



May 2019

SPECIAL OPERATIONS FORCES

Additional Actions Are Needed to Effectively Expand Management Oversight

Accessible Version

GAO Highlights

Highlights of [GAO-19-386](#), a report to congressional committees

Why GAO Did This Study

As DOD increased its reliance on special operations forces, SOCOM's budget has increased from \$5.2 billion in 2005 to \$12.3 billion in 2018. Section 922 of the NDAA for Fiscal Year 2017 included provisions to enhance the Assistant Secretary of Defense for Special Operations and Low-Intensity Conflict's responsibilities to be similar to those of a military department secretary regarding the organization, training, and equipping of special operations forces.

The Joint Explanatory Statement accompanying the fiscal year 2018 NDAA included a provision for GAO to assess DOD's actions in response to section 922. This report assesses (1) the extent to which DOD has identified and taken actions to implement section 922; (2) what, if any, challenges it faces in completing implementation; and (3) the extent to which its hiring approach for the office of the ASD-SO/LIC has incorporated strategic workforce planning principles. GAO reviewed relevant documents and interviewed DOD officials.

What GAO Recommends

GAO is making three recommendations to DOD to establish time frames for section 922 actions; update applicable guidance to clarify roles and responsibilities for the ASD-SO/LIC and SOCOM; and develop a strategic workforce plan that incorporates key principles. DOD partially concurred with the recommendations and GAO continues to believe the recommendations are valid, as discussed in the report. GAO also modified one recommendation to address DOD concerns regarding its applicability.

View [GAO-19-386](#). For more information, contact Cary Russell at (202) 512-5431 or russellc@gao.gov.

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What GAO Found

Since 2017 the Department of Defense (DOD) has made recommendations, developed actions, and taken steps to address requirements in section 922 of the National Defense Authorization Act (NDAA) for Fiscal Year 2017 to expand the Assistant Secretary of Defense for Special Operations and Low-Intensity Conflict's (ASD-SO/LIC) roles and responsibilities. DOD officials noted that they have taken an incremental implementation approach to addressing section 922. In 2018, DOD identified 166 recommendations to change the ASD-SO/LIC's oversight of special operations forces (SOF). These recommendations were used to develop 87 actions that were necessary to implement section 922. Since February 2019, DOD has implemented 56 of these actions. For example, the Deputy Secretary of Defense approved a new Special Operations Policy and Oversight Council directive that identified the ASD-SO/LIC as the lead for that council. The Deputy Secretary of Defense also delegated the ASD-SO/LIC with authority to approve waivers to hire civilian personnel during a civilian hiring freeze.

Although the office of the ASD-SO/LIC has taken many actions to implement section 922, DOD faces two key challenges in completing its implementation of the ASD-SO/LIC's new roles and responsibilities:

- **Lack of time frames.** As of February 2019, 28 out of 31 unimplemented actions associated with section 922 did not have clear time frames for implementation. According to ASD-SO/LIC and U.S. Special Operations Command (SOCOM) officials, they did not prioritize establishing time frames because they took an incremental approach to implementing actions and addressed them on a case-by-case basis. Without clear time frames for implementation, ASD-SO/LIC and SOCOM may be less effective in implementing section 922.
- **Unclear guidance.** Current guidance about ASD-SO/LIC responsibilities is outdated: for example, it states that the ASD-SO/LIC shall report directly to the Under Secretary of Defense for Policy. However, section 922 states that special operation forces-related administrative matters are managed directly by the Secretary of Defense to the ASD-SO/LIC. The special operations force enterprise is a complex system, and unless roles and responsibilities are clarified in guidance, other DOD stakeholders, such as the military services, may not know the extent of the ASD-SO/LIC's and SOCOM's authorities and responsibilities. DOD officials expressed some concerns that until these matters are clarified in guidance, it will remain unclear whether the ASD-SO/LIC and SOCOM should work together—for example, on personnel issues—and how their relationships with stakeholders with oversight authority will be managed. DOD partially concurred, and based on its comments, GAO modified one recommendation.

The office of the ASD-SO/LIC has made efforts to develop a workforce plan, including commissioning a manpower study and taking steps to develop a hiring plan; however, these efforts do not fully incorporate some leading principles for a strategic workforce plan. For example, ASD-SO/LIC did not share the hiring plan with its staff, including key officials from the office of the ASD-SO/LIC and SOCOM. Without completing a comprehensive strategic workforce plan that includes key principles, the office of the ASD-SO/LIC may not know what gaps exist in skills and competencies in order to develop effective workforce strategies to fill those gaps. These issues could put the office of the ASD-SO/LIC at risk of hiring personnel who may not adequately meet its needs as defined by section 922.

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Abbreviations

ASD-SO/LIC	The Assistant Secretary of Defense for Special Operations and Low-Intensity Conflict
DOD	Department of Defense
FTE	Full Time Equivalents
NDAA	National Defense Authorization Act
OASD-SO/LIC	Office of the Assistant Secretary of Defense for Special Operations and Low Intensity Conflict
POM	Program Objective Memorandum
SAP	Special Access Programs
SOCOM	Special Operations Command
SOF	Special Operations Forces
USD (P)	Under Secretary of Defense for Policy
USD (P&R)	Under Secretary of Defense for Personnel and Readiness

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May 13, 2019

The Honorable James M. Inhofe
Chairman
The Honorable Jack Reed
Ranking Member
Committee on Armed Services
United States Senate

The Honorable Adam Smith
Chairman
The Honorable Mac Thornberry
Ranking Member
Committee on Armed Services
House of Representatives

For more than a decade the Department of Defense (DOD) has increased its reliance on U.S. Special Operations Forces (SOF), growing from 45,000 SOF personnel in 2001 to 70,000, carrying out a broad range of activities that include counterterrorism, crisis response, and contingency force operations. To support these activities, funding for U.S. Special Operations Command (SOCOM) increased from \$5.2 billion in 2005 to \$12.3 billion in 2018. Despite the growth in activities and resourcing, oversight of SOCOM's responsibilities to organize, train, and equip has remained largely the same. SOCOM has a unique structure and responsibilities in that it has both combatant command responsibilities and military service-like functions for organizing, training, and equipping SOF. Under sections 164 and 167 of Title 10, United States Code, the SOCOM commander is responsible for, among other things, training and ensuring the combat readiness of assigned forces and monitoring the preparedness of SOF assigned to unified combatant commands to carry out assigned missions.¹

¹The term "combatant command" means 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. *DOD Dictionary of Military and Associated Terms* (January 2019).

To strengthen the oversight of SOCOM and SOF, section 922 of the National Defense Authorization Act (NDAA) for Fiscal Year 2017 (hereinafter referred to as section 922) included a number of reforms designed to enhance the role of the Assistant Secretary of Defense for Special Operations and Low-Intensity Conflict (hereinafter referred to as ASD-SO/LIC).² Taken together, these reforms are intended to give the ASD-SO/LIC responsibilities similar to those of a military department secretary with regard to certain SOF-peculiar administrative matters, such as budgeting, programming, and personnel matters related to the organization, training, and equipping of SOF. This “service secretary-like” role was further reinforced in section 917 of the John S. McCain National Defense Authorization Act for Fiscal Year 2019.³ The Office of the Secretary of Defense for Special Operations and Low-Intensity Conflict (hereinafter referred to as OASD-SO/LIC) assists the ASD-SO/LIC in carrying out his roles and responsibilities.

Section 1074 of the NDAA for Fiscal Year 2018 directed the Secretary of Defense to submit a report on the implementation of requirements specified in section 922.⁴ The joint explanatory statement accompanying the NDAA for Fiscal Year 2018 included a provision for us to review DOD’s report and any actions taken to implement section 922.⁵ For this report, we assess (1) the extent to which DOD has identified and taken actions in response to section 922 of the NDAA for Fiscal Year 2017; (2) what challenges, if any, DOD faces in completing its implementation of the ASD-SO/LIC’s new service secretary-like roles and responsibilities; and (3) the extent to which DOD has incorporated strategic workforce planning principles into its hiring approach for OASD-SO/LIC.

For objective one, we reviewed monthly reports from September 2018 through February 2019 submitted by OASD-SO/LIC to Congress on the steps DOD has taken to address requirements in section 922. Two analysts independently assessed the extent to which OASD-SO/LIC’s and SOCOM’s combined recommendations for OASD-SO/LIC’s implementation of section 922 established new roles and responsibilities. In cases where two independent analysts disagreed on an assessment,

²Pub. L. No. 114-328, § 922 (2016) and codified at 10 U.S.C. § 138(b).

³Pub. L. No. 115-232, § 917 (2018).

⁴Pub. L. No. 115-91, § 1074 (2017).

⁵H.R. Rep. No. 115-404 at 930 (2017).

we compared the two sets of observations, discussed the assessments, and reconciled any differences. We analyzed the action items listed in the monthly reports to determine the items that were implemented. The monthly reports indicate whether each action item was implemented. To conduct the evaluation, an analyst reviewed the action items listed in these reports to determine how many action items had been implemented or had not been implemented, whether the description of the action item referred to OASD-SO/LIC's involvement in a meeting, and whether the description of the action item referred to OASD-SO/LIC's "coordination" role.

For objective two, we reviewed challenges to completing the implementation of ASD-SOLIC's roles and responsibilities under section 922. Specifically, we analyzed the extent to which the action items listed in the monthly reports to Congress were linked to clear time frames for implementation. To conduct the evaluation, an analyst reviewed the action items listed in these reports to determine whether the action items that had not been implemented were linked to clear time frames for implementation. We also compared existing guidance with the ASD-SO/LIC's evolving roles and responsibilities under section 922. Based on the monthly reports to Congress and the combined OASD-SO/LIC and SOCOM recommendations on implementing the section 922 roles and responsibilities, we assessed the extent to which the ASD-SO/LIC has taken steps to strengthen its roles and responsibilities and support new service secretary-like authorities under section 922. We also reviewed potential challenges we identified against *Standards for Internal Control in the Federal Government*, which states that establishing time frames is important for agency reform efforts and that management should define objectives clearly throughout the organization.⁶

For objective three, we reviewed steps that DOD has taken to develop a hiring plan and the extent to which the plan fully incorporates key strategic workforce planning principles. For example, DOD commissioned a study by the Army's Office of the Assistant Secretary of Manpower and Reserve Affairs (hereinafter referred to as the Army study) that determined personnel requirements needed to implement section 922. We also compared OASD-SO/LIC's hiring plan against key strategic workforce-planning principles that state, for example, that workforce

⁶GAO, *Standards for Internal Control in the Federal Government*, [GAO-14-704G](#) (Washington, D.C.: Sept. 10, 2014).

planning should involve both employees and management, and we met with the Office of the Assistant Secretary of Manpower and Reserve Affairs, which performed the manpower study to discuss personnel requirements.⁷ We compared OASD-SO/LIC's hiring plan against key principles for strategic workforce planning that we identified in prior work and compiled as part of this review.

To address all of the objectives in this report, we also interviewed officials responsible for implementing section 922 in OASD-SO/LIC and SOCOM; the Office of the Chief Management Officer; Office of the Director, Cost Assessment and Program Evaluation (CAPE); Office of the Under Secretary of Defense for Policy (USD (P)); and Office of the Under Secretary of Defense (Comptroller).

We conducted this performance audit from July 2018 to May 2019 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

Roles and Responsibilities of SOCOM and the ASD-SO/LIC

SOCOM has a unique structure and responsibilities in that it has both combatant command responsibilities and military service-like functions for organizing, training, and equipping SOF. Under sections 164 and 167 of Title 10, United States Code, the SOCOM commander is responsible for training and ensuring the combat readiness of assigned forces and monitoring the preparedness to carry out assigned missions of SOF assigned to unified combatant commands. In addition, SOCOM is

⁷GAO, *Key Principles for Effective Strategic Workforce Planning* (GAO-04-39). To identify strategic workforce planning principles and illustrative agency examples, we selected five examples of agencies' workforce planning activities to present in the report. We met with human capital and program officials and analyzed documents related to these examples to more fully understand the specific workforce planning issues associated with the examples and how the agencies addressed these issues.

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. In its combatant command function, the commander of SOCOM is responsible for and has the authority to conduct 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, and (10) other activities such as may be specified by the President or the Secretary of Defense.

Congress initially established the position of the ASD-SO/LIC in the NDAA for Fiscal Year 1987.⁸ As previously discussed, in 2016 Congress enhanced the role of the ASD-SO/LIC in section 922, which is codified in section 138(b) of Title 10, United States Code. The ASD-SO/LIC's current statutory responsibilities include overall supervision, including policy and resources, of special operations activities listed above; exercising authority, direction, and control of all special operations-peculiar administrative matters relating to the organization, training, and equipping of SOF; and assisting the Secretary of Defense and USD (P) in the development and supervision of policy, program planning and execution, and allocation and use of resources for irregular warfare, combating terrorism, and special operations activities.

DOD Directive 5111.10, *Assistant Secretary of Defense for Special Operations and Low-Intensity Conflict (SO/LIC)*, first issued in 1995 and most recently updated in 2011, also prescribes the roles and responsibilities for the ASD-SO/LIC.⁹ Among other things, the ASD-SO/LIC serves as the principal staff assistant to the USD (P) and the Secretary of Defense on special operations and low-intensity conflict

⁸See Pub. L. No. 99-661, § 1311 (1986).

⁹ DOD Directive 5111.10, *Assistant Secretary of Defense for Special Operations and Low Intensity Conflict (SO/LIC)* (October 21, 2011).

matters and counterdrug policy, among others.¹⁰ DOD Directive 5111.10 also establishes responsibilities, functions, relationships, and authorities for the ASD-SO/LIC on issues such as the coordination and oversight of policy for humanitarian assistance, refugee affairs, and foreign disaster relief activities (e.g., emergency relief for Ebola).

Prior to the enactment of section 922, OASD-SO/LIC coordinated regularly with SOCOM on administrative matters, such as reviewing SOCOM's budget materials. Specifically, the administrative chain of command for SOF-related matters was formally changed by section 922 to give the ASD-SO/LIC more oversight over SOCOM through direct interaction with the Secretary of Defense.¹¹ Section 922 provided the ASD-SO/LIC with the statutory authority to exercise authority, direction, and control of all special operations-peculiar administrative matters relating to organizing, training, and equipping SOF. Section 922 did not alter SOCOM's operational chain of command as a combatant command.

DOD's Report Summarizing Its Progress in Implementing Section 922

Section 1074 of the NDAA for Fiscal Year 2018 directed DOD to submit a report on the progress the department had made in implementing the requirements identified in section 922. Section 1074 specified seven reporting elements, such as the accounting of personnel currently assigned, that DOD's report should address. DOD submitted its report on

¹⁰The principal staff assistants are the Under Secretaries of Defense; the Deputy Chief Management Officer; the General Counsel of DOD; the Inspector General of DOD; and those Assistant Secretaries of Defense, Assistants to the Secretary of Defense, and Office of the Secretary of Defense Directors, and equivalents who report directly to the Secretary or Deputy Secretary of Defense. The 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. DOD Directive 5100.01, *Functions of the Department of Defense and Its Major Components* (Dec. 21, 2010).

¹¹The administrative chain of command refers to the exercise of authority, direction, and control with respect to the special operations-peculiar administration and support of SOCOM, including the readiness and organization of SOF, resources and equipment, and civilian personnel.

March 12, 2018, wherein it identified a high-level summary of actions taken, as shown in table 1 below.¹²

¹²Department of Defense, *Management of Special Operations Forces and Special Operations: Section 1074 Report on Implementation of Requirements in Connection with the Organization of the Department of Defense for Management of Special Operations Forces and Special Operations* (Mar. 12, 2018).

Table 1: Identification of Elements in the Department of Defense’s (DOD) March 2018 Report to Congress

Element in section 1074 of National Defense Authorization Act of Fiscal Year 2018	DOD’s response in the report
Element 1: A statement of the responsibilities of the Assistant Secretary of Defense for Special Operations and Low-Intensity Conflict that is consistent with the covered authority, including an identification of any responsibilities to be divested by the Assistant Secretary pursuant to the covered authority. ^a	Provides an overview of the change to the administrative chain of command for the Assistant Secretary of Defense for Special Operations and Low-Intensity Conflict and Special Operations Command (SOCOM).
Element 2: A resource-unconstrained analysis of manpower requirements necessary to satisfy the responsibilities akin to those of the secretary of a military department that are specified by the covered authority.	Includes the results of an analysis of personnel based on unconstrained resources, which was conducted by the Army’s Office of Manpower and Reserve Affairs.
Element 3: An accounting of civilian, military, and contractor personnel currently assigned to fulfill responsibilities akin to those of the secretary of a military department that are specified by the covered authority, including responsibilities relating to budget, personnel, programs and requirements, acquisition, and special access programs.	Details the 14 individuals assigned to implement the Secretariat responsibilities. As of February 2019, the number of individuals assigned to Secretariat responsibilities had risen to 28.
Element 4: A description of actions taken to implement the covered authority as of the date of the report, including the assignment of any additional civilian, military, or contractor personnel to fulfill additional responsibilities akin to those of the secretary of a military department that are specified by the covered authority.	Details the actions taken to implement section 922, the majority of which were the inclusion of the Assistant Secretary of Defense for Special Operations and Low-Intensity Conflict in relevant meetings and hiring of new full-time equivalents.
Element 5: An explanation of how the responsibilities akin to those of the secretary of a military department that were assigned to the assistant secretary by the covered authority will be fulfilled in the absence of additional personnel being assigned to the office of the Assistant Secretary of Defense for Special Operations and Low-Intensity Conflict.	Explains that the Assistant Secretary of Defense for Special Operations and Low-Intensity Conflict is evaluating options to meet the intent of Congress, including receiving personnel from other parts of the Office of Secretary Defense as well as realigning staff internally.
Element 6: An assessment of whether the responsibilities specified in section 138(b)(4) of Title 10, United States Code, could be accomplished more effectively if the Assistant Secretary of Defense for Special Operations and Low-Intensity Conflict were elevated to an Under Secretary, including the potential benefits and negative consequences of such a change.	Explains that the creation of an undersecretary would solve a long-standing issue of the hybrid nature of Special Operations and Low-Intensity Conflict’s role under the Under Secretary of Defense for Policy. However, the report states that it would increase the bureaucracy in the department and require a large amount of resources.
Element 7: Any other matters the secretary considers appropriate.	Officials did not indicate any additional matters.

Source: GAO analysis of DOD information. | GAO-19-386

^aCovered authority refers to all of the changes made to the Assistant Secretary of Defense for Special Operations and Low-Intensity Conflict’s responsibilities by section 922 of the National Defense Authorization Act for Fiscal Year 2017.

DOD Has Made Recommendations, Developed Actions, and Taken Steps to Address Requirements in Section 922

DOD Identified Recommendations and Developed Actions to Address Requirements in Section 922

In 2018, DOD identified 166 recommendations to address the reforms required by section 922 that are aimed at increasing the ASD-SO/LIC's role in the management of SOF and special operations. To identify these recommendations and support the implementation of service secretary-like responsibilities under section 922, OASD-SO/LIC and SOCOM created a "tiger team" to review broad functional areas typically performed by the military service secretariats and determine the need for potential changes to the roles and responsibilities of OASD-SO/LIC and SOCOM related to addressing requirements in section 922. The tiger team included five working groups to review potential roles and responsibilities for budget, special access programs, personnel and readiness, program and requirements, and acquisition functions.¹³ Two officials, respectively representing OASD-SO/LIC and SOCOM, co-led each of these working groups.¹⁴

OASD-SO/LIC established design principles to help the working groups identify new roles and responsibilities for OASD-SO/LIC and SOCOM under section 922. These principles included the following three broad categories of authorities that OASD-SO/LIC could be expected to take on:

- **Monitor:** This role requires that OASD-SO/LIC be informed, observe, and check the progress or quality of an activity throughout the lifetime of the activity. This includes, for example, monitoring SOCOM's submission of its presidential budget justification material to Congress.

¹³According to OASD-SO/LIC officials, other functional areas such as Inspector General, Public Affairs, and Legislative Affairs, were not included in each of the five working groups, but were addressed jointly by OASD-SO/LIC and SOCOM officials.

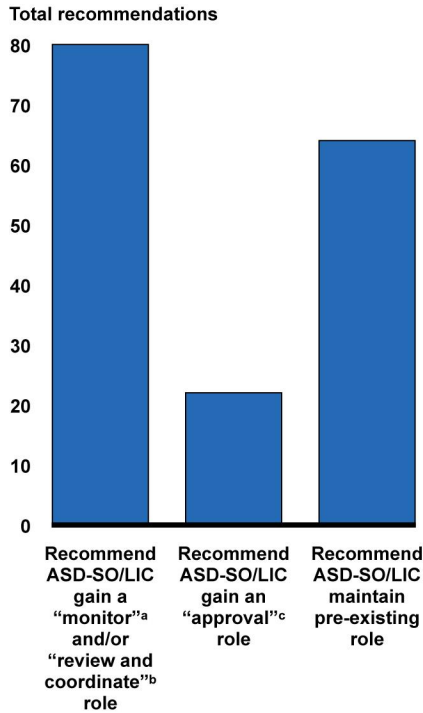
¹⁴Working groups also included a representative from the military departments and additional DOD personnel as needed.

- **Review and coordinate:** This role requires that OASD-SO/LIC review, analyze, and coordinate throughout the lifetime of an activity to ensure compliance with authoritative policy and with statutory and other regulatory issuances, and to ensure achievement of broad program goals. Coordination does not imply authority to compel agreement, however. An example of the review and coordinate role is that OASD-SO/LIC liaises with the military departments on military personnel issues.
- **Approve:** This role requires OASD-SO/LIC's concurrence to give explicit or official sanction, permission, or ratification of an activity. An example of approval authority is that ASD-SO/LIC approves SOCOM's Program Objective Memorandum (POM).¹⁵

We found the largest share of the 166 recommendations made by the working groups strengthened OASD-SO/LIC's roles related to monitor and to review and coordinate, as shown in figure 1. Specifically, 80 out of 166 recommendations (48 percent) would strengthen OASD-SO/LIC's role regarding monitor or review and coordinate. Twenty-two out of 166 recommendations (13 percent) would give OASD-SO/LIC approval authority—requiring OASD-SO/LIC's concurrence to give explicit or official sanction, permission, or ratification of an activity. Of these 22 recommendations, 16 involved either joint approval—requiring both OASD-SO/LIC and SOCOM to jointly approve the action—or partial approval—that is, OASD-SO/LIC would have approval authority on certain aspects of an action item. Sixty-four out of 166 recommendations (39 percent) did not recommend any change to OASD-SO/LIC's role. In addition, the majority of the recommendations, about 156 out of 166 (about 94 percent) would not change SOCOM's roles.

¹⁵The Program Objective Memorandum (POM) is the final product of the programming process within DOD. A component's POM displays the resource allocation decisions of the military department in response to and accordance with Defense Planning Guidance. The POM shows programmed needs 5 years hence (for example, in fiscal year 2016, POM 2018–2022 will be submitted). *Defense Acquisition University Glossary of Defense Acquisition Acronyms and Terms* (as of March 2019).

Figure 1: Department of Defense (DOD) Recommendations Regarding Potential Roles of the Assistant Secretary of Defense for Special Operations and Low-Intensity Conflict's (ASD-SO/LIC) in the Management of Special Operations Forces



Source: GAO analysis of Department of Defense data. | GAO-19-386

^a A "Monitor" role requires that ASD-SO/LIC be informed, observe, and check the progress or quality of an activity throughout the lifetime of the activity.

^b A "Review and Coordinate" role requires that ASD-SO/LIC review, analyze, and coordinate throughout the lifetime of an activity.

^c An "Approval" role requires ASD-SO/LIC's concurrence to give explicit or official sanction, permission, or ratification of an activity.

OASD-SO/LIC used the 166 recommendations to inform the development of 87 actions in OASD-SO/LIC's monthly reports to Congress.¹⁶ We found that with regard to the 87 actions identified in OASD-SO/LIC's February 2019 monthly report, 49 percent of the action items (43 out of 87) focused on OASD-SO/LIC's participation in meetings. For example, prior to the implementation of section 922, OASD-SO/LIC attended Joint Resources Management Board meetings. After implementing section 922, OASD-

¹⁶Beginning in September 2018, ASD-SO/LIC has been providing monthly reports to Congress that give updates on the implementation of section 922. These reports list action items that either have been implemented or are planned to be implemented.

SO/LIC exercised its review and coordinate responsibility by attending Joint Resources Management Board meetings, thereby formalizing OASD-SO/LIC's prior role. According to DOD officials, there is a value in adding OASD-SO/LIC as a participant in key meetings and formalizing OASD-SO/LIC's review and coordinate role. For example, officials explained that, by participating in meetings, OASD-SO/LIC can have more situational awareness about key topics and can better advocate for the SOF enterprise.

DOD Has Taken Several Actions to Address Section 922 Requirements

DOD, through OASD-SO/LIC, has taken various actions, including changes in roles and responsibilities, related to addressing requirements in section 922. According to OASD-SO/LIC officials, its actions reflect an incremental approach to strengthening OASD-SO/LIC's roles and responsibilities. In February 2019 OASD-SO/LIC reported to Congress that it had completed 56 of its 87 actions. For example, one of the actions identified in the February 2019 monthly report was the need to enhance OASD-SO/LIC's role in the development and approval of SOF-related program and budget matters. The report further identified a number of actions, including having OASD-SO/LIC approve SOCOM's POM. According to the report, OASD-SO/LIC was briefed on and approved SOCOM's POM for fiscal years 2020-2024. As another example, the report identified the need to enhance OASD-SO/LIC's oversight of SOF-related military construction activities and contingency basing. This included a requirement that OASD-SO/LIC co-chair SOCOM's Military Construction Summit, which according to officials deals with acquisition-related issues regarding military construction and is used to inform the POM. According to the February 2019 report, OASD-SO/LIC co-chaired the summit for fiscal year 2019, and its formal role as co-chair will be reflected in future updates to SOCOM guidance. The February report also explained that the Deputy Secretary of Defense approved a new Special Operations Policy and Oversight Council directive that identified the ASD-SO/LIC as the lead for that council. The Deputy Secretary of Defense also delegated the ASD-SO/LIC with authority to approve waivers to hire civilian personnel during a civilian hiring freeze.

Many of the actions taken thus far formalize pre-existing, informal relationships between OASD-SO/LIC and SOCOM. According to OASD-SO/LIC officials, a formalization of a pre-existing role occurs when OASD-SO/LIC identifies a role that OASD-SO/LIC performed informally before

addressing requirements under section 922 and continues to maintain the role officially under its section 922 responsibilities.¹⁷ Based on the February 2019 report to Congress, we found that 26 out of 56 implemented action items (about 50 percent) formalize ongoing OASD-SO/LIC roles and responsibilities that were previously conducted informally. Officials stated that all of the actions relating to budget execution are formalizations of previously existing informal roles and responsibilities. For example, according to OASD-SO/LIC and SOCOM officials, OASD-SO/LIC had an informal role in reviewing SOCOM's POM prior to section 922, such as participating in the review of the POM without formal approval authority. According to DOD officials familiar with the POM process, giving OASD-SO/LIC approval authority for SOCOM's POM essentially formalized what had been done in the past, while allowing OASD-SO/LIC to perform a more thorough review. Similarly, officials stated that OASD-SO/LIC had an informal role in developing SOCOM's budget justification books prior to the passage of section 922.¹⁸ Another action identified in DOD's February 2019 monthly report is OASD-SO/LIC's role in budget submission. Officials explained that, in an effort to enhance OASD-SO/LIC's role in budget submission, OASD-SO/LIC has formalized this role. According to the officials, the benefit of this formalization is that OASD-SO/LIC has greater access to the process of producing justification books. There have been similar examples of formalization of pre-existing roles in other areas as well. For example, prior to section 922, SOCOM's public affairs requirements were coordinated with USD (P)'s public affairs office. Rather than duplicate SOCOM's existing public affairs role with an additional public affairs office for the ASD-SO/LIC, OASD-SO/LIC coordinates with the USD (P)'s public affairs office.

¹⁷ASD-SO/LIC's formal role does not include clarifying the role in written DOD guidance, such as a DOD directive. ASD-SO/LIC's formal role is clarified in monthly reports to Congress and in tiger team recommendations.

¹⁸The budget justification is a document that an agency submits to the appropriations committees in support of its budget request.

Lack of Clear Time Frames and Guidance Are Challenges to Completing Implementation of the ASD-SO/LIC's Roles and Responsibilities

Most Actions That Remain to Be Implemented Do Not Have Clear Time Frames

Most of the actions remaining to be implemented do not have clear time frames for implementation. Based on our analysis of the February 2019 monthly report, we found that 31 out of 87 identified actions remain unimplemented. Of these 31 actions, three have clear time frames for implementation. For example, one of the remaining actions involves enhancing the ASD-SO/LIC's role in SOF military personnel-related issues. Among other things, this includes liaising with the military departments on relevant military personnel issues and coordinating on related policy issues. The February 2019 monthly report includes an action related to OASD-SO/LIC's plans to coordinate a process to monitor promotions of SOF personnel and communicate issues with military departments. The report specifies that the ASD-SO/LIC expected to implement this process in 2019. As another example, documenting and funding for the Secretariat for Special Operations was expected to be resolved by the first quarter of fiscal year 2019.¹⁹

However, the remaining 28 actions do not have time frames for implementation. For example, some of the actions associated with implementing the ASD-SO/LIC's key functions, such as acquisitions and legislative affairs, do not have clear time frames for implementation. Regarding acquisitions, OASD-SO/LIC is developing standard operating procedures, such as regular coordination and meetings, but it has not established time frames for the creation or implementation of these procedures. Similarly, OASD-SO/LIC and SOCOM are prescribing roles with regard to legislative affairs pending further departmental guidance, but they have not established time frames within which these roles will be defined.

¹⁹ASD-SO/LIC established the Secretariat for Special Operations to focus on organize, train, and equip functions for special operations. The Secretariat was divested from other policy functions (for example, policy development related to irregular warfare). See DOD's Monthly Report to Congress, "*Report on Implementation of Requirements for Management of Special Operations Forces and Special Operations*" (Nov. 30, 2018).

DOD officials identified some reasons for not having identified time frames for the remaining actions. First, according to OASD-SO/LIC officials, their initial efforts were focused on identifying and prioritizing the list of actions needed to implement section 922, as reflected in the March 2018 report required by law. Since then, according to OASD-SO/LIC and SOCOM officials, OASD-SO/LIC has taken an incremental approach to implementing these actions, addressing items on a case-by-case basis as they occur. For example, OASD-SO/LIC initially placed a higher priority on implementing its fiscal roles and responsibilities, partly because the POM cycle included deadlines associated with the President's Budget for Fiscal Year 2020. Throughout the cycle, OASD-SO/LIC determined its specific role in each step of the POM process as the step arose. Second, OASD-SO/LIC officials stated that they had not established clear time frames linked to action items because the ASD-SO/LIC was new in that role and they were waiting for him to determine OASD-SO/LIC's broader strategy and goals, which they could use to inform implementation time frames. However, we note that the ASD-SO/LIC has been in that position since December 2017, and OASD-SO/LIC has hired new personnel who could help develop and track time frames.

Standards for Internal Control in the Federal Government emphasizes the need to establish time frames to implement actions effectively, and as we reported in June 2018, establishing time frames with key milestones and deliverables to track implementation progress are important for agency reform efforts.²⁰ Failure to do so can have significant consequences. For example, by not establishing clear time frames for updating guidance that defines the ASD-SO/LIC's acquisition roles, the ASD-SO/LIC is at risk for having unclear roles and responsibilities that may overlap between SOCOM and the Office of the Secretary of Defense on functions related to acquisitions. According to SOCOM officials, having clearer time frames to update DOD guidance could enable OASD-SO/LIC and SOCOM to operate more efficiently and effectively. Without establishing clear time frames for the implementation of key oversight functions and other actions, the ASD-SO/LIC may not be able to fully execute OASD-SO/LIC's service secretary-like authority, and DOD decision-makers may not be well positioned to track progress and evaluate whether or how the

²⁰GAO, *Standards for Internal Control in the Federal Government*, [GAO-14-704G](#) (Washington, D.C.: September 2014). For more detail about agency reform efforts, our prior work identified leading practices for efficiency and government streamlining, see GAO, *Government Reorganization: Key Questions to Assess Agency Reform Efforts*, [GAO-18-427](#) (Washington, D.C.: June 13, 2018).

ASD-SO/LIC's completed and pending actions support the full implementation of section 922.

Outdated Guidance Limits Clarity of Understanding of the ASD-SO/LIC's Broader Roles and Responsibilities under Section 922

While the ASD- SO/LIC's responsibilities, functions, relationships, and authorities are established in DOD Directive 5111.10, *Assistant Secretary of Defense for Special Operations and Low-Intensity Conflict (ASD SO/LIC)* (Mar. 22, 1995) (incorporating Change 2, Oct. 21, 2011), this directive is outdated and does not reflect the ASD- SO/LIC's statutory roles under section 922 and codified at 10 U.S.C. § 138.²¹ For example, DOD Directive 5111.10 states that the ASD- SO/LIC shall serve under the authority, direction, and control of the USD (P). However, section 922 states that the ASD- SO/LIC's exercise of authority of all special operations-peculiar administrative matters related to the organization, training, and equipping of SOF shall be subject to the authority, direction, and control of the Secretary of Defense. According to DOD officials, while there is other guidance that broadly lays out DOD roles and responsibilities, this guidance lacks details concerning operationalizing ASD- SO/LIC's roles and responsibilities under the new administrative chain of command, creating potential confusion regarding the ASD- SO/LIC's roles and responsibilities on some key SOF-related issues. For example:

- **SOF personnel issues:** SOF personnel activities include readiness reporting, training, education, warrior care, awards, decorations, and death notification. Support for SOF personnel issues is generally dispersed among different components, including the military services, SOCOM, the office of the Under Secretary of Defense for Personnel and Readiness (USD (P&R)), and OASD- SO/LIC. Although DOD Directive 5111.10 states that the ASD- SO/LIC "shall advise and coordinate with the Under Secretary of Defense for Personnel and Readiness on manpower" issues, it does not define whether manpower issues include SOF career management, such as special pay and promotion. According to DOD officials, DOD lacks overarching guidance that would clarify ASD-SO/LIC's role on

²¹DOD Directive 5111.10, *Assistant Secretary of Defense for Special Operations and Low-Intensity Conflict* (Mar. 22, 1995) (incorporating change 2, Oct. 21, 2011).

manpower issues. DOD Directive 5111.10 also does not provide specific information about the extent of the ASD- SO/LIC's coordination role as it relates, for example, to issues such as career management, retirement, pay, or promotion with regard to USD (P&R) responsibilities on SOF personnel management. As a result, according to DOD officials, the lack of clear and updated guidance has caused some confusion among DOD components. According to OASD-SO/LIC officials, after section 922 was implemented, OASD-SO/LIC's initial attempts to provide strategic outreach for SOF personnel faced some challenges because officials were not included in key personnel meetings. For example, OASD-SO/LIC officials told us they were not included in some meetings that discussed delegating civilian hiring waivers. By not participating in some key SOF personnel-related meetings, OASD-SO/LIC could have missed the opportunity to advocate for similar waiver authority. According to DOD officials, USD (P&R) officials did not fully understand the ASD-SO/LIC's authorities under section 922 when OASD-SO/LIC officials attended some meetings.

Despite this confusion, the ASD-SO/LIC has taken some steps to strengthen its role on SOF personnel issues. For example, according to DOD officials, during the federal government civilian employee hiring freeze, DOD delegated civilian employee hiring waivers to the secretaries of the military departments but did not include waivers for the ASD-SO/LIC or SOCOM. Without the waiver authority to re-instate SOF personnel, SOCOM would have to request a waiver separately through the military services. OASD-SO/LIC officials told us that by ensuring the ASD-SO/LIC was granted a similar waiver authority, OASD-SO/LIC officials streamlined the process and supported SOCOM's efforts to hire additional SOF civilian personnel. However, the ASD-SO/LIC's authority on SOF personnel matters remains unclear and SOF personnel issues are generally dispersed among the authorities of USD (P&R), military services, and SOCOM. Overall, it remains unclear what, if any, authorities the ASD-SO/LIC has with respect to leading and coordinating the department's SOF personnel issues.

- **Budgetary authority:** SOF-related budgetary issues include the SOCOM special operations-specific-funding budget materials, the POM, acquisition, and congressional requests for information, among other things. DOD officials told us that before section 922 was enacted, the ASD-SO/LIC reviewed SOF-peculiar budget materials (generally linked to major force program funding) prior to submission

of the POM, and the ASD-SO/LIC was notified of SOF-related congressional unfunded priority list submissions.²² The ASD-SO/LIC did not have principal staff assistant authority to approve the POM. DOD Directive 5111.10 states that the ASD-SO/LIC will provide overall supervision of the preparation and justification of the SOF budget and programs and will review the SOCOM POM. However, the DOD directive has not been updated to provide the ASD-SO/LIC with clear oversight and approval authority over special operations–specific funding, which traditionally has been controlled by SOCOM. DOD Directive 5111.10 also states that the ASD-SO/LIC will advise and coordinate with the Under Secretary of Defense for Acquisition and Technology on acquisition priorities, but this does not provide the ASD-SO/LIC with oversight of the SOF acquisition process.²³ In addition, DOD does not have any guidance that gives ASD-SO/LIC clear oversight roles regarding the SOF acquisition process. By comparison, SOCOM is responsible for the development and acquisition of special operations-peculiar equipment, materiel, supplies, and services in accordance with section 167(e) of Title 10, U.S. Code, and it executes funding in operation and maintenance, procurement, and military construction accounts, among other things. According to OASD-SO/LIC senior officials, the ASD-SO/LIC has some authority over special operations–specific funding through the POM process. According to OASD-SO/LIC officials, after implementing section 922, the ASD-SO/LIC established a new principal staff assistant authority to approve the POM in 2018. However, DOD officials familiar with SOF-related budgetary issues stated that it is unclear how much authority the ASD-SO/LIC has over funding issues to adjudicate potential disagreements between the services and SOCOM on either SOF-specific or common funding issues.

²²A major force program is an aggregation of program elements that reflects a force or support mission of DOD, such as special operations, and contains the resources necessary to achieve a broad objective or plan relating to that mission. Special operations–specific funding, also known as MFP-11 funding, provides appropriated funds to SOCOM to procure SOF-peculiar equipment and services required to meet its requirements. Throughout this document we will refer to this funding as special operations–specific funding.

²³The Under Secretary of Defense for Acquisition and Technology was later renamed as the Under Secretary of Defense for Acquisition, Technology, and Logistics and then in February 2018 reorganized into two positions: the Under Secretary of Defense for Acquisition and Sustainment and the Under Secretary of Defense for Research and Engineering.

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- **Special Access Programs (SAP):** SAPs 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. Given the sensitive nature of these programs, DOD has established different levels of authorities to create and manage SAPs. According to DOD Directive 5205.07, *Special Access Program (SAP) Policy*, the Deputy Secretary of Defense designates certain DOD component heads, or DOD agency heads—for example, the secretary of a military department or the Commander, SOCOM—as cognizant authorities to manage and execute their respective SAPs.²⁴ While the ASD-SO/LIC has always played a role in SOF-related SAPs, DOD officials stated that the role is expected to evolve as part of the implementation of section 922. OASD-SO/LIC's February 2019 monthly report includes several actions intended to enhance the ASD-SO/LIC's role in the management of SAPs, and OASD-SO/LIC has already begun participating in various SAP-related conferences and meetings. However, according to DOD officials, the ASD-SO/LIC's future role related to SAPs remains unclear in existing guidance. For example, DOD Directive 5111.10 states that the ASD-SO/LIC will provide oversight over all special operations and low-intensity conflict related sensitive SAPs. Although the ASD-SO/LIC and SOCOM officials told us that they are currently further defining these roles, the DOD directive has not been updated to clarify whether the ASD-SO/LIC should be included in the SAP governance process, which includes designating the ASD-SO/LIC as a cognizant authority with service secretary-like SAP responsibilities. DOD officials expressed some concerns that until these matters are clarified in guidance, it will remain unclear whether the ASD-SO/LIC and SOCOM should work together on SAP issues, and how their relationships with the various Under Secretaries of Defense with oversight authority will be managed.

Standards for Internal Control in the Federal Government states that management should define objectives clearly and assign responsibility for key roles throughout the organization.²⁵ Specifically, the standards call for management to define objectives in specific terms so that they are understood at all levels of the entity. This involves clearly defining what is

²⁴See DOD Directive 5205.07, *Special Access Program (SAP) Policy*, (July 1, 2010)(incorporating change 1, Aug. 31, 2018).

²⁵ GAO, *Standards for Internal Control in the Federal Government*, [GAO-14-704G](#) (Washington, D.C.: September 2014).

to be achieved, who is to achieve it, how it will be achieved, and time frames for its achievement. We have also previously reported that management practices key to program success include clearly identifying organizational roles and responsibilities and clarifying program objectives.²⁶ OASD-SO/LIC and SOCOM officials stated that updated guidance is needed to help clarify the ASD-SO/LIC's roles and responsibilities under section 922. In December 2018 OASD-SO/LIC officials told us that they were starting to update guidance on the ASD-SO/LIC's roles and responsibilities under section 922 in DOD directive 5111.10. However, OASD-SO/LIC officials did not provide details about the information that would be updated, and did not provide a copy of that draft guidance. In addition, OASD-SO/LIC officials did not have clear time frames regarding when the guidance will be updated.

As DOD updates the ASD-SO/LIC's roles and responsibilities either in DOD Directive 5111.10 or through new guidance, it has an opportunity to clarify changes in its relationship with DOD components involved in overseeing SOF administrative matters related to personnel, budgetary authority, and SAPs. The SOF enterprise is a complex system, and without clearly identified roles and responsibilities for a service secretary-like role for the ASD-SO/LIC, other DOD components—such as the military departments, USD (P), and USD (P&R)—may not know the extent of the ASD-SO/LIC's and SOCOM's authorities in key issues where they have vested interests. For example, it will remain unclear what authorities the ASD-SO/LIC has with regard to SOF-related administrative matters, and which entities will have visibility over any problems or resourcing decisions related to the SOF enterprise. By clarifying the ASD-SO/LIC's roles and responsibilities with regard to its relationship with SOCOM and other DOD components, DOD can more effectively implement the intent of section 922.

²⁶GAO, *Defense Management: DOD Needs to Establish Clear Goals and Objectives, Guidance, and a Designated Budget to Manage Its Biometrics Activities*, [GAO-08-1065](#) (Washington, D.C.: Sept. 26, 2008).

DOD Has Taken Steps to Develop a Hiring Plan but Has Not Fully Incorporated Some Key Strategic Workforce Planning Principles

OASD-SO/LIC Has Hired Additional Personnel and Taken Steps to Develop a Hiring Plan to Guide Future Growth

OASD-SO/LIC has taken steps to develop a hiring plan to identify personnel requirements and an approach to hiring additional personnel. DOD's efforts began in 2017, when OASD-SO/LIC commissioned the Army Office of Manpower and Reserve Affairs to conduct a manpower study to provide an analysis of manpower requirements based on unconstrained resources that are necessary to satisfy the service secretary-like responsibilities under section 922. The Army's manpower study was based on nine functions, including budget, acquisitions, and legislative activities.²⁷ For each function, the study identified corresponding tasks and the average man hours, or time needed, to complete each task. The study, which was included in DOD's March 2018 report to Congress, ultimately estimated that up to 64 full-time equivalent (FTE) positions might be needed to implement the ASD-SO/LIC's section 922 responsibilities. According to OASD-SO/LIC officials, the study provided an initial framework for OASD-SO/LIC to determine its staffing needs, but the study was not comprehensive and OASD-SO/LIC's hiring needs will likely continue to change in the future.

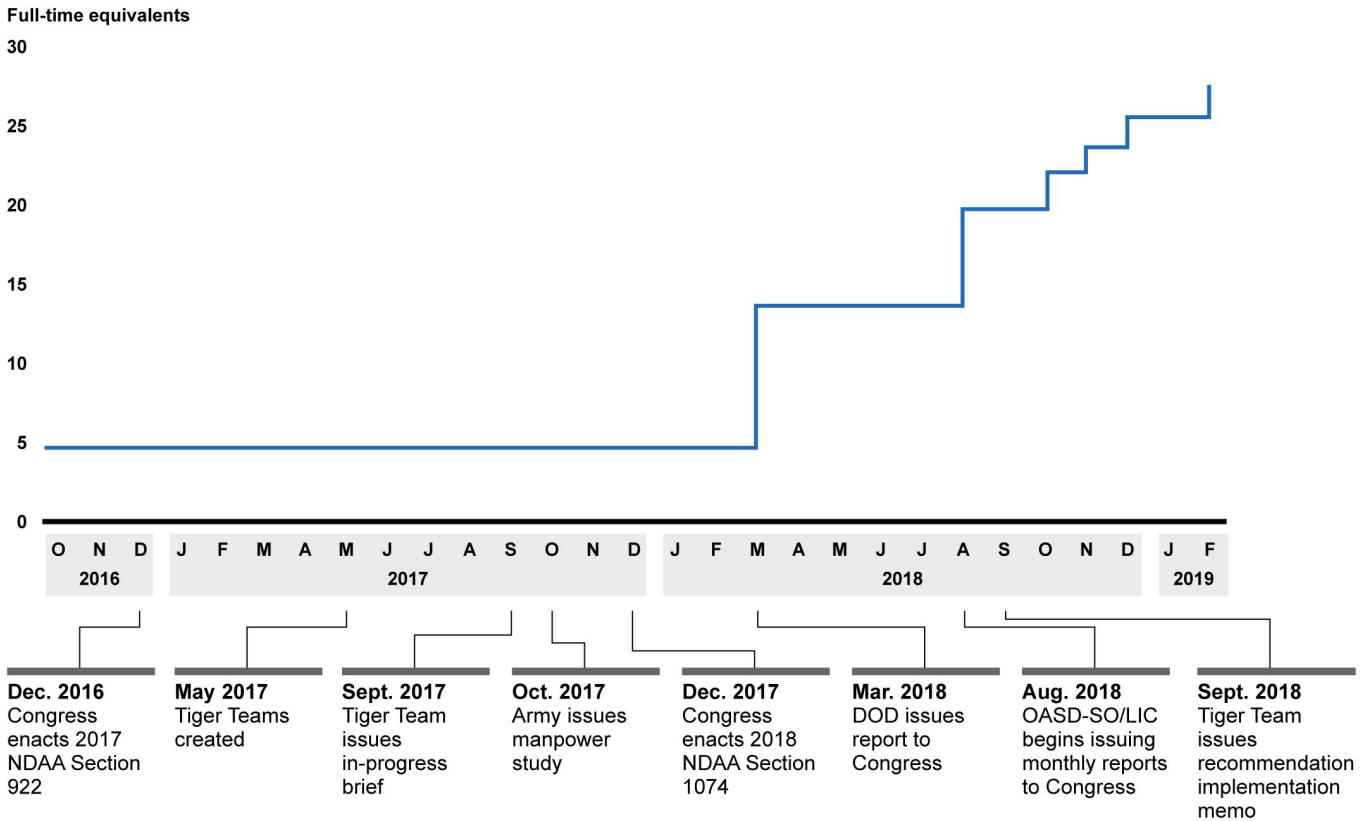
Over the past 2 years, according to OASD-SO/LIC officials, OASD-SO/LIC has begun to hire personnel to fulfill various roles and responsibilities. Specifically, the number of FTEs hired to support OASD-

²⁷According to the Army study, the nine functions include: exercise authority, direction, and control over all budget & execution relating to special operations activities; monitor the promotions of special operations forces (SOF); supervise the development of SOF requirements and program planning and execution; exercise authority, direction, and control over all acquisitions relating to SOF activities; exercise authority, direction, and control over all Special Access Programs relating to SOF; exercise authority, direction, and control over all Sensitive Activities relating to SOF; Chair and administer the Special Operations Policy and Oversight Council; exercise authority, direction, and control over all legislative activities related to SOF; and exercise authority, direction, and control over all public affairs activities related to SOF man, train, and equip issues. See Department of the Army, "Manpower Analysis to Transform the Special Operations and Irregular Warfare Directorate to Align with Section 922" (Oct. 24, 2017).

SO/LIC's implementation of section 922 increased from 14 in March 2018 to 24 as of December 2018. In addition, section 361 of the John S. McCain NDAA for Fiscal Year 2019 gave the ASD-SO/LIC additional flexibility to hire staff in fiscal year 2019. For example, section 361 directed that not less than \$4 million in fiscal year 2019 shall be used to fund additional civilian personnel to help implement section 922.²⁸ Section 361 also provided the OASD-SO/LIC an exemption from the statutory civilian personnel limitation in the Office of the Secretary of Defense imposed by 10 U.S.C. § 143. Figure 2 shows OASD-SO/LIC's hiring actions to date, along with key events related to the implementation of section 922.

²⁸ Pub. L. No. 115-232, § 361 (2018).

Figure 2: Increased Special Operations and Low-Intensity Conflict (SO/LIC) Personnel Associated with Implementation of Section 922



OASD-SO/LIC NDAA Office of the Assistant Secretary of Defense for Special Operations and Low Intensity Conflict National Defense Authorization Act

Source: GAO analysis of Department of Defense data. | GAO-19-386

In December 2018 OASD-SO/LIC officials completed a basic hiring plan to guide future personnel growth as OASD-SO/LIC continues to implement actions related to section 922.²⁹ The plan—documented in a 10 slide presentation—includes OASD-SO/LIC’s short-term hiring goals through the start of fiscal year 2020, a hiring approach involving a mix of permanent and temporary staff, and the identification of targeted skillsets for personnel hired. For example, the plan includes targets related to achieving key skills, such as force planning and shaping the President’s Budget for Fiscal Year 2021. The plan also calls for OASD-SO/LIC to grow from 27 current FTEs to a total of 55 FTEs in fiscal year 2020.

²⁹The plan is entitled “Secretariat for Special Operations: Growth Plan (U/FOUO).”

OASD-SO/LIC's Hiring Plan Does Not Fully Incorporate Key Strategic Workforce-Planning Principles

While OASD-SO/LIC's current hiring plan represents a first step toward developing a broad overview of its hiring goals and some key hiring considerations, it does not fully incorporate some leading practices for strategic workforce-planning. As we have previously reported, strategic workforce planning addresses two critical needs: (1) aligning an organization's human capital program with its current and emerging mission and programmatic goals; and (2) developing long-term strategies for acquiring, developing, and retaining staff to achieve programmatic goals.³⁰ While agencies' approaches to workforce planning will vary, we have previously identified several key principles that strategic workforce planning should address, irrespective of the context in which the planning is done. GAO's prior work on workforce planning identified the following five key principles: involve top management, employees, and other stakeholders in developing the strategic workforce plan; determine the critical skills and competencies needed to achieve long-term goals; develop strategies that are tailored to address critical competency gaps; build the capacity needed to address requirements important to supporting workforce strategies; and monitor and evaluate the agency's progress toward its human capital goals. However, we found that as of December 2018, the OASD-SO/LIC's hiring plan had not fully incorporated several of these key strategic workforce-planning principles, as described below:

- **The hiring plan was not fully aligned with long-term goals.** 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. However, we found that OASD-SO/LIC has not clearly linked its hiring plan with its overall mission and goals. For example, the hiring plan mentions short-term goals, such as analyzing the budget for fiscal year 2021 and long-term goals, such as strategic assessment and aligning the organization with National Defense Strategy requirements. However, the plan does not define strategic assessment, and it lacks detail about how newly hired personnel in fiscal year 2019 will help OASD-SO/LIC meet long-term goals related to strategic assessment. For example, OASD-SO/LIC recently hired

³⁰GAO, *Human Capital: Key Principles for Effective Strategic Workforce Planning*, [GAO-04-39](#) (Washington, D.C.: Dec. 11, 2003).

seven personnel, but it is not clear whether the newly hired personnel have skills that match competencies, such as the ability to work with Special Access Programs, identified in OASD-SO/LIC's hiring plan.³¹ We have previously reported that unless hiring needs are clearly linked with long-term goals, the hiring plan may be incomplete or premature.

- **OASD-SO/LIC's approach did not fully involve stakeholders.** While stakeholder involvement is not statutorily required, another key principle of effective strategic workforce planning is to involve top management, employees, and other stakeholders in developing, communicating, and implementing strategic workforce plans. We found several cases in which OASD-SO/LIC did not involve stakeholders in its key efforts. For example, although OASD-SO/LIC senior officials shared information about the hiring plan with one senior official at SOCOM, several OASD-SO/LIC and SOCOM officials stated that OASD-SO/LIC did not communicate the hiring plan's expectations or strategies more broadly, to involve a full range of OASD-SO/LIC and SOCOM officials and other stakeholders, such as USD (P). In another example, when OASD-SO/LIC hired personnel from September 2018 through December 2018, several OASD-SO/LIC and SOCOM officials were unclear about the specific roles and responsibilities of new personnel hired.
- **The hiring plan did not include strategies to address critical competency gaps and identify related personnel requirements.** Leading principles of effective strategic workforce planning hold that agencies should develop strategies to address critical skill gaps and systematic personnel requirements processes, which are considered a good human capital practice across government. However, we found that OASD-SO/LIC's hiring plan did not include completed competency-gap assessments or have procedures in place to periodically reassess personnel requirements. Without a systematic process to periodically assess personnel requirements, OASD-SO/LIC could not determine whether the Army study's initial estimates were the most efficient choice for the workforce. For example with regard to the legislative affairs positions, OASD-SO/LIC and SOCOM officials told us that the Army manpower study's initial estimate of eight FTEs was too high. OASD-SO/LIC officials eventually hired two FTEs for the legislative affairs office, but the hiring plan did not include a methodology to analyze the workforce and explain why two FTEs

³¹OASD-SO/LIC hired seven personnel between the period of September 2018 through January 2019.

would fit within the Army study's framework. According to OASD-SO/LIC officials, OASD-SO/LIC also did not use a standardized process to assess whether two FTEs would meet its requirements.

According to OASD-SO/LIC officials, the hiring plan is the first step in developing an initial framework, and they stated that it lacked implementation details. OASD-SO/LIC officials stated that they anticipate building upon the hiring plan as the current workforce plan evolves over time. In addition, OASD-SO/LIC officials stated that key priorities include strengthening OASD-SO/LIC's participation and oversight of SOF resources through the POM and fiscal guidance processes. As a result, the hiring plan includes information about new personnel focused on fiscal oversight, such as analyzing the budget in fiscal years 2020 through 2021, but it does not clarify long-term goals, competency gaps, and program results tied to other priorities, such as legislative and acquisition-related functions. Officials from OASD-SO/LIC and SOCOM agreed that incorporating key principles in the strategic workforce plan would help them determine the most appropriate size and composition of OASD-SO/LIC's workforce.

Until OASD-SO/LIC completes a comprehensive strategic workforce plan that includes key principles as outlined above, OASD-SO/LIC may not know what gaps exist in skills and competencies, and what their workforce strategies to fill those gaps should be. These issues could put OASD-SO/LIC at risk of hiring personnel who may not adequately meet its needs as defined by section 922.

Conclusions

As DOD increasingly relies on SOF, the department has taken steps to implement section 922. Given the expanded statutory authority under section 922, the ASD-SO/LIC has greater authority to oversee and advocate for the SOF enterprise. The ASD-SO/LIC has implemented several actions to clarify and strengthen its oversight roles and responsibilities, and it has many additional planned actions underway. However, without time frames to implement action items and revised or new guidance that clearly articulates the ASD-SO/LIC's roles and responsibilities with regard to SOCOM and the wider SOF enterprise, these changes may not be fully effective. In addition, without a strategic workforce plan that fully incorporates leading practices to ensure that the department has the right people, in the right place, at the right time, OASD-SO/LIC may not be well prepared to respond to future workload

changes and manage its human capital strategically. As OASD-SO/LIC makes progress in its hiring plan, it is important for OASD-SO/LIC to develop a strategic workforce plan to ensure that it appropriately addresses the human-capital challenges of the future and better contributes to the agency's efforts to meet its missions and goals.

Recommendations

We are making three recommendations to the Secretary of Defense:

The Secretary of Defense should ensure that the Assistant Secretary of Defense for Special Operations and Low-Intensity Conflict defines time frames for completing action items necessary to implement the Assistant Secretary of Defense for SO/LIC's expanded section 922 responsibilities. (Recommendation 1)

The Secretary of Defense should ensure that the Assistant Secretary of Defense for the Special Operations and Low-Intensity Conflict updates existing guidance or develops new guidance to clarify the roles and responsibilities of the Assistant Secretary of Defense for SO/LIC and relationships with DOD components that have vested interests in the SOF enterprise—such as the military services, SOCOM, the Under Secretary of Defense for Personnel and Readiness, and the Under Secretary of Defense for Policy. (Recommendation 2)

The Secretary of Defense should ensure that the Assistant Secretary of Defense for Special Operations and Low-Intensity Conflict builds upon its hiring plan by developing a strategic workforce plan that incorporates key principles, such as aligning the plan with long-term mission goals; fully involving stakeholders in developing the plan; and including strategies to address critical competency gaps and identify related personnel requirements. (Recommendation 3)

Agency Comments and Our Evaluation

In written comments on the draft of this report, DOD partially concurred with our recommendations. Comments from DOD are summarized below and reprinted in appendix I. DOD also provided technical comments, which we incorporated as appropriate.

DOD partially concurred with the first recommendation that the ASD-SO/LIC define time frames for completing action items necessary to implement the ASD-SO/LIC's expanded section 922 responsibilities. In its response, DOD stated that most time frames have been established or the action completed. Additionally, DOD noted that some actions may not be completed because they depend on events, actions or leadership decisions that are outside of OASD-SO/LIC's control. We agree that some DOD leadership decisions have yet to be made. However, 28 out of 31 already identified actions do not have clear time frames for implementation. Further, time frames can be modified as events change or better information becomes available. As we discuss in the report, establishing time frames with key milestones to track implementation progress are important for agency reform efforts. Without clear time frames, ASD-SO/LIC may not be able to fully execute its service secretary-like authority.

DOD partially concurred with the second recommendation that the ASD-SO/LIC update DOD Directive 5111.10 to clarify the roles and responsibilities of the ASD-SO/LIC and relationships with DOD components that have vested interests in the SOF enterprise. DOD is in the process of revising this directive, but DOD noted that the purpose of DOD Directive 5111.10 is to define only specific Department-wide roles and missions for ASD-SO/LIC and is not the appropriate issuance to define ASD-SO/LIC's relationship with other DOD components in the SOF enterprise. Given that DOD does not believe DOD Directive 5111.10 is the appropriate issuance to clarify ASD-SO/LIC's relationships with DOD components, we modified our recommendation from focusing solely on updating DOD Directive 5111.10 to updating existing guidance and/or developing new guidance. Updating or developing guidance that clarifies ASD SO/LIC's relationship with DOD components, such as the military departments, USD (P), and USD (P&R) would likely allow for improved oversight of and collaboration on SOF matters related to personnel, budgetary authority and SAPs.

DOD partially concurred with the third recommendation that the ASD-SO/LIC build upon its hiring plan by developing a strategic workforce plan that incorporates key principles, such as aligning the plan with long-term mission goals; fully involving stakeholders in developing the plan; and including strategies to address critical competency gaps and identify related personnel requirements. In its response, DOD agreed that there is room to improve the involvement of stakeholders. In addition, DOD stated that it developed a strategic workforce plan that aligns with long-term mission goals and has identified strategies to address critical competency

gaps, including target skillsets. However, as noted in our report, the 10 slide presentation that constitutes the hiring plan lacks details that would be included in a comprehensive workforce plan. For example, the hiring plan did not explain how the hiring needs would be specifically tied to long-term goals, such as National Defense Strategy requirements. Although the hiring plan mentions some skillsets, it does not include a competency gap assessment or assess personnel requirements. As noted in our report, OASD-SO/LIC and SOCOM officials stated that the initial personnel requirements developed by the Army study were inaccurate for several reasons, including the lack of a standardized process to assess personnel requirements. Accordingly, we continue to believe that until OASD-SO/LIC develops a comprehensive strategic workforce plan that includes key principles outlined in our report, OASD-SO/LIC could be at risk of hiring personnel who may not adequately meet its needs to perform the roles and responsibilities of section 922.

We are sending copies of this report to other interested congressional committees and the Acting Secretary of Defense. In addition, this report will be available at no charge on the GAO Web site at <http://www.gao.gov>.

If you have any questions regarding this report, please contact me at (202) 512-5431 or at russellc@gao.gov. Contact points for our Offices of Congressional Relations and Public Affairs may be found on the last page of this report. Key contributors are listed in appendix II.



Cary Russell
Director
Defense Capabilities and Management

Appendix I: Comments from the Department of Defense



SPECIAL OPERATIONS /
LOW INTENSITY CONFLICT

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

APR 23 2019

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 the GAO Draft Report, GAO-19-386, "SPECIAL OPERATIONS FORCES; Additional Actions Needed to Effectively Expand Management Oversight," dated March 2019 (GAO Code 102910).

The Department finds the information contained in the draft GAO Report 19-386 to be accurate and partially concurs with comments in the recommendations contained in the report. The Department also provided technical corrections to the GAO for its consideration. 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. Neicko C. Williams, at (703) 697-5871 and neicko.c.williams.civ@mail.mil.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "M. E. Mitchell", is written over a light blue horizontal line.

Mark E. Mitchell

GAO DRAFT REPORT DATED MARCH 21, 2019
GAO-19-386 (GAO CODE 102910)

“SPECIAL OPERATIONS FORCES: ADDITIONAL ACTIONS NEEDED TO
EFFECTIVELY EXPAND MANAGEMENT OVERSIGHT”

DEPARTMENT OF DEFENSE COMMENTS
TO THE GAO RECOMMENDATION

RECOMMENDATION 1: The GAO recommends that the Secretary of Defense should ensure that the Assistant Secretary of Defense for Special Operations and Low-Intensity Conflict defines time frames for completing action items necessary to implement the Assistant Secretary of Defense for SO/LIC’s expanded section 922 responsibilities.

DoD RESPONSE: DoD partially concurs with this recommendation. Most time frames have been established or the action completed. To the extent possible, DoD will establish time frames for remaining actions. Some actions, however, may not be completed because they are dependent upon events and actions that are outside of ASD(SO/LIC)’s control or because they are based on recommendations from the 922 Tiger Teams. Those recommendations depend on DoD leadership decisions that have yet to be made.

RECOMMENDATION 2: The GAO recommends that the Secretary of Defense should ensure that the Assistant Secretary of Defense for the Special Operations and Low-Intensity Conflict updates DOD Directive 5111.10 to clarify the roles and responsibilities of the Assistant Secretary of Defense for SO/LIC and relationships with DOD components that have vested interests in the SOF enterprise – such as the military services, SOCOM, USD P&R and USD (P).

DoD RESPONSE: DoD partially concurs with this recommendation. A draft DoD Directive 5111.10 has been completed and is in informal staffing. However, the purpose of DoDD 5111.10 is to define only the specific Department-wide roles and missions of ASD(SO/LIC). DoDD 5111.10 is not an appropriate issuance to define ASD(SO/LIC)’s relationship with other DoD components vis-à-vis the SOF Enterprise. These relationships are included in issue-and topic-specific DoD issuances.

RECOMMENDATION 3: The GAO recommends that the Secretary of Defense should ensure that the Assistant Secretary of Defense for Special Operations and Low-Intensity Conflict builds upon its hiring plan by developing a strategic workforce plan that incorporates key principles, such as aligning the plan with long-term mission goals; fully involving stakeholders in developing the plan; and including strategies to address critical competency gaps and identify related personnel requirements.

DoD RESPONSE: DoD partially concurs with this recommendation. ASD(SO/LIC) has developed a strategic workforce plan that specifically aligns with long-term mission goals. It has

identified strategies to address critical competency gaps and identified personnel requirements as outlined in its hiring cohorts. These are not merely hiring actions. They are identified tranches focused on target skillsets to align with key long-term deliverables. We concur that there is room to improve involvement of stakeholders.

Appendix II: GAO Contacts and Staff Acknowledgments

GAO Contact:

Cary Russell, (202) 512-5431 or russellc@gao.gov

Staff Acknowledgments

In addition to the contact named above, Jim Reynolds (Assistant Director), Tracy Barnes, Mikey Erb, Amie Lesser, Mike Silver, Cheryl Weissman, and Yee Wong (Analyst-in-Charge) made key contributions to this report.

Appendix III: Accessible Data

Data Tables

Accessible Data for Figure 1: Department of Defense (DOD) Recommendations Regarding Potential Roles of the Assistant Secretary of Defense for Special Operations and Low-Intensity Conflict's (ASD-SO/LIC) in the Management of Special Operations Forces

Recommend ASD-SO/LIC Gain a "Monitor" ^a and/or "Review and Coordinate" ^b Role	Recommend ASD-SO/LIC Gain an "Approval" ^c Role	Recommend ASD-SO/LIC Maintain Pre-Existing Role
80 (total recommendations)	22 (total recommendations)	64 (total recommendations)

Accessible Data for Figure 2: Increased Special Operations and Low-Intensity Conflict (SO/LIC) Personnel Associated with Implementation of Section 922

Date	Full-time equivalents
Oct. 2016	5
March 2018	14
Aug. 2018	20
Oct. 2018	22
Nov. 2018	24
Dec. 2018	26
Feb. 2019	28

Agency Comment Letter

Accessible Text for Appendix I Comments from the Department of Defense

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APR 23 2019

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 the GAO Draft Report, GAO-19-386, "SPECIAL OPERATIONS FORCES; Additional Actions Needed to Effectively Expand Management Oversight," dated March 2019 (GAO Code 102910).

The Department finds the information contained in the draft GAO Report 19-386 to be accurate and partially concurs with comments in the recommendations contained in the report. The Department also provided technical corrections to the GAO for its consideration. 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. Neicko C. Williams, at (703) 697-5871 and neicko.c.williams.civ@mail.mil.

Sincerely,

Mark E. Mitchell

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Page 3

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