



December 2023

SPECIAL OPERATIONS FORCES

DOD Should Slow Acquisition of Armed Overwatch Aircraft Until It Conducts Needed Analysis

GAO Highlights

Highlights of [GAO-24-106283](#), a report to congressional committees

Why GAO Did This Study

SOCOM is responsible for acquiring a new aircraft called Armed Overwatch and plans to invest over \$2 billion in aircraft through FY 2029. These aircraft are being resourced by the divestment of two existing aircraft that, among other things, collect intelligence. Congress has expressed concerns about the program, delaying the reprogramming of funds and requiring DOD to provide information about its plans.

House Report 117-118, accompanying a bill for the National Defense Authorization Act for FY 2022, includes a provision for GAO to review the Armed Overwatch program. This is the first of two GAO reports. GAO (1) describes the number of Armed Overwatch aircraft and projected expenditures for the program through fiscal year 2029, and (2) evaluates SOCOM's use of required analysis when determining the number of aircraft to acquire.

GAO reviewed SOCOM's plans for FY 2022–2029 and compared Armed Overwatch-related analyses with DOD guidance. GAO also interviewed SOCOM and other officials.

What GAO Recommends

GAO is making two recommendations, including that DOD (1) analyze the number of Armed Overwatch aircraft needed using valid assumptions and taking into account changes in SOCOM's operating environment, and (2) limit the acquisition of the aircraft until SOCOM completes the analysis. DOD concurred with the first recommendation and partially concurred with the second, describing its need for training aircraft.

View [GAO-24-106283](#). For more information, contact Joseph W. Kirschbaum at (202) 512-9971 or KirschbaumJ@gao.gov.

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DOD Should Slow Acquisition of Armed Overwatch Aircraft Until It Conducts Needed Analysis

What GAO Found

U.S. Special Operations Command (SOCOM) has entered into a contract to acquire 75 Armed Overwatch aircraft through fiscal year (FY) 2029. According to Air Force command officials, this acquisition will be personnel neutral after SOCOM divests two classes of existing aircraft. As of October 2023, SOCOM was in year 2 of its 7-year contract and officials said the command expected to have purchased 28 aircraft by April 2024.

Armed Overwatch Aircraft



Source: L3Harris. | GAO-24-106283

SOCOM is required to determine its force structure requirements using classified guidance and processes established in Department of Defense (DOD) guidance. SOCOM officials said the command completes force structure analysis annually. GAO found, however, that studies completed in 2021 and 2022 did not justify SOCOM's planned fleet size of 75 aircraft, nor did four other related studies conducted by external entities that were published from April 2021 through March 2023. GAO found that SOCOM is limited in its ability to justify this acquisition target for three reasons:

1. Documentation indicates that SOCOM decided on the size of the fleet before conducting the required analyses.
2. SOCOM did not assess how changes in the aircraft's capabilities could affect the number needed for operations. Specifically, the aircraft selected is more capable than the one modeled. SOCOM is also determining how to adapt the aircraft to meet intelligence requirements that may affect demand.
3. SOCOM has not reevaluated its needs despite changes to operational missions (such as the U.S. withdrawal from Afghanistan) and force structure reductions under consideration.

Because of these reasons SOCOM is also not well-positioned to justify its acquisition timeline. According to SOCOM, changes to the acquisition timeline might affect the cost per aircraft. By ensuring that it thoroughly assesses its needs against adjustments in the cost per aircraft, SOCOM will be better able to make informed decisions and efficiently use the more than \$2.2 billion it estimates that it will spend for the program through FY 2028.

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Abbreviations

CAPE	Cost Assessment and Program Evaluation
DOD	Department of Defense
ISR	intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance
SOF	special operations forces
AFSOC	U.S. Air Force Special Operations Command
SOCOM	U.S. Special Operations Command

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December 14, 2023

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

The Honorable Mike Rogers
Chairman
The Honorable Adam Smith
Ranking Member
Committee on Armed Services
House of Representatives

As the Department of Defense (DOD) evaluates its investments in support of the National Defense Strategy’s focus on deterring strategic competitors,¹ U.S. Special Operations Command (SOCOM) is planning to invest over \$2 billion to change how it provides air support to special operations forces (SOF) in permissive and semi-permissive environments.² SOCOM typically uses a number of different aircraft to provide capabilities—such as close-air support; precision strike; and intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance (ISR)—for SOF operations.³ Collectively, SOCOM refers to these air capabilities as “the stack.”

In a 2019 memorandum, SOCOM, on behalf of U.S. Air Force Special Operations Command (AFSOC), announced plans to acquire Armed Overwatch aircraft and subsequently described Armed Overwatch as a

¹See DOD, *2022 National Defense Strategy of the United States of America* (Washington, D.C.: March 28, 2022).

²SOCOM defines permissive environments as those with no threats to airborne aircraft and semi-permissive environments as those with threats to airborne aircraft that are characteristic of non-state actors.

³Close air support is air action by aircraft against hostile targets that are in close proximity to friendly forces and that require detailed integration of each air mission with the fire and movement of those forces. Strike is an attack to damage or destroy an objective or a capability. This is also sometimes referred to as “fires.” ISR is an integrated operations and intelligence activity that synchronizes the planning and operation of sensors, assets, and processing, exploitation, and dissemination systems in direct support of current and future operations. See DOD, *DOD Dictionary of Military and Associated Terms* (May 2023).

cost-effective alternative to existing aircraft.⁴ In 2022, SOCOM selected the L3Harris “Sky Warden” as the Armed Overwatch platform. Armed Overwatch aircraft are intended to provide SOF with a deployable, affordable, and sustainable crewed aircraft system capable of executing close-air support, precision strike, and armed ISR in austere and permissive environments for use in irregular warfare operations in support of the 2022 National Defense Strategy.⁵ In July 2021, SOCOM leadership described the multiple roles Armed Overwatch could play in SOF operations, including providing armed ISR, deploying worldwide wherever SOF needed ISR, and serving as a cost-effective approach to meeting ISR requirements as other platforms reached the end of their lifecycles.⁶ However, as of August 2023, the initial planned capabilities for the aircraft emphasized the close-air support and precision strike missions, and SOCOM has not determined the full extent to which the aircraft might perform ISR missions.

The Committees on Armed Services of the Senate and House of Representatives have expressed concerns about the Armed Overwatch program and asked DOD to provide supporting analysis regarding its capability and force structure needs, while simultaneously preventing it from moving forward with this program. In July 2020, the Armed Services Committees initially denied a request to reprogram funds to support the Armed Overwatch program until SOCOM had conducted analysis to support the need for the aircraft.⁷ In December 2021, Congress directed an independent assessment by the Director, Cost Assessment and

⁴DOD, Memorandum for Secretary of Defense, *United States Special Operations Command Special Operations Forces-Armed Overwatch Recommendation*, (Dec. 5, 2019); and SOCOM, *U.S. Special Operations Command Validation of Special Operations Rapid Requirements Document for Special Operations Forces Armed Overwatch*, (May 29, 2020).

⁵Irregular warfare is a violent struggle among state and non-state actors for legitimacy and influence over the population(s).

⁶Statements of Gen. Richard Clarke, SOCOM Commander, “House Armed Services Subcommittee on Intelligence and Special Operations Holds Hearing on Fiscal Year 2022 Budget Request for Special Operations Forces and Command”, House Armed Services Committee (Jul. 21, 2021).

⁷H.R. Rep. No. 116-442, at 134 (2020). Congress later authorized procurement funding for fiscal years 2022 and 2023. See section 4101 of the National Defense Authorization Act for Fiscal Year 2022, Pub. L. No. 117-81 (2021) and the James M. Inhofe National Defense Authorization Act for Fiscal Year 2023, Pub. L. No. 117-263 (2022).

Program Evaluation (CAPE), of the Armed Overwatch program's ability to fulfill SOF requirements.⁸

House Report 117-118, accompanying a bill for the National Defense Authorization Act for Fiscal Year 2022, includes a provision that we assess SOCOM's Armed Overwatch program.⁹ This is the first of two GAO products. We (1) describe the number of Armed Overwatch aircraft to be procured and projected expenditures for the program through fiscal year 2029, and (2) evaluate the extent to which SOCOM conducted required analysis to justify the number of Armed Overwatch aircraft it plans to acquire. We plan to issue the second report in 2024 evaluating the capabilities Armed Overwatch might provide to SOF operations and meet end-user requirements.

We focused our review on the planned fleet of Armed Overwatch aircraft, specifically the force structure projections for Armed Overwatch for fiscal year 2022 through fiscal year 2029, the year SOCOM expects to receive the last aircraft. We also reviewed analyses related to the Armed Overwatch program conducted by CAPE, the Office of the Under Secretary of Defense for Intelligence and Security, the DOD Inspector General, and RAND from April 2021 through March 2023.¹⁰ Further, we reviewed reports documenting the results of SOCOM's Joint Mission Analysis process for fiscal years 2020 through 2022.¹¹

For both objectives, we interviewed officials and analyzed information from the Office of the Assistant Secretary of Defense for Special Operations/Low-Intensity Conflict; the Office of the Under Secretary of Defense for Intelligence and Security; CAPE; the DOD Inspector General; SOCOM; AFSOC; and RAND. We also reviewed force structure documents developed by SOCOM and AFSOC that outlined their planned fleet size and the personnel and equipment required to support and

⁸Joint Explanatory Statement to accompany the National Defense Authorization Act for Fiscal Year 2022, at 945-946 (2021) (Committee Print 2).

⁹H. R. Rep. No. 117-118, at 36-37 (2021).

¹⁰CAPE, *United States Special Operations Command Armed Overwatch Program: Requirements and Threats* (Mar. 25, 2022); Office of the Under Secretary of Defense for Intelligence and Security, *PDM II: CT Study—Phase 1*, (as briefed to GAO on Mar. 8, 2023); DOD Inspector General, *Evaluation of the U.S. Special Operations Command Armed Overwatch Program*, DODIG-2022-136 (Sept. 22, 2022); and RAND, *SOCOM Armed Overwatch: Independent Assessment of Requirements and Alternative Materiel Solutions—Primary Phase Results* (April 2021).

¹¹SOCOM, *Joint Mission Analysis 2021 POM 24-28* (Sept. 1, 2021) and SOCOM, *Joint Mission Analysis—POM 24-28 Final Report* (Aug. 1, 2022).

maintain that Armed Overwatch fleet. Further, we reviewed documents from DOD projecting Armed Overwatch expenditures. We compared this information with SOCOM's published budget requests and found the data to be sufficiently reliable for the purposes of our report. For our second objective, we assessed how DOD used analyses to inform decision-making for the Armed Overwatch program against requirements included in DOD Directive 8260.05, SOCOM Directive 71-4, Air Force Policy Directive 90-11, and classified DOD guidance.¹² As part of this assessment, we applied the SOCOM-approved force structure ratios for Armed Overwatch to the Joint Mission Analysis estimates of operational need for Armed Overwatch. We then compared the calculated results with the planned Armed Overwatch fleet size.

We conducted this performance audit from October 2022 to December 2023 in accordance with generally accepted government auditing standards. Those standards require that we plan and perform the audit to obtain sufficient, appropriate evidence to provide a reasonable basis for our findings and conclusions based on our audit objectives. We believe that the evidence obtained provides a reasonable basis for our findings and conclusions based on our audit objectives.

Background

SOCOM Air Support Capabilities

AFSOC fields the following systems, among others, to provide aerial support to SOF operations:

- **AC-130J.** Crewed aircraft that provide close-air support, air interdiction, and armed reconnaissance.
- **U-28 and MC-12.** Crewed aircraft that provide an ISR capability.
- **MQ-9.** Uncrewed aircraft that provide ISR and strike capability.
- **CV-22.** Crewed tilt-rotor aircraft that support infiltration and exfiltration of units.

Armed Overwatch Program

The Armed Overwatch program evolved from an Air Force effort to develop a fleet of multirole aircraft capable of performing reconnaissance and precision strike missions. The Air Force planned to dedicate some of these aircraft to AFSOC to support SOF missions. In 2019, DOD directed a transfer of \$1.3 billion and responsibility for a modified program to

¹²DOD Directive 8260.05, *Support for Strategic Analysis (SSA)* (July 7, 2011); USSOCOM Directive 71-4, *Force Development: Special Operations Forces Capabilities Integration and Development System* (Jan. 22, 2020); Air Force Policy Directive 90-11, *Air Force Strategy, Planning, and Programming Process* (Aug. 6, 2015); and Secretary of Defense, *Fiscal Year 2025–Fiscal Year 2029 Defense Planning Guidance* (Feb. 22, 2023).

SOCOM. SOCOM designated AFSOC as the lead component for the program, and began approving the first of three sets of requirements documents in May 2020.¹³

With the Armed Overwatch program, SOCOM sought to acquire an aircraft capable of conducting strike, close-air support missions in austere environments, and some ISR missions. In 2022, SOCOM selected the L3Harris “Sky Warden” to be the Armed Overwatch aircraft (see fig. 1) and intends to equip that aircraft to provide close-air support, strike, and limited ISR capabilities. This aircraft is designed to be crewed by two people. The program also allows for the integration of a more robust ISR capability, but SOCOM had not developed this capability as of August 2023.

Figure 1: L3Harris “Sky Warden”



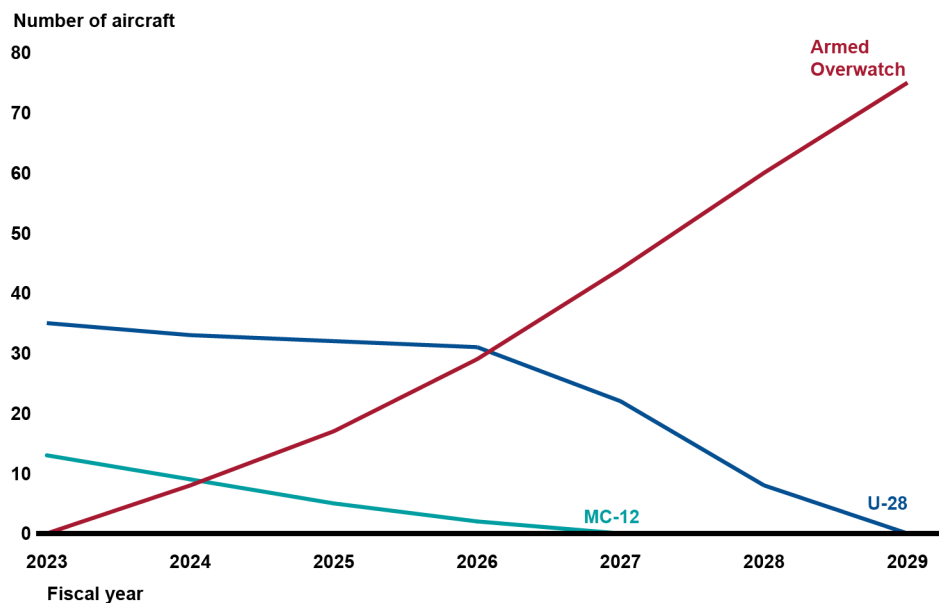
Source: L3Harris. | GAO-24-106283

¹³SOCOM, *U.S. Special Operations Command Validation of Special Operations Rapid Requirements Document for Special Operations Forces Armed Overwatch*; *U.S. Special Operations Command Validation of the Capability Development Document for Armed Overwatch* (Jan. 8, 2021); and *U.S. Special Operations Command Validation of the Document Update to the Capability Development Document for Armed Overwatch* (May 6, 2022).

SOCOM Plans to Acquire 75 Armed Overwatch Aircraft for about \$2.2 Billion through Fiscal Year 2029

SOCOM plans to acquire 75 Armed Overwatch aircraft for AFSOC. According to AFSOC officials, this acquisition will be budget and personnel neutral because SOCOM plans to divest two other aircraft—the U-28 and MC-12—that currently provide ISR and other capabilities to support SOF operations. These officials said they expect to field all 75 Armed Overwatch aircraft by fiscal year 2029 and that aircraft divestments will be completed in fiscal year 2027 (MC-12) and fiscal year 2029 (U-28), as shown in figure 2.¹⁴

Figure 2: Acquisition and Divestment Timelines for Selected U.S. Air Force Special Operations Command Aircraft, Fiscal Years 2023-2029, as of September 2023



Source: GAO analysis of Department of Defense information. | GAO-24-106283

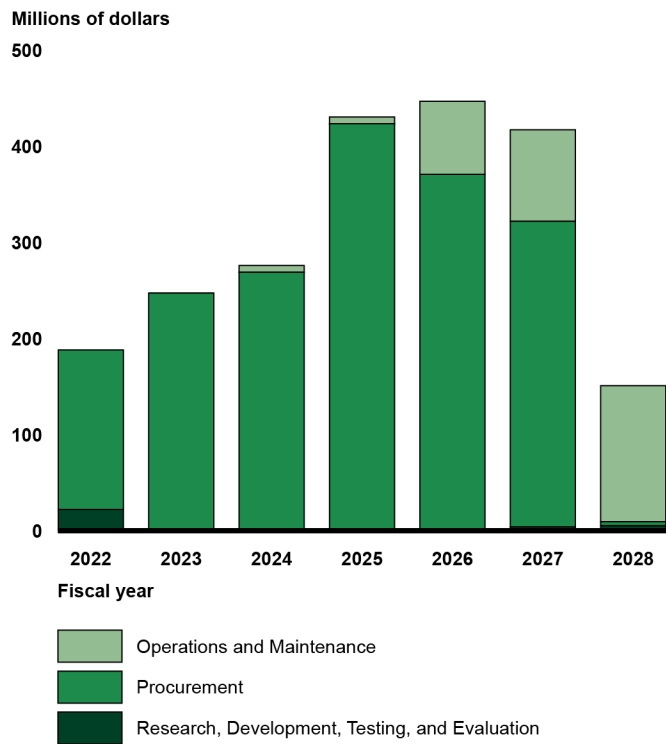
SOCOM has entered into a 7-year Indefinite Delivery Indefinite Quantity contract that includes five base ordering periods, one each year from July 2022 through July 2027 with an option for an additional two ordering periods.¹⁵ SOCOM has flexibility in the number of aircraft it orders each year, and plans to order from one to 15 aircraft per year, according to SOCOM officials.

¹⁴According to a DOD official, as of November 2023, the first four aircraft will be delivered in mid-2024.

¹⁵Contract/Purchase Order/Agreement No. FA8637-22-D-B001 with L-3 Communications Integrated Systems L.P. (Sept. 24, 2021).

As of October 2023, SOCOM was in year 2 of its 7-year contract. DOD officials told us that SOCOM had purchased 16 aircraft and planned to purchase another 12 by April 2024. For fiscal years 2022 through 2028, the projected cost for the Armed Overwatch program is approximately \$2.2 billion, with a contract ceiling of \$3 billion. That approximately \$2.2 billion dollars is split among Operations and Maintenance; Procurement; and Research, Development, Testing, and Evaluation, as shown in figure 3.

Figure 3: Breakdown for \$2.2 Billion in Projected Expenditures on the Armed Overwatch Program, Fiscal Years 2022–2028, as of September 2023



Source: GAO analysis of Department of Defense information. | GAO-24-106283

SOCOM's Analysis Did Not Validate a Requirement for 75 Armed Overwatch Aircraft

SOCOM's Process for Establishing and Validating Force Structure

SOCOM, like the military services, is required to determine its force structure requirements using classified guidance—such as the National Defense Strategy and planning guidance issued by the Secretary of Defense—and the processes established in DOD Directive 8260.05.¹⁶ The National Defense Strategy and Defense Planning Guidance identifies adversaries that should be used as the basis for the military services and SOCOM to prioritize investments in force structure. This guidance also identifies counterterrorism-related tasks for SOCOM, but states that SOCOM should adapt how it prioritizes counterterrorism missions in assessing its force structure needs. Further, the guidance calls for strategic analysis to consider how SOF can contribute to overall department objectives.

DOD Directive 8260.05 requires that the military services and SOCOM provide component-specific data necessary for the development of analytical products to support deliberations by DOD senior leadership on force sizing, shaping, and capability development. Relatedly, Air Force Policy Directive 90-11 directs AFSOC—as an Air Force component—to use analysis to support force structure decisions.¹⁷ In addition to these documents, SOCOM has issued guidance that requires command leadership to agree that proposed capabilities are necessary and approve the acquisition of those capabilities.¹⁸

SOCOM officials told us that they routinely analyze the totality of SOCOM's force structure in a manner that is intended to meet the requirements put forth in DOD Directive 8260.05. This analysis is completed through SOCOM's Joint Mission Analysis process, a multistep process intended to identify SOCOM's operational needs for individual platforms (such as a specific type of aircraft). According to SOCOM officials, Joint Mission Analysis applies classified strategic guidance and

¹⁶DOD Directive 8260.05, *Support for Strategic Analysis (SSA)* (July 7, 2011).

¹⁷Air Force Policy Directive 90-11, *Air Force Strategy, Planning, and Programming Process* (Aug. 6, 2015).

¹⁸SOCOM Directive 71-4.

relies on versions of Defense Planning Scenarios developed by the Office of the Under Secretary of Defense for Policy; the Joint Staff; and the Director of CAPE.¹⁹

According to SOCOM officials, the Joint Mission Analysis process has three steps. First, SOCOM analysts run computer-based programs to see how SOCOM might be able to employ its various platforms, resulting in what SOCOM calls its “planning force.” Second, analysts refine the programs by applying real-world constraints (such as actual force availability) to create an “objective force.” Third, analysts apply assumptions of risk and changes resulting from external factors, resulting in the final estimate of operational need, the “program force.” Officials said that when asked by senior leaders they may run analytical excursions and sensitivity analyses, but that they do not do so routinely as part of the Joint Mission Analysis process. This process is similar to those used by some of the military services, such as the Army.²⁰

SOCOM’s Analysis Relied on Unproven Assumptions and Does Not Justify Acquiring 75 Aircraft

Despite a well-identified process for reviewing and validating force structure requirements, final reports resulting from SOCOM’s Joint Mission Analysis for fiscal years 2020 through 2022 did not support the need for SOCOM’s planned fleet size of 75 Armed Overwatch aircraft. Specifically, SOCOM’s initial analysis in September 2021 stated that the aircraft did not demonstrate a capability enhancement to the force and would require significant logistics support to operate. Subsequently, SOCOM’s August 2022 analysis estimated an operational need less than the number of aircraft SOCOM had approved to be acquired in May 2022.²¹ We found that applying the SOCOM-approved force structure ratios for Armed Overwatch aircraft to the Joint Mission Analysis estimates of operational need for Armed Overwatch aircraft results in a

¹⁹We have previously evaluated DOD’s analytic approach for force structure decisions. See GAO, *Defense Strategy: Revised Analytic Approach Needed to Support Force Structure Decision-Making*, [GAO-19-385](#) (Washington, D.C.: Mar. 14, 2019). In this report we found that DOD’s analysis did not provide senior leaders with the support they needed to evaluate and determine force structure. We recommended that DOD identify and update analytic products; provide guidance to the military services; and establish an approach for joint force structure analysis. DOD subsequently implemented these recommendations.

²⁰GAO, *Army Planning: Comprehensive Risk Assessment Needed for Planned Changes to the Army’s Force Structure*, [GAO-16-327](#) (Washington, D.C.: Apr. 13, 2016); and [GAO-19-385](#).

²¹A DOD official told us that, as of November 2023, a subsequent Joint Mission Analysis product was completed as part of DOD’s budget formulation process. This study was not reviewed because DOD’s budget had not yet been submitted to Congress.

required fleet size substantially smaller than SOCOM's planned 75 aircraft.

In addition to not justifying an acquisition target of 75 aircraft, each report made assumptions about the Armed Overwatch aircraft that do not reflect its intended capabilities or employment. Specifically, both reports relied on assumptions regarding the capabilities that an Armed Overwatch aircraft would provide and the tactics, techniques, and procedures under which it would operate when deployed despite AFSOC's not having developed them. For example, the 2021 and 2022 reports assumed deployments against mostly non-ISR operational requirements and the 2022 report was based on assumptions derived from the AFSOC Concept of Employment. However, none of these assumptions are based on operational testing of the aircraft or codified doctrine, tactics, techniques, and procedures because, according to DOD officials, they must have received aircraft to do so.

Finally, from April 2021 through March 2023—after SOCOM had established an acquisition target—other organizations completed four evaluations related to aspects of the Armed Overwatch program. However, none of these evaluated the planned fleet size in the manner consistent with DOD's classified guidance and DOD Directive 8260.05.

- **April 2021 RAND assessment.** RAND assessed possible modifications to existing aircraft and the survivability of an Armed Overwatch aircraft, compared an Armed Overwatch aircraft with other aircraft with overlapping missions, and assessed the cost effectiveness of different configurations of aircraft—for example, combining an Armed Overwatch aircraft with an MQ-9. RAND found that a combination of an Armed Overwatch aircraft and the MQ-9 would be more cost-effective than alternatives currently in use. However, the study did not assess how many Armed Overwatch aircraft were needed and assumed a fleet of 75 planes.
- **March 2022 CAPE study.** CAPE officials told us the office assessed whether a potential Armed Overwatch aircraft or a modified MQ-9 would have the capabilities to most effectively meet SOF needs. According to the same officials, costs of the two alternatives are similar, with a modified MQ-9 providing some near-term cost savings. However, this study did not evaluate how many Armed Overwatch aircraft were needed for operational requirements, and assumed SOCOM would have 75 Armed Overwatch aircraft. SOCOM and CAPE officials disagreed about the appropriateness of comparing Armed Overwatch with the MQ-9 given their differing capabilities.

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- **September 2022 DOD Inspector General evaluation.** The DOD Inspector General issued a report evaluating whether SOCOM had followed relevant acquisition processes when developing the Armed Overwatch program and whether the aircraft met user needs. The Inspector General found that SOCOM's acquisition plan for the Armed Overwatch program met DOD and SOCOM guidance. However, the Inspector General also found that proposed Armed Overwatch aircraft capabilities do not match the combined capabilities of existing SOF ISR aircraft (including the U-28 and MC-12 capabilities that SOCOM plans to divest), nor did the Armed Overwatch aircraft meet all SOF ISR requirements. This evaluation described the intended fleet size of 75 aircraft, but did not assess the appropriateness of that figure. SOCOM nonconcurred with an Inspector General recommendation related to planning for ISR, and said in its comments that SOCOM has the ability to address this issue in the future.
 - **March 2023 DOD Intelligence and Security analysis.** According to officials from DOD's Office of the Under Secretary of Defense for Intelligence and Security, they completed the first phase of a planned multiphase analysis of ISR capabilities and requirements for DOD operations. The office focused on ISR for counterterrorism operations and compared ISR requirements with SOCOM and military service plans for continuing or divesting ISR platforms. The officials told us that their analysis did not assess the size of the Armed Overwatch fleet.

Despite limitations in its analysis, SOCOM validated the planned target of 75 aircraft several times from 2020 through 2022. Specifically, SOCOM approved capabilities planning documents in May 2020, January 2021, and May 2022.²² Each of these documents identified the planned force structure of 75 aircraft, but did not provide information about how SOCOM had arrived at the 75 number of aircraft or any associated analysis.

Despite the various internal and external assessments, SOCOM is limited in its ability to justify its current approach. SOCOM has presupposed the number of aircraft to be acquired; modeled demand for this aircraft using potentially invalid assumptions about its capabilities and tactics, techniques, and procedures; and has not assessed how changes in

²²SOCOM, *U.S. Special Operations Command Validation of Rapid Requirements Document for Special Operations Forces Armed Overwatch* (May 2020); *U.S. Special Operations Command Validation of the Capability Development Document for Armed Overwatch* (January 2021); and *U.S. Special Operations Command Validation of the Document Update to the Capability Development Document for Armed Overwatch* (May 2022).

SOCOM's operating environment alter demand for the aircraft, as discussed below:

1. **Documentation and discussions with SOCOM show that SOCOM had already decided on its acquisition target before conducting required force structure analyses.** Specifically, SOCOM began assessing the operational need for Armed Overwatch aircraft in its force structure analysis in 2021, but established the acquisition target of 70–75 aircraft in a 2019 memorandum transferring funding from the Air Force to SOCOM.²³ In March 2020, DOD wrote to Congress that it sought 75 Armed Overwatch aircraft to, in part, meet SOCOM goals.²⁴ In this document, DOD said that 75 aircraft would enable fleet management and cited Air Force standards for allocating aircraft among operational, training, maintenance, and test statuses. However, SOCOM has not been able to provide the analysis and documentation to support this determination.
2. **SOCOM's Joint Mission Analysis process did not include analysis to assess how changes in assumptions pertaining to aircraft capability and aircraft deployment could alter the number needed to meet operational requirements.** According to the 2022 Joint Mission Analysis report, the aircraft selected for the Armed Overwatch program is more capable than the one modeled and could significantly change the results for the number of aircraft needed. A more capable aircraft may be able to meet additional mission needs (increasing SOCOM's need for aircraft) or could more efficiently meet modeled requirements (decreasing SOCOM's need for aircraft). SOCOM is also in the process of determining the requirement for an ISR capability for the aircraft that could further enhance its ability to meet mission requirements.²⁵

Additionally, SOCOM's analysts made assumptions about the number of aircraft that would deploy to meet an operational requirement and about how those aircraft would be used. However, those assumptions were not based on doctrine or codified tactics, techniques, and procedures

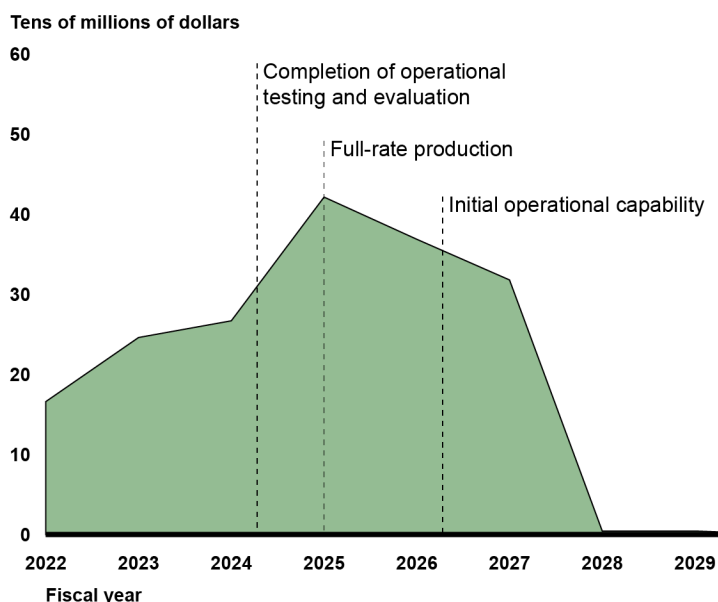
²³Memorandum for the Secretary of Defense, *United States Special Operations Command Special Operations Forces—Armed Overwatch Recommendation* (December 2019).

²⁴DOD, RFI 20-085, *Congressional Request for Information—HASC-SASC Rollout—Armed Overwatch Airframe Quantity*, Mar. 17, 2020.

²⁵SOCOM's officials told us that modeling was completed prior to SOCOM selecting the Sky Warden as the Armed Overwatch aircraft.

because AFSOC had not developed them, as of August 2023. AFSOC is not scheduled to complete operational testing and evaluation—which officials told us will underpin DOD’s assessment of the airplane’s capabilities and provide the basis for developing doctrine, tactics, techniques, and procedures—until the end of fiscal year 2024. This time period would coincide with or even occur after DOD would need to make key decisions about the program, including about budget preparation and allocation of funding to support a commitment to the full production of the aircraft through fiscal year 2029 (see fig. 4). DOD can modify its approach to the acquisition and reduce obligations to a minimum amount needed for the contractor to maintain the production line for the aircraft at its discretion.

Figure 4: Comparison of Procurement Expenditures and Decision Points for the Armed Overwatch Program, Fiscal Years 2022–2029, as of August 2023



Source: GAO analysis of Department of Defense information. | GAO-24-106283

- 3. As of August 2023, SOCOM had not revisited its acquisition target for Armed Overwatch aircraft or the acquisition timeline despite several factors affecting SOCOM’s operating environment indicating this may be warranted.** Specifically, geopolitical changes since SOCOM established the acquisition target in 2019, such as the U.S. withdrawal from Afghanistan and leadership changes in African countries, may affect where and how these aircraft can be used in the future. Furthermore, in June 2023, the Secretary of the Army discussed reducing Army SOF

personnel. Uncertainty about the extent and type of potential cuts raises questions about the number of aircraft needed to support operations. As of August 2023, DOD officials said they expected to move forward with the acquisition of the Armed Overwatch aircraft on its current timeline. However, these changes could significantly affect the feasibility of SOCOM's acquisition timeline and the overall requirement for the capability.

Due to these three weaknesses, SOCOM is not well-positioned to justify its acquisition target or timeline and is at risk of acquiring more or even fewer aircraft than it needs. According to SOCOM officials, changes to its planned schedule for acquiring Armed Overwatch aircraft might affect the cost per aircraft acquired. Although this may be accurate, ensuring that SOCOM has thoroughly assessed the number of Armed Overwatch aircraft it actually needs against any potential adjustments in the cost per aircraft and opportunities to reduce the overall purchases will enable SOCOM to make more fully informed decisions during each ordering period and facilitate the prudent use of the more than \$2.2 billion SOCOM estimates it will spend on this program through fiscal year 2028.

Conclusions

SOCOM must prepare for a future where it is able to help the joint force deter strategic competitors and respond to violent extremist organizations. To position itself to achieve both missions, SOCOM must invest its resources wisely and ensure it is acquiring capabilities designed for future fights, and not merely the operations of the past 20 years. This, along with departmental demand for analytically justified force structure decisions, means that SOCOM should reassess its planned investment in the Armed Overwatch aircraft to ensure that the fleet is sized appropriately for future SOF operations and based on an assessment of the capabilities; tactics, techniques, and procedures; and recent changes in the operating environment that may alter demand for the aircraft. Doing so would ensure that SOCOM is aligning over \$2 billion estimated for the program against its actual needs and is providing leaders and decision-makers with the information they need to deliver the most effective suite of capabilities across the special operations enterprise.

Recommendations for Executive Action

We are making two recommendations to the Secretary of Defense.

The Secretary of Defense should ensure that the Commander, U.S. Special Operations Command, analyzes the number of Armed Overwatch aircraft needed in SOCOM's force structure in accordance with the priorities established in classified guidance and DOD Directive 8260.05 and provide this analysis to Congress. The analysis should be documented, informed by modeling demand for this aircraft using valid assumptions about its capabilities and tactics, techniques, and

procedures, and take into account changes in SOCOM's operating environment that may alter demand for the aircraft. (Recommendation 1)

The Secretary of Defense should ensure that the Commander, U.S. Special Operations Command, starting in fiscal year 2025, limits the acquisition of the Armed Overwatch aircraft to the minimum rate needed to maintain the aircraft production line and support operational test and evaluation until SOCOM completes the recommended analysis. (Recommendation 2)

Agency Comments and Our Evaluation

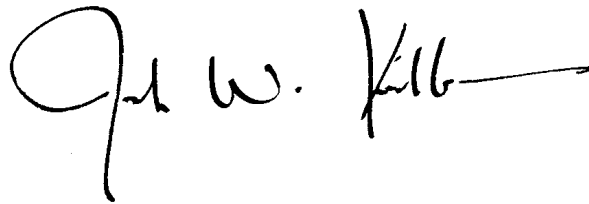
We provided a draft of this report to DOD for review and comment. DOD submitted written comments that are reprinted in appendix I and separately provided technical comments that we incorporated as appropriate.

DOD concurred with our first recommendation, stating that the department regularly analyzes force structure needs and would analyze the Armed Overwatch force structure and provide the results of this analysis to Congress as recommended. DOD partially concurred with our second recommendation about limiting the acquisition of the Armed Overwatch aircraft until DOD had completed the force structure analysis from our first recommendation. In its comments, DOD agreed that production line stability and operational test and evaluation are important considerations but stated that SOCOM would factor into the analysis the need to have sufficient aircraft to train an initial cadre of qualified aircrew and establish a training pipeline that supports the initial operational capability timeline.

We agree that training aircrews is an essential part of the development of the Armed Overwatch program. However, ensuring that DOD is acquiring the appropriate number of aircraft is an important prerequisite for helping SOCOM refine its training plans to make the most efficient use of special operations personnel. Since special operations officials estimate that the department will have spent approximately 80 percent of funding for the Armed Overwatch program before it reaches initial operational capability, we believe that SOCOM would benefit from minimizing acquisition until completing the recommended force structure analysis of Armed Overwatch aircraft needs. SOCOM could inform this analysis by considering training, tactics, and techniques as well as changes in DOD's operating environment, among other factors identified in our report. Completion of the force structure analysis would position SOCOM to make efficient use of its resources when making decisions about aircraft acquisitions and aircrew conversions.

We are sending copies of this report to the appropriate congressional committees, the Secretary of Defense, and the heads of the DOD components included in the scope of this review. In addition, the report is available at no charge on the GAO website at <http://www.gao.gov>.

If you or your staff have any questions concerning this report, please contact me at (202) 512-9971 or KirschbaumJ@gao.gov. Contact points for our Offices of Congressional Relations and Public Affairs may be found on the last page of this report. GAO staff who made key contributions to this report are listed in appendix II.

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Joe W. Kirschbaum" with a long horizontal flourish extending to the right.

Joseph W. Kirschbaum
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

Mr. Joseph W. Kirschbaum
Director, Financial Management and Assurance
U.S. Government Accountability Office
441 G Street, NW
Washington, DC 20548

17 NOV 2023

Dear Mr. Kirschbaum,

Attached is the Department of Defense (DoD) response to the GAO Draft Report GAO-24-106283, "SPECIAL OPERATIONS FORCES: DOD Should Slow Acquisition of Armed Overwatch Until it Conducts Needed Analysis," dated October 23, 2023 (GAO Code 106283).

My point of contact is Col Michael Murphy who can be reached at (703) 697-3033 or michael.s.murphy8.mil@mail.mil.

Sincerely,

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

Erin M. Logan
Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defense for
Special Operations Policy and Programs

Enclosure:
As stated



**GAO DRAFT REPORT DATED OCTOBER 23, 2023
GAO-24-106283 (GAO CODE 106283)**

**“SPECIAL OPERATIONS FORCES: DOD Should Slow Acquisition of Armed
Overwatch Aircraft Until It Conducts Needed Analysis”**

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

RECOMMENDATION 1: The Secretary of Defense should ensure that the Commander, U.S. Special Operations Command, analyzes the number of Armed Overwatch aircraft needed in SOCOM’s force structure in accordance with the priorities established in classified guidance and DOD Directive 8260.05 and provide this analysis to Congress. The analysis should be documented, informed by modeling demand for this aircraft using valid assumptions about its capabilities and tactics, techniques, and protocols, and take into account changes in SOCOM’s operating environment that may later demand for the aircraft.

DoD RESPONSE: Concur. USSOCOM regularly analyzes force structure needs to meet the National Defense Strategy. USSOCOM will analyze the Armed Overwatch force structure and provide the results of this analysis to Congress as recommended.

RECOMMENDATION 2: The Secretary of Defense should ensure that the Commander, U.S. Special Operations Command, starting in the year 2025, limits acquisition of the Armed Overwatch aircraft to the minimum rate needed to maintain the aircraft production line and support operational test and evaluation until SOCOM completes the analysis previously specified.

DoD RESPONSE: Partially concur. USSOCOM agrees that production line stability and operational test and evaluation are two important considerations in sizing the quantity of future Armed Overwatch procurement lots. USSOCOM will also factor in the need to have sufficient aircraft to train an initial cadre of qualified aircrew and establish a training pipeline that supports the initial operational capability timeline.

Appendix II: GAO Contact and Staff Acknowledgments

GAO Contact:

Joseph W. Kirschbaum, (202) 512-9971 or KirschbaumJ@gao.gov

Staff**Acknowledgments:**

In addition to the individual named above, Alex Winograd (Assistant Director), Jennifer Spence (Analyst-in-Charge), Jennifer Baker, Tracy Barnes, Kasey Hudson, Matthew Jacobs, Mae Jones, Suzanne Kaasa, Amie Lesser, Samuel Moore, Steven Putansu, and James Walker made key contributions to this report.

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