

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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SPECIAL OPERATIONS FORCES

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.