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Opening

Chairman Rogers, Ranking Member Smith, distinguished members of the Committee, thank you for inviting me to testify on our defense posture and policy in the U.S. Central Command (USCENTCOM) and U.S. Africa Command (USAFRICOM) areas of responsibility (AORs), alongside Commanders General Kurilla and General Langley.

As the Department of Defense (DoD) articulated in the 2022 National Defense Strategy (NDS), a strong, principled, adaptive U.S. military is a central pillar of U.S. leadership in the world. The NDS sets out how the U.S. military will meet growing threats to vital national security interests while supporting a stable and open international system. It directs the Department to act urgently to sustain and strengthen deterrence and identifies the People's Republic of China (PRC) as the pacing challenge for the Department, and Russia as an acute threat. The NDS further explains how we will work with our NATO Allies and partners to reinforce robust deterrence in the face of Russian aggression while mitigating and protecting against threats from North Korea, Iran, violent extremist organizations, and transboundary challenges such as climate change.

The NDS identifies four defense priorities to strengthen deterrence: defending the homeland paced to the growing multi-domain threat posed by the PRC, deterring strategic attacks against the United States and its allies and partners, deterring aggression while being prepared to prevail in conflict when necessary – prioritizing the PRC challenge in the Indo-Pacific region, then the Russia challenge in Europe, and building a resilient Joint Force and defense ecosystem.

The NDS is focused on leveraging our strengths to maximum effect. The Department will accomplish this through integrated deterrence by campaigning to disrupt destabilizing activities and push back against competitors' coercive actions and by undertaking reforms and making investments within the DoD and the U.S. defense enterprise to build enduring advantages.

These lines of effort make us a better partner by enhancing U.S. contributions to our own security and to the security of coalitions that we support around the world. This emphasis on coalition-building to achieve collective defense and expand interoperability is key to our approach in the USCENTCOM AOR. In the USAFRICOM AOR, our approach emphasizes disrupting violent extremist organization (VEO) threats against the U.S. homeland and vital U.S. national interests and working alongside African partners to build their capabilities to degrade terrorist organizations and contribute broadly to regional security and stability.

As Assistant Secretary of Defense for International Security Affairs, my portfolio spans a vast network of U.S. allies and partners in Europe, Eurasia, the Middle East, and Africa. It is my responsibility to ensure that the DoD has a sustainable approach, consistent with the NDS, to achieving our objectives and addressing the most pressing threats in the regions.

The military instrument of power supports diplomacy, the Biden Administration's preferred tool for global engagement. By enhancing partners' capabilities and capacities to provide for their own defense and to address regional problems together, the DoD advances U.S. interests more efficiently and effectively. America's comparative advantage includes building partnerships that strengthen deterrence while using diplomacy wherever possible to deescalate tensions.

The DoD remains committed to using all of our assets – in support of broader instruments of our national power – to further U.S. interests in the USCENTCOM and USAFRICOM AORs and around the world. As we do, we will continue to stand with our allies and partners to win what we view as the competition of coalitions that is becoming increasingly critical to our national security.

Middle East

Security and stability in the Middle East are necessary for protecting vital U.S. national security interests. A prosperous, peaceful, integrated region is central to the long-term security and prosperity of the United States and remains essential for mitigating threats to American citizens emanating from this region. Resilient, interoperable, and capable Middle East partners are essential for maintaining security inside the region and addressing global challenges beyond the region. Our decades-long security partnerships with the armed forces and defense ministries of our Middle East partners provide the foundation upon which civilian-led work to secure stability can build. DoD makes enhancing these partnerships, both bilaterally and multilaterally, a priority.

The Department's priority objectives in the Middle East are to (1) maintain credible military options to deny Iran a nuclear weapon while working to counter Iran's other destabilizing activities; (2) disrupt top-tier VEO threats that endanger the homeland and vital U.S. national interests; (3) safeguard freedom of navigation in some of the world's most vital waterways; and (4) work with Israel to ensure its security. DoD seeks to expand regional coalitions of capable, willing partners ready to share in the daily tasks designed to achieve these objectives.

The 2022 National Security Strategy (NSS) articulates five principles that guide defense engagement in the Middle East: partnership, deterrence, diplomacy, integration, and values. DoD applies these principles as it works to strengthen integrated deterrence, reduce conflict, and promote stability. First and foremost, we support diplomacy as the preferred means to achieve our objectives. Second, the Department's vision for sustainable security relies on expanding regional security constructs, integrating our partners with us and with each other, and extending deterrence through multi-domain, collective defense. Weaving air, maritime, land, cyber, and space capabilities together both enhances collective defensive capabilities and raises the potential cost to adversaries for aggression. Finally, respect for fundamental freedoms and human rights expands opportunities in our security partnerships. U.S. defense officials reinforce U.S. values in key leader engagements, through security assistance programming, across professional military education courses and training, and by demonstrating these values in exercises.

DoD's activities support the commitments made by President Biden during his visit to the region last year. President Biden committed (1) to support and strengthen partnerships with countries that subscribe to the rule-based international order, (2) to prevent foreign or regional powers from jeopardizing freedom of navigation through the Middle East's waterways, and to disrupt any country's ability to dominate another through military buildups, incursions or threats, (3) to

work to reduce tensions, de-escalate, and end conflicts wherever possible through diplomacy, (4) to build political, economic, and security connections between U.S. partners wherever possible, and (5) to promote human rights and the values enshrined in the United Nations (UN) charter.

The NDS directs DoD to address major security challenges in the region in effective and sustainable ways as the Department continues to right-size its forward military presence in the Middle East, using the Joint Force more effectively over time. U.S. posture in the Middle East remains significant. Over 30,000 forces are deployed in this critical region, together with combat-ready capabilities. Our ability to support the region should not be evaluated only by what is deployed within the Middle East. DoD is ready to rapidly flow significant forces into the region and to integrate those forces with partners based on decades of military cooperation to enhance interoperability and address any contingency. Maintaining this ability will require political will and resource investments by both the United States and the leaders of the Middle East.

DoD maintains readiness to unilaterally respond to any crisis or contingency, but our preference is to work alongside interoperable and capable partners within coalitions. This emphasis on consultation and cooperation is the U.S. competitive advantage in the Middle East. Though others seek to strategically compete, there is no combat-credible, willing alternative prepared to share its cutting-edge capabilities and invest vital national resources in support of regional security and defense of others within the rules-based international order. The United States remains the partner of choice across the Middle East.

Iran

Iran is a persistent threat across a range of domains, most notably through its nuclear program, support for Iran-aligned militia groups (IAMGs) in Iraq, and the proliferation of advanced conventional weapons and attack drones. Iran continues to pose a threat to maritime security, commercial shipping, and freedom of navigation in the Middle East.

The Department maintains unilateral options to address Iranian threats while pursuing a range of partnered activities to bolster the defensive capabilities of our partners. While we execute these activities and maintain readiness to respond to Iran-related contingencies, U.S. force protection is the highest priority. We also demonstrate through exercises, Dynamic Force Employment activities, and bomber task force flyovers that the United States can rapidly flow forces into theater to respond to any contingency.

Iran plays a destabilizing role not only in the region but across the globe, through its support and proliferation of advanced weapons to proxies and rogue states. In response to the persistent threat posed by Iranian drones, the Secretary directed a comprehensive review of our counter-unmanned aerial systems (c-UAS) investments and capabilities that have bolstered our efforts to defeat these weapons prior to launch. Together with our partners, we are enhancing our intelligence collection capabilities, expanding opportunities to interdict and degrade illicit weapons transfers, and improving defense capabilities. We have made clear that we will respond to Iranian and IAMG attacks against U.S. personnel with military force, and we remain prepared

to take necessary and appropriate action if attacked. This was most recently demonstrated in August 2022, when the U.S. military took necessary and proportional defensive strikes against IAMGs in Syria responsible for attacks against our forces.

At sea, Iran continues to pose a threat to vital shipping lanes. We have seen a demonstrated pattern of Iranian attacks on oil tankers, which poses a challenge to freedom of navigation, has implications for insurance rates, and threatens global rules and norms. The United States, our partners, and our allies will continue to address Iran's maritime assaults and protect freedom of navigation, including through our participation in the International Maritime Security Construct (IMSC).

Deepening Russian-Iranian military cooperation poses a serious threat to stability in Europe and the Middle East. Since Russia's brutal invasion of Ukraine, Iran has transferred lethal aid for Russian use in Ukraine, offered support for Russian sanctions evasion, and received Russian support for Iran's space program. In addition to the DoD's "prior-to-launch" activities, the Defense Intelligence Agency declassified information in February 2023 to demonstrate that Iran is actively supporting Russia's war in Ukraine by supplying the same systems – including uncrewed aerial systems – used to attack U.S. forces, as well as our partners, across the Middle East.

Iraq and Syria

In Iraq and Syria, DoD remains committed to the enduring defeat of ISIS. We pursue this objective through the Global Coalition to Defeat ISIS (D-ISIS), which brings together 80 nations and five international organizations to provide an array of military capabilities, funding, and political support to the campaign against ISIS. Since 2014, the United States and its Allies and partners in the Global Coalition have made tremendous progress in the fight against ISIS in Iraq and Syria, liberating more than 100,000 square kilometers of territory and more than 11 million people from ISIS tyranny. Though ISIS no longer holds territory, the group maintains the capability to conduct intermittent attacks and seeks to infiltrate population centers by exploiting sectarian and other demographic tensions. ISIS maintains the intent to direct, support, and inspire attacks across the globe and continues efforts to rebuild its organization and re-establish a viable insurgency to regain territorial and social control. As a result, maintaining operational pressure on the group – by, with, and through vetted partner forces – is essential.

DoD is authorized to provide assistance to vetted partners in Iraq and Syria under Section 1236 and 1209, respectively, of the National Defense Authorization Act for Fiscal Year 2015, as amended, and through the Counter-ISIS Train and Equip Fund (CTEF) appropriation. CTEF remains an essential tool for enabling the Iraqi Security Forces (including the Kurdish Peshmerga forces), the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF), and other vetted partners to achieve the enduring defeat of ISIS. Current CTEF support to vetted partner forces includes basic life support services, stipends, detention facility renovation and construction support, equipment, and sustainment.

In Iraq, Combined Joint Task Force – Operation INHERENT RESOLVE (CJTF-OIR) completed its primary mission transition to an advise, assist, enable role in support of Iraq's fight against

ISIS in December 2021. This transition fulfilled commitments made by U.S. and Iraqi leadership during the July 2021 U.S.-Iraq Strategic Dialogue and was made possible due to the significant progress the Iraqi Security Forces, including the Kurdish Peshmerga, have achieved in their counterterrorism capabilities. Today, the Iraqi Security Forces are in the lead for ensuring ISIS's enduring defeat in Iraq. U.S. forces continue to support the Iraqis in this fight at the Government of Iraq's invitation, and DoD remains committed to supporting the Iraqi-led fight against ISIS.

U.S. and Iraqi leaders agree that Coalition support remains essential for achieving the enduring defeat of ISIS. DoD is focused on increasing the capabilities of the Iraqi Security Forces and setting the conditions for a long-term defense partnership. DoD will continue to provide logistical support, within means, to NATO Mission-Iraq, which conducts ministerial-level advising -- a complementary mission to CJTF-OIR's operational advising. This continuity in the D-ISIS mission is an essential pillar of the broader U.S. government approach to build a strong, stable, and sovereign Iraq.

In Syria, DoD is committed to achieving the enduring defeat of ISIS, working by, with, and through vetted, capable partner forces -- including the SDF. DoD conducts both unilateral and partnered counterterrorism operations that have yielded significant success in degrading ISIS networks in Syria. In 2022 alone, Coalition forces conducted 122 operations resulting in 466 ISIS operatives killed and 215 detained. The SDF continue to demonstrate increased capabilities to plan and conduct counterterrorism operations, though Coalition presence and support remains critical to their success.

DoD is prioritizing the secure and humane detention of the 10,000 ISIS fighters by providing support to the SDF to maintain custody of this population. ISIS remains intent on reconstituting its forces by liberating detained fighters. Repurposed facilities currently housing many detainees are not sufficient for long-term detention. To address these concerns, DoD is leveraging CTEF to work with the SDF to construct purpose-built detention facilities and professionalize and expand the guard force securing detained ISIS fighters.

The DoD coordinates with the Department of State and the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) to address the simultaneous security and humanitarian crises at the al-Hol and al-Roj displaced persons camps in northeast Syria. DoD provides support to the SDF to disrupt ISIS activity and networks that threaten al-Hol's residents and the broader populations of northeast Syria. This support includes efforts to reinforce the camp's physical security, increase the number of security forces operating in the camp, and ensure those forces are appropriately trained to provide security in the unique environment of a displaced persons camp.

Repatriation remains the only durable solution for the humanitarian and security crises presented by the detention facilities and displaced persons camps in northeast Syria. It is imperative for countries of origin to repatriate, rehabilitate, and prosecute, where appropriate, their nationals who are detained in northeast Syria. DoD is committed to working with countries of origin to facilitate repatriations, including the Government of Iraq whose nationals make up most of both detained fighters and displaced persons. DoD will continue to prioritize supporting State Department activities to facilitate repatriation.

Military activities to support the enduring defeat of ISIS are just one piece of a broader whole-of-government strategy to address the underlying social, economic, and political conditions that gave rise to ISIS and that ISIS continues to exploit. DoD continues to work with interagency partners to best support our local partners in Iraq and Syria and encourage international action to address the challenges that remain to ensure ISIS's enduring defeat.

Partnerships: Israel, Egypt, the Levant, and the Gulf

Israel

The United States' security commitment to Israel is ironclad. In July 2022, the United States and Israel signed the Jerusalem Declaration, which reinforces our commitment to Israel's long-term security and Qualitative Military Edge. DoD plays an essential role in supporting this objective through a robust and far-reaching bilateral relationship with the Israeli Ministry of Defense and Israel Defense Forces (IDF). The bilateral cooperation extends across all elements of our defense enterprises, ranging from senior-level policy dialogues to bilateral operational collaboration and training, combined military exercises, missile defense cooperation, cooperative scientific research and development, technological innovation, and even collaboration on care for wounded veterans and addressing traumatic brain injury.

Within the Middle East, U.S.-Israel military exercises demonstrate our ongoing work to improve our interoperability and increase military cooperation. The JUNIPER OAK 23 combined military exercise in January deployed roughly 6,400 U.S. troops alongside more than 1,500 Israeli troops, highlighting the ability of our two militaries to be interoperable and conduct combined operations. We look forward to further engagements with our Israeli partners as we build on this success. As Israel's alignment to USCENTCOM's area of responsibility (AOR) matures, there will also be increased focus on working multilaterally with other partners throughout the region.

Egypt and the Levant

Egypt remains a key partner to the United States that is essential for maintaining regional stability. Egypt's positive responses to U.S. overflight requests to transit the Suez Canal remain critical to U.S. military global readiness. DoD supports Egypt's military modernization, and in particular Egypt's efforts to bolster its counterterrorism capabilities, mitigate risk to civilian harm in its operations, and border and maritime security efforts. The Egyptian Armed Forces are key to advancing integrated deterrence and stability in the region, as evidenced by their command of Combined Task Force 153 as part of the Combined Maritime Forces (CMF) activities to secure vital sea lanes in the Red Sea and the upcoming combined, joint exercise BRIGHT STAR 23. DoD also continues to maintain U.S. contributions to the Multinational Force and Observers which monitors the implementation of the Egypt-Israel peace treaty in the Sinai Peninsula.

Jordan remains a steadfast partner and a leader for stability throughout the region. DoD continues to work with Jordan to bolster its ability to secure its borders against the continued

threat posed by ISIS and address new and emerging threats such as drug smuggling, unmanned aerial systems, air and missile threats, and other challenges posed primarily by Iran. In September, Jordan and the United States signed the most significant Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) between our two countries to date. The MOU deepens our military and economic cooperation and strengthens Jordan's role as a leader in regional security. The agreement covers the longest timeframe and provides more assistance than any prior agreement, including an unprecedented level of Foreign Military Financing, which will support the modernization of Jordan's military. DoD is committed to strengthening the capabilities, professionalism, and interoperability of the Jordanian Armed Forces through robust security assistance, bilateral and multilateral exercises, joint training, and defense institution building efforts.

In Lebanon, the DoD works closely with the Lebanese Armed Forces (LAF) to help them counter VEOs, secure their border with Syria, maintain internal stability, and preserve internal stability. As Lebanon faces destabilizing economic, political, and social crises, the LAF continue to perform admirably in securing Lebanon's borders, conducting effective counterterrorism and counternarcotics operations, and in maintaining internal stability. The LAF's reputation as a capable, nonsectarian, responsible institution undermines Lebanese Hizballah's false narrative that its weapons are necessary to defend Lebanon. This year, the U.S. Government partnered with the UN Development Programme to provide \$72 million to all eligible LAF and Internal Security Forces in the form of a \$100 per month living stipend for six months. This Administration remains committed to strengthening Lebanon's security and stability through a combination of diplomatic engagement and sustained support for the LAF.

The Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) Countries

The GCC countries remain critical to U.S. priorities in the region. These are strategic partnerships. We rely on these partners for critical access, basing, and overflight. We coordinate diplomatic and security approaches to regional challenges and objectives. We share intelligence and early warning. And we are working to expand interoperability and defensive capabilities to collectively address threats. The armed forces of each GCC country are significant Foreign Military Sales (FMS) customers, expanding opportunities for interoperability and integration. Finally, resilient, strong partnerships across the GCC are vital if we are to achieve the NDS vision for integrated deterrence and strategically compete in the region and globally.

Decades of investment in security cooperation, exercises, and FMS to Gulf partners such as Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates (UAE) are enabling these governments to effectively defend their territory, their citizens, and the tens of thousands of U.S. citizens living in the Gulf. The United States remains committed to supporting the defense of our GCC partners' territories and will continue to provide intelligence, early warning, training, and security cooperation activities.

The convention of GCC Defense Working Groups in Riyadh in February was one of many initiatives to promote integration as a foundation for a more secure and prosperous region. Additional enterprises include expanding multilateral relations between Abraham Accords signatories, increasing information sharing and improving interoperability between Negev Forum

members through participation in the Regional Security Working Group, and regular security initiatives and joint exercises under the auspices of USCENTCOM.

The U.S. strategic partnership with the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia spans nearly eight decades. Saudi Arabia remains a critical stakeholder for reaching a durable political solution in Yemen. Saudi Arabia also is a leader for integrating regional security architecture and advancing a stable, integrated, and prosperous Middle East region. DoD remains committed to supporting Saudi Arabia's security and territorial defense and facilitating the Kingdom's ability to obtain necessary capabilities to defend its people and territory against external threats. In 2022, Saudi Arabia also assumed command of Combined Task Force 150, which reinforces shared maritime security objectives in the Gulf of Oman and Northern Arabian Sea and has increased its cooperation with USCENTCOM's Task Force 59.

The UAE is a strategic partner that has fought alongside U.S. forces in Afghanistan, Libya, Iraq, Syria, and Yemen. It remains solidly committed to the collective defense of the region and continues to take the lead in bolstering regional cooperative defense efforts for the Gulf. The UAE also recently hosted the Negev Forum, an opportunity to not only deepen Israel's integration with the region, but also shore up our bilateral cooperation with the UAE on a broad range of shared interests.

We also have a close and robust partnership with Qatar, which acts as a host and provides critical support to U.S. forces and facilities. Qatar is also taking steps to increase its interoperability with U.S. forces and continues to rely on the United States as one of its top suppliers of defense sector purchases.

A long-term partner and strong ally in the region, Kuwait, provides critical support for U.S. troops and equipment, acting as a force-flow and logistic hub. Kuwait continues to host the fourth largest presence of U.S. forces outside the United States.

Bahrain is a key driver of regional coalitions as host to the U.S. Navy's Fifth Fleet -- a critical resource in protecting the freedom of navigation through the Strait of Hormuz -- the International Maritime Security Construct (IMSC) -- an eight-member consortium that helps to maintain the free flow of trade for legitimate mariners in the region -- and the Combined Maritime Forces (CMF), which works to interdict Iran's illicit shipments of weapons to the Houthis and underscores the United States' enduring commitment to freedom of navigation and maritime security.

Oman serves as a critical waypoint for DoD operations in the USCENTCOM AOR and is a consistent voice for diplomacy and moderation in regional affairs. Oman provides critical access, basing, and overflight to U.S. forces. With its strategic location at a key naval chokepoint in the Strait of Hormuz, Oman is valuable to DoD operations and planning.

Yemen

In Yemen, U.S. policy objectives remain focused on creating the conditions to implement a durable resolution under UN auspices that will end the now eight-year conflict in order to alleviate humanitarian suffering and stymie threats from al-Qa'ida in the Arabian Peninsula

(AQAP) and ISIS-Yemen. DoD supports the Department of State's work to secure a peaceful settlement to the war. Although the April 2022 UN-mediated truce was extended twice after it was first announced, an agreement could not be reached to extend the truce before it expired in October 2022. Both sides have largely upheld their commitments under the UN-brokered truce agreement and continue to do so despite the truce's expiration.

The Kingdom of Saudi Arabia has, at times, faced a high-volume of cross-border attacks from Yemen. DoD provides air defense support, intelligence-sharing, and other coordination to the Kingdom to defend its territory, people, and the 70,000 U.S. citizens who reside there. DoD is also bolstering activities to interdict Iranian weapons transfers to the Houthis and expose Iran's involvement in such transfers so that Iran can no longer hide behind the veneer of plausible deniability. In the past few months, there have been four significant interdictions of Iranian illicit cargo that were en route to Yemen. These interdictions have prevented the transfer of more than 5,000 weapons and 1.6 million rounds of ammunition to the Houthis.

Inside Yemen itself, DoD continues to maintain a small presence of U.S. special operations forces to combat AQAP and ISIS terrorist organizations that have capitalized on Yemen's instability. These terrorist organizations threaten U.S. national security interests, and the United States has worked with our partners in the Gulf, such as the UAE and Saudi Arabia, to degrade AQAP's ability to conduct external attacks and ISIS-Yemen's presence.

The People's Republic of China (PRC)

As President Biden made clear: "we are not going to leave a vacuum in the Middle East for Russia or China to fill." Across the U.S. Government, we have worked with our allies and partners to mitigate food insecurity, address climate change, enhance maritime security, and cooperatively bolster air and missile defense. The PRC is DoD's pacing challenge. The PRC is the only country that has both the intent and, increasingly, the economic, diplomatic, military, and technological capabilities to fundamentally reshape the rules-based international order. The countries of the Middle East have benefited tremendously from the existing rules-based international order and should have an interest in maintaining it.

The PRC is not working alongside the governments in the region to address strategic threats or improve collective defensive capabilities. In some significant instances, the PRC is actively undermining the region's security, including upgrading strategic relations with Iran, deploying coercive economic tactics to secure contracts for Chinese Communist Party (CCP) companies, and expanding exercises to increase its own power projection operations. The PRC is not a member of the Global Coalition to Defeat ISIS. It has contributed only negligibly to international humanitarian support to Yemen and Syria and political processes to wind down these conflicts.

As the 2022 China Military Power Report states, the PRC naval forces are increasingly operating outside of home waters, including in the Middle East. PRC forces are a significant contributor to peacekeeping missions in the Middle East, and the PRC is using Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) projects to develop inroads with governments across the region. In response to the strained economies of many Middle East partners resulting from Russia's unprovoked war in Ukraine, the

PRC is also moving to offer financial incentives to many governments, which could make them more susceptible to PRC coercive influence in the future.

As the PRC's overseas interests have grown, its leaders have increasingly pushed the People's Liberation Army (PLA) to rethink how the military will protect those interests. The PRC seeks to establish a more robust overseas logistics and basing infrastructure to allow the PLA to project and sustain military power at greater distances. A global PLA military logistics network could interfere with U.S. and allied military operations and eventually support offensive operations as the PRC's global military objectives evolve. The PRC likely considers the UAE as a location for PLA military logistics facilities. We encourage allies and partners to carefully consider the potential strategic and security risks of hosting PRC facilities prior to committing to BRI and other economic initiatives.

DoD's approach to competition with the PRC in the Middle East is not maximalist or zero sum. We recognize that our partners seek healthy relations with the PRC, including commercial, trade, and defense ties. However, there are specific categories of engagement that put at risk U.S. defense partnerships, U.S. defense technology, and ultimately, U.S. force protection. Given the robust U.S. force presence and basing across the region, PRC military installations on the territory of our strategic partners is a major concern. We constantly engage our partners to ensure that secure communications networks, U.S.-origin defense equipment, and U.S. military personnel are secure. This is an area that requires constant vigilance and consistent engagement from across the DoD enterprise.

Russia

The NDS describes Russia as an acute threat. Russia's unprovoked war in Ukraine has already produced significant consequences for the governments, forces, and people of the Middle East. Russia's influence and destabilizing activities in the Middle East include Russia's military activity in Syria and deepening military cooperation with Iran. Russia and Syria limit the UN and other organizations from providing sufficient humanitarian aid to Syrian populations in need. Russian forces in Syria interfere with Coalition D-ISIS operations. Russia's procurement of hundreds of Iranian drones, and the use of the drones against Ukrainian civilian targets and critical infrastructure, represent a growing risk to Middle East partners.

Increasing Russian-Iranian military cooperation has altered the perception for those in the region as Russia deepens ties with Iran. Iran is gaining battlefield experience and forging a strategic relationship with Russia, which will have serious implications for the region. The United States is working with partners to issue new restrictions to prevent components found in Iranian drones from making their way onto the battlefield in Ukraine. Additionally, the United States is at the forefront of a global coalition supporting Ukraine with capabilities to defend itself. More than 50 nations, including many Middle East partners, support the Ukraine Defense Contact Group. Middle East partners have an important role to play, from increased humanitarian support to air defense assets to protect population centers.

Many Middle Eastern countries have historically relied on Russian arms imports to supply their militaries. Russia's defense industry has already struggled with numerous challenges, such as

inefficiency, low production capacity, and lack of a modern machinery base. These challenges have only been exacerbated as Russia's military takes substantial losses in Ukraine. Major supply shortages for Russia's forces in Ukraine, in part because of U.S. sanctions and export controls, complicates imports of Russian arms replenishment of spare parts, ammunition, and material. Furthermore, Russian battlefield losses undermine its own portrayal of Russian armed forces and military equipment as highly capable.

Afghanistan, Pakistan, and Central Asia

Afghanistan

Under Operation ENDURING SENTINEL, DoD is conducting counterterrorism operations using personnel and platforms stationed outside of Afghanistan to ensure terrorist groups do not use the country to launch attacks against the United States, its allies and interests. DoD retains the ability to conduct kinetic strikes to disrupt terrorist threats within Afghanistan. Our service members and civilian employees remain hard at work to advance our interests in Afghanistan, which includes supporting the Department of State's work to facilitate the relocation of U.S. citizens, Lawful Permanent Residents, and our Afghan allies from Afghanistan.

Central Asia

DoD also continues to work with our Central Asian partners to help counter a wide range of threats to the region and to the U.S. homeland. Of particular note, Congress appropriated \$90 million in the Consolidated Appropriations Act for Fiscal Year 2023 to establish aviation-based security cooperation programs in the region that will build the ISR capabilities of partner nations and enhance our ability to work with them on countering terrorism and VEOs while enhancing border security in support of regional stability.

Additional long-term security cooperation programs with our Central Asian partners support their sovereignty and territorial integrity, particularly in light of Russia's demonstrated willingness to coerce its neighbors.

Pakistan

Pakistan is a key partner on several issues that are important to our national interests. We continue to seek and build upon areas of mutual interest to improve regional security and our bilateral relationship. Strategic stability in South Asia remains an enduring interest of both Pakistan and the United States. There are several ways we can continue to cooperate with Pakistan to pursue these interests. For example, counterterrorism remains an area of mutual interest as several violent extremist organizations seek to target U.S. and Pakistani interests. Pakistan also participates in counter-piracy efforts, meant to ensure a rules-based international order with free and open maritime transit.

Africa

Africa's geopolitical importance cannot be understated. With a growing population of over a billion people and increasing political and economic power, there are extraordinary opportunities

on the continent arising from its dynamic workforce, burgeoning private sector markets, and natural resources. Many of the world's most pressing challenges and global solutions will emanate from this rising continent. However, this limitless potential is consistently threatened by episodes of political instability, democratic backsliding, the entrenched presence of VEOs, transnational threats, and the impact of climate change and environmental degradation. Without US-Africa partnerships, the United States cannot successfully accomplish its global strategic objectives and pursue its national security interests in Africa. Advancing the stability and partnerships needed to protect Americans ultimately requires promoting local economies, supporting good governance, and addressing conflict in African countries. Simply put, Africa is increasingly important to U.S. national security.

Over the last few years, the African security environment has become increasingly unpredictable. DoD prioritizes disrupting VEO threats against the U.S. homeland and vital national security interests, working by, with, and through our African partners to build states' capability to degrade terrorist organizations and contribute broadly to regional security and stability. DoD supports interagency initiatives to disrupt malign PRC and Russian activities that present a military risk to the United States.

DoD security cooperation builds resilient defense institutions by promoting civilian oversight of the military, respect for human rights, and gender diversity in partner nation security and defense sectors. To accomplish our objectives, we employ a variety of tools, including key leader engagements, counter-terrorism training and operations, accountability training to minimize civilian harm, military exercises, Department of State's foreign military sales, partner intelligence sharing, institutional capacity building, crisis response, and humanitarian assistance.

DoD works with African defense ministries and other security institutions to strengthen their capabilities to manage and sustain armed forces consistent with the principles of good governance and the rule of law while continuing to build the institutional capacity of defense ministries and other security institutions. DoD enhances our partnerships in Africa through a '3-D' approach that includes diplomatic, development, and defense activities. Working with our partners at the Department of State, USAID, and across the U.S. Government, our holistic approach ensures that U.S. security and governance initiatives are mutually reinforcing and sufficiently comprehensive to address the complex nature of threats in the USAFRICOM AOR. We have increased our programming with African partners in key areas of cooperation, to include cyber security and space technologies. We work together to ensure our programs and activities help Africans advance their security.

Posture

DoD's force posture in Africa is primarily concentrated in the Horn of Africa and in Niger. It is supplemented with modest security assistance investments directed to North Africa, the Sahel, and the Gulf of Guinea regions. Our work streams elsewhere on the continent, such as in Central and Southern Africa, are designed to sustain and advance relationships and encourage more robust bilateral cooperation where possible.

Horn of Africa

In the Horn of Africa, VEOs like al-Shabaab present both near-term and long-term threats to the United States and regional interests. We remain steadfast in our support of regional initiatives and the African Union Transition Mission to Somalia (ATMIS) to counter the threat from al-Shabaab in Somalia and across East Africa, including bilateral support to the troop contributing countries of Kenya, Djibouti, Burundi, and Uganda. Last May, at the request of and in coordination with the Government of Somalia, DoD returned a small, persistent U.S. military presence to Somalia to train and advise partner forces to degrade and deny al-Shabaab the time and space it needs to plot external operations. The next two years could be critical for Somalia as ATMIS is scheduled to draw down its contingent of over 19,000 armed forces, and police and the Federal Government of Somalia assume security responsibilities by 2024. We have seen renewed resolve and determination by the Somali Government and population to combat al-Shabaab. DoD's persistent presence in Somalia has been instrumental in supporting their efforts to defeat al-Shabaab. The United States will continue to support a comprehensive, Somali-led approach to eliminating the terrorist threat and restoring stability.

In Ethiopia, DoD supported the U.S.-facilitated diplomatic peace negotiation mediation efforts in response to the two-year Tigray conflict in northern Ethiopia, which resulted in the signing of a cessation of hostilities agreement in November between the Government of Ethiopia and the Tigray People's Liberation Front. Subsequently, parties to the conflict have largely withdrawn military forces from the battlefield, yielding access to humanitarian assistance and a resumption of critical services throughout the region. We are working closely with our allies and partners to facilitate ongoing Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam negotiations between Ethiopia, Sudan, and Egypt.

East and Central

In Sudan, we support a shared commitment to facilitate a successful transition to a civilian-led government, including through security sector reform initiatives that promote regional security and deter strategic competitor malign activities. Instability remains a key issue for political transition and potential spoilers continue to engage to stymie deals and negotiations.

In the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC), we share the concern of other U.S. departments and agencies about the loss of life, mass displacement, and escalating tensions in the region. DRC's abundance of natural resources and critical minerals continue to subject it to foreign interference and territorial incursion. Additionally, eastern DRC remains ravaged by over 120 rebel groups that exploit weak governance and corruption, compounding the deteriorating security situation in the Great Lakes Region.

Djibouti is the host of the largest contingent of U.S. military personnel in Africa, with over 3,000 U.S. military and civilian personnel, and it remains a critical U.S. partner even with PRC's naval base only a few miles from our U.S. location. The airfield and port in Djibouti are critical to U.S. capability and capacity for both USAFRICOM and USCENTCOM to disrupt VEO threats and counter illicit activities at sea.

Sahel and West Africa

Security is further deteriorating in the Sahel as instability is spreading to coastal West Africa, resulting in thousands of civilians killed in Burkina Faso, Mali, and Niger by VEOs, a dramatic increase over the past four years. Currently, the most active and dangerous VEOs in the Sahel are al'Qaida-aligned Jama'at Nasr al-Islam wal Muslimin (JNIM) and ISIS-Greater Sahara. Porous borders and lack of state legitimacy provide an enabling environment for VEOs and transnational criminal networks. The region's security crises have outpaced the ability of governments and local actors to respond, intensifying existing development, humanitarian, and governance challenges. DoD has approximately 1,100 troops in Niger combatting terrorism in the region. The series of coups that have taken place over the last two years in Mali, Guinea, and Burkina Faso have limited U.S. military assistance, and in turn, little access and influence to help counter VEOs, as well as the malignant influence of the Russian Private Military Contractor (PMC), Wagner Group. In the Sahel, and more specifically Niger, DoD supports the militaries of our African and European partners in their fight against VEOs such as JNIM and ISIS-Greater Sahara through security cooperation, logistical support, intelligence sharing, and capacity building efforts. DoD is focused on improving coordination of these programs to prevent the spillover of instability into littoral West Africa.

In West Africa, strong U.S. partners like Ghana and Senegal have been able to maintain peace and security and counter downward security trends in the region through their strong commitments to democracy and security governance. Despite these notable bright spots, the rising rates of piracy, illicit trafficking, and illegal, unregulated, and unreported (IUU) fishing in the Gulf of Guinea and broader Atlantic impedes global trade and put freedom of navigation at risk. Alongside the Department of State, DoD continues to work with global and regional partners to secure the South Atlantic from maritime threats by executing security cooperation activities and joint exercises that enhance the capabilities of partner nation navies and Coast Guards. DoD is working closely with the Department of State and USAID to develop programs that address the drivers of insecurity, contain the spread of violence, and stabilize the region for coastal West African countries (Guinea, Cote d'Ivoire, Togo, Benin, and Ghana) as part of the U.S. Strategy to Prevent Conflict and Promote Stability (SPCPS) a ten-year plan to promote stability.

North Africa

In North Africa, Morocco and Tunisia continue to be key security partners that broadly support our common security objectives on the continent and in the southern Mediterranean. As the only two major non-NATO Allies in Africa, Morocco and Tunisia have worked with us to achieve U.S. defense goals in the region and maintain readiness as hosts to the largest land and naval exercises in Africa. Both countries have committed to helping the United States export security to other African partners through training, exercises, and support to UN peacekeeping missions in Mali and the Central African Republic.

Libya continues to struggle with political reconciliation, but recent advances by the UN to push for elections in 2023 may be successful, as popular demand for political progress grows in the country and international stakeholders apply renewed energy to this process. On a positive note,

the 2020 ceasefire is holding. We see Libyan military leadership from major western and eastern factions discussing what a future unified Libyan military under civilian control would look like.

However, Russia's foreign presence, through the Russian PMC, Wagner Group, continues to threaten a peaceful and sovereign Libya. The majority of Libyans want all foreign fighters to leave their country, with Wagner at the top of the list. It is clear that Wagner must leave Libya for the country to sustain real progress on security.

We continue to seek strengthened ties with Algeria. The Algerians see Russia's invasion of Ukraine and the Wagner Groups' destabilizing activities in Africa as reasons to diversify their security relationships with international partners rooted in international norms and respect for sovereignty.

Southern Africa

In Southern Africa, DoD is building partnerships with Angola and Zambia and is reinforcing long-standing partnerships with Botswana and Malawi. In Mozambique, DoD is also working closely with the Department of State and USAID through the U.S. Strategy to Prevent Conflict and Promote Security to strengthen the resilience of Mozambican communities affected by violent extremism and terrorism. U.S. government security assistance to Mozambique supports the regionally-led Southern African Mission In Mozambique (SAMIM) and focuses on both capacity building and combined training between U.S. special operations forces and Mozambique's armed forces to combat the threat from ISIS in the Cabo Delgado province.

Strategic Competition

Strategic competitors like the PRC and Russia seek to take advantage of weak governance, faltering political institutions, and the misperception of U.S. indifference or withdrawal from the continent. China's influence poses a longer-term risk to the rules based international order, and Russia's use of the Wagner Group undermines the security and resilience of our partners.

The PRC in Africa

The PRC remains our most serious competitor on the continent. Russia, operating through the Wagner Group, is a destabilizing force. The PRC has adapted its model for engaging African partners to emphasize security cooperation, in addition to its large-scale economic investment and its courting of African support in multilateral fora. PRC activities in Africa undercut regional and global work to strengthen local defense institutions and improve long-term stability grounded in international rules and norms. Also of concern to DoD are the PRC's ambitions to expand its military footprint, which has the potential to degrade maritime security and adversely affect U.S. freedom of movement and influence throughout Africa.

As the PRC's overseas interests expand, so too may its military and logistical support systems to protect those interests and eventually projection power. A global PLA logistics network could interfere with U.S. and allied military operations and eventually enable offensive operations. We are seeing warning signs of this in Djibouti, which hosts the PRC's first overseas military base, where the PLA has violated international norms and has sought to restrict access to sovereign

Djiboutian airspace. The base also has implications for security in the Middle East in sight of vital shipping lanes transiting through the Suez Canal.

The PRC government is the only country with the intent and increasingly the capability to challenge the rules based international order. Amid democratic backsliding in Africa, China is pursuing deepened security and defense relationships, sometimes without consideration of international norms and courting an increasingly important bloc of voting nations in the UN.

Russia

Russia's invasion of Ukraine has produced significant ramifications for agricultural and energy imports to Africa. Many countries rely on Russia for agricultural products, oil and gas imports, and arms sales. Russia exerts influence in some countries through PMCs and through historical relationships rooted in its Cold War support for African independence movements.

Russia's security cooperation, assistance, and use of PMCs directly undermines our efforts to advance U.S. interests and democratic values in Africa. Together with interagency partners, we are concerned about Wagner's expanding political meddling, illicit resource extraction, propagation of instability, and human rights violations in Africa. Wagner's destabilizing actions in countries across the continent, such as in Libya, Central African Republic, Mozambique, and Mali, have not led to improved security outcomes. Instead, Wagner mercenaries have increased violence, sowed division, peddled disinformation, and undermined state sovereignty.

We continuously seek to bring Wagner atrocities and dangerous behavior to light when engaging our African partners, making clear that turning to Wagner only serves to prolong conflicts. The United States is also working to support African countries in resisting Wagner's expansion.