



## SPECIAL OPERATIONS DEFINED

Last Updated: 1 February 2020

[Special operations](#) require unique modes of employment, tactical techniques, equipment, and training, and often occur in hostile, denied, or politically sensitive environments. Some or all of the following characteristics typify special operations: time sensitive, clandestine, low visibility, conducted with or through indigenous forces, requiring regional expertise, and/or a high degree of risk.

Air Force special operations are an integral part of special operations and provide [combatant commanders](#) and ambassadors discreet, precise, and scalable operations that integrate military operations with other activities. They are designed to assess, shape, and influence foreign political and military environments unilaterally or by working with host nations, regional partners, and indigenous populations in a culturally attuned manner that is both immediate and enduring in order to enable the nation to prevent and deter conflict or prevail in war. Special operations can be conducted independently; however, most require a networked approach in conjunction with operations of [conventional forces](#) (CF), other government agencies, or host nations, and may include operations with indigenous, insurgent, or irregular forces. Special operations may differ from conventional operations in degree of strategic, physical, and political risk; operational techniques; modes of employment; and dependence on intelligence and indigenous assets.

Additionally, Air Force special operations forces (AFSOF) are relatively small forces that may operate independently from other friendly forces. Air Force special operations are often conducted at great distances from major bases in a distributed manner with relatively small footprints. They employ sophisticated communications systems and special means of infiltration, support, and exfiltration to penetrate and return from hostile, denied, or politically sensitive areas. AFSOF should complement and collaborate with, but not compete with nor be a substitute for CF. As an example, an AC-130 gunship should not be employed when a conventional aircraft would be more appropriate for the target and the operational conditions. The need to attack or engage strategic or operational targets with small units drives the formation of units with specialized, highly focused capabilities. Although not always decisive on their own, when properly employed, special operations can be designed and conducted to create conditions favorable to US strategic goals and objectives. Often, these operations may require clandestine or low visibility capabilities.

The most important element of the Air Force's special operations capabilities resides in its aircrews, special tactics units, combat aviation advisory teams, and support personnel specially trained to conduct and support a wide array of missions. Certain AFSOF units are regionally-oriented, culturally astute, and include personnel experienced and conversant in cultures and languages found in specific operational areas. When required, [special operations forces](#) (SOF) elements should provide liaisons to facilitate conventional, multinational, and interagency interoperability. For example, special operations liaisons are normally provided to the [joint force air component commander](#) to help ensure coordination, synchronization, and to prevent friendly fire incidents.

## **DESIGNATION OF AFSOF**

AFSOF is the umbrella term for those regular and Reserve Component (RC) Air Force forces or those units or forces that have since been designated as SOF by the Secretary of Defense. The Commander, US Special Operations Command (CDRUSSOCOM) exercises [combatant command](#) authority over all active component and all RC mobilized or ordered to active duty (other than training) AFSOF. CDRUSSOCOM exercises training and readiness oversight authority over assigned RC AFSOF when not on active duty or when on active duty for training.

AFSOF are composed of special operations aviation units (including unmanned aircraft systems), special tactics personnel (including combat control teams, pararescue personnel, special reconnaissance teams, and select tactical air control party), dedicated SOF [intelligence, surveillance, reconnaissance](#) units, precision strike, specialized air mobility, aviation [foreign internal defense](#) units, and support capabilities such as [command and control](#), [information operations](#), and [combat support](#) functions.

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