



## SPECIAL OPERATIONS CORE ACTIVITIES

Last Updated: 1 February 2020

[Special operations forces](#) (SOF) conduct specific special operations core activities as established by the United States Code, Title 10, *Armed Forces*, section 167, "[Unified Combatant Command for Special Operations Forces](#);" Department of Defense (DOD) Directive 5100.01, [Functions of the Department of Defense and Its Major Components](#); or as otherwise specified by the President or the Secretary of Defense. These activities are explained in US Special Operations Command (USSOCOM) Publication 1 (Pub 1), *Doctrine for Special Operations*; Joint Publication (JP) 3-05, [Special Operations](#); JP 3-13.2, [Military Information Support Operations](#); JP 3-22, [Foreign Internal Defense](#); JP 3-24, [Counterinsurgency](#); JP 3-26, [Joint Combating Terrorism](#); JP 3-40, [Joint Countering Weapons of Mass Destruction](#); JP 3-57, [Civil-Military Operations](#); as well as other USSOCOM, joint and Air Force doctrine documents.

## SPECIAL OPERATIONS CORE ACTIVITIES

The special operations core activity definitions and descriptions are primarily derived from JP 3-05, USSOCOM Pub 1, and other supporting special operations doctrine publications. It is important to note that core activities are mutually supporting and interoperable in most cases. Rarely, if ever, will a special operation occur that does not support, include, or impact multiple core activities. The execution of one core activity may have operational or strategic influence on other core activities being performed or planned. As an example, an unconventional warfare campaign may include elements of direct action and special reconnaissance. The special operations core activities are:

- ✦ [Direct Action](#) (DA). Short-duration strikes and other small-scale offensive actions conducted as a special operation in hostile, denied, or diplomatically sensitive environments and which employ specialized military capabilities to seize, destroy, capture, exploit, recover, or damage designated targets. [Air Force special operations forces](#) (AFSOF) primarily support DA by employing specialized air mobility, precision strike, and special tactics core mission areas.
- ✦ [Special Reconnaissance](#) (SR). Reconnaissance and surveillance actions conducted as a special operation in hostile, denied, or politically sensitive environments to collect or verify information of strategic or operational significance, employing military capabilities not normally found in [conventional forces](#). AFSOF

support SR by employing specialized air mobility, intelligence, surveillance, reconnaissance (ISR), and special tactics core mission areas.

- ★ **Countering Weapons of Mass Destruction** (CWMD). SOF support US government efforts to curtail the development, possession, proliferation, use, and effects of weapons of mass destruction (WMD), related expertise, materials, technologies, and means of delivery by state and non-state actors. WMD are chemical, biological, radiological, and nuclear weapons capable of a high order of destruction or causing mass casualties and exclude the means of transporting or propelling the weapon where such means are a separable and divisible part from the weapon. The strategic objectives of CWMD operations are to reduce incentives to obtain and employ WMD; increase barriers to acquisition and use of WMD; manage WMD risks emanating from hostile, fragile, failed states, or havens; and deny the effects of current and emerging WMD threats. USSOCOM supports geographic **combatant commanders** through technical expertise, materiel, and special teams to complement other combatant command teams that locate, tag, and track WMD; DA in limited access areas; helping build partnership capacity to conduct CWMD activities; military information support operations (MISO) to dissuade adversaries from reliance on WMD; and other specialized capabilities. AFSOF supports CWMD through its specialized air mobility, precision strike, and special tactics core missions.
- ★ **Counterterrorism**. Actions taken directly against terrorist networks and indirectly to influence and render global and regional environments inhospitable to terrorist networks. AFSOF primarily support these actions with specialized air mobility, ISR, precision strike, and special tactics core mission areas.
- ★ **Unconventional Warfare** (UW). Activities conducted to enable a resistance movement or insurgency to coerce, disrupt, or overthrow a government or occupying power by operating through or with an underground, auxiliary, and guerrilla force in a denied area. AFSOF primarily support UW activities with specialized air mobility, aviation foreign internal defense (AvFID), and special tactics core missions.
- ★ **Foreign Internal Defense** (FID). Participation by civilian and military agencies of a government in any of the action programs taken by another government or other designated organization to free and protect its society from subversion, lawlessness, insurgency, terrorism, and other threats to its security. AFSOF support this core activity through the AFSOF AvFID and special tactics core missions.
- ★ **Security Force Assistance** (SFA). The DOD activities that contribute to unified action by the US Government to support the development of the capacity and capability of foreign security forces and their supporting institutions. AFSOF support SFA activities through the AFSOC AvFID and special tactics core missions.  
**Note:** FID and SFA are similar at the tactical level where advisory skills are applicable to both. At the operational and strategic levels, both FID and SFA focus on preparing foreign security forces (FSF) to combat lawlessness, subversion,

insurgency, terrorism, and other internal threats to their security; however, SFA also prepares FSF to defend against external threats and to perform as part of an international force. Although FID and SFA are both subsets of security cooperation, neither is considered a subset of the other and can be executed simultaneously.

- ✦ **Hostage Rescue and Recovery**. Hostage rescue and recovery operations are sensitive crisis response missions in response to terrorist threats and incidents. Offensive operations in support of hostage rescue and recovery can include recapture of US facilities, installations, and sensitive material outside the continental US. AFSOF support these activities through the full range of their core missions.
- ✦ **Counterinsurgency** (COIN). Comprehensive civilian and military efforts designed to simultaneously defeat and contain insurgency and address its root causes. SOF are particularly suited for COIN operations because of their regional expertise, language, and combat skills, and ability to work among populations and with or through indigenous partners. AFSOF support COIN activities employing the full range of their core missions.
- ✦ **Foreign Humanitarian Assistance**. DOD activities conducted outside the US and its territories to directly relieve or reduce human suffering, disease, hunger or privation. AFSOF supports humanitarian assistance and disaster relief by employing command and control, specialized air mobility, ISR, and special tactics core mission areas.
- ✦ **Military Information Support Operations** (MISO). The planned operations to convey selected information and indicators to foreign audiences to influence their emotions, motives, objective reasoning, and ultimately the behavior of foreign governments, organizations, groups, and individuals. The purpose of MISO is to induce or reinforce foreign attitudes and behavior favorable to the originator's objectives. AFSOF supports MISO by employing the information operations core mission area.
- ✦ **Civil Affairs Operations**. Those military operations conducted by civil affairs forces that, (1) enhance the relationship between military forces and civil authorities in localities where military forces are present; (2) require coordination with other interagency organizations, intergovernmental organizations, nongovernmental organizations, indigenous populations and institutions, and the private sector; and (3) involve application of functional specialty skills that normally are the responsibility of civil government to enhance the conduct of civil-military operations. AFSOF can support these activities by establishing measures to help the host nation gain support of the local populace and the international community, and reduce support or resources to those destabilizing forces threatening legitimate processes of the host nation government. AFSOF support civil affairs operation activities by employing the full range of their core missions.