

## Statement for the Record



Mr. Christopher P. Maier

Acting Assistant Secretary of Defense

for Special Operations and Low-Intensity Conflict

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## Introduction

Chairman Reed, Ranking Member Inhofe, and other distinguished members of the committee, thank you for the opportunity to testify on our global posture for DoD's Special Operations Forces (SOF) Enterprise. As Acting Assistant Secretary of Defense (ASD) for Special Operations and Low-Intensity Conflict (SO/LIC), my remarks will focus on ASD SO/LIC's statutory responsibilities for administrative oversight of U.S. Special Operations Command (USSOCOM). I am honored to testify alongside General Clarke and General Nakasone. I greatly appreciate their decades of leadership and service in protecting the Nation's national security interests.

I would like to begin by acknowledging the service, sacrifice, and success of our Special Operations Soldiers, Sailors, Airmen, Marines, and civilians. U.S. SOF have played a critical role in every major conflict since the Second World War, and they remain in the fight today – conducting operations against ISIS, al-Qaeda and its affiliates; working alongside partners and allies; and providing our Nation's leaders with flexible and rapid response options to a wide range of national security emergencies. Since the terrorist attacks of September 11, our SOF community has established a remarkable record of achievement. From the overthrow of the Taliban regime in Afghanistan in December 2001, to the complex operations targeting the world's most notorious terrorist leaders like Osama bin Laden, and to the extraordinary effort to eliminate the ISIS caliphate in Syria and Iraq, we owe our SOF community our deepest gratitude.

Despite recent reductions in deployments, SOF remain at the forefront of U.S. combat operations, often operating in remote and hostile environments. Over the past two years, fifteen members of the SOF formation were killed in combat operations. Although SOF make up only approximately three percent of the Joint Force, they have endured more than half of U.S. combat casualties during that period. Many more have sustained life-altering injuries or suffer from psychological trauma. The service and sacrifice of these men and women challenge us to live up to the high standards they embody.

I would also like to thank Congress for your strong support of the SOF community as well as your predecessors and their foresight in recognizing the need to build and sustain special operations capabilities to respond to an increasingly complex threat environment. The Nunn-Cohen amendment that established USSOCOM and the position of ASD SO/LIC in 1986 was prescient in recognizing that future conflicts would be fought by both state and non-state actors and often through unconventional and irregular means. The authors of these reforms rightly understood that dedicated resources for Special Operations-specific purposes were essential to promoting and sustaining these capabilities within the Department.

My statement this morning will focus on how the SOF community is supporting Secretary Austin's three principal priorities as outlined in his March 3, 2021, "Message to the Force" – 1) Defend the Nation, 2) Take Care of Our People, and 3) Succeed through Teamwork. In the nearly two decades following the terrorist attacks of 9/11, SOF have continued to develop new technologies and capabilities to become the most effective counterterrorism (CT) force in history. Today, the SOF Enterprise is in the midst of a critical period of transition as the National Defense Strategy (NDS) and the Interim National Security Strategic Guidance (INSSG)

challenges us to conduct counterterrorism operations more sustainably as we also adapt to the challenges of great power competition. At the same time, I am pleased to report that we have continued to improve the readiness of the force and reduce the strain of deployment on our SOF warriors and their families. Your leadership and support and have been, and will continue to be, essential in this effort.

### Defend the Nation

Representing approximately two percent of the DoD budget, SOF play a crucial role within the Joint Force in support of multiple DoD priorities, and the SOF community continues to make progress in adapting its capabilities to the challenge of great-power *competition* with Russia and China. I emphasize the word “competition” because just as the National Defense Strategy calls on us to develop traditional military capabilities to deter and respond to threats, we are also called to strengthen alliances, innovate, and compete more effectively below the level of armed conflict. Revisionist powers, rogue states, and non-state actors are actively pursuing unconventional, irregular, and asymmetric strategies to undermine U.S. strategic interests, erode democratic institutions, and destabilize and re-shape the post-WWII world order to their advantage, without provoking a U.S. conventional military response. Indeed, as the Department continues to strengthen our traditional military capabilities, we can expect that our adversaries will increasingly employ indirect and irregular approaches to achieve their strategic objectives to capitalize on asymmetries that work to their advantage.

Thus, winning the *competition* is essential to achieving our near-term strategic objectives, and to precluding a major conflict. This is not a theoretical battle to prepare for in the future. This is today’s fight, and the SOF capabilities we have nurtured over the past 30 years are essential to successfully competing – *and winning* – in today’s unconventional and irregular battlespaces. In close coordination with the Joint Staff, Services, and Combatant Commands, including USSOCOM, my office is leading the implementation of the Irregular Warfare (IW) Annex to the NDS to institutionalize the Department’s approach to IW throughout the Joint Force and to operationalize it for great power competition and resource-sustainable counterterrorism. The IW Annex directs the Joint Force to embrace the potential for irregular warfare to shape great power competitors’ behavior proactively to our advantage, create dilemmas to deter future aggression, and strengthen alliances and partnerships.

As we adapt to meet the challenges of great power competition, we remain focused on ensuring CT operations are sustainable and focused on the most relevant threats to U.S. national security interests such as ISIS and al-Qaeda and their affiliates that continue to pose a threat to Americans and U.S. interests around the globe. Continued U.S., allied, and partner nation pressure has helped prevent these groups from attacking the homeland.

Within this strategic context, and consistent with the INSSG, we continue to adapt our global posture and develop SOF-unique capabilities that enable our operators to *compete and win* in a wide variety of contingencies, including CT, crisis response, competition below the level of armed conflict, and as a force multiplier to the Joint Force if deterrence fails. Although our adversaries increasingly employ irregular warfare tactics, SOF support can ensure the

Department does not depend only on high-end warfighting and deterrent capabilities. Today, approximately 40 percent of SOF deployed forces are tasked with countering malign influence of our great-power adversaries.

Central to our irregular warfare efforts is a suite of legislative authorities that underpin our efforts to address these challenges alongside our international and interagency partners. We appreciate Congress's support for the extension and expansion of "Section 1202" authority to conduct irregular warfare operations and for the establishment of a new Title 10 funding authority for operational preparation of the environment activities in the National Defense Authorization Act for Fiscal Year (FY) 2021. Authorities such as these and Section 127e of Title 10 are cost-effective, agile ways for the United States to advance our security interests working by, with, and through partners.

We continue to invest in technologies and capabilities to empower SOF to operate in denied areas and conduct high-risk operations in remote and austere environments, operate seamlessly with our general purpose force counterparts, and produce scalable precision effects. For instance, USSOCOM is developing next-generation Intelligence Surveillance and Reconnaissance capabilities to enhance situational awareness for the SOF warfighter, even in contested areas. Similarly, we are making investments to enhance SOF maritime capabilities, including surface combatant craft, submarines, and unmanned underwater vehicles, and working with the Department of the Navy to ensure integration of SOF operational concepts and capability investments related to great power competition.

USSOCOM is pursuing technological advancements designed to enhance network interoperability, enable secure communications for command and control, and employ data analytics, artificial intelligence (AI) and machine learning (ML) to enable our SOF to operate more effectively. In close collaboration with the Joint Artificial Intelligence Center, USSOCOM is adapting and employing AI to streamline a wide range of activities, such as intelligence analysis and operational functions. For instance, USSOCOM is leveraging AI/ML to optimize preventive maintenance for aircraft of the Army's 160<sup>th</sup> Special Operations Aviation Regiment (SOAR) that has demonstrated significant potential for increasing the operational readiness rate of the unit's fleet of aircraft.

USSOCOM has also employed innovative acquisition pathways, including mid-tier acquisitions to execute tailored acquisition strategies and to streamline capability delivery to the warfighter. Additionally, USSOCOM is leveraging public-private partnerships and deepening relationships with academic institutions and non-traditional partners, including through its pilot project to expand small business participation in technology development to enhance SOF warfighting capabilities.

### Take Care of Our People

Consistent with the clear priorities outlined in the NDS and the INSSG, we continue to invest in the readiness of the force and the resiliency of our SOF warriors and their families. Despite the unique challenges associated with the COVID-19 pandemic over the past year, SOF

have continued to maintain a high level of operational readiness in support of strategic priorities. COVID-19-related restrictions on CONUS and OCONUS movements have reduced flight hours and training opportunities, particularly alongside our overseas partners. Although the number of forces deployed overseas is down approximately 15 percent over the past year, nearly 5,000 SOF are currently deployed to 62 countries.

In the years following the terrorist attacks of September 11, the high demand for SOF resulted in a near-constant cycle of deployments for some capabilities. To address the strain caused by that operational tempo, we have taken a hard look at the forces that we can responsibly and sustainably provide to support global demand amid multifaceted and simultaneous mission requirements. Over the past several years, we have made considerable progress toward meeting the Department's requirement of a 1:2 deployment-to-dwell ratio across the force, meaning that a typical service member would expect to spend twice as much time at home station as on deployment. We continue to make progress toward achieving this target with now more than 90 percent of the force at a 1:2 ratio or better.

The additional dwell time spent at home station is not only contributing to increased predictability for the force and improved work-life balance, it is also enabling additional time for training, screening, rest, refit, and reintegration. USSOCOM has also continued to meet the Department's goal of fewer than five percent non-deployable military personnel.

In addition to monitoring metrics of SOF readiness, we are closely evaluating how SOF posture relates to our ability to sustain CT and crisis response operations along with high-priority missions. We are also focused on limiting SOF deployments to those that require SOF-specific capabilities and training. For instance, the establishment of the Army's Security Force Assistance Brigade has provided a capable General Purpose Force option for training and mentoring foreign security forces. The combination of these efforts has helped ease the strain of a high and unsustainable rate of overseas deployments for SOF personnel.

In addition to reducing the strain on the force due to high operational tempo, the SOF Enterprise is further enhancing readiness by taking a holistic approach to caring for SOF warriors and their families. With the strong support of Congress, USSOCOM has continued to develop its Preservation of the Force and Families (POTFF) program to address SOF-unique challenges and to optimize physical, psychological, social, and spiritual performance. The POTFF program leverages a combination of USSOCOM, Service, and DoD resources to meet the needs of the various SOF components and individual unit commanders. These programs include injury prevention/strength training, performance nutrition, rehabilitative care, improved access to behavioral health and suicide prevention, family and community programs, promoting healthy living, and reinforcing resiliency and spiritual fitness.

Participation in the POTFF human performance program and neurocognitive baselining are now mandatory for all USSOCOM personnel. Our SOF warriors recognize POTFF as an invaluable resource for their readiness and career longevity, and data collected from our SOF commanders indicates that the program is having a significant and positive impact on the mission readiness of their units. SO/LIC is currently collaborating with the command to develop standardized and quantitative outcome metrics to help inform future resourcing decisions, and

we look forward to working closely with the committee to ensure we are achieving a solid return on this investment in our personnel.

Similarly, USSOCOM's Warrior Care program continues to provide specialized care for soldiers who have suffered physical or psychological trauma by providing SOF members and their families support through recovery, rehabilitation, and reintegration. We have no greater responsibility than to care for our SOF warriors and to provide them with a path to return to service and/or transition to civilian careers following their years of service. We appreciate the strong support of Congress for each of these efforts.

I remain concerned about instances of moral and ethical failings within the SOF community, and I know General Clarke shares this concern. Incidents such as these have no place in the military or our Department, and if not tackled head-on can erode morale and undermine trust and our moral authority with our partners and allies. I commend General Clarke for his initiative in directing a comprehensive review of SOF culture and ethics beginning in August 2019. The review was directed to address shortfalls and limitations of multiple previous studies and to build upon them to address enterprise-wide issues and to analyze data from across the SOF Enterprise.

SO/LIC strongly supported this effort, and SO/LIC personnel actively participated in the review, which entailed conducting in-depth interviews with approximately 2,000 personnel of all ranks within more than 50 SOF commands. Although the comprehensive review did not identify evidence of a systemic ethics deficiency, it did note that "in some instances USSOCOM's cultural focus on SOF employment and mission accomplishment is to the detriment of leadership, discipline and accountability," and it outlined concrete recommendations. My office is now helping to guide the Comprehensive Review Implementation Team, established to drive implementation of the review's recommendations. These recommendations address training and organization of the force, leader development, and the prevention of over-exertion on the force that we believe contributes in part to ethical lapses.

As we address challenges related to SOF culture and ethics, Secretary Austin has placed special emphasis on combatting sexual assault and addressing actions associated with extremist or dissident ideologies within the Department. The men and women who make up the SOF Enterprise deserve nothing less than a safe and supportive work environment – free from intimidation, harassment, and racial and cultural bias of any kind. We recognize that extremist ideology exists within our military, and we must ensure that our service members honor the oaths they have taken to uphold and defend our Constitution against all enemies – foreign and domestic. For this reason, Secretary Austin directed a Department-wide stand-down to allow senior leaders to discuss the importance of our oath of office, impermissible behaviors, and procedures for reporting extremist behaviors. I am committed to working hand-in-hand with General Clarke in leading this effort on behalf of the SOF community, ensuring that our efforts are closely aligned with top-level guidance and actions and policies taken by the Department and the Military Services.

We recognize that many of the solutions have not yet been fully implemented and that true cultural change will require a sustained and focused effort over many years. I look forward

to working with you and your staff as we strengthen the foundation of our culture and ethics throughout the SOF Enterprise. SO/LIC will continue to support this effort by focusing on those actions that fall within our administrative role overseeing the organization and training of SOF personnel and ensuring these efforts are adequately resourced. Working closely with USSOCOM and each of the Services, we will continue to develop and sustain a SOF culture of personal accountability that is worthy of the men and women that constitute our force.

We are similarly focused on enhancing the diversity within our SOF formation. As it stands today, our force is not adequately reflective of the American people. In addition to the moral imperative of addressing this challenge, we recognize that a more diverse force makes us more effective operationally by allowing us to draw upon diverse perspectives and talents and new ideas to enable us to prevail in the global contest for influence and legitimacy we are faced with today. Enhancing diversity within the force will become increasingly important as the Department places greater emphasis on operations in the information environment against foreign disinformation and malign influence.

Over the past year, ASD(SO/LIC) served on the Executive Working Group as part of the Department of Defense's Board on Diversity and Inclusion. A SOF officer on my staff sat on the DoD Board on Diversity and Inclusion to ensure that special operations-unique issues were reflected and considered as part of the overarching DoD efforts. Last year, SO/LIC, in partnership with USSOCOM's Commander and Senior Enlisted Leader, issued a memorandum to all SOF personnel emphasizing that diversity and inclusion is a strategic imperative to the mission of SOF. I co-chair, along with the USSOCOM Vice Commander, the SOF Executive Committee on Diversity and Inclusion to oversee and drive the development and execution of the USSOCOM Diversity and Inclusion Strategic Plan. I am pleased that USSOCOM has recently hired its first Chief Diversity and Inclusion Officer, and I look forward to working with the command as we collectively address this challenge.

In addition to addressing racial and cultural diversity within the SOF formation, we are also working to ensure that all SOF career fields are open to all who have the desire and meet the rigorous standards. Women have filled vital roles within the SOF community for many years, and we are proud that in the past year, two women have for the first time successfully completed the Special Forces Qualification Course and are currently serving as Green Berets. Although we recognize that we have much more progress to make in this area, these talented soldiers have blazed a path that we expect many others will follow.

Addressing each of these challenges will require a multifaceted, sustained approach, with a clear strategy, concrete objectives, and measurable benchmarks. Additionally, the continued institutionalization of ASD(SO/LIC)'s role in the administrative chain of command will provide additional avenues to highlight policy and resource issues affecting SOF, including diversity, ethics, and accountability. For instance, regularly occurring readiness briefings from USSOCOM to ASD(SO/LIC) now address sexual assault and harassment prevention and response, domestic violence, suicide prevention, COVID-19 vaccination rates, and accession/promotion by sex and ethnicity. SO/LIC brings unique perspective to these challenges, and you have my commitment that we will remain fully engaged.

## Succeed Through Teamwork

Secretary Austin's Message to the Force challenges us to join forces with our partners and allies; work in partnership across U.S. departments and agencies, with Congress, and with private industry; and to build unity of effort and missions throughout the Department, including strengthening civil-military cooperation. The men and women of the SOF community excel in building strong and lasting partnerships, including with our foreign, interagency, and private industry partners. SO/LIC and USSOCOM continue to deepen our civilian-military collaboration across a wide range of issues, including SOF personnel and readiness, budget and acquisitions, special access programs, and legislative affairs.

Civilian control of the military is a bedrock principle of our democracy, and strengthening civilian institutions within the Department is a key priority of Secretary Austin. As the Secretary testified before this committee in his confirmation hearing, "the safety and security of our democracy demands competent civilian control of our armed forces ... the subordination of military power to the civil." We also recognize and appreciate the Congress's strong interest in empowering civilian leadership, both within the Special Operations community and throughout the Department.

The continued institutionalization of the ASD(SO/LIC)'s role in the administrative chain of command, as codified in Title 10, is one of many examples where the Department is making progress in empowering civilian leadership, oversight, and advocacy within the Department's decision-making mechanisms. Over the past year, we have made progress in strengthening civilian oversight of SOF, but we recognize that more remains to be done to realize the full intent of recent legislative reforms to strengthen the ASD(SO/LIC)'s role and to establish the Secretariat for Special Operations. Recent actions include designating ASD(SO/LIC) as a Principal Staff Assistant to the Secretary of Defense for Special Operations administrative matters, establishing a position of Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defense to lead the Secretariat and to assist the ASD with those responsibilities. The ASD(SO/LIC) also has been added to numerous senior Departmental decision-making bodies, in many instances marking the first time the SOF Enterprise has had representation and a voice in these discussions and decisions.

Enhanced civilian leadership and oversight are essential to advocating for SOF within the Department and tackling key issues affecting the SOF Enterprise. These elements also help ensure an independent and objective assessment of military capabilities and policy issues. Further institutionalization of the ASD(SO/LIC)'s administrative chain of command responsibilities will require continued close coordination with senior DoD leadership, USSOCOM, and Congress. I fully embrace this role, and I also recognize that there is more work ahead as we fulfill Congress's intent. As these efforts mature, I look forward to working with you, General Clarke, and other DoD senior leaders to ensure that these reforms meet the intent of Congress and serve the interests of the Department and the men and women of our SOF community.



## Conclusion

Mr. Chairman, I would like to conclude by thanking the committee again for its strong support for our special operations personnel, who serve as a critical linchpin in safeguarding our national security – in wartime and peacetime. As an integral component of the Joint Force, SOF bring unique capabilities that complement and strengthen those of our general purpose forces as well as our interagency and international partners.

I thank the committee again for the opportunity to testify, and I look forward to your questions.