

STATEMENT FOR THE RECORD

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PERFORMING THE DUTIES OF ASSISTANT SECRETARY OF DEFENSE
FOR SPECIAL OPERATIONS AND LOW-INTENSITY CONFLICT**

AND

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

BEFORE THE

COMMITTEE ON ARMED SERVICES

SUBCOMMITTEE ON EMERGING THREATS AND CAPABILITIES

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INTRODUCTION

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

WIN: AN IRREGULAR AND ASYMMETRIC ADVANTAGE FOR THE NATION

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

Preventing Great Power Conflict

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

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

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

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

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

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

Preparing the Environment through Strategic Partnerships

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Enabling the Joint Force to Prevail

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

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

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

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

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

Preserving Strategic Focus

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

PEOPLE: HUMANS ARE MORE IMPORTANT THAN HARDWARE

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

Embracing America's Greatest Resource

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

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

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

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

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

Educating to Solve the Nation's Hardest Problems

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

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

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

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

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

Empowering Those Who Serve at the Tip of the Spear

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

TRANSFORM: MODERNIZE FOR THE FUTURE

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

Building an Enduring SOF Advantage

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Accelerating Momentum

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

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

CONCLUSION

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

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

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