadowy Section 127e raids alongside local forces across the African continent while leaving more conventional training and advising tasks to rank-and-file troops. In other words, the number of commandos in Africa may be cut, but the total number of American troops may not — with covert combat operations possibly continuing at the present pace.

If anything, U.S. Special Operations forces are likely to expand, not contract, next year. SOCOM's 2019 budget request calls for [adding](#) about 1,000 personnel to what would then be a force of 71,000. In April, at a meeting of the Senate Subcommittee on Emerging Threats and Capabilities chaired by Ernst, New Mexico Senator Martin Heinrich [noted](#) that SOCOM was on track to "grow by approximately 2,000 personnel" in the coming years. The command is also poised to make 2018 another historic year in global reach. If Washington's special operators deploy to just 17 more countries by the end of the fiscal year, they will exceed last year's record-breaking total.

"USSOCOM continues to recruit, assess, and select the very best. We then train and empower our teammates to solve the most daunting national security problems," SOCOM commander General Thomas [told](#) the House Subcommittee on Emerging Threats and Capabilities earlier this year.

Why Green Berets and Navy SEALs need to *so*lve national security problems — strategic issues that ought to be addressed by policymakers — is a question that has long gone unanswered. It may be one of the reasons why, since Green Berets "[liberated](#)" Afghanistan in 2001, the United States has been involved in combat there and, as the years have passed, a plethora of other forever-war fronts including Cameroon, Iraq, Kenya, Libya, Mauritania, Mali, Niger, the Philippines, Somalia, Syria, Tunisia, and Yemen.

"The creativity, initiative and spirit of the people who comprise the Special Operations Force cannot be overstated. They are our greatest asset," said Thomas.

And it's likely that such assets will grow in 2019.

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