

STATEMENT OF

LIEUTENANT GENERAL KENNETH TOVO,

U.S. ARMY (RETIRED)

FORMER COMMANDING GENERAL

UNITED STATES ARMY SPECIAL OPERATIONS COMMAND

BEFORE THE

SENATE ARMED SERVICES COMMITTEE

EMERGING THREATS AND CAPABILITIES SUBCOMMITTEE

17 May 2023

## **Introduction**

Madam Chairwoman Gillibrand, Ranking Member Ernst, and distinguished Senators of the Committee, thank you for the opportunity to appear before you today to discuss the role of Special Operations Forces in supporting the National Defense Strategy, particularly how SOF contributes to the strategic competition with China and Russia.

I last appeared before this subcommittee as the Commander of the US Army Special Operations Command 5 years ago, several months before I retired from active service. While I have remained active and close to the SOF community in my civilian professional pursuits, nonprofit volunteer work, and personal relationships, I am no longer, to paraphrase President Teddy Roosevelt, “In the arena.” I testify today as a private citizen; my comments are purely my own judgments and opinions.

## **Implications of the Security Environment**

As a Nation, we are faced with an incredibly complex and dangerous global security environment. The Rules Based International Order created after WWII is under significant attack: at best, faltering; at worst, crumbling.

China and Russia, supported by like-minded regional actors such as Iran, are aggressively challenging international norms to pursue their aims at the expense of U.S. and allied interests. While our adversaries prefer to employ coercive measures below the threshold of traditional conflict, Russia’s invasion of Georgia in 2008, Crimea and eastern Ukraine in 2014, and today’s ongoing conflict in the Ukraine demonstrates they have no reluctance to resort to war.

Each invasion was preceded by a period ripe with indications and warnings. In each case, the U.S. and its allies and partners endeavored to deter war; and, in each case, deterrence failed. You can be assured the Chinese are drawing lessons from this history.

Adding to this complex environment are continuing conflicts and instability enflamed, and in some cases caused, by the activities of Violent Extremist Organizations. Syria, Iraq, Afghanistan,

Yemen, Libya, the Trans Sahel region in Africa, and most recently the Sudan, may head the list, but there are many others. As we saw routinely in the Cold War, and are witnessing today, our adversaries seize on these conflicts as an opportunity to further their aims, providing arms, money, and support on the ground. Russia's actions in the Sudan are just the most recent example.

In this period of strategic competition, we should expect a near continual parade of challenges, spanning everything from active information operations to degrade our will, and disrupt national and allied cohesion; cyber-attacks to undermine our competitive advantage; state-sponsored and non-state sponsored acts of terror with the potential to diffuse our focus from the existential threats; proxy conflicts that threaten regional stability; and up to traditional conflict with one or both of our peer adversaries.

US Special Operations Forces are uniquely suited to operate and contribute to the Interagency Team and the Joint Force in this turbulent environment, whether in strategic competition or conflict. In the interest of brevity, I'll focus my opening remarks on SOF's role in competition.

### **Crisis Response**

The SOF enterprise provides the Nation a **multi-layered capability** to respond to crisis that will be essential for navigating the emergency-strewn landscape of the competition space.

Primarily developed through the engagement activities of its regionally aligned forces, SOF has a global network of allied and partner forces that are often able to respond rapidly and effectively. In some cases, our partners obviate the need for US forces; in other cases, they are effective teammates in the response, providing both tactical capabilities and a deeper understanding of the situation.

At any given time, SOCOM's global footprint of approximately 6,000 personnel in 80-90 countries provide another layer of crisis response capability. On numerous occasions, SOF elements and individuals have deployed abroad for campaigning, training, or other activities have been re-missioned on short notice to respond to everything from humanitarian disasters, terrorist incidents, and the outbreak of conflict.

Of course as you know, SOF provides a variety of highly capable alert forces, rapidly deployable on little to no notice anywhere in the world.

The key ingredient to all these crisis response capabilities are the specially assessed and selected Special Operators, who possess the mental agility, complex problem solving skills, and high state of readiness and training to rapidly adapt to dynamic crisis situations. They are adeptly enabled by an irreplaceable team of assigned intelligence professionals, logisticians, communications specialists, and medical personnel.

### **Campaigning**

The NDS highlights the concept of “campaigning” as a key way to successfully gain military advantage, deter our adversaries, and address grey zone challenges in an environment of strategic competition.

SOF is well versed in this campaign approach. Under the design of the Geographic Combatant Commands and the direction of the Theater Special Operations Commands, SOF have played an integral role in Theater Campaign Plans for decades. They are primarily conducted by regionally aligned, culturally attuned, and local language-capable forces who have an unparalleled ability to operate in austere and complex environments with a small footprint, low resource requirements, and in synchronization with the US country team.

Often executed as continual or persistent presence missions, these activities have been essential to developing our partner’s capability; signaling U.S. commitment to the relationship; developing influence; and providing unique insights and understanding into local and regional dynamics.

SOF campaigning activities are long term investments that often take years or even decades of patience, persistence, and presence to fully mature.

Classic examples are SF deployments under the Partnership for Peace program in Eastern Europe during the 1990s and Plan Colombia since 1999. In the case of PFP, these activities and relationships helped pave the way for ascension of our Eastern European counterparts into NATO and directly

contributed to helping them build their own credible special operations forces. We reaped the return on that investment a decade later, as they fought alongside us in Iraq and Afghanistan.

In Colombia, SOF was a significant component of the decade and a half investment in Plan Colombia that eventually brought the FARC to the negotiating table. SOF helped build and improve the ability of Colombian Forces to combat the FARC, while also improving its professionalism and human rights approach. Despite the myth that SOF did nothing but direct action and counterterrorism for the last twenty years, this is but one example of myriad SOF campaign activities that continued around the globe, despite heavy commitments in Iraq and Afghanistan.

Campaigning in an era of strategic competition will be more challenging than it was in the post-Cold War era and during the GWOT. For one, China and Russia have been aggressive in spreading influence globally. To some extent, we have been absent from the field, in other instances our efforts have been reactive and defensive; the recent diplomatic effort in the Solomon Islands comes to mind. We have significant ground to regain in the competition for influence.

Another challenge to effective campaigning in this era is the trend of decreasing willingness to accept calculated risk. The U.S. fairly routinely shuts embassies, ceases ongoing programs in support of a host nation, and withdraws personnel, to include deployed SOF personnel, in the face of developing crises. We lose access to the environment; undermine the relationship and influence with our partners; situational awareness and understanding; and the ability to impact events.

During the GWOT, SOF actions outside the declared combat theaters generally had to each be approved individually, often at the highest levels of government. This “CONOP” process applied to both kinetic and nonkinetic operations. Indeed, the comment that “it is easier to get permission to drop a bomb than to gain approval for an information operation” was heard as frequently in combat theaters as elsewhere.

It is a bureaucratic process that can’t scale to the volume of a global campaign against multiple, aggressive adversaries, and where many in the approval process can say “no” and few can say “yes”.

It is a process that focuses on the all the risks that can be imagined in regard to proposed operations, but rarely assesses the risk of taking no action.

It is a process that will stymie initiative, fail to match the pace and volume of our adversaries' activities, and result in an arthritic campaign that neither deters our adversaries nor sets the necessary conditions to prevail in competition or conflict.

Finally, to be effective, any campaigning approach must be nested within a coherent National Strategy. While the recent unclassified National Security and Defense Strategies are useful aspirational statements of purpose and intent, one hopes that there is a classified NSC 68-like document to drive unified action across US Government Departments and agencies.

I'd offer a cautionary quotation from Sun Tzu:

“Strategy without tactics is the slowest route to victory. Tactics without strategy is the noise before defeat.”

### **Conclusion**

Some of our current SOF organizations were created to meet the requirements of the last period of strategic competition, the Cold War with the Soviet Union; in some ways this a return to our roots. Regards, all our Nation's Special Operations Forces have a history of successful adaptation to meet changing demands driven by the security environment. SOCOM and its components are well on their way in this journey; I am confident they will meet the challenge. In my view, SOF is a critical capability for strategic competition, but it is not sufficient. It must be incorporated in an ecosystem that promotes action to advance our strategic aims.

Senators, Thank you for your time and attention. I look forward to your questions.