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**U.S. SPECIAL OPERATIONS FORCES AND
COMMAND—CHALLENGES AND RESOURCE
PRIORITIES FOR FISCAL YEAR 2024**

HEARING

BEFORE THE

SUBCOMMITTEE ON INTELLIGENCE AND
SPECIAL OPERATIONS

OF THE

COMMITTEE ON ARMED SERVICES
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HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES,
COMMITTEE ON ARMED SERVICES,
SUBCOMMITTEE ON INTELLIGENCE AND
SPECIAL OPERATIONS,
Washington, DC, Thursday, March 9, 2023.

The subcommittee met, pursuant to call, at 1:09 p.m., in room 2212, Rayburn House Office Building, Hon. Jack Bergman (chairman of the subcommittee) presiding.

OPENING STATEMENT OF HON. JACK BERGMAN, A REPRESENTATIVE FROM MICHIGAN, CHAIRMAN, SUBCOMMITTEE ON INTELLIGENCE AND SPECIAL OPERATIONS

Mr. BERGMAN. Good afternoon. I call to order this hearing of the Intelligence and Special Operations Subcommittee on “U.S. Special Operations Forces and Command—Challenges and Resource Priorities for Fiscal Year 2024.”

I would like to first welcome our newest member to the subcommittee, Representative Jennifer McClellan of Virginia. So, hi.

Ms. MCCLELLAN. Thank you, Mr. Chairman. I’m very excited to be here.

Mr. BERGMAN. Well, welcome, and I served with your predecessor. Don and I came in together and, you know, God rest his soul. But glad you’re here and looking forward to working with you as we move through these things.

Okay. The United States today finds itself in a shifting strategic landscape in which great power competition will be the defining geopolitical feature over the coming decades.

With that, our special operations forces similarly find themselves at an inflection point. After 20 years of the global war on terrorism, the SOF enterprise is retooling and retraining for the threats and competition posed by China and other strategic adversaries.

This will not be easy as limited budgets compel the Department and Congress to make difficult budget decisions, especially as it pertains to special operations.

While USSOCOM [U.S. Special Operations Command] remains tasked with combating the continued threat posed by violent extremist organizations and other non-state actors, our special operations forces will remain the tip of the spear in competing against and deterring our strategic adversaries, creating strategic dilemmas, and making them think twice about their own capabilities.

As we discuss USSOCOM’s priorities for the coming year’s budget, we must examine which capabilities and tools used for the CT

[counterterrorism] mission may also be used against state adversaries in great power competition, as well as what capabilities must be developed or expanded.

These capabilities and tools may range from counter-UAS [unmanned aerial system] and advanced ISR [intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance] technologies, to cyber and web-based tools to compete and win in the information environment and increased clandestine operations.

We similarly must examine the force structure of the SOF enterprise to ensure that SOCOM is adequately manned to compete and operate in great power competition.

As a small single-digit percentage of the overall force, any cuts in personnel to the SOF enterprise will have a disproportionate effect on the ability of SOF to execute required operations.

Make no mistake, as we look to compete with and deter adversaries like China and Russia, our special operators will remain at the tip of the spear, shaping the environment and creating conditions for successful follow-on operations by the joint force.

In short, if we are looking to prepare the military services for a high-end fight with a near-peer adversary, then we must ensure that our special operations forces are properly manned, equipped, and trained to enable the rest of the force.

I look forward to hearing from our witnesses on the priorities for U.S. Special Operations ahead of Congress' work on the fiscal year 2024 budget and NDAA [National Defense Authorization Act].

With that, I would like to welcome our witnesses here today.

The Honorable Christopher Maier serves as the Assistant Secretary of Defense for Special Operations and Low-Intensity Conflict, and General Bryan P. Fenton, who currently serves as the 13th Commander of U.S. Special Operations Command.

In the interest of time, I ask the witnesses to keep their opening remarks to 5 minutes or less so that we can have sufficient time for question and answers.

With that, let me thank our witnesses for appearing before us today and I now recognize the ranking member for today, Representative Slotkin, who's filling in for Representative Gallego, for any opening remarks.

STATEMENT OF HON. ELISSA SLOTKIN, A REPRESENTATIVE FROM MICHIGAN, SUBCOMMITTEE ON INTELLIGENCE AND SPECIAL OPERATIONS

Ms. SLOTKIN. Great. Real quickly, thank you, Mr. Chairman, for convening us on this hearing. I also want to welcome HASC's [House Armed Services Committee's] newest member, Representative McClellan. It's great to have you here.

We are, I think, doing something historic. I believe this is the first time in a long time that two Michiganders have chaired a HASC subcommittee. I'm happy to be here with Mr. Bergman, my fellow Michigander.

And I think, you know, from my perspective, the global security environment—we all know it's changing. We all know we have shifted towards, you know, great power competition.

We all know that from Ukraine to the Chinese Communist Party to Iran, North Korea, violent extremist groups, it's dynamic, to say

the least, and that these changes need to be explained to the American people so that we can understand not just what we have gone through in the last 20, 25 years in the wake of the wars of Iraq and Afghanistan, but where—how we chart the future forward, particularly with the unique capabilities of the special operations community.

We have asked the special forces in the last 20 years to really focus on counterterrorism, countering violent extremism, Iraq, Afghanistan, other hot spots elsewhere. I lived this firsthand as a CIA [Central Intelligence Agency] officer working alongside and often living with the special forces on three tours in Iraq, and we know the importance and the danger of the work that our special forces took part in.

And while we still need to maintain that capability and not lose sight of those gains, I think we really need to help explain and chart the way forward on today and tomorrow.

What is the role of the special forces in an era of increased great power competition? Do you have the right training, manning, equipping, institutional support, professional military education?

Do the lessons of the last 20 years carry forward or do we think about things in a different way and adjust doctrine? These are some of the core questions that I'm hoping to hear a little bit about today.

And you all will have, one way or another, an essential role in what I understand is, you know, the National Defense/Security Strategy, going forward. The word deter was mentioned 56 times in that strategy and I think it's very clear that the special forces community is going to have a really key and essential role in that deterrence.

I look forward to hearing from our witnesses and hand it back over to the chairman.

Mr. BERGMAN. Thank you, Representative Slotkin.

And not only do we represent the State of Michigan, between your district and my district, we represent almost the whole State of Michigan, not just two districts. I think we probably would be probably 60-plus percent of the landmass.

We will now hear from our witnesses, then move on into the question and answer session.

Assistant Secretary Maier, we will begin with you.

STATEMENT OF HON. CHRISTOPHER P. MAIER, ASSISTANT SECRETARY OF DEFENSE, SPECIAL OPERATIONS AND LOW-INTENSITY CONFLICT

Mr. MAIER. Well, thank you, Chairman Bergman and Ranking Member for today Slotkin, and distinguished members of this committee.

Thank you for providing this opportunity to testify on the global posture of our Nation's special operations forces, or SOF. I am honored to appear alongside General Fenton.

I could not ask for better teammates in both General Fenton and Command Sergeant Major Shane Shorter in ensuring your SOF enterprise is prepared to address the threats facing the United States today and in meeting the challenges to come.

I start with thanking Congress and especially this committee—this subcommittee—for your enduring support of the men and women of SOF. I am particularly grateful for your assistance in building the organization I lead, Special Operations and Low-Intensity Conflict, with dedicated and gifted public servants.

Sitting before this committee last year, I testified that we were at an inflection point in SOF's transformation to focus more on the pacing challenge of China and the acute threat posed by Russia, while maintaining enduring capabilities to counter violent extremist organizations, address Iran's destabilizing behavior, and conduct no-fail crisis response around the globe.

Today, in updating you on progress and the work that remains, I will highlight three areas: SOF's ongoing transition in support of the National Defense Strategy [NDS], the development of SO/LIC [Special Operations/Low-Intensity Conflict], and our continued emphasis on empowering and supporting our people.

First, we are transforming the SOF enterprise to achieve the goals of the NDS. While SOF's role in counterterrorism is widely understood and appreciated, my team and I work daily to ensure the value proposition of SOF in integrated deterrence and campaigning against strategic competitors is accounted for and incorporated into the Department's processes.

As it has been in every major military challenge this Nation has confronted since World War II, your SOF will play an essential role. To start, the deep relationships SOF has forged with allies and partners over the last two decades, often through shared challenges and sacrifice, has produced an international SOF enterprise that provides unique firsthand understanding of the global operating environment. It also has enhanced the resilience of allies and partners to resist aggression.

Second, drawing on those relationships and our ability to reach some of the most difficult locations on the globe, your SOF formations provide unique access and placement that creates options for our Nation's leaders, and SOF is adept at creating dilemmas for our adversaries.

Here, I would highlight the many years of our investment in transforming Ukrainian forces into highly capable—the highly capable force that is consistently outperforming Russia on the battlefield.

Representing the value that SOF brings to the joint force is one of my primary responsibilities and we continue to make progress institutionalizing SO/LIC's role as Congress has directed.

Through my role providing civilian leadership for the organize, train, and equip of SOF, we have established over the last year in the Department a series of recurring processes and delivered key outcomes for the SOF enterprise.

For example, the Special Operations Policy [and] Oversight Council that I chair provides a senior level forum to address SOF-unique challenges across the Department.

We also have made progress on important initiatives to deter our adversaries and fill warfighting gaps, especially on irregular warfare and information operations. I'm also proud that SO/LIC played a central role in the Department's landmark Civilian Harm Mitigation Response Action Plan.

Finally, I would emphasize that the first SOF truth remains truer today than ever: Humans are more important than hardware. None of our efforts are possible without our most important resource, our people.

With the strong support of Congress, we continue to evolve the Preservation of the Force and Families, or POTFF, program to address SOF-unique challenges and to optimize physical, psychological, social, spiritual, and now cognitive performance.

We also continue to prioritize a diverse, capable force by removing barriers to participation and advancement in SOF, an operational imperative if we are to succeed in an ever more complex geopolitical environment.

Recent publicized challenges remind us that we must continue to evaluate our approaches to force employment, accountability, and, most importantly, present and engaged leadership.

A healthy SOF culture that reflects our Nation's values is essential to readiness and core to ensuring we remain the most lethal SOF enterprise the world has ever known.

Investing in our people is the cornerstone of ensuring your SOF are ready to take on our Nation's toughest challenges, because it is not a question of if but when the call will come.

Mr. Chairman and distinguished members of this committee, I thank you again for your partnership and support, and for the opportunity to testify today. I look forward to your questions.

[The joint prepared statement of Mr. Maier and General Fenton can be found in the Appendix on page 29.]

Mr. BERGMAN. Thank you, Secretary Maier.
And, General Fenton, you are recognized.

**STATEMENT OF GEN BRYAN P. FENTON, USA, COMMANDER,
U.S. SPECIAL OPERATIONS COMMAND**

General FENTON. Thank you. Chairman Bergman, Ranking Member, and distinguished members of the subcommittee, I thank all of you for the opportunity to appear before you today.

I'm honored to testify alongside the Honorable Chris Maier and I'm equally honored to be here on behalf of the dedicated men and women of U.S. Special Operations Command.

Joining me today is Command Sergeant Major Shane Shorter, USSOCOM's senior enlisted leader. Command Sergeant Major Shorter is representative of the incredible USSOCOM team, particularly our noncommissioned officer corps.

Our noncommissioned officers are the backbone of our military and a decisive advantage within your special operations community and they make us the envy of every military around the world.

We are thankful for the leadership and support of Congress, particularly this subcommittee. Congress had the vision and determination to establish USSOCOM almost 36 years ago. Thank you for this subcommittee's steadfast support ever since.

Your special operations forces remain a national advantage as we enter a decisive era, an era where strategic competitors, such as the PRC [People's Republic of China] and Russia, seek to reshape the rules-based international order.

In response, your special operations forces strengthen and sustain deterrence globally as part of our approach to integrated deterrence.

With SOF's World War II origins and DNA rooted in decades of experience in strategic competition, now building upon 20-plus years of hard-won combat credibility, your SOF provide creative, tailorable, and asymmetric options for our Nation while create dilemmas for any competitor.

As part of the broader joint force your SOF campaign every day to deter and prevent aggression, counter coercion, close warfighting gaps, and tackle shared challenges alongside allies and partners, all in support of accelerating strategic momentum towards NDS objectives.

Yet your SOF also remain vigilant in protecting our homeland and U.S. interests from the persistent threat posed by global terrorist networks. In doing so your SOF work tirelessly alongside a trusted network of allies and partners, U.S. interagency counterparts, and our joint force teammates to disrupt VEOs [violent extremist organizations] wherever they may be.

And while we campaign for integrated deterrence and counter violent extremists, your SOF's capabilities to respond to crisis represent a critical strategic hedge and advantage for our Nation.

Agile, tailored, modernized capabilities enable us to undertake sensitive, high-risk missions crucial to safeguarding and, when necessary, rescuing our citizens and protecting vital national interests.

Foundational to all these efforts remains our collaborative partnership with ASD(SO/LIC) [Assistant Secretary of Defense for Special Operations and Low-Intensity Conflict] Chris Maier and his team. The oversight, policy guidance, and advocacy provided by ASD(SO/LIC) are essential for the modernization, readiness, well-being of SOF units and our families, and together we are committed to placing people as our number one shared priority.

We're preparing for the future by investing in them and by leveraging our Nation's diverse talent to solve diverse challenges. And to those listening today who might be considering service to our Nation, know the profound sense of calling and purpose those of us serving in uniform and SOCOM share.

We know that a deeply rewarding journey lies ahead for all those who choose to join. You will be part of an incredible team of men and women tackling the toughest challenges for our Nation.

Earlier this week I had the great privilege of hearing from Colonel (retired) Paris Davis, our Nation's most recent Medal of Honor recipient and a Green Beret. At Monday's ceremony to induct him into the Pentagon's Hall of Heroes, he summed up his military service and special operations service in three words: purpose, opportunity, and pride.

And as we speak here today, more than 5,000 service members of USSOCOM are deployed who share his sense of purpose and pride defending our Nation and standing shoulder to shoulder with allies and partners in over 80 countries to make our world a safer place.

The courage and commitment of our special operations community and our military inspires the Command Sergeant Major and me daily.

We are immensely proud to serve with them, and we look forward to your questions.

Mr. BERGMAN. Thank you, General Fenton.

Mr. JACKSON, you're recognized.

Dr. JACKSON OF TEXAS. Thank you, Mr. Chairman, and thanks to both of our witnesses for being here today. Appreciate your time.

The special operations community is, obviously, one of our greatest assets in defense of our country. For the past 20 years, special operators have carried a heavy burden during the war on terror, fighting not against uniformed soldiers under a defined flag but, rather, against networks of non-state actors uniting under a loose ideology.

While terrorism remains a threat warranting our vigilance, we must focus on state actors with significant economic, political, and military influence now, namely China, Russia, Korea, and Iran.

The demands on our operators in the SOF community and, frankly, on their families are intense. The training is demanding, the ops [operations] tempo is high, deployment tempo is high, and often the objectives are no-fail missions.

There's no doubt that while rewarding, working in the special operations community is stressful and even chaotic at times. Yet, recruitment and retention in the SOF community remains high, especially when compared to the services as a whole who are either barely meeting or missing their recruiting and retention goals.

General Fenton, what are you guys doing differently in the SOCOM community to continue to recruit and retain your personnel? You hit on this a little bit at the end of your statement.

But how do you think the Department of Defense could replicate some of the success you're having and is there any things in particular that you're doing that are leading to this success?

General FENTON. Congressman, thank you very much for that question. I would start that your Special Operations Command team takes in its personnel from across the services from the service components.

We have a very small recruiting effort that goes external but we are the recipients of Army, Navy, Air Force, Marines, and Space Guardians into the SOCOM team and in that effect we work very closely with the services to assist all of us in recruiting goals, certainly, and retention and that we recognize as well while there are recruiting challenges for services out there we won't be immune even though our recruiting numbers right now are very good.

And at some point that bubble will hit us so it's in our best interest and, certainly, as a teammate in the Department to work with all the services on anything that we have that we would find as best business practices.

I would also mention that our retention, along with the Department's retention, is at an all-time high. My sense in many ways would be first to say thanks to this Congress for the work that's gone into BAH [Basic Allowance for Housing] increases, pay increases, as you think about your troops, and those certainly assist in recruiting and retaining our teammates.

I would say in SOCOM I don't know if these are the best of—the best business practices but, certainly, each and every day, and

the services do as well, we make sure our people know they are our number one priority.

I think that has a heck of an impact on folks knowing that they're empowered, embraced, experienced, and absolutely cared for and educated as we go forward. And I think we offer very rigorous standards that are meant to be combat and, certainly, a great team of teams to be a part of.

Dr. JACKSON OF TEXAS. Thank you for that. I hope—that helps. I appreciate that. I hadn't thought in terms of recruitment having your own farm team in place but I guess that's kind of what you have going on.

So one more question. When special operations really came into its own the career field was primarily geared toward kinetic actions executed by physically fit individuals possessing mental fortitude and the ability to problem solve in real time.

No doubt that those attributes are going to continue to be of huge importance to the SOF community. But with each passing day the realities of warfare continue to evolve. Technology is developing at a breakneck speed and every day we hear more about artificial intelligence, autonomous weapon systems, and cyber issues and cyberattacks.

So, General Fenton, my question is, BUD/S [Basic Underwater Demolition/SEAL], obviously, the Q Course, the Ranger course, they're not going anywhere. But how is SOCOM also addressing the reality that expertise in technology is going to be essential to special operations going forward, and do you foresee any changes or additions to the training pipeline or integration of new forces into SOCOM to augment your mission set that we haven't seen previously?

General FENTON. Congressman, I'll begin by saying we always want to be ready for whatever challenges lie ahead and, frankly, stay ahead of those.

In this instance, I'd say we create talent to solve those challenges to congested, certainly increasingly complex challenges that we get in the world. And I think it starts, first, as it always has, even in World War II, when we had the OSS [Office of Strategic Services] and people willing to parachute behind enemy lines, raise a resistance, and do sabotage and subversion.

If I take that all the way from Korea, Vietnam, and then, we want that person first and foremost that desires a challenge, desires hard challenges and problems to solve and coming up with creative solutions.

And I think in this day and age that looks like teammates from cyber and space, tech, software engineers, technologists, folks who understand autonomy and uncrewed systems as much as it does the folks that came to us in those days that when that didn't exist it was about grit.

It was about determination, motivation. We need all that now in our operational layer and, certainly, with critical enabling expert layer.

So you'll see us chase all that talent and more as we look to, certainly, address adversaries and create dilemmas for them.

Dr. JACKSON OF TEXAS. Thank you, sir. My time has expired. Thank you.

Mr. BERGMAN. Thank you.

And, Representative Slotkin, you're recognized.

Ms. SLOTKIN. Great. So, you know, I think most people understand or they think they understand the role of SOF in the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan and against the al-Qaida threat and affiliate threat.

But I think it's less commonly understood the role of SOF, going forward, in great power competition. And I'm just conscious that this committee supported SOCOM and actually bumped up the budget request from fiscal year 2023 and gave you more in every single category than was requested.

Help explain in English what the different—how it's going to be different and what you're going to be investing in differently so that we understand sort of in colloquial terms what has changed now that we're sort of through this 20-year period and into a different period.

Mr. Maier.

Mr. MAIER. Thanks for the question, Representative Slotkin.

So I think it's kind of the fundamental question that we spend a lot of time working on. So I think I would say there's an element of continuity in this. We still will continue from the SOF enterprise to do counterterrorism and crisis response and there's some lessons from that are very applicable.

We will continue to work by, with, and through partners. We will continue to focus on placement and access, sometimes through those partners, sometimes through our own exquisite capabilities unilaterally.

But I think what we will need to focus on more is if we are, indeed, working across all domains, some of those domains have broadened from what was applicable in the fight against al-Qaida and ISIS [Islamic State of Iraq and Syria].

So space, cyber has already been mentioned; the ability to recognize that the world is one that operating without being seen is particularly challenging so we need more tactics, techniques, and procedures that allow us to do that.

We also need more technology that allows us to do that in a very technologically enabled world.

Ms. SLOTKIN. Yeah. And on that issue, so I always remember being at the Pentagon and being incredibly jealous of SOCOM's acquisition authorities and the ability to go from either commercially available tech or just a concept.

I mean, even just watching it in Syria was amazing, right, that something was needed and SOCOM always had the ability to quickly move to contact.

Can you tell me if you, A, feel like you still have all the acquisition authorities that you need for that and then, B, kind of give me an example if you could of how you've gone from concept to a piece of tech in the life cycle sort of from beginning to end. From idea to fielding, how long is it taking you to field new concepts?

Mr. MAIER. So I think, Representative Slotkin, we still benefit immensely from that capability. In some respects, it's going to be even more applicable as we deal in a more complicated environment.

Some of this is probably better handled in a closed session. But I think if—broadly speaking, if you think of some of the capabilities that are so critical for more advanced intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance, so we have long depended on the same sort of platforms.

We're going to need capabilities that dwell for much longer and are able to operate in non-permissive environments. So there's tremendous amount of investment in the SOF enterprise, also, across the Department, frankly. But we think in many cases we're able to field these faster and operationally test them more quickly because we do have that ability to have an AT&L [acquisition, technology, and logistics] component within the—within the command there.

Ms. SLOTKIN. And what would you say, just back of the envelope from—you know, if you have a crew that's come to you with an idea, if you were going sort of full steam ahead how long would it take to go to fielding, at least a test product?

Mr. MAIER. So I think we have cases where we have been able to do it within a fiscal year. Other cases, depending on the complexity, will take multiple years. But I think benchmark we're much faster than the services are.

But we're also doing much smaller things. So we have an advantage there and benefit immensely from the small—many of the small businesses we're able to work with in some of the flexible ways and some of the authorities that this Congress has given us, ma'am.

Ms. SLOTKIN. So you all should speak up if you feel like there's additional authorities that would help turn the crank. I mean, one fiscal year is lightning speed for the Department of Defense. But if there was something else that you were missing, you should let us know, particularly because you do smaller scale stuff, and you're not looking for, like, a new fixed-wing airframe or something like that.

I yield back, Mr. Chairman.

Mr. BERGMAN. Thank you. Mr. Mills, you're recognized.

Mr. MILLS. Thank you, Mr. Chairman. Thank you, gentlemen, for coming here today.

General Fenton, we had a very long discussion just the other day, which I'm very appreciative for and thank you so much for talking about the priorities of where SOCOM is looking to go and how you're looking to lead that. Having been in this role now for just 6 months, can you share with everyone what your command priorities are?

General FENTON. Congressman, thank you very much for that and thanks as well for the session with you the other day. I can. When I think about it at the enterprise level—at the SOCOM enterprise level—those priorities are, first and foremost, people, followed by win, and then transform. And as we think about our number one priority, our people are our competitive and comparative advantage.

We have seen that time and time again in the special operations community. With just a very little guidance and a whole bunch of initiative and training and skill, very complex problems are solved quickly and we rush to those problems.

So each and every day as the Command Sergeant Major and I are part of this formation we see it and, certainly, in full display, that our people are our number one priority and everything we do really focuses on that because they'll take us to the win, our second priority, across the spectrum of strategic competition, integrated deterrence, counterterrorism, and crisis response, and have done that since the origins.

And I keep going back to World War II and right afterwards with the beginning of special forces and UDTs [Underwater Demolition Teams] that have become the SEALs, Air Commandos, Marine Raiders, and many others in our formation even today. And they've won for decades for this Nation, and we'll stay focused on that across those three missions of strategic competition, crisis response, and counterterrorism.

The third priority for the enterprise is transform and it goes, first and foremost, to our people. It's about this continual education of what we will require as we enter any era or decade and, certainly, in this one as we think about the PRC and Russia it'll be a continuing educational start with our Joint Special Operations University.

In addition to having an acquisition executive, we have our own Special Ops University at the Special Operations Command that stays on top of that and can turn that very fast. And then that's followed by tech, data, the things that we need to compete; and not big items very often, almost a Moneyball-type approach, many little things in order to get after the challenge that the PRC and, certainly, the Russians present.

But those would be the priorities, Representative. Thank you for that.

Mr. MILLS. Well, thank you so much, General Fenton, and for having talked to you earlier I have no doubt that you'll be able to achieve in all those and that SOCOM's in a great position under your leadership.

Switching to you, Assistant Secretary Maier, in 2020 the National Defense Strategy had an irregular warfare annex and in this it talked a lot about great power competition and upcoming strategies.

Have we continued to fulfill that 2020 annex and have we continued to put that into the field in a strategic way?

Mr. MAIER. Congressman, it is a really important question, I think, as we talk about the tools from a more policy and framework perspective that we will need, going forward.

So I think the answer to your question is, yes, we have done a number of things. There is no more irregular warfare annex. It's integrated into the 2020 National—2022 National Defense Strategy.

We have a process underway that's bringing the Department across the spectrum from doctrine to policy to operations and resourcing, training, all those tools that make the world go round in the Pentagon and in the joint force to actually not only apply irregular warfare but look for new opportunities to apply it in other cases.

So I think this is one of my priorities. I have three. It's one of those three, and we're very much pushing in conjunction with Special Operations Command on that.

I would just add that we think irregular warfare is the responsibility of the joint force. SOF may be in the lead for it but it can't be a SOF-only endeavor, sir.

Mr. MILLS. Yeah, I absolutely agree. And in knowing that, you know, we do have the geopolitical alignment of China, Russia, Iran, North Korea. We see what Chairman Xi is doing with advancing his Road and Belt Initiative, which is more focused on an economic resource cyber-based warfare.

We know that the one thing that Chairman Xi and Russia lacks is our noncommissioned officer corps. This is something that every one of our adversaries try to build up and become robust but they cannot meet the United States when it comes to this.

The second thing Chairman Xi said is that he can outpace us militarily and economically. But innovation is a real key.

Do we look at things like quantum entanglement for AI [artificial intelligence] autonomous drone systems with regards to communication platforms and also how we would be able to field those more accurately with the SOCOM communities?

Either.

General FENTON. Representative, I'll take that because I'm going to start. I absolutely agree with your description of our noncommissioned officer corps. Throughout our entire military and, in particular, I've lived in this formation for almost 30 years in your special operations community.

I spoke a bit about it in the opening statement, and if I could pull it a little tighter, every military in the world looks towards the U.S. military because of a very key thing and, more often than not, not our equipment. It's not a number of other things that folks might think. It is our noncommissioned officer corps. They want to be the U.S. military because of our noncommissioned officer corps. Always have been, always will be.

Any military we engage with one of their first requirements is build us a noncommissioned officer corps. Give it mission command type orders, initiative, all the tactics, techniques, and procedures, and they ask that because they know they'll be incredibly better off as a result and we, certainly, appreciate when they ask that.

On your technology discussion, we absolutely are pursuing those type of technologies. I would say in the acquisition priorities area for me and has been stated thus in the 2023, certainly, in my—our 2023 budget was anything—AI, autonomous, uncrewed, and much of that really revolves around an artificial intelligence application that could sit on the data, give us a decision advantage, and then on top of that really work to get these systems in the right place to achieve the right effects.

And as quantum comes into our radar screen to be more usable we'll absolutely pursue that as well. Anything that gives us an advantage, a comparative and competitive advantage. Already we're the best military in the world, but we're not satisfied. We want to continue to strive and your SOCOM team is right there with them.

Mr. MILLS. Thank you so much for your service and I really appreciate it. With that, I yield back.

Mr. BERGMAN. Thank you. And just so you know, I know that, Secretary Maier and General Fenton, you cannot see the time clock.

So what's going to happen is as we move forward here, Mr. Green, when there's a minute left will stand up and do the old hand and arm signals. So in the—you know, respecting time that's how we'll do it in the old manual way.

Representative Jacobs, you are recognized.

Ms. JACOBS. Well, thank you, Mr. Chairman, and thank you, Assistant Secretary Maier and General Fenton, for testifying before us today.

You know, as a representative of San Diego, I have to say I am always so proud of the SEALs, of our Delta troops. I think they are the best in the business and it's clear that they are willing to do the most dangerous missions with very little notice and I think we should all be incredibly grateful for that.

I think part of our job on this committee is to make sure that we're asking them to do the right missions when we're sending them out into harm's way and so I wanted to pull us up a little bit and ask about the strategic level.

You know, we have talked a lot about the pivot to great power competition and how when we're going to do counterterrorism, moving forward, it's going to be more by, with, and through, more over the horizon, smaller footprints, lighter counterterrorism.

I would argue that's actually how we have been doing counterterrorism in sub-Saharan Africa for the past 20 years. And, you know, in sub-Saharan Africa U.S. Special Operations have been conducting counterterrorism training for over two decades and we have provided over \$3 billion in related equipment, training, and logistics.

And, General Fenton, I want to ask you, would you characterize this effort in sub-Saharan Africa as a success?

General FENTON. Congresswoman, I'm in—certainly, in constant contact with Africa Command, as they look at this through their lens and a number of other whole-of-government efforts. I think it's necessary because as we have put in our written posture statement, the counter—the VEO threat still persists even though it's been disrupted and we have got to remain vigilant as we think about ISIS, al-Qaida, and, certainly, al-Shabaab and their desires, certainly always, to attack homeland and partners and allies.

Ms. JACOBS. Yeah, and I certainly agree with you that getting our counterterrorism mission right, especially in sub-Saharan Africa, is really important.

But I actually want to point out that despite our billions of dollars in investments and the incredible bravery and professionalism of our tier one operators we have actually seen, and it's just a fact, that violent extremism has increased over threefold since 2013, as you can see on this poster. And just in the last year, according to the Africa Center for Strategic Studies, which is a research institute within DOD [Department of Defense], just in the last year violent extremist violence has increased by 22 percent with fatalities surging over 50 percent and just in the Sahel alone violence has seen a 130 percent increase since 2020.

So I guess as we're talking about using these strategies in other parts of the world, how is SOCOM thinking about the lessons from this clear lack of success so that we're not recreating it both as we move forward in sub-Saharan Africa and in other parts of the world?

General Fenton.

General FENTON. Representative, thank you very much for that. I'll start.

As we continue, we'll do it the way we have been doing it, which is one part of the whole of U.S. Government effort that gets after countering VEOs. That's in concert with the combatant command.

So where we as a SOCOM team operate they have special operations elements there that campaign, contest, and coordinate all of our activities in that arena and as well with our Department of State and the intel and interagency colleagues, and partners and allies. So we'll continue that as one part.

Second, I think I would say across all the various domains, information operations to get after an unconstrained ideology that still exists out there in the violent extremist way and use capability tools and, certainly, partner and allied thoughts as we go forward that can contain, in some ways, the physical terrain in places, Syria and Iraq, that we have been able to do against ISIS. But—

Ms. JACOBS. Thank you. I don't mean to cut you off. I just want to make sure I get to my last question for Assistant Secretary Maier.

I think, as we have talked a lot, one of the main lessons is that the over military-first DOD-led approach to violent extremism is clearly not working. You are the point person for DOD on the bipartisan Global Fragility Act [GFA] and a part of that law is, quote, "that all DOD activity in priority countries will be in joint formulation and with the concurrence of the Secretary of State."

Given that that is part of the law, will you commit today to ensure the Department abides by that and only implements policy or conducts activities in all GFA priority countries that have been developed through joint formulation with the State Department and through Secretary of State concurrence including as it relates to all title 10 and section 127 Echo and 1202 programs?

Mr. MAIER. So, Congresswoman, it's a very important thing. I think, the Global Fragility Act, because it gets at your core question of trying to do things differently than we've done in the past to attrit some of those trend lines you showed. I think as a matter of practice on GFA we are aiming as much as possible to be that three Ds concept: the development, diplomacy, and then our defense piece.

All the plans and programs are developed jointly, all three agencies—USAID [U.S. Agency for International Development], State, and DOD—and I think, as we've talked about in the past, both our 127 Echo programs and other title 10 programs are done in concurrence with the State Department. The chiefs of mission concur on those programs as do other elements of the U.S. Government.

So I think that's an important safeguard against any perception that DOD is doing things that aren't in concert with the President's priorities and the interagency's concerns and also perspectives, ma'am.

Ms. JACOBS. Well, thank you. And I'll just remind you that that joint formulation is part of the law, and so I will look forward to working with you as we move forward.

Mr. Chairman, I yield back.

Mr. BERGMAN. Thank you, and point noted here that we have two Representatives named Jackson on this subcommittee. So, henceforth, it'll be Mr. Jackson of Texas and Mr. Jackson of North Carolina.

Mr. JACKSON of North Carolina, you are recognized.

Mr. JACKSON OF NORTH CAROLINA. Good afternoon, General.

Sir, you've been on the job for about 6 months, which is long enough to learn your way around but not long enough so that any problem is necessarily of your making. It's kind of the sweet spot for reflecting on leadership and vision and sort of where you plan on taking things.

And my first question is, what do you know now that you didn't know the first day you assumed this command?

General FENTON. Congressman, I think I know more now about how important SOF's role is going to be as we go forward in this new—this era of increasingly dangerous challenges in the strategic competition space with the PRC and Russia, and that we still have to absolutely stay and remain vigilant on the counterterrorism mission, getting after the C-VEO [counter violent extremist organizations] threat while the sacred obligation to, certainly, rescue our U.S. citizens and safeguard them around the world remains.

I don't think before I got this job I recognized the totality and how we will probably be needed more-fold going into the future.

Mr. JACKSON OF NORTH CAROLINA. I've listened to your remarks and I've read the memo here. This is a simple question. But is there anything that you need—truly need—that you just don't have? Are there any glaring deficiencies on which this subcommittee should be focused in the short term?

General FENTON. Congressman, I don't have any glaring requirements right now that we need except the continued support of this Congress; your ability to understand how important your special operations team will be, going forward; that your special operations forces, in my estimation, as we proceed in this era will be—and our capability very decisive in preventing aggression, deterring, and really addressing coercion because it's in our DNA.

We've done this for almost 70-plus years before the global war on terrorism. We never stopped and we're [inaudible] needed to continue that even now. The key to that is, certainly, partnerships—partnerships and allies and the training and the combat credibility we bring into that mission area.

Mr. JACKSON OF NORTH CAROLINA. I don't know exactly how to phrase this question, but I know you mentioned that one of your top three priorities was people and I don't know if everyone fully appreciates the extent to which the service members under your command just participate in an op tempo that is not necessarily experienced by all of our service members, that you-all deal with an elevated op tempo and you certainly did for the last two decades.

With the conclusion of Operation Enduring Freedom, has there been an intentional, deliberate effort on the part of—the part of—on your part or your immediate predecessor to give some breathing

space to some service members who just got pulled as tight as any could ever be pulled for the last decades? Some of them served in excess of a decade. You said that retention rates exceed standard. So that tells me something good.

But there are just a ton of horror stories that come out of this space, in particular, because of the level of stress derived, my understanding, is from the op tempo.

Has there been—this is a unique period where we are, perhaps, in between major contingency operations. Are we working on giving these folks some mental health and a bit of a breath?

General FENTON. Congressman, thank you very much for that question. It does hit at the heart of our number one priority, our people. As I think about this, my sense is there has been a slowdown in the tempo, how we've been addressing both counterterrorism and crisis response for the last 20 years.

That's allowed us to do a number of things. Reeducate in terms of how we will go forward in the future, and that is often an opportunity for folks to be at home to do that education in not only our Joint Special Operations University but also in the schoolhouses throughout all of our components in Special Operations Command.

We've had an opportunity to experiment and exercise and that's really important as we think about the challenges that PRC and Russia will throw at us. And that's been extremely helpful in figuring out some new options for combatant commanders and dilemmas for the adversary that we didn't have when we were going at a pace in the CT fight.

I think it's given us a chance as well for—to really fold around our service members our POTFF program that looks at a number of domains, not to mention the cognitive and the behavioral.

I think all that has been a very good thing for this formation as we think about being needed manyfold more as we go forward in strategic competition through crisis response and counterterrorism.

Mr. JACKSON OF NORTH CAROLINA. Thank you, sir. I yield back.

General FENTON. Thank you.

Mr. BERGMAN. Thank you.

And, Representative Mace, you're recognized.

Ms. MACE. Thank you, Mr. Chairman and Ranking Member Gallego, for this hearing today.

General, it is good to see you. Again, we appreciate both of you being here to answer our questions today.

I just had my first hearing—I'm a subcommittee chairman on Oversight of Cyber, Technology, and Innovation, and I just had my first hearing on Oversight yesterday with Dr. Eric Schmidt on the subject of AI and emerging technologies.

And this is a guy who was one of the original folks at Google—original CEO [chief executive officer], a former CEO—and he said that AI—the advent of AI, what's going to happen is going to transform the world and it's going to be epic. It's going to happen fast.

And, in my sense in being here—I'm just over 2 years in now—but it feels like DOD, Pentagon, military, you all are going to have it together better, faster, more, before the rest of the Federal Government.

But I have great concerns just at what some of our vulnerabilities may be both from a defensive and offensive side of things. And

so I just wanted to ask—sort of just pick your brain a little bit today, if you can share with us a little bit about SOCOM and some of your investments in emerging technology.

How do we retain our competitive advantage? What I learned yesterday is that the country of China—the largest nonprofit that’s invested in AI in the world is in China. And so I’d just like to hear a little bit from you all sort of your perspective just kind of high level and some of the emerging technologies that you all have seen us invest in and kind of get your perspective on that, too.

Mr. MAIER. So, Congresswoman, it’s very important. I think we often throw out AI and there’s a lot of different components of this. I’ll give you a couple examples and then I know General Fenton has actually had Eric Schmidt out to the command and could probably talk in even greater detail.

But especially as we look at it in the information space, we are not, as a department, despite your hope for us, very fast in that space. And our adversaries use AI to generate things like deepfakes and all kinds of other things that have the benefit of distracting and misleading, and sometimes that’s just enough space to be able to do what they want to do.

So we have to think about this on the defensive side as much as we think about this on the offensive side. I think some of what we envision using AI for is to reduce the—some of the delays of human beings in the loop or on the loop. Some of that might be in the information space. But some of that could be in traditional warfighting capabilities or the ability to take in large quantities of data and gain situational awareness.

But still, at some point, probably there’s going to be a human being that makes a decision, especially as we talk about things that may be lethal or kinetic in that process. So there’s an ethics piece of this.

There’s a functional man-machine interface that’s going to have to be worked out. And there’s also the—I think, the question of which types of technology do you invest in to actually get the biggest bang for the buck because if you choose wrongly you may end up being even further behind. But maybe General Fenton—

Ms. MACE. Yeah. And to your point, it’s not just software. It’s hardware, too. I mean, there are multiple components. There has to be—

Mr. MAIER. Yes, ma’am.

Ms. MACE [continuing]. You know, human intelligence involved. General.

General FENTON. Congresswoman, thank you very much for that. I’ll go—it hits at the heart of where we’re working to transform in our—transform priority and we have had a number of meetings with Dr. Schmidt and many of his teammates—

Ms. MACE. He’s brilliant on this, yeah.

General FENTON [continuing]. And many others in that community. And I would start on a couple fronts.

Artificial intelligence and what it brings in terms of the applications, first and foremost, for us is about putting those applications over oceans of data that we have in the Department, certainly from our counterterrorism years but even before that, understanding of locations we’ve been in previously, all of that, and using those ap-

plications to crush that information, synthesize it for us, and get it to us with speed.

And in special operations we add an extra S to that with speed speed—SOF speed—so we can make a decision, faster either for our teammates on the ground or at the mission command nodes.

I think the second reason is that decision is important is because it allows us to not only make a decision but put the effects to be achieved in the right place faster than any adversary, and that could be in the information operations domain or it could be a kinetic domain or any number—cyber and space.

So I think you will absolutely see us continue to pursue it in that arena, and if folks asked even more it would be natural language processing and things like picture generation. All of this is important not only—

Ms. MACE. Yes, generative. It's machine learning. I mean, it's all these things. It's all-encompassing, we're learning. And I apologize for cutting you short. But to piggyback on that intersection of government and industry, like, how is that going? Has that been more efficient in trying to make those decisions?

General FENTON. Your SOCOM team is routinely reaching out to all those: academia, industry. We even go overseas to partners and allies. We just don't look here. So we're in search of that technology with anybody that has it, both to use it and understand how the adversary uses it.

Ms. MACE. Thank you, General.

And, Mr. Chairman, I yield back.

Mr. BERGMAN. Thank you. And, Representative McClellan, you are recognized.

Ms. MCCLELLAN. Thank you, Mr. Chairman, and vice—I'm sorry, Ranking Member Slotkin for putting this hearing together, and I want to thank our witnesses for being here today.

This is my first hearing since being sworn in as a Member of Congress and I look forward to working with this subcommittee to strengthen and improve our special forces and maintain American leadership in this space.

And I have a couple of questions for—a few questions for both of you. First, we are now 1 year into the war in the Ukraine—the war in Ukraine, a conflict that has seen immense conflict in the information and digital sphere.

What has U.S. Special Operations Forces and Command learned from this conflict and is SOCOM ready to implement those lessons learned?

Mr. MAIER. So, Representative McClellan, welcome. I wish it was my first hearing but it's not.

So I think there's a lot of lessons learned, some of these probably better handled in a different session. But I'll give you a couple off the bat.

First off, we've had a long-standing relationship with Ukraine and, I think, goes to that fundamental principle, invest early and be prepared, because you can't manufacture partnerships or teaming when crisis hits.

So you asked specifically about the information space. We've had long-standing relationship with not only the Ukrainians but others in the region to help share lessons learned and really expand on

our ability to deal with misinformation, disinformation, that we know Russia is apt to use, but also be able to get the message out for our own forces and I think Ukrainians have demonstrated a tremendous aptitude to do that.

I think also the long-standing investment in the personal relationships that we have had through our 10th Special Forces Group with the Ukrainians and in Europe is really something you can't replicate when you have a situation of a crisis as the Ukrainians have experienced.

So there's lots of elements to it, lots of lessons learned, I think, that we are actively looking at from the SOF enterprise. But I give you those as two pretty clear ones.

Ms. MCCLELLAN. Thank you.

General Fenton.

General FENTON. Thank you very much, Congresswoman.

I would echo that and just pull a little tighter on invest early. It is the power of partnerships with allies and nations around the world.

We started in the 1990s but we got—it spiked in earnest in Ukraine—spiked in earnest in 2014 when the first invasion, and that partnership, the relationship, the speed of trust that had already been worked through allowed us to get to the place we are now where the Ukrainian SOF have done a phenomenal job against the Russians.

Second would be the power of investing in partners and allies around that—around Ukraine. For us, special operations. We worked very closely with European SOF up and down and in the Baltics and that has paid off.

They are doing it the U.S. Special Operations way of warfare as either they're inside of Ukraine or they're training alongside us, and that makes us exponentially better and certainly more powerful.

And then, lastly, the power and the increasing advantage—competitive advantage of technologies like we just spoke about—open source, one-way strike drones, counter-UAS. All this is very important. We've seen it in previous incursions and we're seeing it front and center right now.

Ms. MCCLELLAN. Thank you. And in your statement for the record you discussed the importance of investing in the men and women serving in SOF—and you mentioned several times here the importance of the people—your people. Can you expand on the work that SOCOM is employing to develop a highly trained and diverse workforce?

General FENTON. Congresswoman, I can. It's my favorite thing to talk about. I'll probably get the signal in the back.

But, number one, it's about talent in our people as a competitive comparative advantage. It's about we seek talent any domain and in our instance we talked about cognitive, experiential, and demographic.

We want talent in the formation because we know what happens when we get it. We win. We think about it in terms of announcing to anybody and anyone, please come to the SOCOM formation and give us a shot.

We want that. Embrace it, empower it, and educate so that our people, at the end of the day, continue to be the winning recipe for the SOCOM team.

The number of efforts, I'd be happy to take that for the record and give you a more fulsome piece just in the interest of time.

But we absolutely believe it's a mission imperative and an operational requirement to continue to invest in our people and have, certainly, across cognitive, experiential, and demographic domains a talented force to solve the complex, diverse challenges we'll have in the future.

Ms. MCCLELLAN. Thank you, Mr. Chairman. I yield back.

Mr. BERGMAN. Thank you.

Mr. Panetta, you're recognized for 5 minutes.

Mr. PANETTA. Outstanding. Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

Gentlemen, good afternoon. Thank you for being here.

General Fenton, after Crimea was annexed in 2014 we established a joint multinational training program to bring conventional and special operators across NATO [North Atlantic Treaty Organization] to train Ukraine's military.

We also then established a qualification course—a Q course, as they call it—to train the Ukrainian troops. Obviously, I think as we're seeing, that training has been pretty decisive on the battlefield.

I was wondering if you can give an update as to what exactly is in those trainings and then any particular lessons that we've learned watching it take effect on the battlefield today.

General FENTON. Congressman, thank you very much for that.

I speak just to the special operations piece of the entirety of training that was going on in European Command at the time, but I'll start with the qualification course.

The qualification course at its very nature is designed to build someone who has an approach that has cognitive, physical, and other domains in its very nature, that can go through hardships, continue to do as the Ukrainians are doing, fight this existential threat, who shoot a very high proficiency level, communicate with the equipment that we're able to bring them, and certainly can maneuver in a way that avoids the type of work that the Russians are trying to—and certainly the ammunition and armor that the Russians are bringing.

We also taught a bit about a resistance concept, this idea of how sabotage, subversion, the things that would be in a resistance type of kit bag, would be very important if and when something like this happened.

The Ukrainian special operations forces not only embraced all of it, they engulfed it, and are certainly the superb force that I spoke about—have spoken about before that they are today and admit, certainly, taking it to the Russians.

I think in information operations there was an important piece to ensure that the Ukrainian military and then they, with their government and others, understood the misinformation campaign coming at them from the Russians even before 2014, but certainly 2014 and even now, and then on the other side an idea how to really harness the power of the Ukrainian people towards that existential threat.

I think there are—and the last one I would really highlight, Representative, is we built a noncommissioned officer corps. We took them from a Soviet-style military. You can see what happens to those right now.

Russians are not even the second best military in Ukraine. The Ukrainians are the very best and not even near in the world anymore that the Russian had—the Russians had at one time.

But I'll tell you, the NCO [noncommissioned officer] corps is the difference maker and we built that as well.

Mr. PANETTA. Outstanding. Switching continents, I've had the fortunate opportunity to visit at our operators from Baledogle to Bamako to Agadez to Ouallam to Diffa to N'Djamena, and what I found is that they do a hell of a lot with very little, unfortunately.

Now, obviously, in many of those places imminent [danger] pay is afforded to service members across the Sahel including those in Chad, Mali, and Niger, but not in Burkina Faso, despite the country witnessing two coups in less than 1 year and an uptick in violence from VEOs and we now have reasons to believe that Wagner has already made a presence in that area with French forces being expelled from that country.

We know that there's been a submission by AFRICOM [U.S. Africa Command]—USAFRICOM—to request that the SECDEF [Secretary of Defense] has—puts imminent danger pay afforded to these service members in Burkina Faso, and their spillover threats from neighboring Mali and Chad.

And why—if you can add—let us know why it's important to provide them with that imminent danger pay, especially when you have that—and affording that for Mali and Chad as well to those service members.

General FENTON. Congressman, I've personally been in the African continent, everywhere from East Africa and Somalia all the way through Mali, Mauritania, and Niger locations you're addressing.

The work our teammates do is at the front edge of very often not only the challenging conditions that you find in an austere base logistically, communications, and a number of our different operating systems and base support, but the very edge of what they may encounter when they're in support of AFRICOM addressing the ISIS threat and other threats that are out there.

I would be—Congressman, I'll take this for the record and look into the fact that that hazard pay has been addressed by AFRICOM.

Mr. PANETTA. Please.

General FENTON. I'd like to take that one for the record and certainly get back to you on that one.

[The information referred to was not available at the time of printing.]

Mr. PANETTA. Please do, and I look forward to working with you on that. Thank you, gentlemen. I yield back, Mr. Chairman.

Mr. BERGMAN. Thank you.

Mr. Luttrell, you're recognized for 5 minutes.

Mr. LUTTRELL. Good afternoon, Mr. Secretary, General. Great to see you again, sir, Sergeant Major. Always great to see you, sir.

Mr. Secretary, I'm going to ask you a question. Earlier today I was briefed by Secretary Sherman, the Chief Information Officer, and Mr. Martell, the Chief Digital and AI Officer for the DOD, and the question was asked multiple times if we are in lockstep or behind or in front of China when it comes to our artificial capabilities—artificial intelligence capabilities—and the doctor said not only are we in stride with but we are most likely ahead of. But I'm pretty sure I just heard you say that we're not.

Mr. MAIER. So, Congressman, I think I would defer to them. They're the experts on this. I think what I was saying in responding to Representative Mace's question is that we're in competition with them in the application of AI. So technology, that is absolutely John Sherman and others' job to know on.

We just have anecdotal examples in the operational space where, in some cases, it's less about the AI technology and more about their risk acceptance and ability to do things in a disinformation-misinformation way than we might be inclined to do, sir.

Mr. LUTTRELL. Here's my concern is—so they gave an example from sensor to shooter. And General, this is where I'm going to need your help. This is a request. Okay. And, Mr. Secretary, I'm not coming after you. Okay.

I just want to make sure that we're very clear on this because this—from what I understand this organization of Mr. Martell's is a new organization inside the DOD which we've had two to three of these similar organizations, correct?

Mr. MAIER. It is an amalgamation of previous organizations. Yes, sir.

Mr. LUTTRELL. Okay. So from sensor to shooter the idea is that we take quality data in order to better enforce and inform and train our shooters.

Now, my question was, who's setting the criteria? Where's the data coming from? Because if the inclusion is information from the shooter to the scientist, I would hate for the bureaucrats here at DC to not—to sit up and brief us but our operators are completely in the dark.

So my request is, General, is that you need to keep them honest because this is a great idea, a great concept. I'm 100 percent behind artificial intelligence, machine learning, and advancing our opportunities for our—for the individuals on the ground.

But my concern is, like I said, is that it won't come to fruition. So, General, would you help us out on that?

General FENTON. Congressman, I absolutely will. I will—I'll stay on it, and what I would tell you we are absolutely integrated with Secretary Maier and the Department on this. We recognize that, first, our challenge is a couple-fold.

We've got to get data from all the services, all the COCOMs [combatant commands], and, frankly, anywhere, even as it relates sometimes to a personnel action. So that idea of how that data comes in, the structured, unstructuring of it, we are absolutely pursuing that right now.

When it comes to operations, we assess it will be the same challenge. So you've got my commitment, Congressman, to stay absolutely integrated on this and to be a key part of it as it pertains

to special operations, sensor to shooter, and, frankly, taking care of our people and that people is the number one priority space.

Mr. LUTTRELL. Thank you, sir, because I'm sure you understand the silos that each individual service, especially in the special operations. Like, I would never talk to a Ranger. No offense. Just not my thing.

But you can understand that the silos that we work in. So it's going to take you, sir, from the top to break those silos down and make sure the information is being shared for Mr. Martell so he can do his job effectively. So thank you.

I yield back, sir.

Mr. BERGMAN. Okay. So, now, you know, Mr. Luttrell, we're going to talk to everybody.

[Laughter.]

Mr. BERGMAN. Okay. No—I know. The point is, number one, thanks to all the members of the subcommittee for the focused nature of your questions. Secretary Maier, General Fenton, thank you for the focused nature of your answers. Because, as we try to communicate and do the right thing here on the subcommittee, we need to be listening, and I was—I mean, if we can't throw some friendly jabs in the inter-service [inaudible] nature of things, then shame on all of us. We've lost our ability to actually be adaptable in the fight, and that's what makes us successful.

But, from the higher level point here, Secretary Maier, how can Congress better enable the SOF enterprise to compete in great power competition? For example, do we need to permanently authorize irregular warfare authorities and/or strengthen other authorities or, you know, add some, reduce some?

How do we, from the congressional point of view, really kind of streamline what we're doing to help you downstream streamline? I know that's overuse of the word stream. But the point is, any thoughts on how—what we might do authorities-wise?

Mr. MAIER. Chairman, thanks for the question. I think, as been highlighted by Representative Mills in my opening statement here, irregular warfare is going to be a very important tool, going forward, and I think with that there's probably some maturing in the authorities framework.

So section 1202, which is—this committee has worked on in the past, I think, is one that we could use your help on. I think at a staff level we're already working on that.

But it's an area where having that authority then allows us to introduce some concepts and also do experimentation in some respects, but most importantly, allows us to get tight with our partners who want to work with us against the PRC and Russia but don't want to do that in a—as an overt way as some of our other authorities prompt us to do. So that would be one, sir.

And then I think the continued support from this committee for my office, ASD(SO/LIC), not because it's a nameless, faceless element of the bureaucracy in the Pentagon but because of the authorities we have to really be that articulator of the SOF value proposition, that advocate in the Department.

The fact that I sit with the Secretary of Navy, Secretary of the Army, and Secretary of the Air Force when the Secretary of Defense calls together service secretaries, I think is an important role

that allows us to do some of the things that your committee members have asked today are we doing and we can continue to keep that top-down pressure on the enterprise, sir.

Mr. BERGMAN. Okay. Yeah. What I heard you say was, you know, a seat at the table, or said a different way if you're not at the table you're on the menu, so to speak?

Mr. MAIER. Sir, I think there's a lot of competing interest in the Department. If there isn't a voice for one, it is really at the mercy of where it falls in the prioritization for very busy senior people, sir.

Mr. BERGMAN. Thank you. And, General Fenton, you know, we've talked a lot about people—recruiting, training, retention—you know, the ability to execute the mission. We can build a lot of really cool things, tools. But those tools ultimately in most cases have to be used by human beings, your operators.

Can you explain how any potential manpower cuts to SOF could restrict SOCOM's ability to operate in nonpermissive environments when shaping the environment for the joint force to operate against strategic adversaries—you know, putting where you are in the fight in the lead, whatever it happens to be, its manpower is critical.

Thoughts? Comments?

General FENTON. Chairman, thank you for that. Certainly, a couple comments.

I'd start with anything that degrades or impacts or decreases either personnel or fiscal resources would have a—would hurt. It would impact your special operations team and I say that through the lens of we certainly have a wide array and remit for very high-priority missions.

Counterterrorism still—as we—still persists in the VEO space and we've got to stay vigilant—crisis responses, strategic competition. And as a, I would say, a very small portion of both personnel and fiscal resources—maybe 3 percent of the population and 2 percent of the budget, your SOCOM team—any degradation of that capability, Chairman, would absolutely hurt and I would assess, and I'd have to do additional study, impact our ability, going forward.

And I think about it in terms of not only our operational teammates who are incredible across the array of Army, Navy, Air Force, Marines, but our critical facilitators in terms of communications, electronics, logistics. It all makes up your SOCOM team.

So I'll just wrap it up, Chairman, by saying any of that would hurt and impact your SOCOM team.

Mr. BERGMAN. Okay. Thank you very much.

Basically, the open portion of the hearing is now adjourned and we will reconvene in room 2337 for a closed session as soon as people walk in, but in the next 8 minutes. Thank you.

[Whereupon, at 2:23 p.m., the subcommittee proceeded in closed session.]

A P P E N D I X

MARCH 9, 2023

PREPARED STATEMENTS SUBMITTED FOR THE RECORD

MARCH 9, 2023

STATEMENT FOR THE RECORD

THE HONORABLE CHRISTOPHER P. MAIER

ASSISTANT SECRETARY OF DEFENSE

FOR SPECIAL OPERATIONS AND LOW-INTENSITY CONFLICT

AND

GENERAL BRYAN P. FENTON, USA

COMMANDER, UNITED STATES SPECIAL OPERATIONS COMMAND

BEFORE THE

COMMITTEE ON ARMED SERVICES

SUBCOMMITTEE ON INTELLIGENCE & SPECIAL OPERATIONS

UNITED STATES HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

MARCH 9, 2023



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INTRODUCTION

Chairman Bergman, Ranking Member Gallego, and distinguished members of this subcommittee, thank you for this opportunity to discuss the posture of our nation's Special Operations Forces (SOF). We are honored to present an account of the priorities, activities, and investments that ensure SOF are prepared to meet today's challenges and those to come.

On behalf of the Special Operations community, we thank you for your leadership and steadfast support. Congress's support ensures our SOF remain the world's most capable and credible, contributing integrally to safeguarding and advancing U.S. national interests. Both U.S. Special Operations Command (USSOCOM) and the Office of Special Operations and Low Intensity Conflict (SO/LIC) were established through the foresight and determination of Congress. Your enduring commitment enables our force to tackle the nation's most challenging security problems while building enduring advantages.

SOF remain a national advantage in this decisive decade, as they have been since their formation. This will be an era marked by dramatic geopolitical, technological, economic, and environmental changes globally. SOF combine decades of combat-tested and coalition experience to advance Department of Defense (DoD) efforts to strengthen and sustain deterrence with creative, tailorable, and asymmetric options for our nation. Together, SO/LIC and USSOCOM directly contribute to DoD and broader U.S. efforts to deter aggression by our strategic competitors, counter acute forms of coercion, and tackle shared challenges alongside our Allies and partners. With our unmatched capabilities, SOF also remain vigilant and committed to protecting Americans and America's interests globally with enduring responsibility for countering violent extremist organizations and responding to crisis.

The *National Defense Strategy* (NDS) is clear that we will advance our priorities through integrated deterrence, campaigning, and actions that build enduring advantages. Integrated deterrence requires the United States to sustain strategic deterrence and its conventional military advantage, including in space and cyberspace – complemented by credible irregular warfare capabilities. Competitors continue to seek advantage through coercive and malign activities in the “gray zone” below a threshold they perceive as likely to prompt a U.S. military response. SOF are uniquely positioned to draw upon our joint, global, full-spectrum, all-domain capabilities to provide asymmetric options for our nation and create dilemmas for competitors, allowing our Joint Force to gain warfighting advantage and close warfighting vulnerabilities.

To ensure SOF are well-prepared for current and future challenges, we are focused on supporting our shared priorities – People, Win, and Transform – to strengthen our force and families, succeed for the nation, and modernize for the future.

Advancing Civilian-Military Partnership

The Assistant Secretary of Defense for Special Operations and Low-Intensity Conflict's (ASD(SO/LIC)) oversight, policy guidance, and advocacy within DoD are essential for the modernization, readiness, and well-being of SOF and their families. As ASD(SO/LIC) reports directly to the Secretary of Defense in exercising authority, direction, and control of special operations-peculiar administrative matters, SO/LIC maintains a seat at the table alongside Secretaries of the Military Departments in key decision forums, such as the regular Service

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Secretary meetings, the Deputy's Management Action Group, and the Joint Requirements Oversight Council. Participation in these forums empower ASD(SO/LIC) to provide effective and enduring civilian representation of SOF equities and competencies to DoD and national leadership – a voice that is even more important in this period of strategic transition for the Department and for SOF.

SO/LIC's unique role ensures key SOF-led capabilities are integrated into strategic concepts and associated investments are made to critical priorities such as irregular warfare, operations in the information environment, and undersea capabilities. SO/LIC ensures SOF concepts and capabilities inform and support DoD's broader planning, investment, capability development, and experimentation. For example, the Special Operations Policy Oversight Council (SOPOC) enhances integration between SOF, the Military Services, and the Combatant Commands, with the shared goal of ensuring SOF can meet Joint Force requirements with essential support from the Department. SO/LIC has instituted regular meetings of the SOPOC to integrate governance of SOF as well as SOF capabilities and processes across DoD as envisioned through the enactment of reforms in the Fiscal Year (FY) 2017 National Defense Authorization Act (NDAA) and subsequent legislation. Additionally, senior leaders from SO/LIC, USSOCOM, and the Under Secretary of Defense for Acquisition and Sustainment (USD(A&S)) co-chair a biannual SOF Acquisition Summit – with participants from each Military Department and several USD-level organizations – to address challenges impacting USSOCOM's acquisition, technology, and logistics efforts in order to enable agile and innovative support to SOF operations.

The SO/LIC–USSOCOM relationship is defined by multilayered collaboration, characterized by near-continuous engagement across all echelons from top leadership to working levels. Over the past year, this collaborative partnership has continued to deepen as we have been developing a co-authored future operating concept, detailing our vision for SOF operating alongside the Joint Force in the future and guiding near-term force design considerations. At the heart of this operating concept are our three shared priorities: People, Win, and Transform.

PEOPLE: STRENGTHEN OUR FORCE & FAMILIES

Our people are the competitive and comparative advantage of our SOF formations. The creativity and commitment of these men and women are essential to adapting tactics, technologies, and organizations for tomorrow's challenges. We believe unreservedly that the first SOF Truth endures: "Humans are more important than hardware." Together, we are committed to investing in our people through tailored education and training, leveraging our nation's diverse talent, and enhancing readiness, resilience, and professionalism.

Investing in Our People

We continue to invest in our men and women by adapting SOF-peculiar education and training for both today's environment and future requirements, coupled with tailored talent management for our highly skilled personnel. In full partnership with the Services, SOF-focused recruiting, assessing, training, and education yields the most highly developed workforce within DoD – often with language, regional expertise, and cultural knowledge proficiency unique to SOF.

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SOF's persistent, global campaigning efforts enable tactical units to cull the latest battlefield lessons learned – notably from Eastern Europe, the Indo-Pacific, and the Middle East – while continually adapting and improving the specialized training pipelines. SOF service components institutionalize these lessons and pair them with requirements to prepare the force to integrate new and emerging technologies.

As one example, USSOCOM's Joint Special Operations University (JSOU) provides the unique ability to offer SOF-peculiar, joint education and academic expertise for the force, bridging the gap between practitioners and academia. JSOU hones its educational offerings to complement Service-specific professional military education programs with tailored courses. Publications, such as the *Resistance Operating Concept*, ensure both SOF practitioners and Allied and partner SOF are equipped with academic resources relevant to current challenges.

As another example, the Army SOF component – via U.S. Army Special Operations Command's (USASOC) John F. Kennedy Special Warfare Center and School – has adapted its training enterprise for the evolving strategic environment. The Special Forces pipeline recently modernized portions of its heavy weapons, anti-armor demolitions, and long-range communications courses to better operate alongside local partners in contested environments – drawing upon the operational requirements and lessons learned in Eastern Europe. The Civil Affairs qualification course modernized its culmination exercise to focus on pre-conflict strategic competition and setting conditions for the rapid reconstitution of governance immediately following a near-peer conflict. The Psychological Operations culmination exercise now incorporates synthetic internet and real-time sentiment analysis to educate students on foreign malign influence techniques and activities in the information environment. Finally, USASOC recently established a robotics and unmanned systems integration course that teaches students how to fabricate, integrate, and employ unmanned systems – while also training how to counter these same technologies. With support from SO/LIC, these changes were informed by SOF experimentation in the Indo-Pacific, lessons learned in the Middle East, and observations from Russia's ongoing, brutal war in Ukraine.

To steward investments in education and training, SOF talent management enables USSOCOM to address distinct career needs and best use the skills of its talented, high-demand, low-density workforce. Specialized training and operational experience for personnel engaged in unique, and often sensitive, SOF activities require a more flexible career management system. A tailored career model optimizes operational employment potential for individuals with unique skill sets while providing incentives to attract and retain the most talented individuals to select SOF career fields. Additionally, the increasing complexity of the operating environment and the realities of ubiquitous technical surveillance require a greater emphasis on identity management and expansion of advanced skill sets across the SOF enterprise.

Leveraging Diverse Talent

As the NDS highlights, our dynamic, diverse, and innovative society remains a core strength and source of American advantage. Maintaining the world's finest SOF in the decades to come requires leveraging all the dimensions of diversity within the nation's deep pools of talent. Building a diverse force is both an operational and strategic imperative for SOF.

We continue reinforcing efforts to enhance diversity in our workforce and foster inclusive work environments through USSOCOM's Diversity and Inclusion Strategic Plan and the

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accompanying 2022 Implementation Action Plan – as outlined in the April 2022 presentation to Congress. The SOF enterprise is committed to welcoming all capable individuals, ensuring they are part of inclusive teams, and supporting their equitable career advancement. The SOF Executive Committee on Diversity and Inclusion – co-chaired by SO/LIC and USSOCOM – continues to provide senior-leader oversight and fosters accountability for sustained progress in implementation.

We continue to make essential progress in removing barriers to women's and minorities' participation and advancement within SOF while also working with the Services to attract the best talent. Women and minority servicemembers serve in key leadership roles throughout all four SOF components and within various SOF headquarters. Women have also continued to successfully enter SOF-specific career fields within our most elite units. Throughout SOF, women servicemembers' representation has increased approximately 40% over the past five years. While this progress is important and notable, it is not sufficient. Our sustained commitment to the Diversity, Equity, Inclusion, and Accessibility strategic goals and implementing successful best practices from across the enterprise will spur continued progress.

In 2022, USASOC released its “Women in Army SOF Study” to identify barriers female servicemembers encounter and establish best practices to recruit, integrate, and retain women in our formation. Based upon input from over 5,000 participants, the study's findings generated 42 recommendations related to education and training, equipment modernization, mentorship and sponsorship, healthcare, childcare and other matters. Though specific to the Army component, many of the findings are applicable across the joint SOF enterprise and will inform future joint implementation efforts.

Additionally, in August 2022, the Navy SOF component – Naval Special Warfare Command (NSW) – formally established its Assessment Command (NSWAC) to transform how its units compete for talent by building a sustainable architecture for diversified outreach, by conducting more rigorous pre-assessments for character, cognitive, and leadership attributes, and by strengthening NSW's culture of continuous assessment. NSWAC is taking a whole-person approach to identify, prepare, and mentor qualified candidates from diverse backgrounds to complete training programs and pursue a successful career in NSW. As this new command was being developed, NSW conducted 60 outreach events with more than half specifically focused on increasing force diversity and inclusivity with underrepresented demographics. These efforts will enhance the way NSW continuously assesses and selects its incoming officers and enlisted personnel.

The SOF enterprise similarly requires a highly skilled and diverse civilian workforce. Like our uniformed personnel, USSOCOM's civilian workforce includes women and minority members serving in key roles throughout its components and various headquarters, including in senior executive leadership positions.

At the same time, SO/LIC has continued to make progress in establishing and filling civilian positions for the Secretariat for Special Operations to support the ASD(SO/LIC)'s administrative oversight responsibilities. Over the past several years, these efforts have resulted in a team of highly skilled and experienced civilian personnel with expertise in capabilities development, budget, acquisition, civilian and military personnel, force management, legislative affairs, and special access programs. Given the relatively small size of the Secretariat, we

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continue to focus our hiring efforts on areas where civilian oversight can have the greatest impact on SOF readiness, resiliency, and transformation to meet future challenges.

Enhancing Readiness, Resilience & Professionalism

The Preservation of the Force and Family (POTFF) program – along with our Warrior Care Program (WCP) – continues to enhance readiness and resilience for our formation and their families. The POTFF program delivers a holistic, multifaceted approach to human performance, resilience, and rehabilitation through a combination of USSOCOM, Service, and DoD resources. The WCP provides recovery care coordination for those who have been challenged due to wounds, injuries, or illnesses. SOF commanders have overwhelmingly embraced both programs as critical to promoting career longevity, mitigating injury, enhancing retention, and increasing quality of life. The combination of POTFF and WCP provides a continuum of support for our personnel through performance enhancement, injury recovery, and transition assistance.

An increased focus on cognitive performance and brain health is necessary to prepare SOF to operate in an increasingly complex, information-rich environment. This focus complements POTFF's broader holistic approach to human performance across five domains – psychological, cognitive, physical, spiritual, and social and family. Cutting-edge work in the cognitive performance arena has also resulted in demonstrated improvements in self-regulation, cognitive processing speed, and sustained attention among the majority of those participating in cognitive training. Additionally, USSOCOM has partnered with DoD Health Affairs and the DoD Traumatic Brain Injury (TBI) Center of Excellence on brain health initiatives to include enhancing TBI prevention efforts, surveillance modalities, treatment protocols, and research studies. We are grateful for Congress's support in all these areas, including the FY2023 appropriation to continue a pilot study into the long-term effects of repetitive low-level blast exposure in SOF – another of USSOCOM's ongoing brain-health initiatives.

We remain determined to prevent suicide and other forms of self-harm. SOF leaders focus on underlying risk factors through continuous training and education. We have also engaged the nation's leading experts to identify novel ways to address this problem. Through persistent efforts to destigmatize seeking care, we have witnessed an increase in servicemembers seeking preventative mental health resources. Thanks to a combination of POTFF and Defense Health Agency resources, access to both preventative and emergency mental health care has improved measurably.

The WCP provides valuable support and advocacy for wounded, injured, and ill SOF personnel. Over the past year, we have retained nearly 70% of wounded SOF in military service, keeping the talents and dedication of these highly trained, skilled, and experienced personnel in our formation. The WCP also remains a trusted partner and tireless advocate for expanding government and private capabilities to care for our servicemembers and their families, including through both increased access to programs at the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) polytrauma facilities and novel partnerships with non-federal entities. We appreciate Congress' support for Section 522 of the FY2023 NDAA which included a USSOCOM-initiated proposal to improve servicemembers' ability to receive charitable support in order to fill gaps in services that neither DoD nor the VA can provide.

Supporting families also remains a critical component of enhancing readiness and resilience within SOF. A range of family-focused initiatives support our force and their families

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across all Service components. As one example over the past year, we have acted to expand childcare access by facilitating Service funding for the Child Development Center at Camp Bull Simons on Eglin Air Force Base, Florida. Our men and women of the Army's 7th Special Forces Group, and other units in the area, stand to benefit from this expanded support from both the Departments of the Air Force and Army.

Our enduring commitment to professionalism within SOF is critical to preserving the trust of our nation and senior leaders that we have earned over decades. This commitment includes sustaining high professional standards, emphasizing engaged leadership, and maintaining accountability. We are nearing full implementation of the recommendations from the 2019 *Comprehensive Review on SOF Culture and Ethics*, on which we routinely report to Congress, including as detailed in the forthcoming biannual report. The Comprehensive Review Implementation Team has diligently overseen the continued efforts to codify institutional adjustments. USSOCOM's components have taken active roles in refining their processes to select key leaders, enhancing ethical training throughout the force, and ensuring accountability for lapses in conduct – all of which will continue.

Behavior that erodes hard-earned trust or threatens cohesiveness – especially harassment, assault, and extremism in any form – has no place in SOF formations. Period. We will continue aggressively implementing our prevention and response programs and vigorously investigating allegations of misconduct and holding personnel accountable, as appropriate. We continue to execute all DoD and Service policies, including the ongoing implementation of the Sexual Assault Independent Review Commission recommendations to improve reporting processes, victim advocacy, and prevention of harmful behaviors. We are fundamentally committed to removing behaviors that promote discrimination, hate, or harassment and that are inconsistent with the oaths to defend the Constitution against all enemies foreign and domestic.

WIN: SUCCEED FOR THE NATION

SOF are strengthening and sustaining deterrence globally as part of DoD's approach to integrated deterrence. Drawing upon decades of combat-credibility and coalition experience, SOF provide tailorable, asymmetric options for our nation while creating dilemmas for strategic competitors. With a range of options to deter aggression and counter coercion, SOF support Joint Force deterrence, including by bolstering Allies' and partners' resilience and resistance, ensuring precision access, countering misinformation, and mitigating risk.

Our SOF enterprise supports NDS priority efforts to deter aggression by the People's Republic of China (PRC) and Russia – strategic competitors who threaten the rules-based international order. We continue to focus our campaigning activities to support these joint, interagency, and multinational efforts while also providing asymmetric approaches to compete as both the PRC and Russia seek resources and partnerships globally, including in Africa, the Middle East, and South America. By persistent campaigning, SOF actively compete for influence while identifying coercive and malign behavior in the “gray zone” – often offering options to judiciously counter such behavior.

SOF leverage unique authorities to collaborate and operate with Allies and partners – our greatest strategic advantage for tackling shared challenges and promoting effective integrated deterrence. Since September 11, 2001, the transnational shared challenge of violent extremism

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has necessitated deep integration with capable Allies and partners, often via their SOF units and their own interagency partners. Operations over the past twenty years have also necessitated leveraging the unique capabilities of our U.S. interagency community and integrating with the Joint Force across domains.

While the threat of violent extremism persists today and will continue in the years to come, we have honed our approach to conduct sustainable counter violent extremist organizations (C-VEO) operations and remain vigilant in protecting Americans and America's interests globally. The SOF enterprise stands committed to succeed for the nation by strengthening our partnerships, campaigning for integrated deterrence, countering violent extremism, and leading in our DoD-wide responsibilities.

Strengthening Partnerships

Partnerships are fundamental to SOF and to all our missions and endeavors. We now benefit from unparalleled integration with our Allies and partners, the interagency community, and the Joint Force strengthened over decades and honed particularly over the past two decades of global operations. While the shared challenge of countering violent extremism facilitated unprecedented levels of operational partnerships, these mutually beneficial relationships have extended to the full range of SOF operations globally. Ever-expanding partnerships remain the cornerstone of SOF campaigning.

SOF benefit from our nation's unmatched network of Allies and partners. We cannot surge trust in a crisis, so we work every day to sustain this distinct strategic advantage over our adversaries by reinforcing America's latticework of Allies and partners. At its headquarters alone, USSOCOM hosts exchange officers and foreign liaison officers from 27 Allied and partner nations, offering an unrivaled ability to provide options to understand and act worldwide.

Through persistent engagement over decades, SOF have fostered extensive interoperability and generational relationships with Allied and partner SOF, deepened by operating shoulder-to-shoulder during combat and other high-risk operations for over two decades. Authorities under 10 U.S.C. § 333 (Building Partner Capacity) and 10 U.S.C. § 322 (SOF Training) – the latter enabling the Joint Combined Exchange Training (JCET) program – are essential to further enhancing collaboration and promoting interoperability. In 2022, SOF formations executed 173 JCETs in 77 countries training over 2,000 U.S. SOF personnel alongside over 7,000 Allied and partner counterparts.

SOF's integration with our U.S. interagency partners is equally important to leverage our nation's full capabilities to enhance awareness and provide expanded options. This set of trusted relationships facilitates information sharing, enables collaboration, improves decision-making, and enhances synchronization for effective whole-of-government responses. Routine collaboration with interagency partners – such as the Department of State, the Department of Justice, the Department of the Treasury, and the National Counterterrorism Center, among many others – has enhanced USSOCOM's response to a range of threats over the past year, including adversary unmanned aerial systems, violent extremism, adversary misinformation, and near-peer malign activities.

As one example, Operation Gallant Phoenix (OGP) – a U.S. interagency and multinational C-VEO initiative launched by USSOCOM in 2014 – has enabled international and

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interagency partners to share information and disrupt VEOs. Coupled with Counter Threat Finance authorities and expertise, information-sharing operations, like OGP, continue to provide expanded options to disrupt illicit financing and deter malign activities. Well beyond C-VEO efforts, the OGP model is applicable to countering coercive activities in the “gray zone” and deterring aggression.

USSOCOM also maintains collaborative, mutually supporting relationships across the Joint Force. Close coordination with Geographic Combatant Commands enables SOF to support both regional and transregional campaigning efforts – particularly important as competitors, like the PRC and Russia, pursue malign strategic objectives globally. USSOCOM’s Theater Special Operations Commands – each aligned with a specific Geographic Combatant Command – coordinate SOF campaigning in their respective theaters, ensuring activities both support regional strategic objectives and maximize transregional efforts. Operating transregionally has proven critical for C-VEO efforts and is necessary to gain advantage over strategic competitors, particularly in countering coercive “gray zone” activities. Strong collaboration with Functional Combatant Commands also ensures synchronization across essential warfighting domains.

Special Operations, Cyber, and Space forces are unique in their global reach, persistence, endurance, and responsiveness. Each brings complementary capabilities to enable our respective missions. SOF often require cyberspace and space capabilities to see and sense the operational environment, or if required, to strike an adversary. Cyberspace operations may rely on SOF’s physical access and placement to deliver effects. All of these capabilities can be integrated into campaigns, which enhance the effectiveness of the Joint Force. Our ongoing efforts to enhance SOF-Cyber-Space capabilities continue to evolve and now include integration with USSTRATCOM capabilities. This effort leverages quadrilateral coordination and synergy among USSOCOM, USCYBERCOM, USSPACECOM, and now USSTRATCOM in addition to other interagency partners. This partnership generated new options to bolster deterrence by building warfighting advantage and closing warfighting gaps across domains and regions – while providing options for escalation management. In this effort and others, USSOCOM’s Space Force Service Element remains critical to integrating space-based capabilities and identifying SOF-peculiar space requirements.

Lastly, our efforts to promote opportunities for experimentation between SOF components and their respective Services have deepened ties, resulted in operational breakthroughs, and improved warfighting effectiveness. In 2022, USSOCOM participated in the Army’s Project Convergence, experimenting with SOF, cyber, and space capabilities to disrupt near-peer adversaries. Further, SOF supported the USEUCOM-sponsored “Atreus” series of operations, conducting the first-ever demonstration of the palletized precision munition in Europe. Combining Air Force innovation efforts with the air-drop expertise of Air Force SOF and our MC-130 crews enabled the launch of multiple, long-range offensive weapons from non-traditional strike platforms, like cargo aircraft. Efforts like these create credible, strategic dilemmas for our competitors and deepen ties with our Allies and partners.

Campaigning for Integrated Deterrence

SOF campaign globally and across domains to strengthen and sustain deterrence, supporting DoD’s integrated deterrence. SOF operations, activities, and investments can undermine adversary confidence that their aggression will succeed, shaping their decision

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calculus. The access, placement, and influence generated by SOF's long-term commitments to building partner capacity and improving interoperability provide expanded, low-cost options to gain awareness, shape the operating environment, and present adversaries with multiple dilemmas. Additionally, SOF remain ideally suited to identify a competitor's coercive activities in the "gray zone" and counter them with deliberate, credible options while managing escalation.

SOF's placement and access are unique in their breadth. Over five thousand SOF are currently deployed to over 80 countries executing a range of activities that enable the Joint Force to campaign for military advantage. Our active duty force is bolstered by National Guard and Reserve SOF supporting wide-ranging operations globally in over 30 countries. This multifunctional reserve component also deployed domestically to 18 states last year, providing essential Defense Support to Civil Authorities and natural disaster relief.

Our SOF enterprise continues to refine its campaigning activities to support priority efforts to deter aggression by the PRC and Russia – with an emphasis on the PRC as our pacing challenge. Efforts to compete with the PRC are not limited to the Indo-Pacific, and neither are the efforts to compete with Russia limited to Europe. Though SOF are active in both regions, these strategic competitors seek resources and partnerships globally, competing with us and our Allies and partners for influence in Africa, the Middle East, and South America.

Over the past four years, SOF's campaigning activities to counter coercion and deter aggression by strategic competitors have more than tripled – comprising nearly 50% of the deployed forces in FY2023. SOF also provide specialized expertise from our stateside forces to support Combatant Command priorities globally through U.S.-based operational support – a disciplined approach to provide tailored, low-density capabilities to support specific operational needs.

In the Indo-Pacific, SOF continue longstanding efforts to build partner capacity with Allies and partners, building generational relationships grounded in trust. We remain focused on honing the core maritime capabilities of the NSW and Marine Raider formations to preserve and strengthen U.S. warfighting advantage. Multiple SOF elements, including Air Force Special Operations units, leverage large-scale, joint exercises to experiment with emerging technologies and creative options to extend SOF's operational reach.

In Eastern Europe, SOF continue their decades-long commitment to enhancing interoperability with Allied SOF throughout Europe. Additionally, SOF operate alongside critical Allies to support whole-of-nation resilience efforts and enhance resistance capabilities if threatened with territorial aggression. SO/LIC and USSOCOM also actively support U.S. efforts to bolster Ukraine's defense following Russia's ongoing brutal and unprovoked invasion – fully aligning these activities with Security Assistance Group-Ukraine. Since 2014, following Russia's previous aggression in Crimea and Eastern Ukraine, SOF supported multinational training efforts with Ukrainian SOF forces and provided Military Information Support Operations assistance to illuminate and counter Russian disinformation.

Strategic competitors – specifically Russia – threaten established international rules in the Arctic and pose increasing challenges to North American security. SOF play a role in bolstering domain awareness and integrated deterrence in the Arctic as part of the Joint Force. Over the past year, SOF strengthened capabilities to operate and prevail in the austere Arctic environment. Large-scale, joint exercises and operations, such as Arctic Edge and Polar Dagger, provided

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venues for more than 500 U.S. and multinational SOF to experiment and operate in the North American Arctic region.

A critical way the Department is seeking to gain and maintain enduring advantage in strategic competition is through SOF-led, but not SOF-limited, irregular warfare (IW) operations, activities and investments. IW is a critical tool to campaign across the spectrum of conflict, enhance interoperability and access, and disrupt competitor warfighting advantages while reinforcing our own. To further institutionalize IW across the Joint Force, we are updating policy, informing doctrine, and modernizing IW education and training. Through the establishment of the Irregular Warfare Center, we will continue to strengthen our understanding of IW through research, analysis, and engagement with Allies and partners.

SOF continue to campaign in the information environment, exposing and countering adversary propaganda and disinformation to better compete in the cognitive dimension. The PRC and Russia continue to act assertively in the information environment to manipulate populations worldwide. As DoD's Joint Proponent for Military Information Support Operations (MISO) and the Coordinating Authority for Internet-based MISO, we are adapting our psychological operations forces for the evolving information environment. SO/LIC continues to improve guidance for and oversight of those who organize, train, and equip these specialized forces and those who conduct operations in the information environment. As part of the ongoing rebalancing efforts, MISO activities to counter strategic competitors have more than tripled over the past three years – comprising over 60% of the MISO activities worldwide in FY2022. The USSOCOM-hosted Joint MISO WebOps Center (JMWC) continues to coordinate Combatant Commands' MISO conducted via the internet and actively engage foreign audiences to illuminate and counter hostile propaganda and disinformation.

SOF's crisis response capabilities remain a critical strategic hedge and advantage for the nation. Agile, tailored capabilities enable SOF to execute no-fail hostage rescue missions and to counter an adversary's efforts to produce or deploy weapons of mass destruction. Repeatedly during 2022, SOF provided vital forces and command and control for crises requiring rapid deployment, complex problem-solving, and synchronized effects – whether responding to regional crises or safeguarding Americans globally. USSOCOM continues to optimize its global posture while sustaining the ability to respond to crises worldwide.

Lastly, the critical authorities granted by Congress continue to allow SOF to campaign effectively against state and non-state actors, achieving an outsized impact across multiple mission sets. Operations supported by FY2018 NDAA Section 1202 (Irregular Warfare) have proven essential for applying SOF capabilities to expose malign activity and impose costs on malign actors. Operations supported by 10 U.S.C. § 127e (Counterterrorism) provide flexible options to apply counterterrorism (CT) pressure in otherwise inaccessible or contested areas – increasingly important as USSOCOM optimizes its C-VEO capabilities. Authorities under 10 U.S.C. § 127f (Clandestine Operational Preparation of the Environment) and FY2020 NDAA Section 1057 (Intelligence / Counterintelligence) support SOF activities with greater clarity and transparency, providing options to campaign for U.S. advantage.

Countering Violent Extremism

We remain vigilant in protecting Americans and America's interests globally through SOF's enduring C-VEO capabilities. SOF have played a critical role in degrading VEOs and

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disrupting innumerable plots to attack Americans and our interests since September 11, 2001. SOF formations continue to work tirelessly alongside trusted Allies and partners, our U.S. interagency counterparts, and Joint Force teammates, harnessing important capabilities to address the shared challenge of violent extremism and global terrorist networks that threaten our homeland, our citizens, and our interests overseas.

As we focus our campaigning efforts to address the priorities of integrated deterrence, SOF continue to pursue a sustainable approach to C-VEO operations by prioritizing threats, working closely with international and interagency partners, and modernizing approaches to degrade VEO capabilities. Wherever feasible, SOF embrace a “partner-led, U.S.-enabled” campaign approach to C-VEO, built on a disciplined prioritization of risks to drive decision-making and avoid strategic distraction. This approach allows partner-led, unified action to pool resources and share responsibility for our shared security challenges, reducing our collective security burden. We will leverage and enable our partners’ unique capabilities to provide an expanded array of options to disrupt VEO threats.

For example, during operations over the past year to counter the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS), SOF have worked closely with international and interagency partners to disrupt illicit financing, interdict foreign fighters, and illuminate propaganda.

USSOCOM continues leading in its role as the DoD’s Coordinating Authority for C-VEO through our Department-wide campaign planning, assessments, and recommendations. Its annual VEO threat assessment highlights its transregional approach involving multiple Combatant Commands.

Violent extremists will continue to use terrorism as a tactic to achieve their objectives. Drivers of extremist violence exist in deep, multigenerational ideological divisions that military force alone cannot overcome. Ongoing geopolitical, technological, economic, and environmental change often exacerbate regional instability, threatening effective governance and fueling radicalization. As a result, violent extremism and terrorism will persist in the future, representing an enduring threat to the United States, our Allies, and partners.

After sustained global pressure since 2001, the threat to the U.S. homeland posed by VEOs based in the Middle East and Africa has diminished, yet persists. Further, the threat to U.S. citizens and interests overseas remains. The continued availability of safe havens and under-governed spaces perpetuate the risks of VEOs’ external attacks. In East Africa, al-Shabaab presents an ongoing risk to U.S. interests both in Somalia and throughout the region. In West and Central Africa, the operations of Russian private military company Wagner are only exacerbating threats posed by al-Qaeda’s affiliate JNIM and ISIS. In Afghanistan, ISIS-Khorasan is strengthening its connections to the wider ISIS enterprise and increasing attacks across the region. In Yemen, al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula presents a continued threat of conducting or directing attacks externally. In Iraq and Syria, ISIS senior leaders demonstrate the intent and capability to target American interests despite the losses of critical operatives and personnel since 2019. Senior al-Qaeda leaders also remain committed to attacking the U.S. homeland and continue to encourage attacks by their affiliates.

Violent extremists continue to incorporate new technologies and adapt their tactics, posing an ongoing global threat to our citizens and a risk to the effectiveness of our CT efforts. Adversary unmanned aerial systems (UAS) pose a pressing challenge, exhibiting a rapid evolution in employment and lethality exceeding improvised explosive devices over the past two

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decades. While the evolving UAS threat from VEOs is troubling, capable state adversaries and their aligned paramilitary forces have also successfully employed UAS to target American, Allied, and partner forces – most notably in Iraq and Syria over the past year. Given these trends, SOF must continue to modernize for the evolving CT environment.

Advancing Department-Level Responsibilities

In addition to USSOCOM's designation as DoD's Coordinating Authority for C-VEO and Internet-based MISO, the command also invests heavily in its longtime role as the Coordinating Authority for Countering Weapons of Mass Destruction (C-WMD) and its recently established role as Global Coordinator for Counter-Small UAS (C-sUAS) Prior-to-Launch efforts. USSOCOM continues to provide DoD-wide campaign planning, assessments, and recommendations in these capacities.

The command's role as DoD's Coordinating Authority for C-WMD draws upon its international, interagency, and joint relationships to counter WMD proliferation and deter aggressive actions by state and non-state actors. Aligned with DoD's strategic priorities, USSOCOM hosted a PRC-focused C-WMD Senior Leaders Seminar focusing on threats within the Indo-Pacific. This event bolstered support to DoD-wide strategies, plans, and policies while improving interoperability with our international partners. USSOCOM seeks to incorporate select Allies and interagency partners to an even greater degree in the planning efforts for the updated DoD Functional Campaign Plan to Counter WMD. The forthcoming, revised plan will drive deeper interoperability and strengthen deterrence to defend the homeland and our Allies' and partners' interests.

In addition to DoD-wide responsibilities, USSOCOM supports Geographic Combatant Command planning efforts with critical expertise in this specialized C-WMD field. USSOCOM forward-positioned C-WMD subject matter experts to augment and assist USEUCOM contingency planning efforts prior to the Russian full-scale invasion of Ukraine. This proactive posture ensured critical chemical, biological, radiological, and nuclear defense readiness considerations were included in regional campaign plans.

Similar to its Coordinating Authority role for C-WMD, USSOCOM continues to expand and refine its efforts as the Global Coordinator for C-sUAS Prior to Launch efforts, by identifying opportunities to target and disrupt adversarial sUAS and the networks responsible for production, proliferation, and use. In this capacity, the command is actively coordinating with Combatant Commands to synchronize requirements for intelligence collection, technology development, operations, and plans – all closely aligned with interagency and intelligence community partners intended to disrupt sUAS prior to launch. Further, USSOCOM is working closely with SO/LIC and across the DoD on C-sUAS-related policy, authorities, and resources to enhance SOF's capability to lead in this role.

SO/LIC and USSOCOM continue to support DoD's civilian harm mitigation and response (CHMR) efforts. Both SO/LIC and USSOCOM played a central role in the development of the Civilian Harm Mitigation and Response Action Plan (CHMR-AP) and continue to support its ongoing implementation. SO/LIC leads CHMR policy efforts within DoD and serves as the executive secretariat for the CHMR Steering Committee, which is co-chaired by the Under Secretary of Defense for Policy, the Vice Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, and the Comptroller. In furtherance of that effort, ASD(SO/LIC) co-chairs regular sub-steering

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committee meetings with representatives from across the force to advance CHMR-AP implementation across DoD.

Finally, apart from Coordinating Authority roles, USSOCOM also serves as the DoD's lead component for synchronizing Counter Threat Finance activities, including integrating, standardizing, and advocating for this important capability. The 10 U.S.C. §284 (Support to Counterdrug Activities and Activities to Counter Transnational Organized Crime) authorities and the associated FY2004 NDAA Section 1022 authorities remain valuable assets, supporting interagency partners to identify and counter competitors' illicit activities in the "gray zone." These authorities provide options to illuminate and counter malign activity by global terrorist networks and PRC- and Russian-affiliated transnational organized criminal networks, which are often closely tied to illicit networks associated with drug trafficking organizations.

TRANSFORM: MODERNIZE FOR THE FUTURE

We are building enduring advantage by the continued investment in our people, technologies, and organizations – marked by a commitment to evolve, modernize, and optimize for the future operating environment. Our future operating concept will guide this ongoing transformation through a focused force design effort that examines how we envision SOF operating as part of the Joint Force in the future.

With the direction and advocacy of SO/LIC, USSOCOM is accelerating its wide-ranging modernization efforts and leveraging its essential acquisition authorities that enable it to capitalize on our nation's innovation ecosystem – with an emphasis on surface and subsurface maritime platforms; counter-UAS; next-generation intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance (ISR); mission command systems; and collaborative and autonomous unmanned systems. Modernization also requires strategic discipline and a complementary emphasis on divesting dated or obsolete platforms that are no longer operationally relevant or effective in the current and future environments.

We seek to set the gold standard for data-driven decision-making for our Service-like and Combatant Command responsibilities – focusing on the talent, architecture, and processes needed to capitalize on data and artificial intelligence (AI)-related technologies. This includes partnering with industry and academia to modernize our digital infrastructure, foster a data-literate workforce, and apply data analytics and AI for decision insight from the headquarters to the tactical edge.

To set resourcing priorities for future capability development, SO/LIC and USSOCOM jointly issued Capabilities and Programming Guidance which formed the basis of SOF's five-year Program Objective Memorandum and the President's budget request. Additionally, ASD(SO/LIC) designated two "special interest" acquisition programs – undersea maritime platforms and Armed Overwatch – allowing us to identify and rapidly remedy issues for these essential investments. Both actions represent important steps in enhancing oversight and advocacy for SOF's transformation.

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Building an Enduring SOF Advantage

The SOF enterprise continues to modernize its materiel and systems and incorporate emerging technologies to build enduring advantage. The command leverages its acquisition authority to modernize special operations capabilities in five focus areas: Next-Generation ISR, Next-Generation Mobility, Data and Networks, Precision Effects, and Hyper-Enabling the Operator/Biotechnologies.

Supported by SO/LIC, USSOCOM has coordinated closely with the Under Secretary of Defense for Research and Engineering (USD(R&E)) and the Services to collaborate on and experiment in each of these focus areas. USSOCOM's unique attributes of being inherently globally deployed, partnered, and joint while also possessing acquisition authorities position it to contribute to the overall modernization of the Joint Force. Specifically, the command is well-positioned to be the partner of choice supporting three of USD(R&E)'s technology priorities: within cyber, focusing on MISO capabilities; within directed energy, focusing on electronic warfare/electronic attack at the tactical edge; and biotechnologies.

Next-Generation ISR enables finding and fixing a target in a contested environment and consists of fusing three data streams from cyber-based ISR, space-based ISR payloads, and small autonomous and collaborative unmanned systems. In the cyber domain, we are integrating tools to provide an open architecture mission command system optimized for SOF's role in integrated deterrence. We are also leveraging the full range of open-source data to ensure SOF have access to timely, geo-rectified, and accurate data to inform their decisions. To better harness advances in space, USSOCOM has established a collaborative arrangement with the Space Force and the Space Development Agency to experiment with payloads that will provide its forces with space-based capabilities at the tactical edge. Finally, we are aggressively pursuing collaborative autonomy through our AI for small unit maneuver efforts across our portfolio of ground, air and maritime unmanned and unattended sensors.

As part of the Next-Generation Mobility efforts, we continue to modernize our platforms to prevail in contested environments while working closely with the Services. We are equipping our existing aviation platforms with advanced infiltration and penetration capabilities – such as the Silent Knight terrain-following/terrain-avoidance radar for our rotary- and fixed-wing fleets and radio-frequency countermeasures for our MC-130s. USSOCOM has partnered with both the Air Force and Defense Advanced Research Projects Agency for development of high-speed, vertical take-off and landing platforms and the Army for its Future Vertical Lift program. Finally, we are investing in modernized surface and undersea maritime platforms in close partnership with the Navy – including one of ASD(SO/LIC)'s “special interest” acquisition programs. These efforts in developing, testing, and fielding a range of maritime capabilities will strengthen deterrence in the Indo-Pacific and across the globe.

The Armed Overwatch program provides SOF with an affordable and deployable crewed aircraft system capable of conducting close air support, precision strike, and armed ISR. This program remains central to SOF's Precision Effects modernization efforts that will provide critical situational awareness and force protection to SOF ground forces executing missions in austere and permissive environments.

Precision Effects are not limited to kinetic fires as USSOCOM modernizes its electromagnetic warfare capabilities – best exemplified by its C-UAS efforts. While the command hones capabilities to defeat UAS prior to launch, it is also closely teamed with SO/LIC

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and the Army's Joint Counter-UAS Office to detect and defeat UAS that pose a threat to deployed SOF and our partners. Through a System Integration Partner contract, USSOCOM has taken a unique software-centric approach to C-UAS which will enable it to effectively counter the evolving threat. The command is pursuing a system-of-systems, open architecture approach to C-UAS that will allow for the rapid integration of both emerging and proven technologies.

Within the Data and Networks modernization area, USSOCOM is advancing technologies across three broad capabilities: operations and intelligence fusion for its tactical commanders, protection of its operators from ubiquitous technical surveillance, and influence operations in the cyber domain. The Mission Command System/Common Operating Picture deployed after only one year of development by embracing agile software development techniques and is USSOCOM's gateway to DoD's Joint All-Domain Command and Control (JADC2). As SOF operate in increasingly contested environments alongside partners, we must provide identity management capabilities to protect them, their partners, and their families. Finally, USSOCOM will continue to modernize internet-based and other MISO efforts with automation and AI-enabled capabilities to operate more effectively in the information environment.

Acknowledging the criticality of its network infrastructure, USSOCOM continues to implement a zero-trust architecture, providing greater security across the SOF enterprise. To ensure alignment, we are working closely with partners across DoD during implementation, including the National Security Agency and the Defense Information Systems Agency. USSOCOM has already implemented many of the zero-trust principles, focusing heavily on the principles of least privilege, multi-factor authentication, and controlling access to moving forward. We are also seeking to accelerate the transition to cloud-based architectures with modern data science environments. These efforts are integral to advancing JADC2 and ensuring resilient networks now and in the future.

The final modernization focus area – Hyper-Enabling the Operator/Biotechnologies – focuses largely on developing emerging technologies, enabling SOF to rapidly deploy promising capabilities. Hyper-Enabling the Operator pursues technologies to provide decision advantages by optimizing information for individuals and teams conducting partnered operations – with the goal of enhancing effectiveness. Our biotechnology efforts are closely aligned with the Preservation of the Force and Family program to address the physical and cognitive wellbeing of SOF. Our ongoing brain health efforts remain a critical component of this effort – combining best-in-market, leading-edge data and AI industry partners with nutrition and health partnerships while leveraging state-of-science commercial and academic labs.

Across all areas, USSOCOM continues to steward the acquisition authority granted by Congress. The command leverages the additional flexibility provided through tools such as Commercial Solutions Openings, Other Transaction Agreements, and Middle Tier Acquisition. This acquisition agility enables USSOCOM to benefit from rapidly changing technologies – many of which are evolving quickly in the commercial sector and are often produced by small businesses.

Leveraging Data-Driven Technologies

USSOCOM continues to serve as a pathfinder within DoD for integrating data-driven technologies, leveraging AI powered by machine learning (ML), deep understanding, neural

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networks, and similar cutting-edge technologies. The command is working with partners across DoD and in close cooperation with industry and academia to identify and deploy data and AI capabilities across the SOF enterprise to enhance decision-making from the boardroom to the battlefield.

The SOF enterprise continues to maximize its involvement in DoD-wide initiatives, led by the DoD Chief Digital and AI Office, to identify opportunities to implement data-driven technologies. To this end, USSOCOM was among the first to welcome teams as part of the Deputy Secretary of Defense's Accelerating Data and AI Initiative in early FY2022. Additionally, USSOCOM's efforts to accelerate the adoption of Advancing Analytics (known as Advana) are enabling the command to link Service data and SOF data to illuminate the command's business operations in unprecedented ways. Notably, the command has linked approximately 300 disparate SOF and Service datasets together to create a "single source of truth" for baseline data and performance-related insights for its personnel, financial, materiel, and education activities.

Other recent AI initiatives include capabilities developed for information operations, medical research, predictive maintenance, intelligence, and autonomous vehicles. As one example, USSOCOM's Intelligence Data Science Team is applying AI to intelligence problems across the SOF enterprise. AI/ML disciplines such as topic modeling, network analysis, natural language processing, and predictive modeling are being applied to publicly available information and sensitive intelligence data to address intelligence requirements. Promising opportunities exist to further leverage data analytics and AI technologies in additional areas to include financial planning, logistics, personnel management, cyber, and a variety of operational applications.

Across these efforts, we recognize the importance of deploying ethical and responsible AI capabilities. With partners in industry, academia, and U.S. government agencies, we seek to employ explainable AI capabilities to ensure algorithms and models are aligned with our moral, ethical, and legal obligations. As the SOF enterprise explores the potential of emerging algorithmic technologies, to include natural language processes and large language models, we will remain closely aligned with DoD-wide initiatives to promote responsible and explainable AI to mitigate algorithmic risks, ensure traceability, and guard against unethical, illegal, or immoral outcomes.

CONCLUSION

From SOF's earliest history of strategic competition from World War II to the Cold War through combat operations during the Global War on Terror, our SOF today stand ready to meet the challenges of this decisive era. Many decades of problem-solving, courage, and relentless determination attest to SOF's ability to succeed for the nation today and in the future. SOF's unmatched, combat-tested capabilities provide options to prepare, prevent, and prevail in this era of strategic competition – whether creating dilemmas for our competitors, countering coercion, reassuring Allies and partners, disrupting VEOs, or responding to crises. As creations of Congress, SO/LIC and USSOCOM will continue to provide the leadership and advocacy necessary to ensure that SOF remains the world's most capable special operations force. With your continued support, we will confirm that our nation's SOF are unquestionably a national advantage.

Christopher P. Maier
Assistant Secretary of Defense for Special Operations and Low-Intensity Conflict

Christopher P. Maier is the Assistant Secretary of Defense for Special Operations and Low-Intensity Conflict. Among his responsibilities are all special operations, irregular warfare, counterterrorism, and information operations policy issues and the oversight of special operations peculiar administrative matters, on behalf of the Secretary.

He previously led the Department of Defense's Defeat-ISIS Task Force from its inception until disestablishment, charged with policy and strategy development, international negotiations, oversight, authorities review, and national-level interagency implementation of the Department's role in the U.S. Government's campaign to achieve an enduring defeat of ISIS. In this role, he also directed the Secretary of Defense's leadership of the Defense Ministry components of the 80+ international members of the Defeat-ISIS Coalition.

From July 2015 to September 2017, Mr. Maier served as the Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defense for Special Operations and Combating Terrorism. In this role, Mr. Maier led the Department's policies, plans, authorities and resources related to special operations and irregular warfare, with special emphasis on counterterrorism, counterinsurgency, unconventional warfare, information operations and sensitive special operations.

Before moving to the Department of Defense, Mr. Maier held a number of positions at the National Counterterrorism Center (NCTC), including Senior Advisor to the Director, Chief of Strategic Assessments and Regional Planning, and Chief of Staff in the Directorate of Strategic Operational Planning.

From 2009 to 2013, Mr. Maier served on the National Security Council Staff as a director for counterterrorism. In addition to his government experience, Mr. Maier worked for over five years as a strategy and management consultant to a variety of commercial, government, and nonprofit organizations.

Originally from California, Mr. Maier earned degrees from the University of California, Berkeley and the Fletcher School of Law and Diplomacy at Tufts University. He is an officer in the Air National Guard.

General Bryan P. Fenton
Commander, U.S. Special Operations Command

General Bryan P. Fenton currently serves as the 13th Commander of U.S. Special Operations Command (USSOCOM) headquartered at MacDill Air Force Base, FL.

Prior to assuming command of USSOCOM, General Fenton served as the Commander of Joint Special Operations Command at Fort Bragg, NC.

General Fenton's other assignments as a general officer include: Senior Military Assistant to the Secretary of Defense; Deputy Commander, Indo-Pacific Command; Commander, Special Operations Command Pacific; Assistant Chief of Staff G-3, U.S. Army Pacific; Deputy Commanding General – Operations, 25th Infantry Division; and Deputy Director of Strategy, Plans and Policy, Department of the Army.

His Army and special operations assignments include: Director of Operations (J3), Joint Special Operations Command from 2012 to 2013; Brigade Command from 2010 to 2012; Squadron and Battalion Commands from 2005 to 2009, to include command at the John F. Kennedy Special Warfare Center and School at Fort Bragg, NC.

General Fenton has served in multiple geographic combatant commands including U.S. Southern Command; U.S. European Command; U.S. Africa Command; U.S. Central Command; and U.S. Indo-Pacific Command. He participated in Operations Joint Forge (Bosnia), Enduring Freedom (Afghanistan/Africa), Iraqi Freedom and Odyssey Dawn (Libya).

General Fenton's many military courses include: the U.S. Army Infantry Officer Basic and Advance Courses; Special Forces Qualification Course; Ranger School; Special Forces Language training (Spanish); U.S. Army Jump Master; and the Special Forces Military Free Fall School.

General Fenton holds a Bachelor's Degree in Business Administration from University of Notre Dame, and a Master's Degree from the U.S. Army Command and General Staff College. He attended Negotiation/Leadership Training at Harvard University and served as the 2009 Army Fellow at the Institute for the Study of Diplomacy, Walsh School of Foreign Service at Georgetown University.

General Fenton and his wife Dawn have two daughters.

(Current as of the 7 Sep 2022)

QUESTIONS SUBMITTED BY MEMBERS POST HEARING

MARCH 9, 2023

QUESTIONS SUBMITTED BY MR. SCOTT

Mr. SCOTT. What are the unique challenges and possible mitigations for SOF operating in a sparse electromagnetic signal environment?

General FENTON. Challenges. In environments where the operational electromagnetic spectrum capacity is sparse, units can expect to run into a variety of information exchange challenges. These range from low-level tactical problems, such as Intra team/unit communications to operational and strategic friction induced by loss of Command and Control with higher headquarters elements. These conditions would also influence communications between partner forces and surrogates, which may yield a higher overall mission impact depending on the operation.

Technology is another factor when considering how to operate in this environment. Adversaries have incorporated spectrum dominance as a key enabler against the United States. Their rapid innovation in this field has given them opportunities to outpace dated capabilities while continuing to generate tempo against upcoming technologies, which may be slow to field due to acquisition processes, and test and evaluation requirements.

Another challenge that studies identified relates to an organic increase in the need for usable spectrum. As commercial entities, allies, and adversaries continue fielding capabilities and expanding their need for capacity, spectrum segments have become increasingly congested.

Mitigation Strategies. New technologies are continuously developed, which provide reliable, low probability of intercept, and anti-jam communications for Special Operations Forces (SOF) within a contested environment. Spectrum survivability may be obtained through asset diversification. Leveraging a combination of systems in a threat-informed theater allows SOF operators to build a wider and more resilient spectrum presence. Using multiple satellite-based transport options creates a scenario where you have diversity in frequency bands, satellites, and even space vehicle orbits.

From a terrestrial perspective the use of adaptive networking radio technology that maximizes spectrum use while avoiding interference is becoming more common. By emphasizing more traditional methods, such as High Frequency radios with enhanced data rate capabilities provide an option to enable information exchange in challenging environments.

Additionally, the SOF enterprise is currently conducting numerous exercises annually to replicate contested communication environments. During these exercises, we focus on masking transmissions using Low Probability of Intercept/Low Probability of Detection solutions and using red teams to attempt to locate and intercept blue force communications. The lessons learned from these exercises inform our acquisition and future training to improve tradecraft.

Mr. SCOTT. How can the U.S. Space Command and U.S. Cyber Command be better integrated with USSOCOM as part of the new trinity of multi-domain conflict that consists of space, cyber, and SOF?

General FENTON. USSOCOM can best integrate with the U.S. Space Command and the U.S. Cyber Command through consistent and deliberate engagements to achieve tangible effect within the SOF-Space-Cyber Nexus. We hosted the first of these sessions at Headquarters, USSOCOM to seek synergy and opportunity across concepts for either operations and/or employment. Our U.S. Army Special Operations Command led part of the discussion on a unique and mature proposal for the “new trinity of multi-domain conflict” to achieve an integrated deterrent effect. How we “routinize” this integration within the Department of Defense and across the Combatant Commands is the end state through our Nexus exploration efforts over the next year.

Through the SOF-Space-Cyber Nexus effort, we seek to improve upon the foundation of solid tactical and operational teaming. The U.S. Strategic Command is also a key member of this willing Nexus effort. In addition to concepts for operation or employment, we are collectively seeking solutions to overcome any impediments for coordination and synchronization in terms of policy, authorities/permissions, command and control, and technical challenges. This is a nascent but important effort.

Mr. SCOTT. How can JSOU enhance their ability to play a unique role in helping to link U.S. national security interests and objectives to SOF capabilities at all levels? What additional resources in terms of personnel and dollars are needed by JSOU?

General FENTON. The USSOCOM Joint Special Operations University (JSOU) is in the process of reorganizing into what I refer to as JSOU Next, which will focus on not only JSOU's traditional teaching and learning, but also research in action and outreach, as well as engagement to enable the future force to support the priorities articulated in the 2022 National Defense Strategy. This will include fostering critical thinking and analytical skills, and generating deep expertise in understanding key technologies, as well as about our competitors and the future of warfare. Utilizing the title 10 (U.S. Code) hiring authority granted by Congress in the Fiscal Year (FY) 2019 National Defense Authorization Act (NDAA), JSOU Next would rely on a blended mix of faculty comprised of both academics with specific subject matter expertise and highly qualified SOF practitioners. This hybrid mix of faculty will enable JSOU to achieve its goal of becoming the premiere polytechnic university for the study and application of special operations in a near peer competitor environment.

Mr. SCOTT. Does USSOCOM have all of the authorities needed to train resistance fighters in occupied countries? If not, what authorities do you need?

General FENTON. U.S. SOF (USSOF) could apply Section 1202 of the FY2018 NDAA (as amended) to provide training and other support to a resistance in an occupied country—assuming administration policy and operational authority are aligned in favor of such support. However, to leverage the full utility of 1202, the current definition of “irregular warfare” in 1202 must be modified to allow for the provision of support to resistance elements that are in armed conflict. Furthermore, codifying 1202 into statute and expanding the cap would broaden the aperture, increase opportunities, and provide greater flexibility, thus enhancing the USSOF value proposition in support of Combatant Command irregular warfare requirements.

Mr. SCOTT. Is there a role for SOF in countering illegal, unreported, and unregulated fishing (IUUF)?

General FENTON. Although many of the skill sets normally attributed to special operations (i.e. Direct Action, Unconventional Warfare, and Counterterrorism) are not currently exercised directly in the countering illegal, unreported, and unregulated fishing (IUUF) effort, there are three noteworthy categories of contributions from USSOCOM: Military Information Support Operations (MISO) and Counter Threat Finance (CTF), Intelligence and Intelligence, Surveillance and Reconnaissance (ISR).

USSOCOM is the Joint Proponent for Counter Threat Finance. In this capacity, the CTF Cell at Headquarters USSOCOM is actively working to support the counter-IUUF efforts by linking and illuminating the various global financial entities tied to the People's Republic of China (PRC) IUUF enterprise. USSOCOM CTF provided the strategy, strategic art, and operational design for a law enforcement operation entitled JADE SPEAR (starting in 2020) under the Customs and Border Protection's National Targeting Center. A multinational effort that also included 29 different U.S. departments, agencies, and offices contributing more than 70 action officers, JADE SPEAR was the largest strategic competition operation since the cold war. The operation was a 'greenfield' pilot program to test means and methods against the stated problem: IUUF by a Chinese state directed company on the high seas. SOF's ability to integrate disparate institutions, both domestic and allied, apply campaign planning to hold at risk elements of China's political-economy in a de-risked manner, and deliver significant costs to a malign predator was a first of its kind operation. Two notable successes included the revocation of visas for Pingtan Marine executives (2020), and the imposition of sanctions against Pingtan Marine resulting in them being dropped from the NASDAQ Composite Index (2023).

Additionally, USSOCOM supports the Combatant Commanders through regionally aligned Theater Special Operations Commands in a variety of missions including countering illegal fishing and other illicit activities through the employment of Identity Intelligence (I2) exploitation capabilities to deny national security threat actors anonymity. In the maritime domain, I2 is extremely effective while collaborating with Partners to positively identify persons of interest involved in illegal fishing and other illicit activities.

SOF Intelligence assets provide unique capability in identifying IUUF activities and compelling compliance with international fisheries conservation and management enactments (e.g., Southern Pacific Regional Fisheries Management Organization). These illegal activities also include piracy, narcotics smuggling, and human trafficking, and human rights violations. In many cases, maritime vessels conceal

their location, which is a key indicator of vessels conducting IUUF and other illegal activities. SOF utilizes Airborne Intelligence, Surveillance, and Reconnaissance assets to gain visual fidelity on vessels who conceal their location by turning off their with Automatic Identification System (AIS) transponders. This intelligence is used to support international law enforcement operations and investigations.

Additionally, the SOF Intelligence Enterprise can leverage Digital ISR capabilities to enable collection, enhancement, and analysis of unclassified data on IUUF. Publicly and commercially available information (PAI/CAI) can be collected and merged with exquisite intelligence through the SOCOM Intelligence Data Science Team's DIAMOND architecture. Data can then be visualized using data-agnostic tools on Top Secret systems for analysis. Using collected unclassified data to inform intelligence assessments can provide opportunities for improved partner nation engagement to counter IUUF activity.

As a recent example, the Joint Interagency Task Force—South assigned to U.S. Southern Command, commissioned a ship to conduct maritime interdiction operations with Partner Forces. USSOCOM I2 capabilities allow for 24/7 match comparison against the larger Department of Defense and Interagency holdings. Access to these holdings allows the addition of persons of interest to the Department of Defense “Watchlisting” for enterprise level alerts during future encounters, and supports partner prosecutorial finishes.

USSOCOM MISO organizations, including the USSOCOM Joint MISO WebOps Center (JMWC) and Theater Special Operations Commands (TSOC), focus on messaging to affected populations that highlights the negative consequences of unchecked IUUF by PRC. Informed by intelligence and ISR provided by the US Coast Guard, interagency partners and partner nation forces, TSOC and WebOps messaging has reached populations in SOUTHCOM, CENTCOM, INDOPACOM, and AFRICOM. Additionally in FY21, USSOCOM, as the synchronizer of the Senior Military Engagement Program (SMEP), coordinated a global effort to address IUUF. This continues to be a recurring theme, on the SMEP platform, in SOUTHCOM, INDOPACOM, and AFRICOM AORs.

It should also be noted that SOF engagements with other countries that focus on more traditional SOF-peculiar skill-sets have second and third order effects by enabling those countries to counter IUUF on their own, or in cooperation with U.S. Government assets.

Mr. SCOTT. Does USSOCOM need any enhanced authority for provision of support to partner nation liaison officers assigned to Headquarters USSOCOM?

General FENTON. Headquarters USSOCOM was structured to facilitate SOF leaders' access and maximum utilization of exquisite intelligence to prepare and deploy fully capable and informed SOF to meet national and geographic operational needs. The Office of the Undersecretary of Defense for Intelligence and Security (OUSD(I&S)) policy currently places significant limits and processing delays on non-indoctrinated foreign partners being approved or permitted escorted access to high-level secure facilities, limiting our liaisons' ability to directly engage with U.S. personnel. Our request is to engage with OUSD(I&S) and the Office of the Director of National Intelligence to allow for greater latitude for foreign partner integration. Understanding that information sharing with partner countries is done on a case-by-case basis, updates in the Department of Defense policies, directives, and authorities overseeing information sharing will improve integration and interoperability in support of the National Defense Strategy and National Disclosure Policy. In addition, the department working with Congress to ensure the Arms Export Control Act meets Congressional security requirements, while improving the timely export of defense articles and services in support of SOF missions.

Mr. SCOTT. Does USSOCOM need an increase in the micro-purchase threshold for purchases by USSOCOM in support of operations overseas?

General FENTON. Yes. Given the enduring nature of USSOCOM missions abroad, USSOCOM lacks permanent authority for all Special Emergency Procurement Authorities under 41 U.S.C, Section 1903 for SOCOM missions overseas. This includes increased micro-purchase thresholds, Simplified Acquisition Thresholds (SAT), Simplified Acquisition Procedures (SAP), and the expanded use of Standard Form 44s (SF 44s).