

STATEMENT FOR THE RECORD

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ON

SPECIAL OPERATIONS CULTURE AND CLIMATE: THE  
FUTURE OF THE FORCE

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Mister Chairman, Ranking Member, and distinguished members of the Subcommittee: thank you for the opportunity to speak about the culture, climate, and future of our special operations forces (SOF).

For a variety of reasons, we stand today at a pivotal moment for our Nation. At war against the menace of terrorism for two decades and only barely beginning our recovery from the scourge of COVID, the United States also faces a complex threat from an increasingly capable and aggressive Chinese Communist Party. All other perils to our Republic, including Russia, pale in comparison.

The CCP seeks global economic, military, and political dominance. It aims to supplant the United States and the rules-based, democratic international order that has fostered peace and prosperity for many nations. The CCP seeks to replace this order with an authoritarian system subservient to their will and modeled on their own repressive and genocidal control in China. They seek to promote and export their model of governance: a police state that employs high-tech surveillance, state control of all modes of public discourse, and brutal oppression of all opponents: Hong Kong democracy activists, Falun Gong, the Catholic Church, and other Christian communities, and most egregiously the predominantly Muslim Uighur community. They seek to increase their economic and military leverage through industrial-scale espionage and theft of intellectual property. They convert their commercial power to political influence by coercing all who may consider criticizing their means or their ends. No responsible person should harbor any doubts about the CCP's intentions or what a world under their domination would look like.

In addition to the threat posed by the CCP, the United States must also confront an enormous national debt, substantial budget deficits, and a bitterly divided nation. Congress and the President face many difficult choices about spending priorities, especially regarding national defense. The core conventional capabilities in our Department of Defense—ships, aircraft, missiles, missile defense, etc.—and the resources needed to sustain them are increasingly expensive and, possibly someday soon, simply unaffordable. Pursuing a strategy of deterrence based solely on expanding or upgrading these capabilities risks playing into the hands of the CCP.

Nevertheless, the United States has unrivaled resources to combat this challenge. We have a republic like no other: founded upon universal values, tested through many crises, and capable of inspiring hope worldwide. We have a population like no other: large, heterogenous, resourceful, and energetic. We have an economy like no other: dynamic, creative, resilient, and adaptative. Unlike China, the United

States has strategic alliances and partnerships based not on coercion but mutual affinity, respect, and a shared vision. We also retain unparalleled cultural influence globally.

Yet, not a single one of these advantages is, in and of itself, a guarantee that we will prevail in this competition. Nevertheless, they give us an extraordinary advantage—if we can find the domestic unity needed to wield them effectively and foster the international unity needed to resist Communist China's siren song.

### **Our Special Operations Forces**

It is against this environment that I offer my commentary on our exceptional special operations forces' current state and future. Our SOF are, without question, the world's premier special operations capabilities. They are the standard by which all others are measured. Created in 1987, they came of age after 9-11 and have grown substantially in budget, size, scope, and capabilities since 2001. No other force on the planet is as capable. Still, the world is changing rapidly. The challenges we face today and tomorrow are substantially different from the challenges that USSOCOM has effectively tackled over the last two decades.

More than anything else, 20 years of conflict in the Middle East and South Asia have honed SOF's direct action capabilities to support counterterrorism and counter-insurgency. Our SOF have never been more proficient at the conduct of this mission. It has also reshaped special operations culture, from the small unit to the USSOCOM headquarters in Tampa, which plays well to a Pentagon leadership that consistently conflates deterrence with competition.

Far too many in the Pentagon tend to gloss over Great Power Competition (GPC) and focus on Great Power Conflict; this is a mistake. To be clear, the United States must be able to fight and win a war with any adversary; that is the *raison d'etre* of the Department of Defense. But deterrence and competition are not synonymous. The former is about our adversaries' assessment of our capabilities and will; the latter is about a third party's evaluation of our capabilities and will relative to a competitor like China. If DoD focuses solely on deterrence, then we will likely lose the competition for influence, access, and leverage. And failure in competition has the potential to further embolden China and lead to the very conflict that no one wants to fight.

The reappearance of GPC does not mean that SOF should abandon this hard-won skillset or lessons learned. Instead, the Pentagon must take stock of the unique skills that SOF obtained countering terrorism, including leveraging relationships

and translate those skills into new and proactive strategies and methodologies. We cannot simply be content to "counter" threats but must aggressively shape the environment to our advantage. To succeed, we must reconceptualize the role of SOF in GPC while also capitalizing on the full potential of human capital present in the United States of America.

### **Great Power Competition**

If the United States wants to "compete" with China, we cannot simply adopt a transactional approach with partners and allies. We must avoid what H.R. McMaster recently called "strategic narcissism, the tendency to define challenges and opportunities abroad only in relation to the United States." Competition means helping partners and allies solve their problems in ways that are mutually beneficial. In some cases, particularly in Africa—a theater of great power competition—this means helping them better deal with terrorism, lawlessness, and insurgency. Efforts to help partners counter these threats are necessary but not sufficient for GPC.

Great power competition is or at least should be a global enterprise. It will take place in locations far removed from the South China Sea or Taiwan Straits. It will take place outside of "declared theaters of armed conflict" (DTAC), in areas where U.S. forces have only limited authority to use lethal force (i.e., for self-defense). It will also occur in places where U.S. forces are welcome only in limited numbers. Consequently, many military capabilities will be severely constrained. Persistent surveillance systems (e.g., unmanned aviation platforms) will be of little use and, in most places around the globe, DoD will not be the "lead federal agency." Military forces will operate under Chief of Mission authorities, with restrictions intended to limit political risk. Moreover, we also know that our adversaries will not work within established norms. Their intelligence and counterintelligence capabilities, especially if/when enabled by quantum computing and artificial intelligence, will pose substantial risks to both mission and force.

Consequently, the role of SOF in great power competition—and conflict—will not resemble the manhunting in support of CT or COIN, a mission at which SOF has excelled over the last two decades. SOF can play an essential role in GPC by preparing for conflict and ensuring that our armed forces possess a strategic advantage at the outset. This means building networks and capabilities to hold our adversaries' critical capabilities at risk, identifying (or creating) and exploiting vulnerabilities to derail their strategy or degrade their capabilities and influence, preparing key partners and allies to contribute to advancing mutual strategic goals.

While some may argue that SOF already does these things, I would reply, "Yes, but not well enough in this environment." Significant changes in the structure and culture of our SOF are necessary to ensure that SOF can meet the demands of the GPC environment. USSOCOM must find new and creative ways to capitalize on the full potential of human capital present in the United States of America and, potentially, overseas.

### **Changing the Culture and Charting a Way Forward**

The first SOF Truth is that "Humans are more important than hardware." To prepare for tomorrow's challenges, USSOCOM must be willing to challenge and adapt the "commando" culture that currently reigns in the force. It must be willing to accept that the status quo developed over the last 20 years is not sufficient for the next 20 years. The leaders in the SOF enterprise, civilian and military, must question their assumptions about missions, force structure, and modernization. In simple terms, they must be as daring and creative at the strategic level as their small units are at the tactical level.

First and foremost, SOCOM and its components must also carefully consider adding new military occupational specialties to ensure the right technical skills are resident in the force. Secondly, USSOCOM must create new and better opportunities for women to contribute. Thirdly, USSOCOM must undertake a concerted and well-resourced effort to recruit first- and second-generation Americans with native language skills and cultural sensitivities. Finally, USSOCOM must recommit to an experimental force to test new organizations and employment concepts for irregular warfare.

The 21<sup>st</sup> century has brought with it an explosion of technology and, in many cases, transformed society. DoD and USSOCOM actively seek to take advantage of these technologies but typically in ways that focus mainly on technology and only secondarily on people. There are some notable exceptions, especially in space and cyber, where new military specialties have been added. In the Army Special Forces, however, the structure and composition of an operational detachment have remained static—for decades! The same can be said for a Naval Special Warfare platoon. While the Army and Navy have added new technologies and new skill requirements to these organizations, they have done so without adding personnel or new military specialties.

The modern economy has added a plethora of new skillsets, from cyber to robotics to artificial intelligence and machine learning, and many, many more. Special operations forces operating in sensitive or uncertain environments may not be able

to rely on "reach-back" for these skills. Moreover, at the tactical level, the addition of personnel who possess these skills but who have not been through a rigorous assessment, selection, and training program can pose an unacceptable risk. The best solution is to consider new special operations specialties rather than adding more requirements to an already overburdened soldier, sailor, or Marine. Given the rapid changes in technology, Congress and DoD should also strongly consider some form of increased "permeability" for specific critical skills. i.e., the ability of personnel to move back and forth between active and reserve duty.

Regarding the integration of women into SOF, it has been over five years since Secretary of Defense Carter announced his final determination to open all military positions, career fields, and specialties to women. Since then, the numbers of women who have entered the ranks of special operators through the current model are minuscule. It is simply not enough to say that women serve in Civil Affairs or Psychological Operations or Support Activities. These are invaluable contributions but limiting women to these roles contributes to a culture that does not truly value their role. Only one woman has graduated from the Army Special Forces Qualification Course and, to date, no women have succeeded in earning a Trident or MARSOC Operator badge. Moreover, the numbers of women who have even volunteered to attempt these courses are tiny. Simply put, the five-year, "gender-neutral" experiment of opening to women previously closed military occupational specialties in the special operations forces has been an abject failure.

The incontestable and straightforward truth is that the vast majority of women do not want to be "commandos," and, frankly, this is not the most effective or operationally relevant role that women can fill in SOF. Nor is it what the SOF enterprise or our Nation needs in great power competition. I do not propose that any opportunities be closed to women; the existing pathways should remain open to the handful of women who desire to pursue them. Instead, I argue that USSOCOM must find more and better ways to integrate women as fully qualified and respected "operators." We have more than adequate historical models in the Office of Strategic Services and even current special mission units.

Beyond increasing operational capabilities, these pathways must include real opportunities whereby women operators can rise in rank, responsibility, and pay. Notably, the resulting longevity will also provide an opportunity for the SOF enterprise to reap the rewards of its investments in them. Such a model would also offer female mentors for young NCOs and officers considering a career in SOF. These are necessary requirements if we are serious about retention and longevity in

the force and creates a culture that accepts women as equals and provides them opportunities to contribute in meaningful ways.

Creating these new pathways does NOT mean "lowering standards." It means, however, that the standards must be operationally relevant. Indeed, all special operations organizations must have high standards—physically, mentally, intellectually—but we must base these standards on the special missions these women will perform.

The United States is the most desired global destination for immigrants and has an incredibly diverse population. In a worldwide competition for influence with China and Russia, these recent immigrants can be formidable contributors—tactically, operationally, and strategically. In addition to creating more and better opportunities for women, USSOCOM must also aggressively recruit men and women with native language and cultural skills. This requires targeted recruiting efforts, both within DoD and in the population at large. USSOCOM and its components must develop targeted recruiting campaigns and materials for use in various diasporas found in the United States. Using materials in their native language and recruiters with knowledge and experience in these communities, USSOCOM could vastly increase the likelihood of drawing recruits from these communities.

Recent attempts like the MAVNI program were fatally flawed and, at least in SOF, failed to produce the desired effects. Congress should consider legislation modeled on the Lodge Act of 1950, which enabled direct recruiting of foreign personnel. Carefully crafted legislation with the right incentives (e.g., green cards for a limited number of immediate family and citizenship for them after completion of a mandatory service period) could significantly increase the diversity and operational capabilities of SOF.

Such programs will necessitate improved and expanded counterintelligence programs, but DoD needs to invest in new and expanded counterintelligence capabilities anyway. Enhanced by artificial intelligence, however, the funding and force structure required to address the growing CI threat should be manageable. Moreover, considering the potential talent available, it is well worth the cost. Our military history is replete with extraordinary contributions by immigrants. To the degree to which we fail to recognize that and welcome others like them with open arms, we are failing ourselves and our Nation.

Finally, the leadership of the SOF enterprise must recommit to radical experimentation for irregular warfare. While it is necessary to participate in the services modernization and experimentation programs, it is not sufficient to address the myriad irregular warfare challenges facing SOF. USSOCOM must be willing to commit forces permanently and resource them to experiment with new operational, personnel, and technology integration concepts. This critical mission cannot be left solely to special mission units; it must apply to the theater SOF that comprise the bulk of USSOCOM.

These recommendations are offered in pursuit of two considerations only: professional excellence and the continued operational success of SOF. I firmly believe that these changes will further enhance the capabilities of SOF, especially in the new and more challenging competition with China. I also know that USSOCOM will not fully implement these changes without strong and empowered civilian leadership in ASD(SO/LIC). I have written extensively elsewhere in support of the changes Congress has written into law regarding civilian control and oversight of SOF. I close by renewing my earnest request for your continued insistence on the full implementation of duly passed legislation. Please do not accept anything less.