

STATEMENT OF

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COMMANDER

UNITED STATES AIR FORCE SPECIAL OPERATIONS COMMAND

BEFORE THE

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EMERGING THREATS AND CAPABILITIES SUBCOMMITTEE

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Chairman Kelly, Ranking Member Ernst, and distinguished members of the committee, I am honored to appear before you as the Commander of Air Force Special Operations Command (AFSOC). I would like to thank you for the opportunity to speak before you today about the employment of Special Operation Forces (SOF) in the future operating environment. AFSOC is responsible for developing forces with the skills, resilience, and relevance we need to put the nation in a position of strategic advantage in today's competitive environment. On behalf of myself, Chief Master Sergeant Cory Olson, AFSOC's Command Chief, and the 21,566 Airmen we serve together, I would like to express our gratitude for the support and resources provided by this committee since our last testimony in 2021.

The National Defense Strategy describes a strategic environment substantially different from the one in which we have operated for the last two decades. AFSOC, like all of the SOF components, finds itself at a strategic discontinuity—a moment in which the future should not be considered a linear extension of the past but rather something altogether different. Such inflection points require transformation, and my goal today is to describe in greater detail some of the changes we are implementing to ensure our Airmen—the disciplined professionals who represent our competitive advantage—remain relevant in the emerging operating environment.

As the department embraces integrated deterrence as the cornerstone concept of our defense strategy, the AFSOC of the future will balance among five focus areas to compete with our pacing competitors. First, AFSOC will generate advantage by campaigning in the gray zone. We will operate across the spectrum of visibility and attribution to create dilemmas, uncertainty, and cost-imposing problems with which our adversaries must contend while simultaneously placing the U.S. and our allies and partners in positions of continued advantage. Second, AFSOC will employ SOF-specific capabilities as part of the joint force.

We will use our unique and sensitive capabilities to create windows of advantage for the joint force, most often acting in a supporting role to a broader joint campaign. Third, AFSOC will remain poised to respond to global crises and contingencies, prepared to respond whenever and wherever required in increasingly contested environments. Fourth, AFSOC will more efficiently disrupt violent extremist organizations to ensure they are unable to mount external operations against the U.S. homeland. Finally, AFSOC will remain focused on the specific tasks and missions assigned to United States Special Operations Command in the Unified Command Plan and the Joint Strategic Campaign Plan.

Generate Advantage by Campaigning in the Gray Zone. Our command is committed to developing forces and capabilities capable of campaigning in the gray zone. While the term “gray-zone” is not precisely defined, the DoD has generally accepted the concept of gray-zone operations as those which take place with ambiguous attribution and in space between peace and declared war. From the “little green men” used in the Russian invasion of Crimea to the Chinese maritime militia, our pacing competitors are developing creative ways to obscure their activities and intentions under a veneer of plausible deniability. SOF are uniquely suited to understand, identify, and expose such activities while providing our decision-makers with more proactive options of their own.

Theater-Air Operation Squadron

As our command works to transform into the AFSOC we will need, a new operational unit, the Theater-Air Operations Squadron (T-AOS), will help us campaign in the gray zone. Each regionally aligned T-AOS will apply all-source intelligence analysis; multi-domain space, cyber, information, and special operations integration; and a robust planning capability to enable Geographic Combatant Commanders and their Theater Special Operations Commands to

fully leverage the unique capabilities AFSOC provides. Working in concert with the Theater Special Operations Commands and coordinating with sister SOF services, these squadrons will develop a deep understanding of the environment and develop integrated campaign options for operational commanders.

Generate Advantage

To generate advantage, SOF needs to be able to shape conditions on the ground and create dilemmas and uncertainty for our adversaries. Our reveal to deter and conceal to win approach captures this strategy. The development of an amphibious capability for the MC-130J would enable runway-independent operations and extend the global reach and survivability of the aircraft and the joint force. It offers nearly unlimited water landing zones to enable seaborne operations, allowing us to operate at a time and a place of our choosing, inserting and extracting any number of capabilities, personnel, or devices. Additionally, palletized munitions provide a viable, affordable, near-term means of airdropping long-range precision fires from existing airlift platforms, such as the C-130 and C-17. As a roll-on roll-off capability, the possibility that any airdrop-capable cargo plane in the U.S. inventory could employ munitions, domain awareness, or electronic attack payloads will create dilemmas for our adversaries by, introducing uncertainty in our approach and sowing doubt in the confidence they have of understanding our procedures. In conjunction with the Air Force Research Laboratory, AFSOC pioneered this capability for the joint force with a successful live-fire of an air-launched cruise missile from an MC-130J this past December.

Employ SOF Peculiar Capabilities as Part of the Joint Force. The creation of SOCOM in 1987 and AFSOC in 1990 represented a rare opportunity to build a new kind of fighting force. Habitual joint training and deliberate acquisition of specialized, interoperable

equipment enabled us to create a highly trained and capable force postured for short-term crises and contingency responses while also supporting the broader joint force. This concept paved the way for SOF's unprecedented operational tempo and strategic impact in the fight against violent extremist organizations over the past 20 years.

But now, in 2022, the nation's SOF are once again standing at an inflection point, albeit one not yet defined by a catastrophic event such as those which characterized prior inflection points in April of 1980 and September of 2001 and forced us to make major changes. As we look to the future, AFSOC will need to be postured to deploy to remote locations, create options to sustain and protect operators for multiple days, yet be able to move quickly in contested and austere environments. AFSOC is leading the way in developing concepts and forces required to operate under these conditions.

Mission Sustainment Teams

AFSOC is currently pathfinding a new concept called Mission Sustainment Teams (MSTs). The 58-person teams are comprised of 22 different specialties. These Airmen spend 15 months in a deliberate force generation cycle, learning skills above and beyond their normal tasks, before a five-month deployment window. For example, the food services Airmen learn to drive the forklift, while the heavy equipment operator learns to set up the communication equipment, and the radio operator learns to operate a crew-served weapon. The MSTs will be integral to AFSOC's tactical formations with limited force protection, air transportation services, bed down, subsistence, operational contract support, and aircraft and personnel safety including explosive ordnance disposal. Teams will complete the Special Operation Forces' Force Generation model (SOFFORGEN) in four phases, each made up of 150 days of training. Training includes individual, unit, and joint, collective blocks which build high-functioning

teams prior to their deployment in the fourth, or “committed” phase of their cycle. By building small, agile teams capable of operating in a disaggregated fashion, we will provide skilled teams capable of creating dilemmas and challenges for our adversaries.

Respond to Crisis in Increasingly Contested Environments. The current and future operating environment is characterized by the re-emergence of peer competitors, disruptive technologies, weaponized information and disinformation, and direct and indirect challenges to the global norms of the last 75 years. Our challenge will be to transform AFSOC, which has evolved over the last two decades to sustain long-term counter-violent extremist operations in relatively permissive environments, into a force structured for success in the emerging operating environment. We are moving out aggressively to this end.

Command and Control/ Organizational Change

This year, AFSOC began implementing a new force presentation model to replace the ad hoc Joint Special Operations Aviation Component (JSOAC) structure. JSOACs were comprised of individual augmentees from disparate organizations that had not trained together as a unit prior to deployment. Our new force generation model uses a four-phase cycle to prepare, train, certify, verify, and validate our Airmen for alert and deployment. The construct is required to take us from the AFSOC we have to the AFSOC we need. It will maximize preparation and planning for enduring counter-violent extremist organization threats while also posturing the force for success in competition and conflict. In all instances, our new approach will reduce the current risk to mission and risk to force resident in JSOAC.

The framework calls for expeditionary forces organized as Special Operations Task Groups (SOTGs) and Special Operations Task Units (SOTUs). Task Groups will be squadron-based O-5 led elements focused on integrating Air Force special operations capabilities into

joint special operations units. Task Units will be led by O-4s and senior O-3s, and will reside under the task groups as the tactical units of action for a given capability (e.g., AC-130 gunships, U-28 intelligence platforms, or Special Tactics ground forces). Incorporating this new model will align our processes with other USSOCOM components and provide a more agile and ready force. In the future, our adversaries will apply more pressure to our physical security, communication networks, and our logistics supply lines. The fact that our Airmen will arrive on the battlefield as high-functioning teams will be critical to their success and survivability. Additionally, the predictability of our force-generating cycle combined with a robust certification, verification, and validation processes will now allow deliberate oversight of deployment preparations, which ultimately increase capability and reduce the risk to mission while addressing the central finding of the SOCOM Comprehensive Review of SOF culture and ethics.

Special Tactics Next

Within AFSOC-and the Air Force writ large-no group paid a greater human toll and carried a heavier deployment burden for the last two decades than AFSOC's Special Tactics force. Our Airmen achieved remarkable tactical and operational effects, primarily by calling in devastating, and often lifesaving, airstrikes on the enemy-often in close proximity to friendly forces. However, the Special Tactics force of the future will have to reorient and focus their air and space power expertise to generate and leverage global access, integrate and deliver multi-domain effects, and provide options for personnel recovery in support of the joint force. The air and space-centric perspective of the Special Tactics force will provide unique opportunities to understand and affect adversary activity below the level of armed conflict; project forces, capabilities, and effects into contested environments; and expand relationships and

interoperability with both traditional and non-traditional partners. We think this force will be integral to helping solve some of the joint force's toughest challenges—such as outflanking adversary Anti-Access/Area Denial capabilities and enabling joint force long-range kill chains.

High-Speed Vertical Takeoff and Landing

To remain poised for global crises and contingencies, AFSOC is prepared to respond whenever and wherever required. Highly contested environments require pulsed operations, providing short windows of opportunity to conduct multiple missions, due to the reduced probability of sustained, theater-wide air superiority. To create those windows of opportunity, the joint force needs air capabilities that are runway independent and operate at speeds beyond what current rotary-wing and tilt-rotor technology can provide. High-Speed Vertical Takeoff and Landing (HSVTOL) capabilities will support a range of missions including tactical mobility; autonomous intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance; and kinetic and non-kinetic strike. HSVTOL technology will provide the joint force with vastly increased speed, range, and survivability.

Efficiently Disrupt Violent Extremist Organizations. The reemergence of strategic competition, tightening fiscal constraints, and the accelerating rate of technological change demand significant adjustments to ensure that AFSOC continues to be successful in counter-violent extremist organization operations. In this new environment, AFSOC must disrupt violent extremist organizations, rendering them incapable of mounting effective external attacks on the U.S. homeland and do so in a cost-effective and sustainable manner. These operations will be conducted in more austere environments, demanding smaller logistical footprints and fewer air platforms; AFSOC envisions Armed Overwatch as the centerpiece of our approach to addressing this problem.

Historically, special operations forces have relied on an “air stack,” a composition of 5 to sometimes more than 20 aircraft that combine to provide an array of specific capabilities costing the taxpayer upwards of \$150,000 per flight hour. Armed Overwatch’s light footprint, rapid deployability, multi-mission utility, and approximately \$5,000 per flight hour operating cost will enable AFSOC to “collapse the stack” while providing the necessary air support.

Chairman Kelly, Ranking Member Ernst, and distinguished members of the Committee, The Nation, the Air Force, and U.S. Special Operations Command face a strategic inflection point, and the challenge for AFSOC is clear. The threat and environment have shifted, and today’s challenge is to remain a step ahead. It will undoubtedly be challenging, but the men and women who comprise AFSOC have never shied away from complex challenges in ambiguous environments. Our command will provide forces ready to generate an advantage in competition, enable the joint force in the conflict, and respond to crisis, all while remaining engaged in countering violent extremist organizations. The focus areas outlined in this testimony will unleash AFSOC’s competitive advantage-our people-on this challenge. On behalf of all AFSOC Airmen and their families, thank you for the opportunity to address you today and for your continued support. I look forward to your questions.