

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

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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 present an account of the priorities, activities, and investments that ensure SOF are prepared to meet today's challenges and those to come.

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

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

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

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

Advancing Civilian-Military Partnership

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

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

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

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

PEOPLE: STRENGTHEN OUR FORCE & FAMILIES

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

Investing in Our People

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

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

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

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

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

Leveraging Diverse Talent

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Enhancing Readiness, Resilience & Professionalism

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

WIN: SUCCEED FOR THE NATION

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

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

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

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

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

Strengthening Partnerships

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Campaigning for Integrated Deterrence

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Countering Violent Extremism

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Advancing Department-Level Responsibilities

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

TRANSFORM: MODERNIZE FOR THE FUTURE

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

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

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

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

Building an Enduring SOF Advantage

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Leveraging Data-Driven Technologies

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

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

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

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

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

CONCLUSION

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