

**STATEMENT FOR THE RECORD**

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**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**

**UNITED STATES SENATE**

**APRIL 10, 2024**



## INTRODUCTION

Chairman Reed, Ranking Member Wicker, and distinguished members of this committee, thank you for this opportunity to discuss the posture of our Nation's Special Operations Forces (SOF). We are honored to highlight the priorities, activities, and investments that ensure SOF remain a decisive advantage for the Nation and Joint Force to meet current and future challenges.

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. Your support ensures our SOF remain the world's most capable and credible, safeguarding and advancing U.S. national interests.

The National Defense Strategy (NDS) identifies the People's Republic of China (PRC) as the pacing challenge and Russia as the acute threat, both seeking to upend the rules-based international order. State-sponsored proxies and violent extremist organizations (VEOs) present immediate challenges to global stability. State and non-state actors seek advantage through coercive and malign activities in the "gray zone," below a threshold they perceive as likely to prompt a U.S. military response. Rapid technological advances and a complicated security environment place our Nation in what President Biden has described as a "decisive decade."

For an annual investment of less than two percent of the Defense budget, SOF provide scalable, tailorable, and asymmetric options for our senior leaders and present dilemmas for our adversaries. We do this by:

- **Strengthening Partnerships.** SOF cultivate a global network of generational relationships, building partner force capacity and assisting allies and partners in countering aggression, addressing malign influence, and deterring conflict.
- **Preserving Strategic Focus.** SOF prevent attacks on the Homeland and respond to crises allowing the Nation to focus on the pacing challenge and acute threats.
- **Preparing the Environment.** Strategic competition is in SOF's DNA with decades of extensive access and placement to shape the future operating environment.
- **Enabling the Joint Force to Prevail.** SOF enable the Department of Defense (DoD) Joint Warfighting Concepts across the spectrum of conflict.

Through our civilian-military partnership, SO/LIC and USSOCOM ensure the force is well-prepared for current and future challenges through three priorities: *People, Win, and Transform.*

## ADVANCING CIVILIAN-MILITARY PARTNERSHIP

SO/LIC and USSOCOM make up the SOF enterprise, and we continue to strengthen our civilian-military partnership to ensure SOF are fully integrated into the Department's analytical, planning, programming, and budgetary processes. With responsibilities for oversight of SOF organization, training, and equipping, the ASD(SO/LIC) reports directly to the Secretary of Defense and represents the SOF enterprise in a variety of decision-making bodies alongside the Secretaries of the Military Departments and other Office of the Secretary of Defense

components. At the same time, the ASD(SO/LIC) serves as the Department's principal advisor for a range of issues relevant to SOF, such as counterterrorism, irregular warfare, information operations, civilian harm mitigation and response, counter-small unmanned aerial systems (C-sUAS) prior-to-launch, counternarcotics, counter-transnational organized crime, counter threat finance (CTF), stabilization, civil affairs, and peacekeeping. With these mutually supporting roles, SO/LIC is uniquely positioned within DoD to optimize the integration of SOF capabilities into defense planning and analytical processes that shape SOF's role within the Joint Force.

Over the past year, SO/LIC has continued to enhance the Service-like side of its organization. For example, SO/LIC has realigned its Irregular Warfare Technical Support Directorate under its Service-like functions, enhancing its integration with SOF and leveraging its extensive international partnerships. The Deputy Secretary has allocated additional Senior Executive Service (SES) positions to SO/LIC, which will materially enhance how SO/LIC can execute its Service-like responsibilities. Within the next few months, SO/LIC will have grown from one to four SES leaders dedicated to its Service-like responsibilities. With USSOCOM's support, we have added the first-ever SOF senior enlisted advisor in SO/LIC to contribute a SOF-specific perspective to departmental decision-making on the welfare of our service members and civilian personnel, alongside the senior enlisted leaders of the Services. Reinforcing our priority on people, SO/LIC has also established a new directorate focused exclusively on Manpower and Force Resiliency. Through a reinvigorated Special Operations Policy Oversight Council and participation in other DoD decision-making bodies, we continue to deepen our engagement with the Military Departments and Combatant Commands in caring for our people and in addressing shared challenges.

## **PEOPLE: STRENGTHENING THE RESILIENCE OF THE FORCE**

Consistent with the first SOF Truth that *Humans are More Important than Hardware*, our people are our comparative and competitive advantage. Ensuring the readiness, resilience, and well-being of our men and women and their families remains our #1 priority. The unique nature of the SOF mission demands an extraordinarily talented workforce capable of operating in remote and austere environments, working alongside our global allies and partners, and harnessing advanced technologies to succeed in any warfighting domain. USSOCOM embraces, educates, and empowers our people to tackle the Nation's most complex problems.

### ***Embracing America's Greatest Resource***

America's core advantage over its adversaries is its dynamic, diverse, and innovative society. To generate a force that can succeed in today's complex security environment, SOF embrace the best of our Nation by recruiting, assessing, selecting, training, and employing the Nation's most talented and committed men and women. We continue to invest in thorough assessment, selection, and SOF-peculiar training programs to generate the most advanced fighting force in the world. These efforts depend upon the support of the Military Services for recruiting and critical enablers as most special operations require non-SOF support.

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In SOF, quality is more important than quantity. Our Component Commands continue to maintain rigorous assessment and selection standards amidst current recruiting challenges. They are also working closely with their parent Services to help address shared recruiting challenges. For example, Naval Special Warfare (NSW) Command began outreach engagements with a new recruiting cell, which increased contacts by more than 80% in Fiscal Year (FY) 2023. SOF-specific recruiting efforts continue to enable the Services by providing high-quality military servicemembers to the Joint Force. For instance, approximately 75% of the 1,000 Sailors that annually assess for NSW go on to serve in conventional Navy units. Similarly, approximately 80% of the 3,000 annual Army Special Operations Forces (ARSOF) Ranger and Special Forces recruits go on to serve in conventional Army units.

Diversity in our SOF formations provides an asymmetric advantage. SOF teammates with unique skillsets, experiences, and backgrounds can devise culturally attuned and innovative solutions to key operational problems. USSOCOM employs “big data” analytics from recruitment, assessment, selection, and retention to better understand and harness the talents of servicemembers and civilians. Similarly, to capitalize on unique language and cultural expertise, U.S. Army Special Operations Command (USASOC) has initiated a pilot program that allows legal permanent residents who meet SOF standards to be assessed directly into SOF units.

USSOCOM continues to develop and retain a talented workforce while fostering an inclusive organizational climate and maintaining our high standards. For example, to ensure that SOF draws upon the broadest pool of talent, we remain committed to supporting our women servicemembers’ ability to serve and advance within the SOF community. USASOC continues to implement the recommendations from its *Women in ARSOF Study*, such as enhancing mentorship, leadership opportunities, childcare, and gender-specific equipment. Across the SOF enterprise in 2023, we saw an increase of more than 12% in women joining the community. USASOC is leading efforts for the Army with tailored uniforms and body armor specifically designed for use by our ARSOF Servicewomen. Furthermore, NSW expanded female instructor billets in 2023 to normalize the presence of women in the training pipeline. Finally, USSOCOM units hosted several events for the interagency and Joint Force to demonstrate how women are integrated into SOF and the operational impacts of their service.

### ***Educating to Solve the Nation's Hardest Problems***

We continue to invest in our personnel with SOF-specific education and training, which we constantly adapt to address current security challenges. Our men and women who are entrusted to perform special operations must be equipped to succeed in an ever-evolving operational environment in close coordination with interagency, international, and industry partners. Because SOF’s tactical actions often carry strategic and political consequences, our educational programming and training remain critical for preparing our forces.

Joint Special Operations University (JSOU) is the focal point of our Joint SOF education. Through engagement with academia, the interagency, and international partners, JSOU provides accredited resident and distance learning to prepare SOF professionals to solve novel problems.

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JSOU's Senior Enlisted Academy introduces strategic thinking to tactical action for SOF non-commissioned officers renowned for their creativity, disciplined action, and understanding of the strategic environment. Additionally, JSOU assists Theater Special Operations Commands (TSOCs) with programming focused on integrated deterrence and works closely with allies and partners. As a priority effort, JSOU is increasing course offerings regarding the Indo-Pacific region. In support of our European partners, JSOU promotes interoperability across NATO and provides instruction regarding the intricacies of countering Russia's malign influence on a global scale. Similarly, JSOU continues to update its counter-violent extremist organization (C-VEO) courses to reflect the evolving nature of global terrorist networks.

Likewise, USSOCOM's components are also updating training curricula based on the ever-evolving character of warfare. In 2023, ARSOF added several training programs based on lessons learned through Ukraine's resistance efforts against Russia's illegal invasion. Examples include Slavic and Baltic language instruction, air defense training, robotics and unmanned systems integration, and the integration of artificial intelligence and machine learning into operations. Similarly, USASOC's John F. Kennedy Special Warfare Center and School is establishing an Irregular Warfare Academy at Fort Liberty, NC. NSW is integrating modern underwater demolition tactics and near peer scenarios into training. Lastly, U.S. Marine Corps Forces Special Operations Command is emphasizing special reconnaissance training in littoral environments. These training updates provide relevant tactical expertise, while ensuring training is conducted in accordance with rigorous safety standards.

### ***Empowering Those Who Serve at the Tip of the Spear***

SO/LIC ensures that the care and well-being of the men and women of SOF are elevated in leadership venues such as the Deputy's Workforce Council, management meetings with the Deputy Secretary, and the Secretary of Defense's bi-weekly meetings with the Service Secretaries. SO/LIC and USSOCOM continue to take a holistic approach to optimizing performance and enhancing readiness through SOF-unique support programs. The Preservation of the Force and Family (POTFF) and the Warrior Care Program are the Command's premier programs to strengthen readiness and resilience for SOF personnel and their families by addressing SOF-unique challenges for a performance-based organization that cannot be met through Service-common support resources.

The POTFF program exemplifies DoD's focus on taking care of people and is a model for similar programs, such as the Air Force's True North and the Army's Holistic Health and Fitness programs. POTFF focuses on five domains to optimize readiness and strengthen resiliency: physical, psychological, cognitive, social (family), and spiritual. POTFF focuses on holistic engagement to identify and address chronic issues before they impact performance. Recent data shows that SOF personnel who use the POTFF strength and conditioning program return to duty from non-surgical injuries after an average of 5 treatments, compared to 12 treatments by non-POTFF users. Over the past decade, USSOCOM has seen a steady increase across several mental health diagnoses, with a substantial rise in recent years particularly with post-traumatic stress and traumatic brain injuries. We attribute this to an increased emphasis on mental health,

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brain health, destigmatizing care, and SOF utilization of available programs. In the psychological domain, POTFF provides evidence-based interventions that fit within SOF training and deployment schedules with access to providers typically available on the same day.

Responsive and effective care that extends careers is an enterprise priority. For SOF personnel who are wounded, ill, or injured, the USSOCOM Warrior Care Program provides recovery care coordination services to ensure they have a comprehensive plan to get the treatment and resources they need. The primary objective is retaining talent and returning our personnel to their unit so they can continue serving. The combination of POTFF and the Warrior Care Program provides a continuum of support for our personnel through performance enhancement, injury recovery, and transition assistance. Over the past year, the program supported more than 7,000 cases, resulting in the retention of nearly 70% of wounded, ill, and injured active-duty SOF.

USSOCOM also collaborates with various non-profit organizations to preserve our forces and their families, particularly when faced with complex injuries and illnesses. For example, the Warrior Care Program collaborated with a non-profit organization dedicated to healing the invisible wounds of war to develop the *Comprehensive Brain Health and Trauma Program*. This intensive clinical program documents symptoms, histories, and exposures while providing a comprehensive treatment plan. The program has improved and saved the lives of our SOF personnel. One testimony from a senior Navy SEAL explained how through participation in the program, providers found malignant tumors that turned out to be life-threatening. He received care coordinated through the Warrior Care Program that saved his life and ultimately allowed him to continue to serve.

Because SOF warfighters have higher rates of repeated blast exposures and blast-related injuries, USSOCOM continues to lead efforts to identify methods to protect warfighter brain health in close collaboration with academia. In partnership with Massachusetts General Hospital and Harvard Medical School, USSOCOM concluded *The Repeated Brain Blast Exposure Study*, the most comprehensive work of this kind to date. As part of this effort, in September 2023, USSOCOM published the *Comprehensive Strategy for Special Operations Forces Warfighter Brain Health*, which focuses on monitoring brain health and cognitive performance, optimizing cognitive capacity, advancing brain health science, and connecting wounded, ill, and injured with resources to seek treatment. This USSOCOM Directive is in alignment with the Department's Warfighter Brain Health Comprehensive Strategy and Action Plan. USSOCOM appreciates the support from the James M. Inhofe National Defense Authorization Act for FY 2023 that provides resources to conduct traumatic brain injury research.

Determined to prevent suicide and other forms of self-harm, the SOF enterprise has engaged 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 with SOF leaders from the tactical to strategic levels, the SOF enterprise has worked to ensure the force is aware of all the resources available and has destigmatized seeking help. Additionally, USSOCOM is modernizing suicide prevention by developing virtual reality training tailored to

SOF-specific scenarios to help members of our formation identify and respond to teammates in crisis. As a member of the Department's Suicide Prevention and Risk Reduction Committee, ASD(SO/LIC) ensures that Department-level, Service, and USSOCOM-specific efforts are closely aligned. SO/LIC has also directed funding to support and implement rapidly the most promising suicide prevention training technologies for the SOF enterprise.

Maintaining a professional and healthy culture is essential to the well-being of our teammates and their families along with the accomplishment of their operational responsibilities. USSOCOM has zero tolerance for any behaviors that would undermine a positive work environment. Sexual assault, sexual harassment, and other harmful behaviors erode cohesion and trust. DoD's establishment of the Office of Special Trial Counsel helps cement accountability across the formation and ensures that serious offenses are handled fairly within the military justice system. USSOCOM completed the implementation of 16 Comprehensive Review recommendations in 2023. Despite the official close out, the Command will continue follow-on actions to foster a healthy climate and culture across the SOF enterprise.

## **WIN: DECISIVE ADVANTAGE FOR THE NATION**

SOF provide a decisive advantage for the Nation as an integral part of DoD's approach to integrated deterrence. In 2023 and early 2024, we have seen an increase in the Combatant Commands' demand for SOF capabilities and our critical enablers in support of campaigning towards NDS priorities. We regularly review and prioritize these requests due to demand exceeding capacity. Representing less than two percent of the Defense budget, and less than three percent of DoD personnel, SOF provide an exceptional return on investment in supporting NDS priorities. SOF prepare the global operating environment to enable the Joint Force to prevail in the event of conflict by providing options to senior leaders and dilemmas to our adversaries — all based on years of persistent campaigning. Additionally, USSOCOM preserves strategic focus for the Nation by countering VEO and responding to crises with agile and tailored capabilities. We have learned failure to maintain persistent pressure on extremist elements may allow them to reconstitute and pose a renewed—and sometimes greater—threat. Moreover, USSOCOM continues strengthening relationships and leveraging unique authorities to operate alongside our unrivaled global network of allies and partners.

### ***Preparing the Environment and Enabling the Joint Force to Prevail***

SOF's operations, activities, and investments in support of integrated deterrence can undermine an adversary's confidence in its capabilities and shape its decision and risk calculus to our advantage. The access, placement, and influence generated by SOF's long-term engagements improve interoperability and provide the Joint Force with expanded, low-cost options to gain awareness prior to conflict. SOF's unique access enables the Joint Force to prevail in conflict by building civil-military resilience, supporting resistance elements, facilitating operations in the information environment, enhancing kill webs, and working alongside regular and irregular forces.

SOF's placement and access are unique in breadth and depth. On any given day, SOF personnel are deployed to more than 85 countries conducting special operations missions, training, and exercises supporting the Joint Force while campaigning for military advantage in all domains. Our active duty force is bolstered by National Guard and Reserve SOF, supporting wide-ranging

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operations in approximately 30 countries, making them ideally suited to identify a competitor's coercive activities and counter them with precise, scalable, and credible all-domain options for the Joint Force. Through our Civil-Military Engagement program, USSOCOM-assigned Civil Affairs Soldiers provide a persistent SOF presence in priority countries with small teams of highly trained and culturally attuned professionals who advise and support military forces, host nation institutions, and indigenous populations to increase resilience to malign influence.

SOF campaigning activities are focused on enabling partners and deterring aggression by the PRC and Russia, while emphasizing the PRC as our pacing challenge. Over the past four years, SOF support to Combatant Command activity to counter coercion and deter aggression has more than tripled—comprising nearly 50% of SOF's deployed and forward presence in FY 2023.

In the Indo-Pacific theater, SOF have leveraged generational relationships to support and reassure partners and allies vulnerable to PRC aggression. SOF form the core of joint training efforts that integrate civil and military resilience to deter and, if necessary, resist external aggression. In the Philippines, longstanding SOF partnerships developed over years of counterterrorism efforts continue and have expanded to ensure maritime domain awareness and support the lawful exercise of navigational rights and freedoms in the South China Sea. Through our persistent presence and partnerships, we have demonstrated that we stand ready to support and defend a free and open Indo-Pacific.

In Europe, SOF's decades-long commitment to building capacity and enhancing interoperability with allied and partnered SOF continues. Three decades of training with Ukrainian Forces contributed to the development of a non-commissioned officer corps and special operations capability. Following the start of Russia's aggression against Ukraine in 2014, SOF supported multinational training efforts that included critical resilience and resistance capabilities. SO/LIC and USSOCOM remain steadfast partners with NATO SOF and contribute to U.S. European Command's response and deterrence options. We continue to support Ukraine's defense, fully aligning these activities with the Security Assistance Group-Ukraine. Multinational SOF have provided expert capabilities in countering Russian disinformation, as well as training and materiel support to Ukrainian SOF partners.

Competing with the PRC and Russia extends beyond the Indo-Pacific and Europe. The PRC and Russia 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. SOF provide critical support to broader U.S. government efforts to address this challenge. For example, DoD counterdrug-funded analysts across DoD, including at USSOCOM, support interagency efforts to illuminate transnational organized criminal groups aligned with Russian private military companies that have led to the denial of visas, sanctions, and seizure of assets and currency. USSOCOM also supports these regional partners by exposing malign environmental and illicit encroachments by PRC actors and their state-owned enterprises. As an example, SOF support partner nations' efforts to prevent PRC illegal fishing throughout the Western Hemisphere and Africa, an issue of enormous economic concern to many countries in those regions.

Our service members, civilians, and their families will face increasingly sophisticated misinformation and disinformation at home and in every operating environment. It is imperative to



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equip them with the skills and tools to protect themselves and conduct their missions in virtual and physical domains. To that end, SO/LIC led the development of the Department's Strategy for Operations in the Information Environment (SOIE). The 2023 DoD SOIE identifies four lines of effort to enable the Department to integrate and modernize operations in the information environment to strengthen integrated deterrence: People and Organizations; Programs; Policies and Governance; and Partnerships. This strategy recognizes that internet-based Military Information Support Operations (MISO) are indispensable in 21<sup>st</sup> century warfare, which includes the development of critical information force capabilities such as civil affairs and psychological operations.

As DoD's Joint Proponent and Coordinating Authority for Internet-based MISO, SOCOM is focused on the evolving information environment—to enable the Joint Force during competition and conflict. MISO to counter strategic competitors have more than tripled in the past three years—comprising more than 60% of SOF's worldwide MISO activities in FY 2023. The USSOCOM-hosted Joint MISO WebOps Center (JMWC) enables Combatant Commands' MISO campaigns conducted via internet platforms, actively engaging foreign audiences to illuminate and counter hostile propaganda and disinformation. The JMWC provides Combatant Commanders with options to generate desired effects globally, especially in countering propaganda, misinformation, and disinformation from Russia, the PRC, and C-VEOs. Due to the increased demand signal from across the Joint Force, the number of Combatant Command representatives in the JMWC doubled in 2023.

Modernized and updated 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' support in codifying Section 1202 authority under 10 U.S.C. 127d (Irregular Warfare), which will improve the range of options to impose costs on malign actors. Other authorities, such as 10 U.S.C. § 127f (Clandestine Operational Preparation of the Environment and Non-conventional Assisted Recovery) and FY 2020 NDAA Section 1057 (Intelligence / Counterintelligence) are valuable in illuminating and countering malign influence and preparing for potential future military operations.

Irregular warfare is a critical tool for campaigning across the spectrum of conflict, enhancing interoperability and access, and disrupting competitor warfighting advantages while reinforcing our own. To further institutionalize irregular warfare across the Joint Force, SO/LIC is updating policy, informing doctrine, and modernizing irregular warfare education and training. As part of this effort, in close coordination with the Joint Staff, SO/LIC recently updated DoD's definition of irregular warfare to better reflect the role of the Joint Force. Irregular warfare activities impose costs on our adversaries, strengthen our network of allies and partners, and interrupt our adversaries' decision cycle.

Irregular warfare is a fundamental component of the DoD's contributions to a larger whole-of-government approach to strategic competition. 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 from the PRC, Russia, Iran, and other malign actors. Irregular warfare enhances posture and options to counter an adversary's gray zone activities and their counter-intervention strategies. Consequently, an enhanced understanding of irregular warfare will bolster deterrence and make large scale conflict less likely. While SOF may perform the preponderance of the DoD's irregular warfare operations and activities, it remains the responsibility of the entire Joint

Force. Shared investments in irregular warfare across the DoD will enhance interoperability and disrupt our competitors' advantage.

### ***Preserving Strategic Focus***

SOF preserve DoD strategic focus on NDS priorities by executing crisis response and counter terrorism missions. This focus allows the Nation to direct efforts on the pacing challenge of the PRC and the acute threat of Russia. SOF continue to play a critical role in degrading VEOs – including those supported by our adversaries – and disrupting plots to attack Americans and our interests. SOF's crisis response capabilities remain a strategic hedge in no-fail missions to protect U.S. citizens and our vital national security interests globally.

USSOCOM is optimizing its global posture while sustaining the ability to respond to crises worldwide. In the past three years, the requirement for USSOCOM to fulfill its crisis response remit has increased more than 130% over the previous decade's annual average. Repeatedly during 2023, SOF provided vital forces and command and control for global crises requiring rapid deployment, complex problem-solving, and synchronized effects. For example, SOF executed an emergency evacuation of U.S. Embassy personnel from Khartoum, Sudan, when conditions deteriorated and placed American lives at risk. More recently, SOF postured to prepare for a wide-range of contingency operations in Israel and Lebanon following the Hamas attacks on Israel and subsequent regional instability.

Presidentially directed crisis response and C-VEO operations are inherently unpredictable and vary year-to-year in terms of timing, duration, and total cost. With an increase in the frequency of crises and compounded cost increases, reimbursement via supplementals is inefficient. Paying for previous crisis response deployments draws resources away from modernization efforts that aim to meet future challenges. We look forward to working with the committee to address these challenges.

USSOCOM is the DoD's Coordinating Authority for C-VEO through our Department-wide campaign planning, assessments, and recommendations. The conflict in Gaza, combined with perceived anti-Islamic sentiment, risks making certain populations more vulnerable to extremist appeals. Iran and aligned regional groups are leveraging the conflict to promote anti-U.S. sentiment and impose costs on the U.S. across the Middle East and Africa. Ongoing geopolitical, technological, economic, and climate change challenges exacerbate regional instability, threatening effective governance and fueling radicalization. As a result, violent extremism and terrorism persist as a threat to the United States, our partners, and our allies.

After sustained global pressure since 2001, the threat to Americans, to include the U.S. Homeland, posed by VEOs based in the Middle East and Africa is less acute but more diverse and amplified by destabilizing activities from nation-states like Russia and Iran. No individual organization is as great a threat to the U.S. homeland as al-Qa'ida or the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) when they were at their peak; however, the number and operating areas of VEOs with intent to threaten the Homeland and interests abroad have increased. Additionally, the continued availability of safe havens and under-governed spaces provide opportunities for continued threats against U.S. interests overseas. We must continue to pressure VEOs wherever they emerge, to prevent them from having the time and space to develop into threats to Americans, the Homeland and U.S. interests abroad. We have learned from the past and cannot become complacent.

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In East Africa, Somalia has emerged as a critical hub for both al-Qa'ida and ISIS. Al-Shabaab presents an ongoing risk to U.S. interests both in Somalia and throughout the region while maintaining ties to the larger al-Qa'ida organization. For its part, ISIS-Somalia has emerged as a prominent element of the larger ISIS enterprise. We are working closely with our Somali counterparts to push back on and prevent these organizations from establishing safe havens for future operations. In West and Central Africa, socio-political instability and the operations of Russian private military companies exacerbate the threats posed by al-Qa'ida's affiliate Jama'at Nasr al-Islam wal Muslimin (JNIM) and ISIS in the region. SOF are providing indications and warnings of threats from these regions and posturing to respond when directed.

In Afghanistan, ISIS Khorasan is strengthening its connections to the broader ISIS enterprise and is increasing attacks across the region while exploiting links into Central Asian diasporas abroad to encourage attacks against the West. Despite the removal of key leaders since 2019, ISIS continues to demonstrate the intent to target U.S. interests in the Middle East and reconstitute military capabilities.

Since the Hamas attack on October 7th, 2023, the United States has leveraged SOF heavily in our response. SOF deployed quickly and stood ready in nearby countries to provide our nation with crisis evacuation options. SOF continue to work closely with Israeli counterparts to locate and rescue the American citizens suspected to have been taken hostage by Hamas. Moreover, in the subsequent regional unrest, SOF often have the lead to counter the malign influence of Iran and its proxies. Due to their unique placement and capabilities, SOF are on the front lines of these efforts.

With the Secretary of Defense's priority to protect civilians during military operations, SO/LIC and USSOCOM are leaders in implementing DoD's civilian harm mitigation and response (CHMR) efforts. SO/LIC spearheaded the effort to develop the Civilian Harm Mitigation and Response Action Plan, and USSOCOM continues supporting its ongoing implementation through best-in-class innovations and approaches. USSOCOM proactively revised kinetic strike protocols and implemented mandatory target engagement authority training across the enterprise. The CHMR policies and procedures outlined by the Department assist with C-VEO efforts as they prevent underlying dynamics from creating more extremism.

As we focus our campaigning to address the priorities of integrated deterrence, SOF continue to pursue a sustainable approach to C-VEO operations. A sustainable approach consists of prioritizing threats to the Homeland, modernizing ways to degrade VEOs' capabilities, and working closely with international and interagency partners. For example, now celebrating its tenth year, U.S. leadership of the 87-member Global Coalition to Defeat ISIS has undermined a well-understood strategy of globally aspiring extremist groups. These groups seek to overextend individual governments into resource-intensive commitments that eventually deplete national resolve and popular will. Against individual countries, this global strategy can be effective. Against a unified group of like-minded countries, it cannot, and our leadership of the Coalition since 2014 has been a cornerstone of a sustainable U.S. approach to defeating ISIS. Following National Security Memorandum-13 guidance, SOF embrace a "partner-led, U.S.-enabled" campaign approach to C-VEO, built on a disciplined prioritization of risks to drive decision-making. During operations over the past year to counter ISIS, SOF have worked closely with international and interagency partners to

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disrupt illicit financing, interdict foreign fighters, and illuminate propaganda with the operation in January 2023 to capture the ISIS financier, Bilal Al Sudani as an example. Our interagency efforts also have included close cooperation with the Department of State and U.S. Agency for International Development with the implementation of the Global Fragility Act in Coastal West Africa—fundamentally focused on preventing crises and failed states before they can occur.

Now in its tenth year, Operation GALLANT PHOENIX (OGP)—a U.S. interagency and multinational C-VEO initiative—has enabled international and interagency partners to share information from battlefield captures to asymmetrically disrupt 16 distinct al-Qa'ida and ISIS groups in FY 2023. Coupled with counter threat finance authorities and analytical expertise, operations like OGP provide expanded and cost-effective ways to disrupt illicit financing and deter activities. Operations for U.S. and OGP partners contributed to more than 1,500 investigations, in excess of 6,000 foreign disclosure releases, and support to partners repatriating more than 60 individuals in FY 2023. DoD counter-threat finance analysts also supported numerous Treasury designations against VEO finances and facilitators. The OGP model could apply further to countering coercive activities and deterring aggression.

Violent extremists continue to incorporate new technologies and adapt their tactics, posing an ongoing global threat to our citizens. Unmanned aerial systems (UAS) pose a pressing challenge, exhibiting a rapid evolution in employment and lethality exceeding that of improvised explosive devices over the past two decades. In addition to the evolving UAS threat from VEOs, capable state adversaries and their aligned paramilitary forces have also successfully employed UAS to target American, allied, and partner forces—most notably in the Arabian Sea along with Iraq, Jordan, and Syria over the past year.

In its longtime role as the Coordinating Authority for Countering Weapons of Mass Destruction (CWMD), USSOCOM draws upon its international, interagency, and joint relationships to deter weapons of mass destruction proliferation by state and non-state actors. USSOCOM hosts annual CWMD Senior Leader Seminars to bolster support for DoD-wide strategies, plans, and policies while improving interoperability with our international partners. USSOCOM incorporated select allies and interagency partners in planning for the updated DoD Functional Campaign Plan for CWMD. The forthcoming plan will drive interoperability and strengthen deterrence to defend the Homeland, our allies, and our partners' interests.

### ***Strengthening Partnerships***

Extensive partnerships are the cornerstone of SOF's contributions to integrated deterrence, C-VEO, and crisis response. Unparalleled integration and interoperability with allies and partners, the interagency community, and the Joint Force are all characteristics that SOF have strengthened over the past two decades. While the shared challenge of countering violent extremism facilitated unprecedented levels of operational partnerships, these mutually beneficial relationships have now extended to the full range of SOF operations globally, including integrated deterrence and irregular warfare capabilities. Small footprint and persistent low-cost SOF deployments allow our allies and partners to build capacity and bolster their security to prevent wider conflict.

SOF's generational partnerships across the globe provide the Joint Force an asymmetric advantage. In 2023, SOF formations executed 168 Joint Combined Exchange Training iterations in

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76 countries, training more than 2,000 U.S. SOF personnel alongside more than 7,500 allies and partners. Through persistent engagement, SOF have fostered extensive interoperability with allied and partner SOF, deepened by operating shoulder-to-shoulder during combat and other high-risk operations for over two decades. Authorities under 10 U.S.C. § 333 (Building Partner Capacity) and 10 U.S.C. § 322 (SOF Training) are the foundation of SOF's generational relationships to further enhance collaboration and promote interoperability. Additionally, Headquarters USSOCOM hosts 28 foreign liaison officers who provide a level of trust that cannot be surged during a crisis.

An enduring advantage for the United States is its unrivaled network of CT partners who continue to bring bespoke capabilities and remain committed to countering terrorists that threaten all our citizens. SO/LIC and USSOCOM closely coordinate with these partners to ensure unity of effort, streamlined communication, and common priorities. In every CT campaign, we find capable and willing allies, dedicated to the defeat of terrorist organizations, and ready to partner with us in our efforts. Operations supported by 10 U.S.C. § 127e (Counterterrorism) are an example of partner forces providing flexible options to apply pressure against violent extremists in otherwise inaccessible, contested, and ungoverned areas—while reducing risk to U.S. forces.

Moreover, SOF serve as added connective tissue to the interagency community for the Department and a force multiplier for integrated deterrence. Integration with U.S. interagency partners—such as the Department of State, the Department of Justice, the Department of the Treasury, the Department of Homeland Security, the U.S. Agency for International Development, and the National Counterterrorism Center, among many others—enhances the U.S. Government's response to various threats and efforts to mitigate instability over the past year. As an example, USSOCOM CTF analytical support led to high-level indictments of Chinese companies that import fentanyl precursors to the Homeland and was lauded by the Drug Enforcement Administration for supporting the identification and distribution of fentanyl and other drug trafficking, including a global money-laundering network. FBI recognized CTF analysts at Special Operations Command-Pacific for their support to investigations involving Chinese transnational organized crime groups linked to PRC malign influence networks.

USSOCOM serves as the DoD's lead component for synchronizing CTF activities. Since the DoD counterdrug program funds the great majority of DoD CTF activity, USSOCOM uses Title 10 U.S.C. §284 (Support to Counterdrug Activities and Activities to Counter Transnational Organized Crime) authorities and the associated FY 2004 NDAA Section 1022 authorities to support interagency partners in identifying and countering competitors' illicit activities. In 2023, USSOCOM supported dozens of transnational criminal investigations. Notably, these included the Attorney General's prioritized investigations involving Mexico-based cartels, China-based chemical companies, investigations involving international money laundering associated with narcotics, and several other cases involving high-priority interagency targets. As discussed, DoD counterdrug authorities provide options to illuminate and counter malign activity by VEO networks along with PRC and Russian-affiliated transnational organized criminal networks, which are often closely tied to drug trafficking organizations. However, SO/LIC recognizes that the DoD counterdrug program should not underwrite all of the Department's CTF capability. We are working to establish a standardized training program to enable other parts of DoD to develop their own CTF analysts and expand the reach of this critical methodology.

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As the DoD Global Coordinator for C-sUAS prior to launch, USSOCOM has coordinated numerous DoD and U.S. Government actions to disrupt adversaries' networks and organizations responsible for sUAS production, proliferation, and use. USSOCOM continues active coordination with the Joint Force and partners to synchronize intelligence collection and analysis, technology development, plans, and operations to disrupt and degrade adversary sUAS operations. These efforts have enabled law enforcement partners to directly affect criminal networks procuring U.S. components for use in UAS production. DoD support to these cases last year helped to disrupt more than \$46 million of revenue in illicit part procurement and assisted partners, such as the Departments of Treasury and Commerce, to designate entities involved in evading U.S. financial sanctions and export controls. Despite this significant progress, our adversaries' rapid advancement of sUAS technology continues, challenging DoD's future ability to protect, project, and employ forces. To assist USSOCOM in synchronizing DoD C-sUAS prior-to-launch efforts, SO/LIC stood up the Counter Small Unmanned Aircraft Systems Prior To Launch Executive Committee to serve as the senior forum to develop and recommend policy, develop strategy, and oversee DoD's C-sUAS prior-to-launch mission to address critical gaps and issues. SO/LIC also understands that partners in the interagency community have critical roles in the effort to curb the production and distribution of C-sUAS among our adversaries and has also led the effort to build on DoD's collaboration with partners such as the Departments of State, Treasury, Commerce, and Homeland Security.

USSOCOM also maintains collaborative, mutually supporting relationships across the Joint Force. Close coordination with regionally aligned Combatant Commands enables SOF to support regional and transregional campaigning efforts—particularly important as the PRC and Russia pursue malign strategic objectives globally. USSOCOM's TSOCs, are each aligned with a specific Combatant Command to coordinate SOF campaigning in their respective theaters to ensure activities both support regional strategic objectives and maximize transregional efforts. Operating transregionally is critical for both C-VEO efforts and countering our strategic competitors' coercive gray zone activities.

Strong collaboration in support of SOF, space, and cyber operations with other Combatant Commands ensures synchronization across warfighting domains. The nexus of USSOCOM, U.S. Cyber Command, U.S. Space Command, and U.S. Strategic Command, each with a specific functional focus, creates synergy with complementary capabilities to support the Joint Force. This nexus specifically enhances kill webs—the integration of sensors from seabed to space and the options to eliminate targets. It also creates new opportunities to degrade an adversary's confidence and capabilities before conflict. For example, SOF often require cyberspace and space capabilities to see and sense the operational environment and, if needed, conduct strikes against an adversary. Likewise, cyberspace and space operations often rely on SOF's physical access to deliver effects to enhance Joint Force targeting.

SOF produce groundbreaking tactics, techniques, procedures, and materiel solutions. However, in the absence of specific doctrine or standard operating procedures, traditional force modeling and projections are inadequate. This is a problem we share with our colleagues wielding cyber and space capabilities. SO/LIC and USSOCOM are working together to model SOF effects and to better integrate into Joint Staff wargames and analysis—especially below the threshold of armed conflict. ASD(SO/LIC) has issued the establishing order for a new Center for Special Operations Analytics to organize and direct the growth of the SOF enterprise's analytic

capabilities. Beginning in 2023, USSOCOM's Title 10 Wargame, SHADOW WARRIOR shifted from an internal missions focus to how SOF can best support the Joint Force in overcoming key operational problems in conflict. We further saw the utility of SOF enabling the Joint Force during the past two Globally Integrated Wargames. SOF as a force in the deep area produced tangible benefits for the Joint Force's performance. SOF have identified vital concepts to assist the Joint Force and will integrate those concepts in Joint and Service-specific Wargames in 2024. The SOF enterprise is scrutinizing our internal force structure to optimize our efforts to support integrated deterrence. Optimization includes divestment of some legacy counterterrorism-only capacity, while streamlining our force to prepare for the next conflict. Integrating SOF capabilities into Service planning will ensure that the Joint Force can improve resource utilization in long-term planning.

Lastly, USSOCOM is fully integrated with Joint Force training and exercises critical to achieving NDS objectives. As a notable example, Special Operations Command Korea revitalized biannual exercises to support the training of Korean Joint and Combined Forces with Freedom Shield. ARSOF participation in Pacific Sentry 2023 supported the Joint Force in the exercise of large-scale combat operations. In 2023, USASOC participated in Project Convergence and will participate again in 2024 to promulgate lessons learned to assist in the development of the Army's Information Advantage doctrine and training. Also in 2023, AFSOC hosted Emerald Warrior with international partners from France, Germany, and Lithuania to support the U.S. Air Force's approach to operations and Agile Combat Employment.

## **TRANSFORM: MODERNIZE FOR THE FUTURE**

USSOCOM is building an enduring advantage through investment in our people, technologies, and organizations with a commitment to evolve, modernize, and optimize for the future operating environment. With the direction of ASD(SO/LIC), USSOCOM is accelerating its wide-ranging modernization efforts and capitalizing on our Nation's innovation ecosystem. Our innovation efforts emphasize surface and subsurface maritime platforms; C-UAS; next-generation intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance; mission command systems; and collaborative and autonomous unmanned systems. USSOCOM is a trailblazer for data-driven decision-making to both inform and execute our Service-like and Combatant Command responsibilities, focused on the talent, architecture, and processes needed to capitalize on data and Artificial Intelligence (AI)-related technologies.

### ***Building an Enduring SOF Advantage***

The SOF enterprise continues to modernize its capabilities and incorporate emerging technologies to build an enduring advantage. The Command leverages our acquisition authority to modernize special operations capabilities in five key technical challenge areas: battlespace awareness, emplacement and access, all-domain communications and computing, scalable precision effects, and warfighter performance.

Supported by SO/LIC through the Department's programming and budgetary processes, USSOCOM has coordinated closely with the Under Secretary of Defense for Research and Engineering (USD(R&E)), the Defense Innovation Unit (DIU), and the Services to collaborate and experiment in each of these focus areas. Twice a year, the SOF enterprise holds a joint summit with the USD for Acquisition and Sustainability as well to ensure the Department is

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benefitting fully from SOF's agility and ability to operationally test new concepts and technologies. USSOCOM's acquisition authorities, along with its unique attributes of being inherently joint, partnered, and globally deployed, position it to greatly contribute to the overall modernization of the Joint Force. Specifically, the Command is well-positioned to be the partner of choice supporting three of USD (R&E)'s technology priorities: within cyber, focusing on MISO capabilities; within directed energy, focusing on electronic warfare/electronic attack, and biotechnologies. USSOCOM also partners with DIU on several projects to demonstrate and accelerate the vetting of commercially proven technology for operational use.

Battlespace awareness enables finding and fixing targets in contested environments and effective decision making at the tactical edge supporting the Joint Force. Technologies fuse operations and intelligence information from multiple data streams to enhance tactical commanders' domain awareness and connect warfighters to small autonomous and collaborative unmanned systems. In the cyber domain, we are integrating tools to provide an open architecture mission command system optimized for SOF's role in integrated deterrence. We are also leveraging the full range of open-source data to ensure SOF can access timely, geo-rectified, and accurate data to inform their decisions. To harness advances in space, USSOCOM has established a collaborative arrangement with U.S. Space Force and the Space Development Agency to experiment with payloads that will provide its forces with space-based capabilities at the tactical level. Finally, we are aggressively pursuing collaborative autonomy through our AI for small unit maneuver efforts across our ground, air, and maritime unmanned and unattended sensor portfolios.

As part of our emplacement and access efforts, we continue to modernize our platforms to prevail in contested environments while working closely with the Services. We are equipping our existing aviation platforms with advanced infiltration and penetration capabilities, including the Silent Knight terrain-following/terrain-avoidance radar, which enables our rotary- and fixed-wing fleets and radio-frequency countermeasures for our MC-130s. In close partnership with the Navy, we are investing in modernized surface and undersea maritime platforms. These efforts in developing, testing, and fielding a range of maritime capabilities will strengthen deterrence in the Indo-Pacific and across the globe.

Within all-domain communications and computing, USSOCOM is advancing technologies for influence operations in the cyber domain and hyper-enabling Joint SOF and partner forces to provide decision advantage. We focus on optimizing information processing and sharing for individuals and teams conducting partnered operations with the goal of enhancing effectiveness across all domains in contested and congested environments. The Mission Command System/Common Operating Picture deployed after a single year of development due to embracing agile software development techniques. This system is our gateway to DoD's Combined Joint All-Domain Command and Control (CJADC2).

As SOF operate in increasingly contested environments, USSOCOM must provide identity management capabilities to protect our personnel, their families, and our SOF partners. Acknowledging the criticality of network infrastructure, USSOCOM implements a zero-trust architecture, providing greater information security across the SOF enterprise. To ensure alignment, we work closely with partners across DoD, including the National Security Agency



and the Defense Information Systems Agency. We also seek to accelerate the transition to cloud-based architectures with modern data science environments. These efforts are integral to advancing CJADC2 and ensuring resilient networks. Finally, USSOCOM will continue to modernize internet-based and other MISO efforts through automation and AI-enabled capabilities to operate more effectively in the rapidly evolving information environment.

Precision and scalable effects are not limited to kinetic fires. USSOCOM explores cyber and electromagnetic effects through expanded experimentation, and it remains in close coordination with SO/LIC and the Army's Joint C-sUAS Office to detect and defeat any UAS that poses a threat to deployed SOF and our partners. USSOCOM has taken a unique software-centric, open architecture, system of systems approach to C-sUAS that will allow for the rapid integration of both proven and emerging technologies.

The final modernization area, warfighter performance, focuses largely on developing human-centric technologies, enabling SOF to deploy promising capabilities rapidly. These efforts are closely aligned with the POTFF program to address the physical and cognitive well-being of SOF, including the effects of blast exposures on brain health. We are combining leading-edge data with nutrition, health, AI, and industry partnerships while leveraging commercial scientific and academic labs.

Across all areas, USSOCOM leverages acquisition pathways such as Middle Tier Acquisition and contracting strategies including Commercial Solutions Openings that leverage Other Transaction Authorities. Additionally, USSOCOM is exploring novel solutions to get warfighters what they need. Acquisition agility enables USSOCOM to benefit from rapidly changing technologies, many of which are evolving quickly in the commercial sector and are often produced by small businesses. As the DoD focuses on modernizing the defense industrial ecosystem, USSOCOM seeks to bridge gaps with industry and the private investment community to maximize available disruptive technology for the SOF warfighter. Educating the private investment community on current and future capability gaps will provide alternative finance streams and is crucial to energizing this vital portion of the defense industrial base to act akin to tech scouts for our warfighters.

### ***Accelerating Momentum***

SOF has been a pathfinder for the Department in leveraging AI to support tactical operations against VEOs. SOF pioneered some successful capabilities the Services incorporate today, such as the Project Maven Smart System. To meet the demands of the NDS, SOF view the relationship of data, analytics, and AI as a strategic imperative that will not only create advantages in integrated deterrence for the Joint Force and international partners but also improve our management functions associated with organizing, training, and equipping SOF in the future.

In line with the Deputy Secretary of Defense's 2021 memorandum "Creating Data Advantage," SOF has invested in making our data accessible, linked, and secure. USSOCOM has also deployed more than 50 data stewards throughout the SOF formation, implementing the SOF Data Strategy and establishing initial digital talent capacity in each Headquarters Directorate, USSOCOM Components, and TSOCS. This includes cataloging more than 1,300

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SOF data assets in 2023 alone. USSOCOM deployed a mobile education team to provide basic data literacy at the Headquarters and each of our subordinate Commands. Additionally, USSOCOM has invested in modernizing our digital infrastructure to scale SOF's ability to leverage modern data management platforms and tools.

SOF are exploring the application of data, analytics, and AI for mission and management impact. USSOCOM recently developed a capability to internalize, transform, and transport data to fuse with intelligence and enhance analysis. USSOCOM CTF analysts are using advanced commercial tools to identify illicit cryptocurrency transactions and combine that analysis with other types of government and commercial data to illuminate and disrupt illicit networks globally. The operational application of AI focuses on augmenting human capacity in the tactical environment. Additionally, SOF intelligence units seek to develop machine learning and AI as a force multiplier for processing, exploiting, and disseminating multiple forms of information.

SOF data needs and use cases remain nested with the rest of the Department. This partnership and additional investment drive insights on various use cases across logistics, readiness, acquisition, force planning, financial and budget issues. Most importantly, SOF are closely aligned with Departmental policy on developing trustworthy AI. Specifically, algorithmic development in support of autonomy efforts will closely adhere to Departmental policy. As SOF pursue advanced AI models, such as large language models and generative AI, SO/LIC and USSOCOM will ensure it does so in full compliance with test and evaluation requirements. AI capabilities can provide a decisive advantage; as a result, SOF is committed to the ethical development and incorporation of these capabilities for the Nation.

## **CONCLUSION**

Your SOF stand ready to meet the complex challenges of this decisive decade with specially assessed and selected personnel, enabled by cutting-edge capabilities and training. Decades of problem-solving, courage, and relentless determination, attest to SOF's ability to prepare the global operating environment, contributing to integrated deterrence. SOF's unique capabilities generate options that enable the Joint Force to prevail while preserving the Nation's strategic focus. Whether creating dilemmas for our competitors, countering coercion, reassuring allies and partners, disrupting VEOs or responding to crises, SOF provide a decisive advantage for 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 and capable special operations force. The men and women of Special Operations are grateful for your continued support.