

**DEPARTMENT OF DEFENSE AUTHORIZATION
REQUEST FOR APPROPRIATIONS FOR FISCAL
YEAR 2026 AND THE FUTURE YEARS DEFENSE
PROGRAM**

HEARING

BEFORE THE

**COMMITTEE ON ARMED SERVICES
UNITED STATES SENATE**

ONE HUNDRED NINETEENTH CONGRESS

FIRST SESSION

ON

S. 2296

TO AUTHORIZE APPROPRIATIONS FOR FISCAL YEAR 2026 FOR MILITARY
ACTIVITIES OF THE DEPARTMENT OF DEFENSE, FOR MILITARY CON-
STRUCTION, AND FOR DEFENSE ACTIVITIES OF THE DEPARTMENT OF
ENERGY, TO PRESCRIBE MILITARY PERSONNEL STRENGTHS FOR
SUCH FISCAL YEAR, AND FOR OTHER PURPOSES

PART 5

EMERGING THREATS AND CAPABILITIES

APRIL 8, 2025



**DEPARTMENT OF DEFENSE AUTHORIZATION REQUEST FOR APPROPRIATIONS FOR FISCAL YEAR 2026 AND THE FUTURE YEARS DEFENSE PROGRAM—Part 5
EMERGING THREATS AND CAPABILITIES**

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**DEPARTMENT OF DEFENSE AUTHORIZATION
REQUEST FOR APPROPRIATIONS FOR FIS-
CAL YEAR 2026 AND THE FUTURE YEARS
DEFENSE PROGRAM**

TUESDAY, APRIL 8, 2025

UNITED STATES SENATE,
SUBCOMMITTEE ON EMERGING
THREATS AND CAPABILITIES,
COMMITTEE ON ARMED SERVICES,
Washington, DC.

UNITED STATES SPECIAL OPERATIONS COMMAND

The Committee met, pursuant to notice, at 2:36 p.m. in room SD-G50, Dirksen Senate Office Building, Senator Joni Ernst (Chairwoman of the Committee) presiding.

Committee Members present: Senators Ernst, Wicker, Budd, Sheehy, Reed, Slotkin, Shaheen, Rosen, and Kelly.

OPENING STATEMENT OF SENATOR JONI K. ERNST

Senator ERNST. The Emerging Threats and Capabilities Subcommittee meets today to review the posture of our Special Operations Enterprise. Thank you to our witnesses for appearing before the subcommittee today. I want to take a moment to welcome Senator Slotkin as the Subcommittee's new Ranking Member. I look forward to working closely together.

For the Members' information, today's hearing will begin in open session, and then transition to a closed session in SVC-217 in the Office of Senate Security, no later than 3:45 p.m. For years, I have worked closely with our Special Operations Forces (SOF) community to ensure they have the resources to counter evolving threats. SOF is more than a counter-terrorism force. They are indispensable in countering the malign activities of the Chinese Communist Party, Russia, and their authoritarian allies.

Special Operations Command (SOCOM) is operated under stagnant budgets. The limitation of SOF and strength was a very shortsighted decision at a time when SOF capabilities are needed, more than ever. We must change course now. That is why I intend to work with the Department of Defense (DOD) to rebuild SOCOMs budget. Given SOF's critical role in national security, this is a wise and cost-effective investment.

Additionally, we must update DOD policies and authorities to leverage SOF capabilities fully. Irregular warfare has been a core SOF mission since World War II, yet unnecessary restrictions have

hampered their flexibility. We need to empower our combatant commanders to unleash SOF's full potential. President Trump, Secretary Hegseth, and our witnesses today recognize the urgency of these threats and the vital role SOF plays.

As Chair of this Subcommittee, I will prioritize these key forces, which are essential for this era of great power competition and for ensuring the security of the American people. This is not just about defense and deterrence. It's about ensuring the U.S. remains the preeminent global force. We have no time to waste.

Now, I would like to recognize Senator Slotkin for her opening comments.

STATEMENT OF SENATOR ELISSA SLOTKIN

Senator SLOTKIN. Thank you, Chairwoman Ernst. Important hearing on readiness, but importantly, happy to be here with you in our first official hearing on Emerging Threats and Capabilities Subcommittee of the 119th, my first time Ranking Member in the Senate, so, I'm happy to be here and I look forward to maintaining a really strong, robust bipartisan approach.

I think we want the same things, which is to make sure that our Special Operations Forces have the resources, the potential, the acquisition, everything you need to deal with a world of really changing fast changing threats and challenges. Welcome to our guests. We're happy to have you here. I think we want to express our appreciation for everything you do every day particularly in guiding the Special Operations Forces, given that, as you were describing to us earlier, the precipitous increase in the missions you are being asked to do. I think that we are keenly aware of that.

Obviously, the gray zone challenges in places like China, Russia, Iran, North Korea, and enabling the joint force, but I think in particular, I think it's hard to have this conversation without thinking about Taiwan and sort of the scenarios we have going forward with Taiwan and the important role you all will play. Space, cyber, information operations, you all are at the forefront of a very changing world on conflict. Conflict is just going to look different and continue to look different than it was when many of us were starting out.

We want you to have those resources and therefore I will just flag, I'm very interested in what's going on right now and the cuts that are potentially on the table at the Defense Department. We've heard rumors of 80,000, 90,000 forces, for instance, from the Army being cut. I don't think anyone is against cutting actual fat on the bone, but being surgical and smart about it and not cutting the very operators that we need to perform this ever-expanding group of missions, you're being asked to do.

So, with that Madam Chairman, I yield back.

Senator ERNST. Thank you. I'd like to thank Senate Armed Services Committee (SASC) Ranking Member, Senator Reed for being here today. Senator Reed, do you have any opening comments or thoughts?

Senator REED. I just want to commend you Madam Chairman and the Ranking Member. I have great confidence.

Senator ERNST. Okay. Thank you. We will go ahead and proceed to your opening statements, and Mr. Jenkins, we will start with

you and then we will proceed to General Fenton. So, gentlemen, you each have 5 minutes for your opening statements.

STATEMENT OF COLBY C. JENKINS, DEPUTY ASSISTANT SECRETARY OF DEFENSE, PERFORMING THE DUTIES OF THE ASSISTANT SECRETARY OF DEFENSE FOR SPECIAL OPERATIONS AND LOW-INTENSITY CONFLICT

Mr. JENKINS. Thank you. Madam Chair Ernst, Ranking Member Slotkin, Chairman Wicker when he comes, Ranking Member Reed, and other distinguished Members of the Subcommittee, thank you for the opportunity to testify on the global posture of our Nation's Special Operations Forces, or SOF. I'm honored to testify alongside General Fenton. We are joined here today by two extraordinary Americans, who I would like to take a moment to recognize.

Principal Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defense (SECDEF) and Director of the Special Operations Secretariat, Dr. Sandra Hobson, seated behind me, as well as Secretary of Defense for Special Operations and Low-Intensity Conflict (SO/LIC) Senior Enlisted Advisor, Command Master Chief Brad Rhineland, also seated behind me. These dedicated servant leaders bring expertise and insights that have been invaluable as we advocate within the Department of Defense, on behalf of our SOF servicemembers and their families. As a combat veteran Green Beret myself, the opportunity to work with these incredible teammates and represent our SOF enterprise is profoundly humbling and special.

Today's global security environment has become increasingly complex, as artificial intelligence (AI) and other technological advancements rapidly transform the character of warfare, threats from State and non-State actors continue to converge. Our global competitors actively seek to undermine the United States and our allies. Terrorists and transnational criminal networks continue to pose a serious threat to the Homeland.

In these turbulent times, my office, the Office of Special Operations, Low Intensity Conflict or SO/LIC, and the U.S. Special Operations Command remain at the forefront of our Nation's strategic priorities, representing less than 2 percent of the defense budget. Our Special Operations Forces provide unique and outsized effects, adding exceptional value to the Nation. Tasked with the most challenging and dangerous missions, SOF remain the world's most lethal, adaptable, and capable force.

Our priorities for the SOF enterprise are squarely nested within Secretary Hegseth's priorities for the joint force, defend the Homeland, strengthen deterrence, and increase burden sharing with U.S. allies and partners. Our elite warriors deter our adversaries by creating strategic asymmetric advantages and maintaining irregular warfare superiority.

Leveraging our close relationships with our foreign partners in critical regions, SOF are uniquely positioned to identify and counter our adversary's malign and coercive activities. Whether in the Indo-Pacific, Europe, the Middle East, Africa, Western Hemisphere, or near our own southern border, these low-cost, small-footprint efforts promote stability, empower partners and allies, and lead efforts against China, terrorists, drug traffickers, and other threats.

Even with the global increase in demand, our Special Operations Forces face personnel cuts and resource constraints. In fact, armed conflict and regional instability have driven a 200 percent increase in our crisis response mission over the past 3 years. While at the same time, operational and logistics costs for crisis response have increased 260 percent.

We must ensure SOFs readiness while balancing operational demands and optimizing available resources. We must also promote accountability through rigorous analytics and data-driven decision-making. Congress wisely established civilian oversight of Special Operations to ensure that SOF remains strategically aligned, ethically grounded, and accountable. My office provides policy direction, resource advocacy, and oversight needed to ensure that SOFs initiatives and efforts stay focused on war fighter needs and national objectives, without mission creep or undue strain on the force.

This oversight is not bureaucratic. In fact, it is essential to effective war fighting. Our Nation's security depends on a strong, agile, modernized, and accountable SOF enterprise. With your support, we will continue ensuring that SOF is ready to deter, fight, and win anytime, anywhere. Thank you again for the opportunity to testify. I invite you to visit our SOF community around the globe, to meet our servicemembers and their families, and to see firsthand the capabilities that we bring in defense of the Nation. Your continued support is critical. I look forward to answering your questions.

Senator ERNST. Thank you, Mr. Jenkins. General Fenton, you are now recognized for 5 minutes.

STATEMENT OF GENERAL BRYAN P. FENTON, USA COMMANDER, UNITED STATES SPECIAL OPERATIONS COMMAND

General FENTON. Madam Chair Ernst, Ranking Member Slotkin, distinguished Members of this Subcommittee, Chairman Wicker when he comes, Ranking Member Reed, thank you for the opportunity to testify before you today.

This month marks 38 years since the creation of Special Operations Command. We are thankful for Congress's incredible foresight in creating us and steadfast support ever since. I'm joined today by Command Sergeant Major Shane Shorter. Shane exemplifies the unmatched caliber of our non-commissioned officer corps. If you look at the hardest problems facing our Nation in the darkest corners of this earth, you will find our Special Operations non-commissioned officers solving them.

Our Non-Commissioned Officers (NCOs) exemplify the precision, lethality of your Special Operations teams and demonstrate our competitive and comparative advantage. They are the reason we are envied by militaries around the globe. It's the honor of a lifetime for Shane and me to represent the uniform and civilian members of your Special Operations Command, as well as our U.S. Interagency Partners and the Global SOF Warriors from 28 nations who are stationed at our SOCOM headquarters in Tampa.

I'm also honored today to testify alongside Secretary Jenkins from Assistant Secretary of Defense (ASD) SO/LIC. We rely on SO/LIC's partnership, support, and advocacy to ensure your Special Operations warriors and their families who serve alongside them

continue to thrive and win. We are in an era of serious national security challenges. The border, communist China, Russia, Iran, North Korea, and terrorist organizations all pose significant threats in isolation.

However, we're increasingly seeing these threats converge across the globe. Meanwhile, the changing character of war is changing at a rate faster than we've ever seen. The innovation cycle now turns in days and weeks, not months and years. Our adversaries use \$10,000 one-way drones that we shoot down with \$2 million missiles. That cost benefit curve is upside down.

To summarize, this is the most complex, asymmetric, and hybrid threat security environment I've seen in 38 years of service. Contending with these challenges demands more from your Special Operations Forces that requires tough choices, forcing tradeoffs as we strike to balance an increase in operations readiness and the need for modernization.

Your elite SOCOM team provides an outsized return on any investment. However, with only 3 percent of DOD's forces and less than 2 percent of DOD's budget, we are now playing a zero-sum game. Yet I'd submit your Special Operations Forces were tailor made for this era, rapidly responding to crisis, disrupting terrorist organizations, and asymmetrically deterring our adversaries.

Employed expressly at the direction of the President and Secretary of Defense, SOCOM's Crisis Response Mission is the Nation's most lethal and surgical tool to eliminate threats to the Homeland, rescue American citizens, protect our diplomats, all at a moment's notice. In the past 3½ years, the frequency of these Presidentially directed missions significantly increased by 200 percent. Yet for this sacred obligation, we'll accept no risk in today's crisis response mission.

Some may think we're done fighting terror. I'd submit terror is not done with us. SOCOM's mission to degrade terrorist groups starts at our border, spans the globe. In recent months, your Special Operations team eliminated over 500 terrorists who had the intent and capability to strike the Homeland. Alongside our global Special Operations partners, we've captured over 600. Aligned with the Department's priorities, deterrence has long been a part of SOCOM's DNA.

We are America's irregular warfare experts. We deter war by altering our adversaries' decision below the threshold of conflict in the gray zone. We stand ready to prevail if deterrence fails, as combatant commands seek to strengthen, deterrence requests for SOCOM capabilities have increased by more than 35 percent in the last 2 years alone. Against that backdrop, we continue to grapple with years of flat budgets, a 14 percent decrease in buying power, significant personnel reductions, and the requirement to evolve our technology and authorities.

All this forces tradeoffs, tough choices that challenge current missions and puts modernization at risk. Yet SOCOM remains the world's premier Special Operations Force. I pledge to always provide the Nation with the best Special Operations capability for the fiscal and personnel resources we receive. We will never compromise on standards and lethality. We are grateful for this Sub-

committee's work on novel approaches to SOF funding and authorities.

I look forward to taking your questions. Thank you.

[The joint prepared statement Mr. Colby C. Jenkins and General Bryan P. Fenton follows:]

STATEMENT FOR THE RECORD

**DEPUTY ASSISTANT SECRETARY OF DEFENSE COLBY JENKINS
PERFORMING THE DUTIES OF 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 EMERGING THREATS AND CAPABILITIES
UNITED STATES SENATE**

APRIL 8, 2025



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INTRODUCTION

Chair Ernst, Ranking Member Slotkin, and distinguished members of this subcommittee, thank you for this opportunity to discuss the posture of our Nation's Special Operations Forces (SOF). On behalf of the special operations community, we thank you for your leadership and steadfast support. Both the Office of the Assistant Secretary of Defense for Special Operations and Low-Intensity Conflict (ASD(SO/LIC)) and U.S. Special Operations Command (USSOCOM) were established through the foresight and determination of Congress. We are honored to highlight the priorities, activities, and investments that ensure SOF remain an irregular and asymmetric advantage for the Joint Force and Nation.

SO/LIC and USSOCOM are aligned with the Department's focus on reviving the warrior ethos, rebuilding the military, and reestablishing deterrence through our strategic priorities of *Win, People, and Transform*. Your SOF embody the warrior ethos and uphold uncompromising standards. Always ready to deploy at a moment's notice, your SOF are trained to fight and win in the world's most dangerous environments. U.S. SOF remain the world's most capable and lethal special operations warriors and are entrusted to solve the Nation's most challenging problems.

The global security environment has become more challenging as threats converge, terrorism persists, and technological advances accelerate. Additionally, violent extremist and transnational criminal organizations continue to threaten the Homeland and our interests abroad. A convergence of adversaries seeks to divide and weaken the United States, our allies, and partners. To compound this complex security environment, cutting-edge technology is rapidly changing the character of warfare as the innovation cycle runs in days, not years. The operating environment will only be more complex tomorrow and requires constant modernization while balancing today's readiness and operational demands.

Against those challenges, SOF are at the forefront of America's defense strategy, providing unique and asymmetric advantages to the Joint Force and Nation. **With an annual investment of less than 2% of the Department's budget and only 3% of its forces, SOF provide an outsized return with scalable and tailorable options for our senior leaders and create dilemmas for our adversaries. We do this by:**

- **Shaping the Environment to Prevent Conflict.** Irregular warfare is in SOF's DNA, with decades of extensive access and placement to deter conflict.
- **Preparing through Partnerships.** SOF cultivate a global network by building partner force capacity and assisting allies and partners in countering aggression and addressing malign influence.
- **Enabling the Joint Force to Prevail.** Should conflict occur, SOF enable the Joint Force across all domains with lethality and precision.
- **Preserving Strategic Focus.** SOF prevent terrorist threats against the Homeland by aggressively disrupting threats at their origin. SOF's rapid response to crises allows the Nation to focus on pacing threats.

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To manage today's challenges and modernize for the future, we look forward to working with the Department and Congress to prudently manage risk today without deferring increased risk to the Nation's security and strength to tomorrow.

The success of SOF is strengthened by the close civilian-military partnership between ASD(SO/LIC) and the Commander, USSOCOM. Our partnership strengthens America's warfighting edge for the Joint Force. In its service secretary-like role, ASD(SO/LIC) is a force-multiplier for SOF's readiness, fiscal responsibility, and sustainability. SO/LIC works within Department-level mechanisms to ensure that SOF remain a decisive tool for deterrence and conflict. By continuing to institutionalize data-driven decision making and embedding analytics into oversight, resourcing, and strategic planning, SO/LIC is ensuring that force design, capabilities, and training are optimized for future warfare, and that resources are allocated to maximize warfighter effectiveness.

SO/LIC's priorities for SOF oversight are focused on five key areas: 1) readiness and sustainability, to ensure SOF is combat-ready, well-trained, and deployed at a sustainable operational tempo; 2) modernization and investment, to ensure that every dollar spent enhances lethality, agility, and survivability; 3) strategic planning, to ensure SOF's missions, design, and structure are clearly aligned with national security objectives; 4) fiscal discipline and transparency, to ensure efficiency and prevent waste; and 5) talent management and retention, to support long-term career development and sustainment of our elite operators. SO/LIC requires the requisite tools, workforce, and resources to accelerate the implementation of these priorities and enable SOF to be the most effective, disciplined, and strategically relevant force it can be.

WIN: AN IRREGULAR AND ASYMMETRIC ADVANTAGE FOR THE NATION

SOF will win anytime and anywhere for the Nation. The SOF enterprise draws upon over a half-century of irregular warfare and decades of combat experience and credibility to execute our critical roles in three specific mission sets: *deterrence*, *counterterrorism*, and *crisis response*. SOF will succeed in these core missions through the *prevent*, *prepare*, *prevail*, and *preserve* framework. First, SOF leverage persistent access and placement, shaping the operational environment to *prevent* conflict by altering adversaries' decision calculus as America's irregular warfare specialists. SOF *prepare* the operational environment through unique authorities for training and building partner nation capabilities. Should deterrence fail, decades-long relationships with partners and persistent daily SOF presence provide advantageous posture inside the weapons engagement zone and along the periphery to enable the Joint Force to *prevail* in conflict. Lastly, SOF preserve strategic focus on deterrence by faithfully executing *counterterrorism* and *crisis response* missions, allowing the Nation to focus on pacing threats.

Preventing Great Power Conflict

As America's premier partnering and irregular warfare force, SOF counter our adversaries' use of statecraft through persistent access and placement and transregional campaigning against strategic competitors. SOF's value for the Joint Force includes shaping and affecting our adversaries' decision calculus left of conflict by providing Combatant Commands new opportunities and advantages. Persistent, small footprint, and low-cost SOF deployments allow our allies and partners to build capacity, counter malign activity, promote stability, and bolster deterrence – ultimately preventing wider conflict. On any given day, more than 6,000

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SOF are deployed to over 80 countries across the globe and support over 30 ongoing named operations. The demand for SOF continues to grow. From 2023 to 2025, we have seen a 35% increase in Combatant Command demand for SOF capabilities to support deterrence efforts.

In this effort, Theater Special Operations Commands (TSOCs) are USSOCOM's marquee units as our regionally aligned operational headquarters. TSOCs serve as USSOCOM and the Geographic Combatant Commands' primary SOF command and control element by integrating SOF from across the Services into campaigning efforts, directly contributing to irregular warfare options for the Joint Force. Deterrence is a function of influence, and SOF contribute to deterrence via influence generated by SOF's long-term established engagements with partner forces. Furthermore, our TSOCs improve Geographic Combatant Command interoperability and provide the Joint Force with expanded, low-cost options to gain awareness before conflict and exponentially enhance Joint Force kill webs should conflict occur. TSOCs are ideally suited to identify malign and coercive activities and counter them with precise, scalable, and credible all-domain options working alongside partners, allies, and U.S. interagency teams for the Joint Force.

Modernized and updated fiscal authorities enable SOF to campaign effectively against state and non-state actors and achieve an outsized impact across multiple mission sets and domains. We greatly appreciate Congress acting last year to codify, expand, and clarify the intent for the former Section 1202 – now 10 U.S.C. § 127d – irregular warfare authority. Your efforts resulted in increased Combatant Command interest in irregular warfare as they look for more opportunities to employ SOF. USSOCOM continues to expand the use of 10 U.S.C. § 127f (Clandestine Operational Preparation of the Environment and Non-conventional Assisted Recovery). This authority provides SOF the flexibility to meet Combatant Commander-directed requirements by setting the conditions for mission execution in potential operational areas. Novel approaches to operational and fiscal authorities will significantly enhance SOF operational effectiveness, efficiency, continuity of effort, and synchronization of SOF activities at the scale necessary to orient towards key threats and keep our enemies deterred. We stand ready to work with Congress to sustain and adapt our operational and fiscal authorities at pace with mission needs, all to provide the Nation with irregular warfare options across the spectrum of conflict.

The SOF enterprise remains steadfast in investing in operations in the information environment. Military Information Support Operations (MISO) to counter our adversaries in the information environment increased by more than 120% over the last four years. The marked increase required the Department to update capabilities, policies, and guidance to compete with adversaries within the information domain. ASD(SO/LIC) serves as the principal civilian advisor to the Secretary of Defense and Under Secretary of Defense for Policy on MISO policy, capability development, and operational employment of DoD forces and components across all domains to meet novel challenges. ASD(SO/LIC) also establishes operational prioritization in concert with regional policy offices and oversees the centralized MISO operational budget administration. Additionally, ASD(SO/LIC) oversees the Executive Secretariat for the Strategic Information Oversight Board, which convenes leaders across the DoD to integrate operations in the information environment with the Department's strategies, plans, and activities.

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USSOCOM serves as DoD's coordinating authority for Internet-based MISO and capability sponsor of the Joint MISO WebOps Center (JMWC). The JMWC provides Combatant Commanders with options to generate desired information operations globally, especially to counter propaganda of both state and non-state actors. Working closely alongside interagency partners, the JMWC also connects Combatant Command efforts with allied nations by identifying capable partners and strengthening combined relationships to better counter malign narratives.

Preparing the Environment through Strategic Partnerships

SOF prepare and shape the operational environment by strengthening the capabilities and readiness of our allies and partners. USSOCOM's unique authorities for training and building partner capability and capacity allow SOF to build and maintain generational relationships and more effectively counter our adversaries. For USSOCOM, our partnerships are our "pacing" item. The more we have, the farther and faster we can go, along with more options that can be generated. Options take the form of access, potential basing, and overflight for the Joint Force. Within the USSOCOM headquarters alone, we have SOF representatives from 28 nations that serve as a foundation for our global SOF network. Our generational relationships with allies, partners, and interagency relationships are a cornerstone for our contribution to the Joint Force.

SOF partnerships and activities in the Western Hemisphere support our most sacred mission to defend the U.S. Homeland. In FY24 alone, SOF conducted 22 training iterations with partners from Mexico, Colombia, Paraguay, and more. Along our Southwest Border, Special Operations Command North (SOCNORTH) leverages deep relationships with U.S. law enforcement agencies, the intelligence community, and our Mexican SOF partners to provide indications and warnings to USNORTHCOM as directed. USSOCOM's relationships with U.S. Departments and Agencies and SOCNORTH's training of our capable Mexican SOF partners are critical to disrupting illicit networks and denying cartels or other criminal organizations their desired end states.

In the Indo-Pacific theater, our primary mission is to deter Chinese aggression. SOF leverage generational relationships to support and reassure partners and allies vulnerable to Chinese aggression. SOF form the core of joint training efforts that integrate civil and military resilience to deter, and if necessary, resist external aggression. Our persistent presence and partnerships in Indonesia, Thailand, Singapore, Japan, and the Republic of Korea, and elsewhere, demonstrate that we stand ready to support and defend a free and open Indo-Pacific. Your SOF turn longstanding partnerships into warfighting capability and capacity. In these countries, we see "burden sharing" change to "burden owning."

In Europe, SOF's decades-long commitment to building capacity and enhancing interoperability with allied and partnered SOF continues. Over the past year, SO/LIC signed four statements of intent with European allies focused on joint capability development, improved information and intelligence sharing, and increasing interoperability. Deepening ties with NATO through the integration of NATO Allied Special Operations Forces Command SOF build

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lethality and interoperability through persistent presence throughout the theater. SOF also serve as a critical integrating command supporting the Alliance. Our primary objective in Europe is to re-establish deterrence and ensure the Alliance will prevail should deterrence fail. SOF have served as a foundational synchronizer for training, equipping, and generating Ukrainian SOF capability. NATO's support to Ukrainian defense has deepened interoperability and significantly accelerated the Alliance's resilience and preparedness for future conflict.

Competition extends beyond the Indo-Pacific and Europe. Our competitors seek resources and partnerships globally, competing with us, our allies, and our partners for influence in Africa, the Middle East, Latin America, and the Arctic. Working with our interagency partners, SOF provide critical support to broader U.S. government efforts to address this challenge. USSOCOM supports regional partners in Africa and the Western Hemisphere by exposing the corrupt acquisition of minerals, resources, and strategic infrastructure by the Chinese Communist Party and their state-owned enterprises across the globe. Additionally, our TSOCs routinely support the disruption of Iranian efforts to avoid sanctions, impacting Beijing's access to illegal oil shipments.

Cooperation with interagency partners – such as the Departments of State, Commerce, Justice, Treasury, Homeland Security, and the National Counterterrorism Center, among many others – greatly enhanced the U.S. response to various threat streams over the past year. As the Coordinating Authority for Countering Weapons of Mass Destruction (CWMD), USSOCOM draws upon international, interagency, and joint relationships to deter weapons of mass destruction proliferation by state and non-state actors. SOF drive efforts to advance deterrence and strengthen the defense of the Homeland by focusing on countering current and emerging chemical, biological, and nuclear threats; bolstering support for DoD strategies, plans, and policies; and improving CWMD interoperability with partners.

SO/LIC oversees the DoD's small, but highly impactful, Counter Threat Finance (CTF) enterprise. SOF CTF support impacts the ability of adversaries to procure U.S. technology, move sanctioned assets and commodities, and leverage transnational organized crime and drug trafficking networks. CTF analysts at Special Operations Command Central played a key role in facilitating interagency action against illegal Iranian oil shipments that denied hundreds of millions of dollars in revenue to the Iranian regime. Additionally, CTF support to interagency activities focusing on cartels, fentanyl trafficking, and fentanyl chemical precursors yielded more than 200 seizures, 69 arrests, and 34 indictments. SOF also supported law enforcement targeting of several Mexican cartels and their use of cryptocurrency to launder funds.

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Enabling the Joint Force to Prevail

Should deterrence fail, the investments that SOF make prior to conflict in shaping and preparing the operational environment and building partner capacity enables the Joint Force to prevail in conflict. SOF leverage and employ unique authorities and capabilities to impose costs and create dilemmas for adversaries, both on the periphery and within the weapons engagement zone. USSOCOM develops SOF concepts to operate in contested and denied spaces in support of Joint Force maneuver.

SOF are increasingly testing their unique capabilities for large-scale conflict through Joint National Training Center events. In FY24, USSOCOM supported 27 distinct training events. As an example, U.S. Army Special Operations Command (USASOC) conducted the first SOF-only Joint Readiness Training Center rotation, focusing on large-scale combat operations and employing the full suite of Army Special Operations Forces' capabilities. The Command identified ways SOF can contribute to Joint Force maneuver, leveraging the depth and reach of forward-deployed SOF teams to develop resistance forces, enhance partner resilience, provide deep-area sensing, enable fires, maneuver with irregular partners, and exploit the information environment. In comparison to FY24, requests for SOF personnel participation in Joint Force training and experimentation events increased by over 70% in FY25.

In support of Combatant Commands, SOF participated in 29 exercises across the globe in FY24. One such exercise is Rim of the Pacific (RIMPAC) in 2024. It is the world's largest international maritime exercise with 29 nations, 40 surface ships, 3 submarines, and 14 national land forces. USSOCOM's Naval Special Warfare (NSW) Command often participates in exercises like RIMPAC with the Fleet and Joint Force to integrate their extensive capabilities. As the world's premier maritime SOF, NSW integrates with the Fleet to deliver all-domain options for Naval and Joint Force commanders. Converging undersea operational capabilities, extensive partnerships, and advanced intelligence and communications platforms bolster Fleet lethality with substantive access to either denied or contested areas. Acting as the inside force, NSW provides critical linkages across kill webs. In comparison with FY24, Combatant Command requests for SOF in FY25 included 17 additional exercises and a 50% increase in SOF personnel participation.

As demonstrated in current conflicts, small uncrewed aerial systems (sUAS) play an increasingly important role on the modern battlefield. As the DoD Global Coordinator for counter sUAS (C-sUAS) Prior to Launch (PtL), USSOCOM continues to synchronize plans and operations across the Joint Force, intelligence community, interagency, and select partner nations to disrupt and degrade adversary networks responsible for sUAS production, proliferation, and use. These efforts have enabled interagency law enforcement partners to directly affect the networks illicitly procuring U.S. components for use in adversary sUAS production. In 2024, USSOCOM and the DoD helped interagency and law enforcement partners as they sanctioned over 1,400 entities, added 150 entities to the Denied Entities List, and arrested individuals violating export controls and financial sanctions.

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To assist USSOCOM in synchronizing DoD C-sUAS PtL efforts, SO/LIC maintains the C-sUAS PtL Executive Committee (CPEC) to serve as the senior forum to lead, facilitate, and advocate for DoD efforts to disrupt and degrade threat networks and to address the DoD's critical gaps. The CPEC has expanded its focus from C-sUAS to counter uncrewed systems (C-UXS) of all sizes and in multiple domains (air, ground, surface, and underwater). SO/LIC also understands that partners in the interagency have critical roles in the effort to curb our adversaries' production and distribution of unmanned systems. SO/LIC, through its Irregular Warfare Technical Support Detachment (IWTS), is working with key international partners – such as Israel – to co-develop new and innovative C-UXS systems.

Preserving Strategic Focus

SOF preserve the strategic focus of the Joint Force, Department, and Nation by maintaining the global remit on crisis response and CT. Ongoing geopolitical and economic issues, threats from capable hostile adversaries, and multiple conflicts challenge global security and stability. Technological advancements provide state and non-state actors with tools to confront us across multiple domains. The convergence of transregional threats increases the risk to the Homeland. Without SOF's ability to keep the pressure on violent extremist organizations (VEOs) and terrorist networks across the globe via kinetic and non-kinetic actions, the Nation would not be able to maintain focus on its pacing threat.

USSOCOM is optimizing its global posture while sustaining the ability to respond to crises worldwide. In the past three years, the requirements for USSOCOM to fulfill its crisis response remit increased more than 170% over the previous decade's annual average. In 2024, USSOF provided forces and command and control for several global crises that required rapid deployment, complex problem-solving, and synchronized effects. For example, USSOF provided security reinforcement and were staged in support of potential military-assisted departures for U.S. Embassy personnel in Niger, Chad, and Lebanon.

Presidentially directed crisis response operations are inherently unpredictable and vary year-to-year in timing, duration, and total cost. Operational and logistics costs for crisis response increased more than 250% from FY20 to FY23. With increases in the frequency of crises and compounded costs, SOCOM has paid for previous crises response deployments, drawing away from USSOCOM's total modernization efforts that aim to meet future challenges.

USSOCOM is the DoD's Coordinating Authority for countering VEOs (C-VEO). SOF remain vigilant in protecting Americans and America's interests globally through our enduring capabilities and hard-won lessons from decades of combat operations. VEOs and terrorism remain a persistent threat to the Nation, our allies, and our partners.

The threat to the United States from al-Qa'ida or the Islamic State of Iraq and ash-Sham (ISIS) is moderate and trending up. Both organizations have metastasized, operating in a myriad of locations across the globe with intent and capability to threaten the Homeland and U.S. persons abroad. External attack capabilities are varied across ISIS's global affiliates, but the

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group remains focused on attempting to conduct and inspire global attacks against the West and Western interests. The most likely terrorist threat will manifest in small cells or individuals inspired by violent extremist ideologies to conduct attacks. The continued availability of safe havens and under-governed spaces increase risk to the Homeland and U.S. interests overseas. Additional groups like al-Shabaab and the Houthis – encouraged by destabilizing activities from nation-states like Iran – are playing an outsized role in regional conflicts leading to broader concerns and implications to national security.

ASD (SO/LIC) is the DoD lead coordinator for the Global Coalition to Defeat ISIS. The Coalition consists of 88 countries, 29 of which contribute personnel to support Combined Joint Task Force-Operation INHERENT RESOLVE. The Coalition leverages longstanding and trusted CT partnerships to address shared strategic challenges. It also provides an opportunity to position partners to take on a greater share of the burden to address the evolving threat of ISIS. Coalition members remain acutely aware of the conditions that permitted a surge of ISIS in 2014 and resolve to prevent a resurgence in the future.

Western Hemisphere-based Foreign Terrorist Organizations (Tren de Aragua, Mara Salvatrucha, Cártel de Sinaloa, Cártel de Jalisco Nueva Generación, Cártel del Noreste, La Nueva Familia Michoacana, Cártel de Golfo, and Cárteles Unidos) incite campaigns of violence, dominate Western Hemisphere illicit markets, and are incorporating advanced technological capabilities into their cross-border operations – including U.S. bound drug trafficking and human trafficking and smuggling. These groups are financially motivated and are intertwined with local, regional, and global networks. They are highly adaptable, better equipped, and more difficult to dismantle than some other non-state actors. Through kidnappings, assassinations, bribery, and extortion, these entities will ensure the survivability and profitability of their illicit activities while degrading the safety and security of the U.S. at home or abroad.

Since the Hamas attack on October 7th, 2023, the U.S. has leveraged SOF heavily in our response. SOF deployed quickly and stood ready to provide our Nation with crisis evacuation options. Moreover, in the subsequent regional unrest, SOF often have the lead in stabilization efforts and countering the malign influence of Iran and its proxies. The rapid collapse of the Syrian regime in late 2024 demonstrates how quickly the operating environment can shift. We, along with our allies and partners, must continue to pressure VEOs wherever they emerge to deny them the time and space to threaten the Homeland. We have learned from the past and cannot become complacent.

USSOCOM highly values the ability to support partnered SOF elements to combat terrorism under 10 U.S.C. § 127e. The program presents low-cost, low-risk, high-payoff opportunities to achieve strategic CT objectives while enhancing partnerships. Our CT and deterrence missions are mutually reinforcing and, by nature, intertwined. In many cases, SOF's C-VEO efforts are the bedrock of our partnerships and amplify our ability to influence. Consequently, we gain efficiencies where C-VEO and irregular warfare campaigning are complementary. As the Joint Force increasingly looks to employ SOF for irregular warfare and

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deterrence, the Combatant Commands also seek to use 10 U.S.C. 127d authority to provide support to foreign partners that support or facilitate authorized irregular warfare operations by SOF.

Operation GALLANT PHOENIX (OGP) is a USSOCOM-led initiative that facilitates information sharing among international and interagency partners to asymmetrically disrupt al-Qa'ida and ISIS. With 30 partners from across the globe, the enterprise continues to grow, and several countries are expected to join OGP in 2025. The SOF enterprise deploys counter threat finance analysts to OGP to disrupt illicit financing and extremist activities. In FY24, OGP operations contributed to more than 1,600 investigations and 1,700 foreign disclosures. Additionally, DoD analysts used OGP data to support numerous Treasury designations against VEO facilitators. All these actions contribute to degrading VEO networks and ambitions.

PEOPLE: HUMANS ARE MORE IMPORTANT THAN HARDWARE

We win with our PEOPLE. Consistent with the first SOF Truth that *Humans are More Important than Hardware*, our people are our comparative and competitive advantage. SOF sustain a culture where the best ideas win, and meritocracy reigns by *embracing* America's greatest resource, our Nation's most talented and dedicated men and women. The SOF enterprise trains and *educates* our warriors to solve the Nation's hardest problems. To ensure the resilience and well-being of our warriors, SOF *empower* those who serve at the tip of the spear with cutting-edge support from assessment to retirement. The Nation demands lethality and constant readiness out of our people. Consequently, people are our number one priority, and we invest accordingly. Service in SOF is an unparalleled experience for our Nation's best.

Embracing America's Greatest Resource

To generate a force that can succeed in today's complex security environment, SOF embrace America's greatest resource by recruiting, assessing, selecting, training, and employing the most talented personnel. We capitalize on uncompromisingly high standards and SOF-peculiar training programs that generate the most lethal fighting force in the world. We depend on the Military Services to recruit warriors and to provide SOF with critical enablers – as most special operations require non-SOF support. Due to past years' Service recruiting challenges, Army SOF are making hard decisions as they face personnel cuts and force restructuring.

SOF Service Component Commands maintain rigorous assessment and selection courses with high standards and work closely with their parent Services to help identify, attract, and recruit our Nation's top talent. In addition to Service recruiting efforts, SOF-specific efforts continue to enable the Services by providing high-quality warriors to serve successfully in the Joint Force. For example, approximately 75% of the 1,000 sailors assessed annually for NSW go on to serve in conventional Navy units. Similarly, approximately 80% of the 3,000 annual Ranger and Special Forces recruits go on to serve in conventional Army units.

The Nation calls on SOF to conduct high-risk and sensitive missions. Our personnel must be prepared to deploy cutting-edge technologies for precision effects – kinetic and non-

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kinetic. SOF must have perseverance, resilience, multi-domain adaptability, foreign language proficiency, cultural acumen, and refined communication skills. Combining these strengths allows our teams to work more effectively, innovate faster, and overcome challenges that require mental and physical agility.

Talent management in SOF means turning human potential into unparalleled results. SO/LIC and USSOCOM capitalize on the unique skillsets of our military and civilian personnel with targeted policies and programs that assist in the retention and longevity of our elite professionals. When transitioning from military service, SOF programs and partnerships across the DoD and industry help ensure successful integration into new roles while benefitting from the skills and expertise developed through service in SOF.

Educating to Solve the Nation's Hardest Problems

The SOF enterprise trains our warriors for complexity and educates them for uncertainty as a hedge toward the high-risk environment in which they will operate. Because SOF's tactical actions routinely carry strategic and political consequences, our educational programming and training remain critical in preparing our forces. Comprehensive training programs focused on cognitive and physical performance optimize SOF's lethality and operational effectiveness. Service Component programs use a holistic approach with embedded human-performance professionals and instructors to maximize training pathways. USSOCOM's academic offerings focus on Joint SOF tactical-level leadership and are continuously updated to meet evolving security challenges and the rapidly changing character of warfare.

Our adversaries are working hard to avoid the U.S. Military's strengths and assert themselves in the gray zone. Irregular warfare is a critical tool for campaigning against our adversaries. To further institutionalize irregular warfare across the Joint Force, SO/LIC updates policy, informs strategy and doctrine, and modernizes irregular warfare education and training. Through the conduct of irregular warfare education and training, along with joint and combined activities and operations, our allies and partners are better equipped to deter and resist aggression. Irregular warfare efforts and activities enhance posture and provide options to counter an adversary's gray zone activities. Consequently, an improved understanding of irregular warfare bolsters deterrence and makes large-scale conflict less likely.

The Joint Special Operations University (JSOU) is the central pillar of SOF peculiar education. Through engagement with academia, the interagency community, and international partners, JSOU provides accredited resident and distance learning to prepare SOF professionals to solve novel and complex problems while serving in the Joint Force and Joint SOF environments. In the 2024 academic year, JSOU provided 51 accredited courses to educate more than 9,500 students. JSOU's Senior Enlisted Academy connects strategic thinking to tactical action for SOF Non-Commissioned Officers renowned for their creativity, disciplined action, and understanding of the strategic environment. JSOU's new TSOC and Component Command Team Courses offer SOF peculiar education to our Generals and Flag Officers to prepare them for USSOCOM's unique and demanding missions. Additionally, JSOU assists TSOCs with

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tailored instruction globally. JSOU taught more than 1,700 international students from over 90 countries during the 2024 academic year.

The agility within USSOCOM Service Components allows them to quickly adapt training programs to the changing character of war. In 2024, USASOC established the first Army military occupational specialty focused on robotics and autonomous systems across all domains. USASOC's training course will develop warriors with the deep expertise necessary for innovation and integration of novel technology into their formations. Similarly, NSW is incorporating the most advanced surface and undersea SOF maritime mobility platforms into tactics and training. In FY24, U.S. Air Force Special Operations Command established the Air Commando Development Center, significantly boosting regional training for multi-domain operations, including space, electromagnetic spectrum, cyber, and operations in the information environment. U.S. Marine Corps Forces Special Operations Command is focused on developing, evaluating, and exercising multi-domain kill webs in competition to enable targeting for the Joint Force in conflict. Our training programs are threat-informed and matched to capabilities to ensure our SOF are ready for the most demanding and high-risk missions.

Empowering Those Who Serve at the Tip of the Spear

In SOF, people are our platform. SO/LIC and USSOCOM continue to take a holistic approach to optimizing performance and enhancing readiness through SOF-unique support programs. Preservation of the Force and Family (POTFF) is USSOCOM's premier program to strengthen readiness and resiliency for SOF personnel and their families. At the same time, the Warrior Care Program (WCP) serves to coordinate care for the recovery, rehabilitation, and reintegration of those whose resiliency has been challenged by wounds, injuries, or illnesses. The WCP addresses SOF-unique challenges for our personnel and families that Service-common support resources cannot meet.

The POTFF program remains focused on preventative, performance-oriented services. Repeatedly, the program demonstrates that it enhances performance across the physical, cognitive, and psychological domains while improving family and other interpersonal relationships. 86% of our entire SOF community utilizes POTFF. Nearly one-third of the SOF community seeks behavioral healthcare annually. We view this utilization level as validation of the resources we are dedicating to POTFF and as an indicator that the stigma associated with mental healthcare is diminishing.

Fulfilling our commitment to our warriors, the WCP provides recovery coordination services to ensure SOF personnel who are wounded, ill, or injured receive responsive and effective care. Effective care enhances resilience and extends careers. These efforts are key to retaining talent and returning our personnel to their unit so they can continue to serve. Over the past fiscal year, the program supported more than 7,200 cases, retaining nearly 70% of wounded, ill, and injured active-duty SOF. The WCP's adaptive sports programming enhances recovery and fast-tracks healing through sports and competition. With WCP's support, SOF athletes regularly compete in the DoD Warrior Games, Invictus Games, and many more competitive

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events. The combination of POTFF and the WCP provides a continuum of support for our personnel through performance enhancement, injury recovery, and transition out of uniform.

Additionally, the SOF enterprise's approach to brain health and cancer studies shows the commitment to our warriors' readiness and longevity. While much remains unknown about the long-term effects of blast overpressure on the brain, we are taking decisive action to protect our personnel today. Our strategy prioritizes education, monitoring, and early intervention. We are actively reducing exposure through cutting-edge measures, including absorbent materials, suppressors, simulations, augmented and virtual reality, and 3D-printed charges designed to minimize explosive impact. Moreover, USSOCOM signed a cooperative research and development agreement with the National Football League to further collaborate and learn more about brain health. Alongside the Defense Health Agency, we are also looking into elevated cancer incidents among SOF personnel to better understand causal linkages and create prevention and treatment strategies.

Determined to prevent suicide and other forms of self-harm, the SOF enterprise engages the Nation's leading experts to identify novel suicide prevention approaches and address the underlying cognitive and emotional health of our personnel. Through quarterly events – called "*1st SOF Truth - Focus on our People*" with SOF leaders from the tactical to strategic levels– we ensure the force is aware of resources, programming, and training available to optimize cognitive performance and emotional well-being. SO/LIC and USSOCOM are modernizing suicide prevention training through interactive virtual reality technology. The effort trains leaders on how to recognize suicidal ideations and tendencies in the force while providing members of our formation with improved tools to respond to teammates in crisis.

The SOF enterprise takes pride in spearheading proactive measures that optimize our warriors' readiness and exponentially enhance lethality. We actively engage the Services and Joint Staff to collaborate and share the lessons from our people-focused programming. From wellness at home station to tactical performance on the battlefield, SOF inform and guide DoD-wide efforts.

TRANSFORM: MODERNIZE FOR THE FUTURE

SO/LIC and USSOCOM continue to trailblaze and build an enduring advantage for the Joint Force through modernization efforts focused on our *people, technologies, organizations, and capabilities* with a sustained commitment to evolve for the future operating environment. Leveraging our powerful Service-like acquisition authorities with rapid research, development, testing, and evaluation, USSOCOM invests in priorities and capitalizes on our Nation's strategic advantage: innovation. Additionally, SO/LIC's IWTSD rapidly identifies and develops capabilities for DoD and interagency customers to conduct irregular warfare activities. As a pathfinder for DoD in testing and adopting disruptive technology, the SOF enterprise accelerates momentum to create advantages for the Joint Force across the continuum of competition and conflict.

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Building an Enduring SOF Advantage

Building an enduring SOF advantage begins with our top priority – our *people*. Our approach to preparing for the future is always balanced with our operational remits and sustaining the readiness of SOF today. Research and development are at the core of our preparation as we collaborate with leading academic institutions, medical organizations, and industry partners to enhance the performance of our SOF warriors. Our partnerships drive development towards optimized health and human performance tools, cutting-edge medical treatments, and innovative approaches to mission planning, predictive maintenance, and logistics. USSOCOM also invests heavily in education to prepare our SOF warriors for the uncertainty they will encounter.

While at the forefront of scientific and technological development, SOF aim to wrap technology around our warriors. SO/LIC and USSOCOM remain committed to experimenting for the DoD and pursuing the integration of data, analytics, and Artificial Intelligence (AI) into our formations. AI-driven support systems will enhance the organization, training, and equipping of SOF, while mission planning tools will compress timelines. Data, analytics, and the application of AI will revolutionize the battlefield.

SO/LIC and USSOCOM are taking an enterprise approach to data and AI. From viewing AI as experimental, SOF see AI as a core strategic capability requiring resourcing and a clear and collaborative technical roadmap across SOF – from the boardroom to the team room. We see the emergence of “*physical AI*,” meaning the convergence of AI, autonomy, and robotics, as the big bet and principal to the success of future warfighting. We will make this big bet responsibly and in alignment with the guidance and policies of the administration and Department. We must take advantage of frontier AI models and understand how our adversaries are using them. SOF must also ensure its data and architecture are interoperable with the Joint Force.

Through partnerships with trusted experts from large and small industries, government laboratories, and key non-profit partners, SOF are integrating AI to enable decision-making at machine speed. Our collaborative approach ensures that USSOCOM works to link disconnected capabilities, which reduces our warriors’ workload and multiplies SOF’s capabilities. Examples of applications that reduce cognitive burden include automated switching functions for communications, operations center programming, and enhanced sonar on maritime platforms. Pathfinding with autonomy, SOF are demonstrating automated target tracking and natural language processing on government-owned architectures with the potential to scale innovative solutions across SOF aviation. The application of AI will significantly enhance SOF’s impact in competition and lethality in conflict.

Current conflicts demonstrate the importance of rapidly fielding inexpensive uncrewed systems to match our adversaries’ use of drones. Million-dollar missiles cannot be used to shoot down thousand-dollar drones. For the long term, this is a cost-benefit that will not work. The SOF enterprise is working to integrate uncrewed systems into our formations to build economic advantage on the battlefield. SOF are prioritizing uncrewed systems and robotics in every domain that are attritable, affordable, and can be employed at scale. Small, low-signature

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uncrewed systems and autonomous underwater and surface vehicles provide SOF with deep penetration capabilities in contested environments.

No matter how much technology we have to empower our SOF warriors, our organizations must evolve to match the fluid future of warfare. Complex and dynamic environments of the future will require SOF to rapidly deploy in all environments with a range of capabilities that will enable Joint Force and interagency success across ever-changing mission profiles. SOF leverage authorities, testing, and experimentation to develop tomorrow's scalable and tailorable multi-domain force packages, ensuring our forces are always ready for the challenges ahead.

SO/LIC established the Center for Special Operations Analysis (CSOA) to evolve our organization adequately. The CSOA coordinates, conducts, and ensures objective modeling, simulation, analyses, and assessments for SOF. CSOA's work will enable and enhance the analysis of force development and design, programming and resourcing decisions, support to SOF exercises and experimentation, and assessments of SOF contributions to DoD strategies, plans, and initiatives. In 2025, CSOA will focus on the contributions of SOF serving as an inside force, concepts and capabilities based on lessons learned from the Russia-Ukraine war, and contributions to the Joint Force by attacking an adversary's high-value critical nodes.

USSOCOM is examining its organizational structure and modernizing it accordingly. In FY24, USSOCOM established the Joint Special Operations Force Development and Design Directorate without additional resources or staffing. The Directorate will provide sustainable, service-like experimentation and exercises to the SOF enterprise. We will gain efficiencies by coordinating multi-domain development and design efforts with the Services and Joint Force.

SOF must also expand partnerships to meet the demands of the future battlefield. USSOCOM is partnering with USSPACECOM, USCYBERCOM, and USSTRATCOM to advance the convergence of SOF, space, and cyber effects. A critical nexus, our collaboration will synchronize concept development and operational planning to address key operational problems for the Joint Force. Advancing this nexus in 2025, USSOCOM established the Space Force Special Operations Command to deliver specialized space personnel and capabilities to our units responsible for campaigning, our TSOCs. Through its IWTSO, SO/LIC has effectively leveraged cost-sharing agreements with five international partners to accelerate the delivery of irregular warfare technologies including but not limited to anti-tunneling, one-way attack/autonomous systems, C-UXS, cyber, cognitive warfare, and advanced munition initiatives. For example, the IWTSO's anti-tunneling research and development program with Israel has delivered impactful tunnel detection, mapping, and mitigation capabilities that improved SOF readiness in subterranean operations. These capabilities are also leveraged to help tangibly improve U.S. border security.

Testing and experimentation are crucial to hold ourselves accountable in developing tomorrow's scalable and tailorable Joint SOF multi-domain force packages today. USSOCOM developed a new multi-domain, enterprise-level joint exercise, SONIC SPEAR, to ensure we test

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our modernization investments under the most rigorous conditions imaginable to solve the Joint Force's problems on their worst days. SONIC SPEAR will focus on providing target data to the Joint Force while SOF operate in denied and contested spaces.

SOF prioritize programs that frustrate adversary power projection while enabling Joint Force overmatch through enhanced lethality. We have four priority areas: *Assured Access and Preparation*, *All Domain Deep Sensing*, *Partnering for Protraction*, and *Sustainable C-VEO*.

Through investments in *Assured Access and Preparation*, USSOCOM enables its warriors to operate in environments ranging from contested to denied. One leading example is modernizing electronic warfare capabilities against evolving radio frequency threats for SOF-unique AC/MC-130J aircraft. Our radio frequency countermeasures system is completing testing and will be used as part of the defensive countermeasures suite to provide situational awareness and the threat response required for high-risk SOF missions. Additionally, USSOCOM partnered with the Army on the Future Long Range Assault Aircraft to incorporate SOF-unique requirements that extend our reach and speed in large-scale conflict – enabling access current rotorcraft cannot match. *Assured Access and Preparation* investments also include developing, testing, and fielding a wide range of maritime capabilities. The Combatant Craft Medium Mark 2 (CCM Mk2) is the next iteration of SOF maritime mobility, providing enhanced access in maritime environments. The CCM Mk2 will support the Joint Force in contested and denied areas with increased surveillance and reconnaissance capabilities and the ability to host multi-domain autonomous systems.

All Domain Deep Sensing investments enable finding and fixing targets in contested environments and effective decision-making at the tactical edge to support the Joint Force. The nexus of special operations, space, cyber, and strategic capabilities represents a powerful synergy in modern warfare, enabling on-the-ground intelligence, access, global communication, surveillance, information warfare, and network disruption. Investing in enterprise infrastructure, from computing power to data storage for AI, is critical to nexus operations. USSOCOM seeks to fuse operations and intelligence from multiple data streams to increase awareness and connectivity across kill webs in support of and to enable the Joint Force.

In the near future, a key data stream for our SOF Warriors will come from our uncrewed systems—whether in the air, land, or sea. Next-generation communications are crucial to keep our uncrewed systems connected. We invest in systems that communicate seamlessly in highly contested electronic warfare environments. *All Domain Deep Sensing* investments create a force multiplier effect for SOF operations by denying adversaries access to our spectrum and allowing us access to their information and data pathways.

Investments in *Partnering for Protraction* aim to provide continued assurance to our partners and allies over the long term, often through deep, generational relationships. *Partnering for Protraction* invests in people and infrastructure to deliver sustainable command, control, communications, computers, and intelligence to the Joint Force in contested or denied environments. Another investment example USSOCOM's focus on supporting partnerships to

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the maximum extent authorized under 10 U.S.C. § 127d/e/f). By ensuring SOF's ability to train, communicate with, and support partners and allies under a variety of conditions across the spectrum of conflict and competition, USSOCOM delivers an unparalleled asymmetric advantage to the Joint Force and Nation.

Sustainable C-VEO investments allow our force to preserve the Nation's strategic focus. Targeted investments in CT capabilities will prevent strategic distraction and mitigate risk to the Homeland. For example, USSOCOM will field the OA-1K Armed Overwatch aircraft, recently named the Skyraider II, as a low-cost, reliable, multi-role weapon system to support geographically isolated SOF that are going after VEOs at their origin. The aircraft will perform close air support, precision strikes, armed intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance in austere and permissive environments. The multi-role nature of the system allows USSOCOM to perform operations previously conducted by multiple aircraft more effectively and efficiently. Operating in austere environments, the OA-1K is modular and adaptable, allowing the platform to support other irregular warfare activities.

Accelerating Momentum

USSOCOM's unique attributes of being inherently joint, partnered, and globally deployed with acquisition authorities position it to contribute significantly to the overall modernization of the Joint Force and interagency partners. Twice a year, the SOF enterprise holds a joint summit with the Under Secretary for Acquisition and Sustainment to ensure the Department benefits fully from SOF's agility and ability to test new concepts and technology. As another example, SO/LIC's IWTSO partners with U.S. Federal agencies and allies for operational testing and evaluation to force multiply existing resources and accelerate innovation. The ability to buy, try, and decide reduces the risk of sunk investments in subpar products. Due to strong partnerships, we speed the adoption and scaling of commercially proven technology across the Joint Force.

Building a cutting-edge ecosystem of technology companies from the U.S. and allied countries is foundational to our modernization efforts. Alongside longstanding partnerships with major defense firms, venture capital-backed startups and small businesses also contribute to this ecosystem. We have decisively transitioned from merely educating the investment community to actively collaborating through several targeted initiatives. Collaboration enhances mutual understanding, empowers investors to grasp our capability needs more effectively, and grants USSOCOM access to a vast and influential international network of commercial technology firms.

CONCLUSION

Your SOF understand the breadth of challenges facing the Nation today and the volatility of tomorrow. SOF are tailor-made for this era. Leveraging generational relationships, SOF *prepare* the operating environment by building and preserving readiness alongside burden sharing partners. SOF's main effort – deterrence through irregular warfare – aims to *prevent* great power war by influencing our adversaries' decision cycles. Should deterrence fail, SOF stand ready to enable the Joint Force to *prevail* across all domains in high-intensity combat. By maintaining the global remit on CT and crisis response – anytime, anyplace – SOF address and

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solve problems quickly and allow the Joint Force and Nation to *preserve* strategic focus. The Nation gets all of this for less than 2% of the DoD budget and 3% of its force. SOF provide an outsized return on investment to the Nation.

SO/LIC and USSOCOM will continue to provide the leadership and advocacy necessary to ensure that your SOF remain the world's most highly skilled, lethal, and capable special operations force. The men and women of USSOCOM are grateful for your continued support.

Senator ERNST. Thank you, General Fenton, and we will start now with the senators' questions. I'll start with 5 minutes of questions and go on to the Ranking Member. If we have other Members join, we will have them ask questions as well. If we don't have other Members join, we will recess briefly and move to the closed hearing. So, this may be a very speedy round but I will go ahead and start.

General Fenton, so you mentioned the personnel reductions in force, and since the announcement of SOF personnel cuts under the previous Administration, I have been very firmly and vocally opposed to that. The return on investment our Nation gets from our Special Operations Forces is not only measurable, it is absolutely

unmatched. Despite those reductions, SOF continues to do what it does best, it's adapting, innovating, and overcoming.

General Fenton, can you speak to how SOF is adapting its training pipelines to enable future operators to integrate high tech capabilities like AI, cyber, and electronic warfare more effectively?

General FENTON. Senator, I can. I would start by saying I think you know you're your SOF very well, in terms of that we innovate and I like to think we innovate for today and we modernize for tomorrow. As we think about tomorrow, that's certainly through the lens of the lessons learned that we're watching vis-à-vis the events in Ukraine. I think it's more important to not just observe those lessons, but as you laid out, institutionalize them.

I think in the instance of institutionalization of those lessons I would offer U.S. Army Special Operations, ARSOF, has undergone two, what I think are pretty significant efforts against this change of character of war. First, is they've created a brand-new course, the remote Uncrewed Systems Integration Course down at Fort Bragg, a course that is about a 6-week program of instruction, bringing together everything from learning how to build the drone, fly drones, and then certainly adapt them as we have seen on the battlefield.

The second thing they've done, I would characterize in terms of institutionalizing, is they've created a brand-new Military Occupational Specialty (MOS) or job title. That job title is remote systems integrator, and they've created that around the backdrop of a Special Forces warrant officer, a Green Beret warrant officer, and after their training is complete a multi-month program of instruction, they'll go back to the Special Forces groups and start to really take that as a master trainer and weave it into all group training.

You would see that across many of our components. But I think, Senator, those are a couple of examples I'd want to give you.

Senator ERNST. No, that's great, and I think many of us recognize there's nothing more dangerous than a warrant officer. So, appreciate that new MOS. So, let's talk a little bit more about those cuts. A critical strength of SOF is their ability to lead on emerging technologies and developing those capabilities that kind of ripple across the broader force, and it speaks directly to the indispensable role that they play in today's complex threat environment.

So, any additional reductions that we might see in SOF wouldn't just impact our SOF, they would degrade our ability to project power around the globe. So, General Fenton, from an operational perspective, how would further force reductions impact SOF's ability to respond to emerging threats in regions like Indo-Pacific Command (INDOPACOM), Europe, and of course the Middle East?

General FENTON. Well, Senator, I would offer right out the gate that that would absolutely hurt. It would hurt fairly significantly, especially against the backdrop of, I think over the last 3, 3½ years, we've seen a 5,000-person teammate reduction inside of SOCOM already. That's against the backdrop of communications, logistics, intelligence, civil affairs, and sci-ops, and of course operators. I think all those are the type of capabilities that you see combatant commanders, as I mentioned in my opening statement, asking for more and more to the tune of about 35 percent. I think that would absolutely impact that. We're already forced to make tough

choices and tradeoffs. Those would certainly make those would amplify those tough choices and tradeoffs and really put us in a place where I've mentioned earlier in the statement, we're already at a zero-sum game.

Senator ERNST. Thank you, and just in the time that I have remaining, can you please characterize the situation that unfolds when we have SOF teams that are out on the ground as force multipliers? One example that I'm thinking about this is many years ago in Africa when we had Special Forces Operational Detachment Alphas (ODAs) there, we were able to bring together many different nations. Those nations had teams on the ground as well, but they could not get along with the populations that exist in some of those regions.

It took Americans and the leadership that these teams brought into Africa to bring all of these nationalities together into a collaborative force. Can you speak to how SOF really can provide that leadership in small teams, small numbers without a huge footprint and be able to bring different nations together?

General FENTON. I can, Senator. Small teams, small footprints, big impact, is the way I like to think about it. I think that starts with the fact that in our DNA is partnering, and SOF is known as a premier partner force. That's what we do across the globe and maybe even today to the tune of about 7,000 folks in about 80 different countries. It's all about beginning partnerships, and those partnerships then evolve into trust.

Once you get trust, then we're able to do everything, build partner capacity, develop some level of competency and capability. I think it just goes on from there, and even do exactly as you just described, bring folks together who otherwise may not be together. I think at the end of the day, amplify capability and capacity for any combatant commander or for the Secretary of Defense.

Senator ERNST. Thank you, General Fenton. Ranking Member Slotkin.

Senator SLOTKIN. Thank you. The Senator had very similar questions to the ones I had about what are the tradeoffs of these cuts, right? For me, it's hard to miss that Space Force got excluded from having to take cuts. I'm happy for them, that's a mission that's extremely important, but just would hope that if there's someone who's picking and choosing missions that are going to be cut versus protected, that I know you're advocating, but that sort of, we realize that the units that are in highest demand should not be taking the same haircut as everybody else across the force. So, hope that that's happening. Thank you for illustrating some of those tradeoffs that you would have.

I do want to, you know, understand what missions you have been tasked to do in recent months. I am, as someone who was a Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) officer and a Middle East specialist and did three tours in Iraq, I am 100 percent with you that just because you don't hear about threats in the news every day doesn't mean that they're not still out there plotting to kill Americans, attack the Homeland and do really devastating things. We of course have nation states that are causing all kinds of problems.

But I did see that the President designated Mexican cartels, a number of named cartels, as foreign terrorist organizations restrict-

ing in a positive way American citizens from providing support, materiel, leadership in any way to those organizations. Can you describe what, if any, guidance you've been getting and giving on lethal force against cartels on the southern border, given the buildup of about 10,000 U.S. Forces down there?

General FENTON. Thank you. I can begin with that and then we can talk the details. The designation of foreign terrorist organization does not grant us any new authorities as a DOD entity is. What it really does is it helps us unlock the doors to whole-of-government approach. Our threat finance analysts can now better provide their target packets to our counterparts in the whole-of-government approach. But what we are doing now is making sure that we provide options that we can be ready, lethal, and prepared should the President need us to continue to seal and protect the border.

To answer your question directly, it does not grant us any new authorities to take direct action or so forth.

Senator SLOTKIN. So, you would need commander-in-chief authority to go, for instance, and pursue drone attacks inside Mexico against cartels? I'm just asking, Mr. Musk said publicly that that foreign terrorist designation authorizes drone strikes against Mexican cartels inside Mexico. I'm just trying to understand fact from fiction here.

Do you believe you have that authority today? Understanding the designation alone may not give it to you, do you believe you have the authority today to cross over the Mexican border and use drone strikes to go after cartels?

General FENTON. No, ma'am. The designation of Foreign Terrorist Organizations (FTO) does not grant us any new authorities.

Senator SLOTKIN. But separate from the FTO designation, do you, as the service secretary believe you have that? I'm just trying to understand. I'm not—

General FENTON. Yes, ma'am.

Senator SLOTKIN. I have no problem with them being designated. I have no problem going against them and their financing, right, their materiel. But I think certainly as part of this Committee, we want to understand use of lethal force in a neighboring State.

So, is there in any way separate from FTO designation, do you currently have the authority to shoot down, shoot at Mexican cartels over the border right now?

General FENTON. No, ma'am. I do not.

Senator SLOTKIN. Okay. Thank you for clarifying, and then you know, I think a lot of us on the Committee are very worried about Taiwan and a potential problem with China over the next few years. I'm the co-chair of the Taiwan caucus, so we think about this a lot.

Can you give me your best assessment of, you know, what our security assistance activities there, our training, maybe we have to go into classified session, but would appreciate you know, your role and deterrence understanding the role you're playing in that issue.

General FENTON. Senator, we'll absolutely have to go into a closed session to provide details. What I would offer is that, in support of INDOPACOM, you would see your Special Operations Forces doing many of the missions you described earlier. Certainly,

always being prepared for crisis response inside that area of responsibility (AOR) through our theater, Special Operations Command, Special Ops Command Pacific, that is a sacred obligation.

I think you would also see us in a counter-terrorism way making sure that any counter-terrorism (CT) threats, in this case, ISIS East Asia, we're doing in a partnered way with teammates in that region. Then I think you would see us certainly in deterrence. The way we present ourselves is placement and access. It builds relationships and partnerships and capability and all that I think is very valuable to Sam Paparo, and any Combatant Command (COCOM) commander because it provides options and opportunities they wouldn't otherwise have, and dilemmas and challenges to the adversary.

Senator SLOTKIN. Thank you. I yield back.

Senator ERNST. Thank you, and next we will go to Senator Budd. Thank you.

Senator BUDD. Thank you, Chairman. Again, thank you all for being here. General Fenton and Mr. Jenkins, thank you both for testifying before the committee on SOF. I was grateful for the opportunity to travel with Chairman Wicker last year to Joint Special Operations Command (JSOC) at Fort Bragg and to talk about the important work that SOF is doing not only in North Carolina, but around the world.

General Fenton, how would you characterize the demand and requirements for Special Operations Forces particularly in crisis response, General Fenton?

General FENTON. Senator first, thanks for visiting our forces and thanks for allowing us to be in the great State of North Carolina.

Senator BUDD. Our honor.

General FENTON. Appreciate all the hospitality there. I know all our forces do. I would offer in my opening statement; I laid out a couple.

I think in terms of crisis response, we have seen a pace and a scale and duration that I frankly have not seen in my 20 to 30 years in the Special Operations community. It is called on more. So, there's a requirement that's gone up by 200 percent in the last 3½ years. That's on or about 15 missions where we've been asked to get out very quickly and do the type of missions that I mentioned, either recover diplomats, protect an embassy at some point, maybe even recover a U.S. citizen. I think I don't anticipate the world to get any less volatile, and that looks like a pattern to me, and so, I think that demand has certainly gone up.

In deterrence, the combatant commanders have asked for Special Operations in the last 2 years at an increase of about 35 percent to do the type of missions that they're looking for us to do. That could involve anything from partner-based training to unilateral operations that would give them additional opportunities and advantages, maybe an unfair outside advantage and give the adversaries a bunch of dilemmas and challenges. So, I think I anticipate that going up.

Then I just mentioned earlier, terrorism is not done with us, and I think we absolutely have to stay focused on the threat that ISIS, al Qaeda, and Al-Shabaab pose and all three of those missions are absolutely in SOF wheelhouse.

Senator BUDD. General, talk a little bit about, you gave some numbers, 35 percent increase in area, 200 percent in another area. When you're called upon, how often do you have to say no because of that increased demand and perhaps the lack of readiness or rest or requirements that are needed?

General FENTON. Senator, I think that that question is at the heart of something the Command Sergeant Major and I think about every day, that's risk. I think in this case that risk is a combination of operational risk: do we have the capability and the capacity? Then for the first time, certainly in my memory, fiscal constraint risk: can we actually do it?

I think that drives to the heart of I've had to say no in some instances in deterrence, where I feel like I am taking risk almost 41 times in the last year, to combatant commanders that would want Special Forces operational detachments, so 12 Green Berets, folks who may want command and control nodes. I could go on and on.

I can give you additional examples in closed session, but I think it's certainly way too often, and my sense is that, first, that is risk. We're not meeting the combatant command, DURs demands in a special ops peculiar way. I'm also taking risk in modernization, and in a sense, I feel like I'm saying no to the SOCOM enterprise when we don't have the top line increase and the budget needed to modernize not only technology, but certainly our humans.

So, we think about education for an uncertain world, that's modernization, and on top of that, certainly even our authorities. So, I think I say no way too much. Then those two categories to combatant commanders in deterrence, and frankly, to where we need to be as a SOCOM enterprise to win tomorrow, just like we've been winning today and in the past years.

Senator BUDD. Thank you for that, and lots of other questions, either for the record or the closed session.

Senator BUDD. Mr. Jenkins, again, thank you for being here. See if you're tracking this provision in the Senate Fiscal Year 2026 NDAA includes a provision requiring the Assistant Secretary of Defense for SO/LIC and the Commander of Special Operations to ensure the annual defense planning guidance includes specific guidance for requirements and employments Special Operation Forces across the spectrum of conflict. Are you tracking that, sir, and care to elaborate?

Mr. JENKINS. Yes, sir. Yes, and thank you for that very much. So, with our Interim National Defense Strategic Guidance, we have three lines of effort, defend the Homeland, deter China, and increased burden sharing. The only force that can fill in or blend across all three lines of effort there is the Special Operations Force.

In my service like capacity, I've been able to advocate and make sure that as the defense planning guidance goes forward and now gets underway in earnest, that my peers, my counterparts, ensure that SOF is adequately and thoroughly accounted for in all three lines of effort there, and not just as an asterisk, that we play a major part.

Senator BUDD. [Presiding.] Thank you both again. It appears I'm out of time. Chairman Reed, you're recognized.

Senator REED. Thank you very much, Senator Budd. Gentlemen, thank you for your service and your sacrifice and that of your fam-

ily. I endorse your tribute to the non-commissioned officers, General Fenton.

General FENTON. Yes.

Senator REED. I would be in Fort Leavenworth not the military side, the other side without my NCO, so thank you.

General FENTON. I think we all would, Senator.

Senator REED. Yes, sir. Mr. Jenkins, SO/LIC is a work in progress, and I think we're making great progress. We want, as we envision a service secretary like civilian overlooking those Special Operations. I would note in the prepared partial statement for today, it says, "SO/LIC requires the requisite tools, workforce, and resources to accelerate the implementation of these priorities and enable Special Operations to be the most effective disciplined and strategically relevant force it can be."

Could you tell us what additional tool, workforce, and resources you need?

Mr. JENKINS. First, thank you and thank you to Congress for having the vision and foresight to make sure that SO/LIC exists, that we do have the tools that we do have right now. I'd just like to point out, thanks to section 922 and Congress's vision, you can see the physical manifestation back here with Dr. Sandra Hobson, who's the first to sit in that position, that 922 facilitated. So, we are underway in establishing the service secretary side of Special Operations, and that's thanks to Congress. So, we welcome your continued engagement and reinforcement.

In terms of additional authorities or funding that we would need, we certainly welcome that, your continued engagement. One area that comes to mind, is in the realm of talent management. We want to make sure that SOF officers and enlisted leaders, that we have the ability as SOF enterprise leaders to advocate for their advancement, just like our service counterparts would for theirs as well. As a Green Beret, I come from the Army, but I'm also a SOF officer, and so, we want to make sure that we have that.

Then in terms of acquisition authorities we welcome additional discussion on how we can have more agile, more abundant acquisition authorities so that we can answer the need of those quick problems that we encounter out on the battlefield and be able to innovate and modernize and fund those accordingly.

Senator REED. Thank you very much. General Fenton, from your perspective, have you seen the benefits of this empowered senior civilian like secretary?

General FENTON. Senator, absolutely. I think this will be my third time at this table saying how critical it is, how much we appreciate the work this Congress has done in that arena. I think the first thing I offered you before, and maybe even yesterday, and thank you for the office call, was that having Secretary Jenkins at the Service Secretary table, along with the Secretary of Defense representing Special Operations and SOCOM issues, is critical.

I think about that on the service side of the SOCOM organization. Also advocating for issues that support our servicemembers, our civilians, and our family members, and those run the gamut. Certainly, the human performance program, preservation of the force and family, and many other items that we have inside of our enterprise. I would also offer in terms of thinking through mod-

ernization and certainly transformation. So, I think there's a great deal that we've been able to achieve together as a team of teams in the SOF enterprise.

Senator REED. Well, thank you very much, and after some notable civilian casualty several years ago, the Department of Defense set up the Civilian Harm Center of Excellence. In the last year's prepared statement submitted, it pointed out that these policies and procedures outlined by the Department through the center assist with counter violent extremist organizations efforts as they prevent the underlying dynamics from creating more extremism.

I think in layman terms, it means if you're out there and you're hurting a lot of civilians, the reaction is the enemy gets more recruits, essentially. But I've heard public indications that the Department is considering to rescind the policy guidance and to eliminate the center of excellence. Mr. Jenkins, what's your understanding of that?

Mr. JENKINS. Well, first, Senator, thank you for pointing that out. We agree that the ability and requirement to mitigate and limit civilian harm on the battlefield is paramount responsibility for us. Second, it's the law. It's the law, and so, we have to be respondent to that.

I can also say there have been no decisions made on what the program may be called or the form that it will take. But the requirement and the need to report back and make sure that we are always mitigating civilian harm will always be present no matter what it's called or how it looks, Senator.

Senator REED. Again, let me add to the point. It's not only the law and the sense of humanity, it's also a very practical situation because by antagonizing the population, you'll lose ground.

Mr. JENKINS. Yes, sir.

Senator REED. Once you lose it, you don't gain it. Just General, final question. Can you say if SOCOM has received adequate support from the center and that it's been an asset to your operations?

General FENTON. Senator, I'm not—from the center?

Senator REED. From the center.

General FENTON. Senator, I think certainly. As we've thought through it, I go back to Secretary Jenkins piece, we absolutely, as your SOCOM team always aim to do the mission, especially in the kinetic ops that you're referring to, and then protect non-combatants and civilians as part of who we are and what we stand for. I think to your point, that sends a very powerful message across the globe that we're there to eliminate or disrupt a bad actor, yet at the same time protect innocence and vulnerable and non-combatants. That's a very different signal from a nation. That's what your SOCOM team works to do everyday.

Senator REED. Thank you very much. Madam Chairman, thank you.

Senator ERNST. [Presiding.] Thank you, Ranking Member. We'll recognize now Senator Kelly for 5 minutes of questions.

Senator KELLY. Thank you, Madam Chair. General Fenton, in your opening statement, you highlighted your flat budget since 2019, which appears to be a 14 percent decrease in purchasing power, and SOCOM has also faced some significant personnel cuts over the past years. Is it fair to say right now that the demand for

Special Operations Forces continues to increase? Is that a fair observation?

General FENTON. Senator, that's absolutely a fair characterization, as I've laid out in the opening statement.

Senator KELLY. With this flat budget then, where have you assumed any additional risk because of budgetary and personnel constraints?

General FENTON. Senator, I'd actually offer two places. In the operational arena, we've assumed risk in deterrence, as I mentioned in the opening statement, I'll assume no risk in crisis response today. That is a sacred obligation, and as we go across the spectrum in deterrence, as I've laid out, there have been instances where I've had to say no to combatant commander requirements because of operational risk and fiscal constraints in a way I haven't seen before.

So, first in operations deterrence. Second is in modernization. Working to have the SOCOM team and at times tying it to the joint force, for sure. Be able to win in the future environment like we have won for years and years and years in an increasingly contested and congested environment. We're taking risks there. The inability to get after the things I think that are asymmetric, that are part of the changing character of war, do it at speed.

You could add anything, uncrewed artificial intelligence, additive manufacturing, autonomy, all that. I think we're accruing high risk because we at SOCOM are not able to get after that based on a flat top line on 5 years, \$1 billion in lost buying power that is reflective of that 14 percent lost buying power.

Senator KELLY. Would it be fair for me to say then that a risk in deterrence because if you're not deterring our adversaries, there's a higher chance you're going to have to put some of your troops in harm's way that the risk to your forces, personally risk to them being injured or killed in combat, that that has gone up.

I think it's probably fair to say the same thing on the modernization side of this. If you don't have the equipment you need and you're facing a more challenging adversary, that that's possibly putting folks at risk as well?

General FENTON. Senator, I'll take it from the modernization piece first. I think first and foremost, the risk is not winning, not being able to complete the mission in the future environment. Again, against the backdrop of what we're seeing in Ukraine with the changing character of war that has, I call it a version of symmetry and asymmetry.

Symmetry, being all the things—and certainly the Russian Federation had, that any nation needs to go to war tanks, and missiles, and airplanes, and helicopters. Then asymmetry, where Ukraine did not have that, and has imposed costs on the Russian Federation through all things that we're observing, institutionalizing, and operationalizing. I think we're taking risks there and that risk is about winning.

It certainly has a force protection component to it, because if you're unable to get through the contested and congested battle space of integrated air missile defense, radio frequency spectrums, knocking your things down, electronic warfare, there is a force pro-

tection component for sure to that. I look at both, but I think it's both of those and modernization.

In deterrence, I think it's more about aggregated risk, us not being able to fulfill the parts of a campaign plan or a no plan that the combatant commanders absolutely would rely on. That probably at some point has aggregated risk for his end states and certainly their operations.

Senator KELLY. Right. Thank you, General, and Mr. Jenkins, on China Gray Zone operations, they execute this all the time as an instrument of national power and in their effort to supplant us as the world's preeminent superpower. So, what adjustments, just quickly in statute or fiscal authorities, would you need to better compete and deter the People's Republic of China (PRC)?

Mr. JENKINS. In terms of authorities, we are working sufficiently and efficiently with what we have right now. It comes down to what, what the general outlined in terms of resources. We clearly recognize that deterring China is not just in the South China Sea of the first island chain. It's everywhere, and in the closed session, we'll be able to give you some good vignettes on where we are going head-to-head to deter in the irregular warfare arena to make sure that we not only meet China where they are, but where they want to be, where they, where they're trying to be.

So, in terms of authorities, we're moving out and executing on what we have, but we're always looking to evolve with them as well.

Senator KELLY. If you identify something—

Mr. JENKINS. We will.

Senator KELLY.—please, come to us with that. Thank you.

Mr. JENKINS. Yes, sir.

Senator KELLY. Thank you, Madam Chair.

Senator ERNST. Thank you, Senator Kelly, and now I recognize SASC Chairman, Senator Wicker.

Chairman WICKER. Well, thank you Madam Chair, and thank you Senator Kelly as you leave because I'm going to followup on the very important lines of questioning that you pursued. I was planning on asking about what extra things your command has been required to do for less buying power.

But let's talk about the gray zone and followup if we can on that. Do you find that there's not enough coordination in the irregular warfare field and would you recommend any changes in the way our defense department is organized with regard to no one having a particular domain over that particular issue and coordinating it across the various commands?

Mr. JENKINS. Well, thank you for pointing that out. Certainly, over the last 20 years plus, we've seen our counter-terrorism muscle be exercised tremendously and our irregular warfare muscle, not so much. But nowadays, we are certainly exercising that muscle and meeting and deterring, as the Senator alluded, China, where they are and where they're trying to be. SO/LIC itself—

Chairman WICKER. Tell us and those listening what sort of things, specifically some examples of what the Chinese are doing?

Mr. JENKINS. Well, Senator, certainly we can get into more details in the closed session, but it's safe to say, areas where you would not think China is, they are. They're trying to be there, not

only in the South China Sea, the first Island chain, but in the Southern Hemisphere.

We have specific examples that we can point to, to show where we have met, deterred, and even ejected their influence from certain areas, and so, it's incumbent upon us to not only just be counter-terrorist experts, but also irregular warfare specialists.

Chairman WICKER. You can talk about the economic warfare in this hearing, can you not?

Mr. JENKINS. For sure, yes, sir, and that's as you alluded to. In China, it's a whole-of-government approach when it comes to economic warfare. General Fenton's actually starting a new program to bring that together to harness not only attention amongst our economic machines here in the United States, but to show them where they could draw their power to help our Nation as well.

Chairman WICKER. So, are we organized sufficiently in this area, or should one office, one person be in charge of coordinating this for either of you?

Mr. JENKINS. In the irregular warfare arena?

Chairman WICKER. Yes.

Mr. JENKINS. We are sufficiently organized within SO/LIC. We have a department, we have a team, an actual DASD (Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defense), that has irregular warfare within, its charter that it's responsible for and leads through the Department in terms of helping combatant commands draw campaign plans that involve irregular warfare and educating throughout the joint force in terms of its irregular warfare is not just a SOF opportunity. It's a whole of Department of Defense opportunity.

General FENTON. Senator, I would add.

Chairman WICKER. Sure, General Fenton.

General FENTON. I think for now, sufficiently organized, you know, as we talk and work through this, it's through Secretary Jenkins on their policy side. I think for SOCOM, it's unequivocal that we do irregular warfare and our components in our operational elements know it. They go back to the SOCOM headquarters or geographic combatant commanders.

What I would offer is, I think it's always worth relooking because of the pace of the world and the way the world's changing and all type of levels. I talk about modernizing authorities, and I think it's always good to keep an eye on things so we're not complacent, or even as we think about technology, how fast it's moved. My sense is there's certainly a need to re-look authorities to make sure that they have not stayed stagnant or they have moved as fast as we need them.

Chairman WICKER. Okay, well, I might want to have a conversation, an ongoing conversation with you General and for as long as I can, Mr. Jenkins, about how we could perhaps make the coordination better in this area. We're intruding on the time, Madam Chair, but let me just say.

There's been a 35 percent increase from the COCOMs for your capabilities in the last 3 years. Is that right, General?

General FENTON. That's correct, Senator.

Chairman WICKER. One hundred and seventy percent increase in SOCOM crisis response missions. Including, but not limited to hostage rescues?

General FENTON. Yes, sir. In fact, we just updated the numbers after we got chance to see you. I think today I reported 200 percent in 3½ years.

Chairman WICKER. So, instead of 170 percent. Then manpower cuts of nearly 5,000 personnel in recent years. How did those come about?

General FENTON. Well, Senator a couple things. I think through the lens of the defense planning scenario and the work that the service has to do along with the Department, against any potential scenario, and I'll leave at that because we could talk more in a classified session. My sense is that services took a look at the lens that they were given through those scenarios and came away with, we don't need X number of SOF.

Over time, my sense is that that continued surely to gain traction in the Department. As a result, I think you're very aware of a point last year where Secretary of Defense Austin made a decision to reduce SOF by 3,000 people.

Chairman WICKER. Well, have these crisis response requests gone unanswered?

General FENTON. Senator, that—

Chairman WICKER. With everything you're facing with the lack of funding and the lack of purchasing power and cuts of 5,000?

General FENTON. As I said in my opening statement, crisis response is the one place that I'm taking no risk. So, we put everything we have against the crisis response today because our sense is that is a sacred obligation. Presidentially directed, SECDEF directed, we cannot fail.

Chairman WICKER. So, the other things that you might put behind those crisis response things might be, for example?

General FENTON. Senator, I feel like we're absolutely taking risks in two places, modernization, and deterrence. Deterrence would be that mission that we are taking risk in and we're taking risk because in my sense, we are unable to answer the combatant commander's requirements to the level that they have requested and certainly need. When I look at that, that is risk to them and certainly risk to your SOF forces and that we're bringing the value that we could be bringing to the combatant commands, in preventing great power conflict and certainly preparing for it.

Chairman WICKER. One other thing, Madam Chair. I just hope the General understands the Committee's position on both sides of the dais, that we need to hear fully from you on your unfunded requirements. Tell us what you need, be honest about it, and we'll try to get it for you. But we have found that some places within our defense establishment, they're reluctant to actually be honest with us about all the requirements that remain unfunded.

Thank you for your indulgence, Madam Chair.

Senator ERNST. Thank you, Chairman.

General FENTON. You got my commitment to that Senator.

Senator ERNST. Thank you, General Fenton. Next, I will recognize Senator Shaheen 5 minutes. Thank you.

Senator SHAHEEN. Thank you, Madam Chair. So, Mr. Jenkins, you talked about feeling confident about our irregular warfare capacity. Where do you put information operations that irregular warfare?

Mr. JENKINS. Thank you for pointing that out, because irregular warfare is just like, when you think about a kinetic strike, there are regular warfare strikes that are just as potent or valuable or important and need to be timed accordingly. So, the coordination for information operations actually resides within SO/LIC, within my organization.

So, we have the unique opportunity to coordinate across the combatant commands, not only within DOD, but also with our sister agencies, with the Agency, with Department of State, and so those information operation plans are coordinated. So, that messages are comprehensive and complimentary was the word I was trying to think of instead of getting each other off track and timed accordingly. So, it's very important.

Senator SHAHEEN. Well, I understand that you have the ability to coordinate. I'm concerned. General Fenton, you talked about the 3000 person cuts to SOF, and my understanding is that many of those were enablers for the military information support operations (MISO). Is that correct?

General FENTON. That's correct, Senator.

Senator SHAHEEN. I am concerned about our ability to compete in those information operations. We had a hearing in the Foreign Relations Committee at the beginning of the year where our China experts said that China is spending \$1.1 billion a year on information operations, disinformation misinformation. Right now, we've completely dismantled our humanitarian and foreign aid presence in the regions where China has a foothold. We don't have anybody in charge of information operations across as far as I can tell—now, maybe we do, and I just don't know about it—across defense, State, and the Administration and the President just fired General Haugh, the head of Cyber Command.

So, help me understand how we're able to compete in the information arena when we don't have anybody in charge, and when we've lost a lot of our people who are doing that work.

General FENTON. Yes, ma'am. In terms of that, who's actually in charge and in coordination for the Department of Defense, that would fall by default to my organization, because I support the Under Secretary of Defense for policy, who is the principal information operation advisor to the SECDEF.

So, we do have a coordination body and ability to do that. I have a full-time team that that's organizing and actively engaging with the combatant commands in terms of funding, also in messaging. Then they work outwardly with our State and agency partners so that if one agency is going to employ a message or an information operation, it's adequately coordinated with the other so that we don't have fracture side.

Senator SHAHEEN. So, if China's spending over a billion dollars a year on their messaging strategy, how much are we spending in the Department of Defense on our messaging strategy?

General FENTON. Ma'am, I'd have to get back to you with that specific number. But what we are doing is we're trying to make sure that we are good stewards—

Senator SHAHEEN. Is it fair to say we're not spending a billion dollars a year?

General FENTON. Correct. Yes, ma'am. That is fair.

Senator SHAHEEN. Significantly less?

General FENTON. Significantly less. We are trying to be smart with every penny for sure, ma'am.

Senator SHAHEEN. But it's not likely that we're able to match the operations that China's doing, despite our intention and the fact that we think we can do it better, because we don't have the infrastructure to do that. We've dismantled our global engagement center at the Department of State. We're dismantling Voice of America, Radio Free Asia, all of the media that we've relied on really since the cold war to get messaging across to accurately reflect the position of the United States against our adversaries.

So, again, I would ask you, General Fenton, do you think you have—should we be doing more to resource those information operations?

General FENTON. Well, Senator, you and I have talked about this for—

Senator SHAHEEN. We have.

General FENTON.—quite some time. My sense, I'll start with information operations are absolutely critical. You know, there's a sense of you may not win a war with information operations like you could with artillery. You can certainly lose it if you're not a key part of that and putting out the messages. I would offer, I think as a United States of America, we've got a great message to tell. My sense is that there is a void. You mentioned misinformation, disinformation by any adversary. There's a void out there that's not being filled by our message.

I think we take it certainly in Special Operations Command with our information officer professionals to really work at that in concert with our more often not our country teams, our embassy country teams, to put those messages out that assure populations or reassure and also at points in time, deter adversaries. That is also part of the information operations space. So, thank you for the opportunity to comment.

Senator SHAHEEN. Thank you. Thank you, Madam Chair.

Senator ERNST. Yes, thank you, Senator Shaheen. We'll move to Senator Rosen.

Senator ROSEN. Well, thank you, Chairwoman Ernst, Ranking Member Slotkin for holding this hearing. It's very important. I'd also like to thank General Fenton and Mr. Jenkins for testifying today and for your service—excuse me, I'm going to scoot in a little bit here—service to our Nation.

I want to talk about Special Operations Forces in Syria because the United States and Syrian Democratic Forces, the SDF, they share an interest in preventing an Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) resurgence in northeastern Syria. Any escalation in the region, which is Turkish backed Syrian National Army and the central government in Damascus engaged military with the SDF would lead to instability that we know ISIS could exploit.

That is extremely concerning, as is the possibility that such instability combined with destabilizing efforts from Iran and its proxies could cause SDF personnel guarding ISIS prisons and displaced persons camps to leave their posts in order to defend their territory. This would open the door to the possible escape of captured

ISIS fighters and their families, as we saw that just play out in 2019.

So, General Fenton, given our SOF partnership with the SDF and the Defeat ISIS campaign, including security training and assistance, what are SOF and the SDF doing to prevent breakouts from SDF run prisons and displaced persons camps to ensure that captured ISIS fighters and their families do not return to the battle space?

I know this is a question that geographically pertains to CENTCOM, but our troops performing these counter-terrorism missions are Special Operation Forces.

General FENTON. Senator, I think the very first thing we do is partner with our SDF partners, it's almost a decade now. I can get back and certainly provide written on the record how long we've done it, but I think it's about a decade, is disrupt, degrade and work to defeat ISIS in Syria. It's a threat certainly in the United States as we've laid out before. Many of the committees have come before you have talked about it.

But I think the first thing we do is disrupt and degrade ISIS along with SDF counterparts, that certainly vectors into protecting the prisons and the camps. I think that, you know, if you look at it that's keeping improvised explosive ISIS bombers from attacking those, creating a level of or opportunities for breakout, that is taking action in places that may not be close to the camps, but we know have planning going on in the camp.

So, I think there's many things your ARSOF team is doing along with our SDF partners to first and foremost, and that is the mission, disrupt and degrade and diminish ISIS, spur the CENTCOM and SECDEF direction, and also protect those camps from a breakout and a prison as well.

Senator ROSEN. Thank you. I'm going to direct this question to both of you staying on the same topic, because how does a continued elimination of ISIS leadership and which SOF you have accomplished time and time again, impact ISIS's ability to plan and carry out attacks on United States Forces and SDF front prisons and displaced persons camps? What are we doing more specifically to degrade Iranian aligned militias from attacking or attempting to attack United States and coalition forces?

Mr. Jenkins, we can start with you and go on to the General please.

Mr. JENKINS. Thank you, ma'am. We see all those problems clear-eyed for sure, and thank you for sharing that concern with us. As General Fenton alluded to, looking at what SOF can control what we can do in this space. We take that very seriously. We are at the leading edge to make sure that our SDF partners can maintain control of those prisons, that they can repatriate where appropriate and when possible, so that we can decrease the population of potential breakout and under difficult situations.

Then in terms of decreasing malign influence, we have to make sure that, similar to China, that we are deterring wherever possible, whether it's at the level of armed conflict or below with irregular warfare. We have the ability and lots of tools across the spectrum to make sure that we are deterring them from being in the battle space where they want to be, and where they're trying to be.

Senator ROSEN. Thank you. General Fenton, anything to add?

General FENTON. Senator, I would offer on the ISIS piece I think is very important, as you've alluded to, to keep the pressure on ISIS by degrading their leadership the operational experience, personnel, the communicators, financiers, all of these things come together for attacks, not only in the Middle East against our forces, and that is force protection as we take it, but also in Europe and against our Homeland.

ISIS is an ex-op's threat. So, I think that is the multiple responsibility for your Special Operations teammates, not only ISIS, Al-Shabaab, and al Qaeda, but getting after these layers is really important to keep any of those terrorist groups from being able to plan and execute an attack on the Homeland.

Senator ROSEN. Thank you. I'll yield back, but I'm going to actually ask a question for the record about the Houthis relations with Al-Shabaab. So, I'm glad you brought that up because it's critically important we discuss that as well. Thank you.

Senator ERNST. Thank you, Senator Rosen, and at this time, we will recess for about 7 minutes, which will give us time to move over to the SVC-217, and we will go into a closed hearing at that point. So, I call a recess.

[Whereupon, at 3:40 p.m., the Committee adjourned.]

[Questions for the record with answers supplied follow:]

QUESTIONS SUBMITTED BY SENATOR TOM COTTON

SPECIAL OPERATIONS COMMAND AND SUPPLEMENTS

1. Senator COTTON. General Fenton, it also surprised me that the Special Operations Community does not currently provide supplements that average Americans are allowed to utilize for optimal athletic performance such as creatine. Do you support special operators having access to these supplements, not on their own dime, to optimize performance?

General FENTON. USSOCOM supports the use of appropriated funds for the provision of third-party certified dietary supplements, in accordance with Department of Defense Instruction (DODI) 6130.06, Use of Dietary Supplements in the DOD, such as creatine to enhance optimal performance and operational readiness of special operators, while also ensuring the safe use of any dietary supplement. We look forward to Congress' support in this effort.

2. Senator COTTON. General Fenton, can you commit to working with Congress to address this issue and get our special operators the supplements and hormone therapies they deserve after sending them into some of the most demanding and dangerous environments in the world?

General FENTON. Yes, USSOCOM is committed to collaborating with Congress, the Department of Defense, academia, and industry to address the need for evidence-based dietary supplementation and FDA-approved hormone therapy solutions that support the unique physical and psychological demands placed on our special operators.

OPERATOR SYNDROME

3. Senator COTTON. General Fenton, there are widespread impacts of "operator syndrome"—the syndrome associated with low testosterone and other imbalances resulting from years of operating under chronic stress. Do you believe the Special Operations community should call for regular blood testing to identify hormonal imbalances associated with "operator syndrome"?

General FENTON. USSOCOM medical providers adhere to current clinical guidelines on hormonal imbalances and ensure that Special Operators who are experiencing symptoms, which may be related to low testosterone or other hormonal imbalances, receive a comprehensive work-up, including blood testing of hormone levels and appropriate treatment. USSOCOM partners with medical specialists at mili-

tary medical treatment facilities and within the provider networks, including endocrinologists, urologists, and sports medicine physicians to ensure optimal care.

USSOCOM would support a longitudinal study of hormone levels in Special Operators, which could inform future guidelines on testing and supplementation. Normal testosterone levels vary widely, and current medical literature provides a broad reference range. Research that specifically targets the SOF population would be extremely helpful to determine if and how their “normal” hormone levels differ from the general population, and how those differences correlate with performance optimization and health improvement.

4. Senator COTTON. General Fenton, do you believe our policies should reflect a desire to get as many operators access to hormone treatment as possible—acknowledging that their needs may be more aggressive than the average citizen?

General FENTON. Our policies are currently designed to ensure that every operator who is experiencing symptoms due to hormonal imbalances receives a comprehensive evaluation with the appropriate specialists, and when indicated, treatment to correct irregularities. USSOCOM’s medical and Preservation of the Force and Family (POTFF) human performance teams—which include medical providers and SOF medics, licensed nutritionists, physical therapists, strength and conditioning specialists, athletic trainers, mental health providers, and cognitive performance specialists—are trained to recognize potential symptoms of hormone imbalance and communicate their concerns to SOF patients and clients.

While Special Operations personnel face unique operational demands and potentially higher stress levels contributing to hormonal imbalances, treatment decisions prioritize individual medical needs and established clinical guidelines for hormone replacement therapy. In addition to hormone replacement therapy when appropriate, our medical providers rely on non-pharmacological interventions including stress management, sleep optimization, exercise, and nutritional counseling.

PRESERVATION OF THE FORCE AND FAMILY

5. Senator COTTON. General Fenton, SOCOM [U.S. Special Operations Command] has a program called Preservation of the Force and Family [POTFF] that is specifically designed to enhance human performance. Yet out of the approximately \$80 million allocated for that program, none is allocated to address these hormone or supplement performance and optimization issues. Will you commit to seeing if any of that money can be re-allocated to address this appropriately?

General FENTON. USSOCOM lacks the statutory authority to procure quality dietary supplements and sports foods using Major Force Program 11 funding. If granted new authorities to procure dietary supplements and sports food items for SOF servicemembers, USSOCOM will work with ASD SOLIC and DHA on policy and budgetary requirements associated with any changes to authorities to ensure the health and mission effectiveness of SOF, without degrading the other key POTFF services for SOF warfighters. Currently, the POTFF program budget does include contracted service support of Performance Dietitians to advise SOF Commands on hormone and supplements issues.

SENATOR JONI ERNST

UBIQUITOUS TECHNICAL SURVEILLANCE

6. Senator ERNST. General Fenton, as you are aware of the threat of Ubiquitous Technical Surveillance [UTS], from your standpoint, are we executing a coordinated strategy to deal with such a threat? In your opinion, who owns or should own that strategy? What measures will you implement to conduct thorough digital risk assessments aimed at identifying and mitigating vulnerabilities exploited through UTS?

General FENTON. Yes. In the 2024 National Counterintelligence Strategy, the Office of the Director of National Intelligence through the National Counterintelligence and Security Center (NCSC) identified the growing threat of cutting-edge technologies, such as technical surveillance equipment being employed by foreign intelligence entities, and goals for the intelligence community to mitigate.

The NCSC’s charter as the Nation’s premier source for counterintelligence and security expertise leads the development of a whole of government strategy to address the challenges of UTS.

The USSOCOM Director of Intelligence (J2), in accordance with the 2024 National Counterintelligence Strategy guidance, as the office of primary responsibility for the

UTS problem set in close collaboration with the Director of Operations (J3), and intelligence community partners to effectuate the NCSC strategy, has developed procedures to assess the counterintelligence risks to include UTS of on-going operational activities, specifically leveraging sensitive intelligence reporting to identify adversary capabilities to exploit UTS threat vectors, and develop mitigation techniques to secure those operations, activities, and investments. USSOCOM has identified an enterprise gap in countering the long-term threats posed by UTS and the J2 is sponsoring a capability development requirement to centralize and synchronize counter UTS efforts across the enterprise to gain efficiencies within the current fiscal constraints.

7. Senator ERNST. General Fenton, the recently published SOF [Special Operations Forces] Imperatives 2025 document highlighted the threat the digital surveillance economy or UTS poses to SOF. The digital surveillance economy collects, resells, and resolves our commercial transactions and digital habits is an unavoidable part of today's operating environment. The digital signatures and patterns of life of our SOF operators, their communities, and partners risk being exploited by our adversaries. What requirements, policies and programs does SOCOM and its subordinate commands have in place to manage this UTS risk?

General FENTON. USSOCOM established an Identity Management Program of Record in 2014 with the Director of Operations, J3, as the Office of Primary Responsibility. This program provides identity assessment and threat mitigation capabilities by incorporating people, technology, and tools to: assist with the protection of SOF members, their families, and our organizations; coordinate identity management standards and procedures; and provide training to enable and empower USSOCOM personnel to protect their identities. In doing so, USSOCOM strengthens its resilience against UTS threat vectors and ensures viable options—especially in the case of sensitive activities. The USSOCOM Identity Management Program adheres to three key tenets: (1) Train: Train and Educate the force to protect identity data; (2) Govern: Provide policy and governance to the SOF Enterprise, and (3) Employ: Deliberate and judicious application of capability to execute the program's vision. USSOCOM incorporates these key tenets of Identity Management into a larger strategy that supports, enables, and protects SOF before, during, and after the conduct of global special operations and activities. Additionally, USSOCOM disaggregates its Identity Management Program by providing trained Identity Management Technicians to subordinate Commands. Identity Management Technicians are then able to conduct tailored identity management activities for individual personnel, organizations, and assets that are unique to assigned missions and acceptable risk. Furthermore, the J3 coordinates closely with the J2, Director of Intelligence to deconflict and share training opportunities on protecting identities against the threat of UTS. Looking to the future, USSOCOM is seeking opportunities to partner closer with the Services. Identity management programs at the Service level will be mutually beneficial to educate and protect the General Purpose Force and potentially mitigate digital dust prior to a servicemembers ascension into the SOF community.

SENATOR ELIZABETH WARREN

CIVILIAN HARM

8. Senator WARREN. Mr. Jenkins and General Fenton, do you agree that one difference between the United States and its potential adversaries is the greater value that the U.S. Government puts on protecting human life and liberty at home and abroad?

Mr. JENKINS. The Department of Defense has a strong history of compliance with the law of armed conflict, and our commanders strive to minimize harm to civilians

General FENTON. USSOCOM, like the Department of Defense, values all human life, be it a combatant or non-combatant, and is committed to mitigating and responding to civilian harm for legal, moral, operational, and strategic reasons, including to improve the capabilities and effectiveness of our SOF, while recognizing the protection of civilians during military operations. This is not only a top priority for USSOCOM, but a moral obligation for all our SOF members currently operating around the globe.

9. Senator WARREN. Mr. Jenkins and General Fenton, what is your understanding of title 10 U.S.C. 184, which established the Civilian Protection Center of Excellence?

Mr. JENKINS. I am aware of the statute, which requires DOD to operate the Civilian Protection Center of Excellence as a focal point for matters relating to civilian harm, spells out its purpose and use, and requires the issuance of an annual report.

General FENTON. Title 10 U.S.C. § 184 mandated the Secretary of Defense to operate the Civilian Protection Center of Excellence (CP CoE) with the purpose of institutionalizing and advancing knowledge, practices, and tools for preventing, mitigating, and responding to civilian harm. Department of Defense Instruction 3000.17 designated the Army as the joint proponent for Civilian Harm Mitigation Response (CHMR) and directs the Army to establish the CP CoE.

10. Senator WARREN. Mr. Jenkins and General Fenton, the U.S. military has spent many years working to improve its ability to prevent and mitigate civilian harm without sacrificing lethality—including through the development of the DOD [Department of Defense] Instruction on Civilian Harm under the first Trump administration. These efforts received bipartisan support from Congress and grew out of a recognition from the U.S. military itself that, after over 2 decades of U.S. wars, warfighters needed better tools and trustworthy systems to prevent civilian harm, uphold U.S. values, and prevent the moral injury and psychological trauma that too often comes with deadly mistakes. What do you understand to be the importance of preventing and responding to civilian harm for successful special operations, including in areas outside of active hostilities or in support of allies and partners?

Mr. JENKINS. I believe it is both morally right and in the U.S. national interest to reduce civilian harm caused by military operations. The Department will continue to address the challenges of civilian presence on the battlefield in a way that enhances our effectiveness and does not constrain our commanders or diminish our lethality.

General FENTON. USSOCOM values demand the safeguarding of non-combatants during SOF operations. Failure to prioritize this undermines our legitimacy, erodes public trust, and fuels adversary propaganda. Civilian Harm Mitigation is vital for maintaining local support, strengthening partnerships, and denying adversaries opportunities to exploit civilian casualties. Mitigating and appropriately responding to civilian harm underscores both our values and the precision of our capabilities. Furthermore, it sets a critical example for our partners and allies to emulate.

11. Senator WARREN. Mr. Jenkins and General Fenton, what value can advisors with expertise in civilian harm mitigation and response provide to commanders?

Mr. JENKINS. Advisors with expertise in civilian harm mitigation and response support our commanders by analyzing planned operations, identifying potential risks to civilians, and recommend adjustments to tactics, techniques, and procedures (TTPs) to minimize harm.

General FENTON. In the past, CHMR advisors assisted Commanders and their staffs in mitigating civilian harm without compromising lethality. Their expertise enhanced precision, preserving legitimacy and enabling mission success. They proactively shaped strategies, providing foresight into the civilian environment and potential second and third-order effects of operations. This strengthens partnerships, safeguards our forces, and informs decisionmaking. Early staff integration during Shape and Deter planning is key to mitigating harm and preparing appropriate responses to potential incidents.

12. Senator WARREN. Mr. Jenkins and General Fenton, how has Special Operations benefited from the Civilian Protection Center of Excellence?

Mr. JENKINS. The Civilian Protection Center of Excellence has provided support to Special Operations in preparation for, during, and following military operations by enhancing operational effectiveness, increasing battlefield awareness, and minimizing harm caused to civilians.

General FENTON. The CP CoE served as hub and facilitator of Department-wide analysis and expertise related to civilian harm mitigation and response, aiding the operationalization of CHMR concepts through guidance, force development, training and education.

13. Senator WARREN. Mr. Jenkins and General Fenton, how has Special Operations supported and implemented the Civilian Harm Mitigation Response and Action Plan (CHMR-AP)?

Mr. JENKINS. SOLIC and numerous other DOD components, including the Combatant Commands, contributed to the design of the CHMR-AP and worked with others across the force to implement it. We continue to support CHMR efforts being applied in a way that enhances our military effectiveness and does not constrain commanders or diminish our lethality.

General FENTON. USSOCOM has made significant progress on its assigned CHMR actions, reaching an estimated 52 percent completion rate. However, further progress is contingent upon the CP CoE and higher echelons completing their tasks. USSOCOM and its Subordinate Components are actively working with supported Geographic Combatant Commands to ensure the effective integration of SOF capabilities and protection of civilians and non-combatants during operations and exercises involving SOF.

14. Senator WARREN. Mr. Jenkins and General Fenton, what have been the benefits for Special Operations in supporting and implementing the Civilian Harm Mitigation Response and Action Plan?

Mr. JENKINS. Advisors with expertise in civilian harm mitigation and response support our commanders by analyzing planned operations, identifying potential risks to civilians, and recommend adjustments to tactics, techniques, and procedures (TTPs) to minimize harm.

General FENTON. This increased transparency fosters trust with local populations and strengthens the legitimacy of our operations. Proactive mitigation is enhanced through a collaborative effort across the DOD, Combat Supported Agencies (CSA), and NGO's to accurately depict the civilian environment through rigorous data analysis, and adherence to policies that mitigate civilian harm.

15. Senator WARREN. Mr. Jenkins and General Fenton, do you believe that our troops are at higher risk for retribution as the number of civilian deaths from U.S. military operations or U.S.-led military operations increases?

Mr. JENKINS. American security rests on the ability and will to use lawful and appropriate military power. This is a simple fact in a dangerous world. At the same time the Department of Defense has a strong history of compliance with the law of armed conflict, and our commanders strive to minimize harm to civilians.

General FENTON. Civilian harm can fuel resentment and potentially motivate retaliatory actions against U.S. forces, impacting both their physical security and the overall operational environment. SOF recognizes that minimizing civilian harm is crucial for maintaining local support, strengthening partnerships, and denying adversaries exploitable propaganda.

16. Senator WARREN. Mr. Jenkins and General Fenton, how does preventing and mitigating civilian harm help to promote U.S. national security?

Mr. JENKINS. Actions taken to mitigate civilian harm—such as increasing our battlefield awareness and our precision—also enhance our military effectiveness. In addition, mitigating civilian harm supports U.S. strategic goals and limits strategic advantages for our adversaries.

General FENTON. Preventing and mitigating civilian harm significantly contributes to U.S. national security. Respect for civilian lives and property enhances U.S. legitimacy on the global stage, bolstering international partnerships and facilitating foreign policy objectives. Conversely, causing civilian harm undermines U.S. credibility, alienating allies, and empowering adversaries. Protecting civilians improves stability and security in conflict zones, reducing the likelihood of protracted conflicts, terrorism, and the need for costly U.S. military interventions. Furthermore, it protects U.S. servicemembers by mitigating the risk of retaliatory violence and hostility. Finally, protecting civilians upholds core American values of human life and dignity, reinforcing the Nation's moral standing and maintaining public support for military operations both domestically and internationally.

17. Senator WARREN. Mr. Jenkins and General Fenton, does having civilian-harm prevention personnel build trust and relationships with local civil society groups help commanders to collect useful intelligence information?

Mr. JENKINS. Yes. By demonstrating a commitment to mitigating civilian harm, commanders can build trust and cooperation with local communities. This improves intelligence gathering, facilitates access to key areas, and reduces resistance to military operations.

General FENTON. USSOCOM recognizes the importance of building trust and relationships, critical actions to develop a robust civilian environment picture and gather critical intelligence to inform Commanders and their staffs.

18. Senator WARREN. General Fenton, in what ways do you see civilian harm mitigation and response efforts furthering SOCOM's mission and the effectiveness of its operations?

General FENTON. Protecting civilians and non-combatants significantly enhances USSOCOM's mission effectiveness. Minimizing civilian harm reduces blowback, fos-

tering a permissive operating environment for SOF and improving mission success. This effort strengthens operational legitimacy, increasing cooperation with partners and bolstering information operations by countering negative narratives. It also builds trust with partner forces, improving interoperability; furthermore, it fosters greater access and freedom of movement by building rapport with local populations. Finally, it mitigates legal and political risks, while contributing to long-term stability and security, reducing the need for future interventions.

BLAST OVERPRESSURE

19. Senator WARREN. General Fenton, how have Special Operators benefited from working with community partners, such as Home Base, to treat servicemembers who have been exposed to blast overpressure or have suffered brain injuries?

General FENTON. USSOCOM has benefited greatly from Community partners who address traumatic brain injury (TBI) or blast overpressure injuries. Our Special Operators deserve to have the best care that they can possibly get from the military healthcare system and in our communities. Our partnership with Home Base and other institutions remains strong as we have a commitment to taking care of our servicemembers. Community organizations have become an integral part of ensuring that we take care of Special Operators while in uniform and afterwards.

20. Senator WARREN. General Fenton, how have Special Operators benefited from the Comprehensive Brain Health and Trauma [ComBHaT] Program at Home Base?

General FENTON. Over 1,150 USSOCOM servicemembers have attended ComBHaT since the 2019 pilot program and 93 percent have returned to duty after attending. This high return-to-duty rate demonstrates the effectiveness of ComBHaT, and the value of partnership with community organizations like Home Base in supporting the health and readiness of our operators.

21. Senator WARREN. General Fenton, why is it important to mitigate the risks of blast overpressure for Special Operators?

General FENTON. It is important for us to understand and mitigate the risk of blast overpressure because of our inherent commitment to our people. People are our No. 1 priority. We have an obligation to protect the brain health and cognitive functioning of our USSOCOM servicemembers, while preserving the required lethality. USSOCOM is leveraging next-generation technologies to mitigate blast overpressure risks, while effectively monitoring and tracking operator exposures.

22. Senator WARREN. General Fenton, why is it important to ensure Special Operators have access to quality care after exposure to blast overpressure?

General FENTON. While much remains unknown about the long-term effects of blast overpressure on the brain, USSOCOM is taking decisive action to protect our personnel today. USSOCOM is committed to early identification of operators with brain injuries and symptoms from blast overpressure to treat and mitigate possible long-term consequences. We invest heavily in our people, and we want them to operate at their best.

23. Senator WARREN. General Fenton, how do you work with the Department of Veterans Affairs to make sure that servicemembers, veterans, and their families are aware of the risks of blast overpressure and traumatic brain injury?

General FENTON. USSOCOM has a strong partnership with the Department of Veterans Affairs. USSOCOM utilizes the VA's Polytrauma System of Care and network of specialized rehabilitation programs to treat SOF servicemembers with TBI and polytrauma. An integral part of these rehabilitation program is interdisciplinary evaluation and treatment, case management and family education and training. USSOCOM families provide a source of strength for our servicemembers, and it is critical that they remain involved in medical treatment and rehabilitation.

24. Senator WARREN. General Fenton, how would Special Operators benefit from logs detailing their exposure to blast overpressure and traumatic brain injury, including the number, date, and intensity of exposures?

General FENTON. Special Operators would benefit from being able to objectively measure their individual blast overpressure exposure. This would allow individuals, Commanders, medical personnel, and researchers to integrate risk management, correlate blast overpressure exposure to blast related injuries. USSOCOM is at the forefront of developing tools to help SOF operators monitor their exposure, to include coordinating with Program Managers for the Individual Longitudinal Exposure Record and Electronic Health Record to capture and present exposure data to

our Healthcare Providers. A key focus is the investment in and deployment of advanced blast sensors that provide the most accurate measurement capabilities available. These sensors are being developed and fielded to deliver precise data on blast exposure in real-time, empowering operators and medical teams to better assess risks and take timely action.

25. Senator WARREN. General Fenton, how would Special Operators benefit from annual neurocognitive assessments, including one before they begin training to establish a baseline, and one before they leave the military to determine changes in cognitive health over time?

General FENTON. In 2019, USSOCOM instituted requirements for more frequent neurocognitive assessments than the Department of Defense required at the time as we needed closer monitoring of our operators' cognitive functioning throughout their careers. The benefit of more frequent assessments is that it allows for earlier identification and treatment of cognitive changes over the course of a servicemember's career. USSOCOM is attempting to validate and leverage tools like rapid cognitive and balance assessment apps to establish baselines before training events, and to enhance our medical screening processes. The August 2024 Deputy Secretary of Defense memorandum on DOD Requirements for Management of Brain Health Risks from Blast Overpressure directed baseline cognitive testing for all new Active and Reserve members during initial military training. This baseline data will greatly benefit all servicemembers to include those who become Special Operators for monitoring and documentation.

26. Senator WARREN. General Fenton, what steps are you taking to address concerns about increased risks of suicide after exposure to blast overpressure?

General FENTON. To address concerns about increased risks of suicide after exposure to blast overpressure, the USSOCOM POTFF program continues to take a multipronged approach. In the prevention space, we have modernized suicide prevention training, integrating virtual reality (VR) training to assist with these efforts. The training modules highlight the symptoms often seen in those who have experienced repeated blast exposure, such as headaches, fatigue, and memory difficulties. In addition to highlighting these various concerns, the goal of the VR training is to encourage early identification of teammates in distress, have uncomfortable yet necessary conversations, and have the servicemember connected to care. Leveraging interactive, innovative training technology, we hope to decrease stigma in addressing these concerns, and getting necessary assistance before turning into a crisis.

Additionally, the Command Senior Enlisted Leaders and I host quarterly "1st SOF Truth Events" with the leaders of our O-5 and above Command teams to discuss key people topics, such as suicide prevention, brain health, and mental health to ensure that Command leadership teams across the SOCOM enterprise are adopting best practices and are taking proactive actions. Our next event will focus exclusively on Blast Overpressure education and mitigation strategies.

27. Senator WARREN. General Fenton, what steps are you taking to ensure that servicemembers and their families are aware of potential increased risks of suicide after exposure to blast overpressure?

General FENTON. As mentioned earlier, USSOCOM has modernized suicide prevention training, integrating VR suicide prevention training that also includes a module specifically designed for spouses. The training module highlights the symptoms often seen in those who have experienced repeated blast exposure, such as headaches, fatigue, and memory difficulties. It is our hope that the VR suicide prevention training module for spouses will provide them the opportunity to practice addressing concern, asking hard questions, and ultimately getting their SOF members help if necessary. Following each VR suicide prevention training experience is a guided discussion that allows participants to conduct a targeted discussion on elevated suicide risks after a blast overpressure exposure.

Our quarterly 1st SOF Truth Events, focused on suicide prevention, brain health, and mental health enable Command leadership teams to implement proactive actions and promulgate best practices throughout their units and down to the servicemembers themselves.

28. Senator WARREN. General Fenton, what resources and support do you provide for the families of Special Operators so that they can understand the risks of blast overpressure and recognize if their loved one may be experiencing symptoms as a result of this exposure?

General FENTON. USSOCOM wants to increase awareness, identify the need for further evaluation, and foster a culture of early reporting and intervention. We know that spouses are often the first to recognize any change in their partner's well-being.

It is our hope the VR suicide prevention training module for spouses will provide them a tool to help identify the symptoms of blast overpressure and the opportunity to support their loved ones in getting help they need.

Additionally, there is an optional survey for spouses as part of the USSOCOM's brain health monitoring program. USSOCOM requires every SOF Warfighter to complete a Comprehensive Assessment and Symptom History (CASH) within 12 months of completing initial SOF training and every 5 years afterward. Spouses can take an optional CASH survey designed for them. The CASH documents SOF Warfighters' experiences in combat and training that may not have been reported previously. Our CASH assessors spend a significant amount of time educating Operators on TBI and blast overpressure symptoms to enhance treatment.

In alignment with DOD BOP Implementation Guidance, ASD SO/LIC and USSOCOM are committed to educating our servicemembers potentially exposed to BOP hazards on the potential adverse health and performance effects and actions they can take to protect themselves. We have broadened the audience of our quarterly 1st SOF Truth events to include the spouses of our O5 and above Command teams. By educating informing the spouses of our SOF leaders, they will in turn, help mentor and support the spouses of our servicemembers.

29. Senator WARREN. General Fenton, do you support addressing the risks of blast overpressure to servicemembers through the swift implementation of Sections 721 through Section 725 of the fiscal year 2025 NDAA [Fiscal Year 2025 National Defense Authorization Act]?

General FENTON. Yes, I support these DOD-wide efforts to address the risk of BOP on servicemembers' brain health.

SENATOR JACKIE ROSEN

30. Senator ROSEN. General Fenton, the Iranian-backed Houthis are diversifying their military capabilities and leveraging regional conflicts to expand their influence. In recent months, there have been reports that the Houthis are working to provide weapons to the Somali terrorist group, al-Shabab. This development is incredibly concerning, as al-Shabab could utilize more sophisticated Houthi weapons—including drones—to target U.S. equities and personnel in the Horn of Africa, such as our base in Djibouti. To the extent that you are able in this open setting, can you share more about the growing partnership between the Houthis and al-Shabab and the risk this poses not only to US equities in CENTCOM [U.S. Central Command] and AFRICOM [U.S. Africa Command], but also to global shipping in the Red Sea and Gulf of Aden?

General FENTON. Since at least June 2024, the Houthis have provided small weapons, ammunition, explosives, and training to al-Shabaab, one of al-Qa'ida's wealthiest affiliates. A pragmatic strategic interest drives the relationship between the Houthis and al-Shabaab, with reported heightened tactical collaboration in transporting equipment and weapons, training, and intelligence sharing. The Houthis may be facilitating the transfer of advanced weaponry, such as UAVs and surface-to-air missiles in exchange for access to al-Shabaab networks and new locations from which to attack commercial ships, further disrupting freedom of navigation in the Gulf of Aden and the Red Sea. Iranian encouragement may also drive some of the willingness of the Houthis to engage with an ideological adversary, such as al-Shabaab. While a formal alliance remains unconfirmed, the growing evidence of tactical cooperation, particularly in maritime activities, arms trafficking, and potential training exchanges suggests a growing and more diverse threat to U.S. equities and global shipping in the region. Al-Shabaab has used Houthi-supplied weapons in attacks on the African Union presence in Somalia and the group could use Houthi-supplied weapons in the current offensive in Lower and Middle Shabelle, Somalia.

31. Senator ROSEN. General Fenton, since our withdrawal from our two air bases in Niger last year—at the behest of the host nation—our ability to conduct ISR within the Sahel and throughout the African continent has been severely degraded. Can you share more about the challenges this poses to countering violent extremism in the region?

General FENTON. The withdrawal of U.S. Intelligence, Surveillance, and Reconnaissance (ISR) assets and U.S. SOF from Niger impacted USAFRICOM's ability to maintain indications and warnings of terrorist activity, and support and enable African partner-led counterterrorism in the Sahel, respectively. Terrorist groups in the Sahel, including ISIS and al Qaeda affiliates, present a regional threat as they expand their activities and attacks from the Sahel into northern Côte d'Ivoire, Benin, Ghana, and Togo. Continued and increasing control over territory and resources may enable these groups to fund, plan, and execute attacks on the U.S. Homeland, and U.S. persons and interests abroad. To mitigate this impact, the Department of Defense works with and through our West African partners to disrupt, degrade, and deny the terrorist activities by strengthening their northern borders with Sahelian states, bolstering their military capabilities, and improving their own intelligence capabilities. The Department also is working with non-African allies and partners to maintain situational awareness of terrorist groups in the Sahel.

